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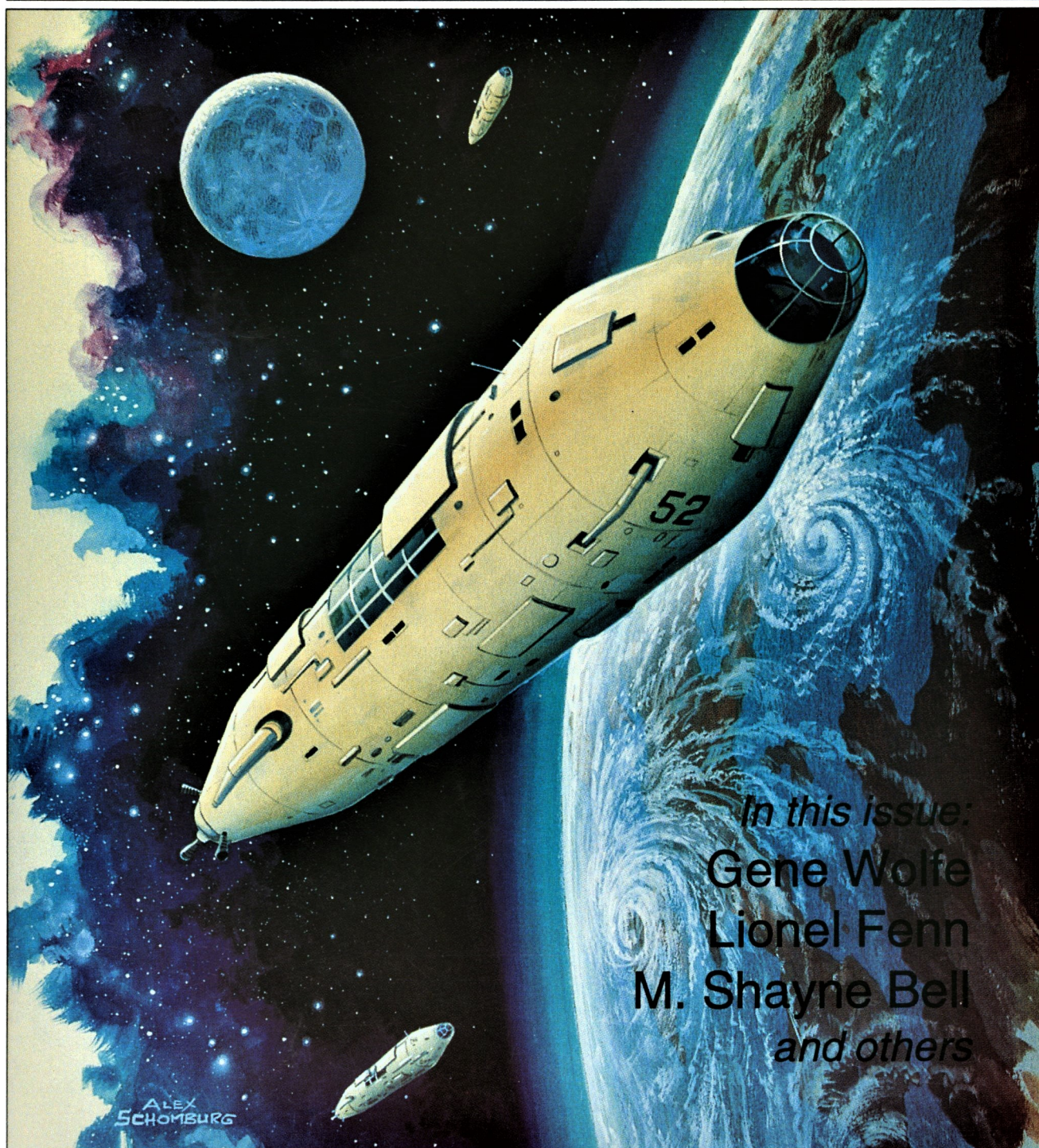
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January

SPECULATIVE FICTION

Number 1

edited by Algis Budrys



In this issue:
Gene Wolfe
Lionel Fenn
M. Shayne Bell
and others

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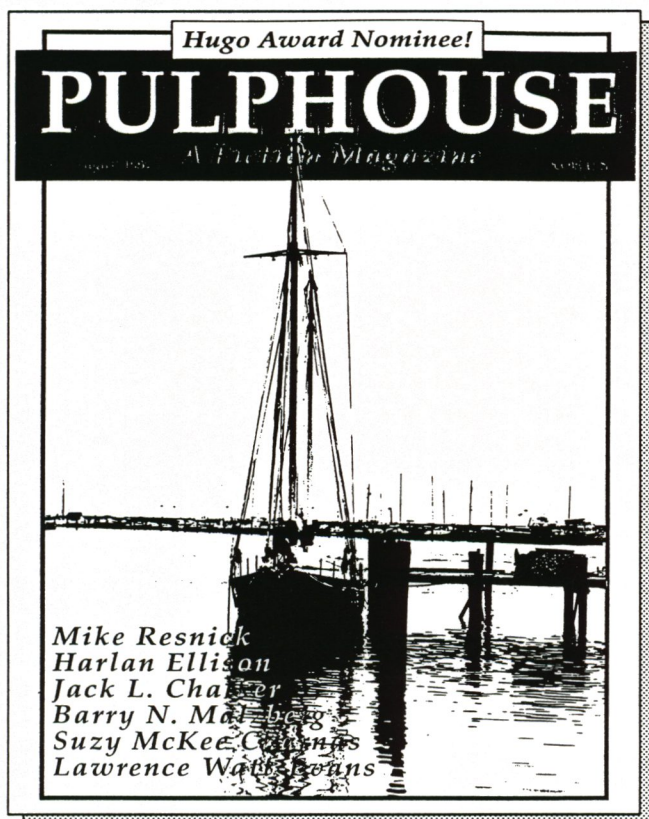
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SPECULATIVE FICTION

January, 1993

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"Starlight" was suggested by a cover painting by Alex Schomburg.

Illustrations by Kelly Faltermayer, Rachid Idriss, Greg Petan, and Susan Van Camp.

tomorrow SPECULATIVE FICTION published by Pulphouse Publishing, Inc.
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SUBSCRIPTION INFORMATION

6 issues...\$18.00

First Class, Canadian and overseas add \$1.00 per issue.

Lifetime subscriptions are also available for \$200.00.

EDITORIAL



This is the first issue of a new magazine, and all we are going to promise you is that subsequent issues will be pretty much like the first, plus gradual evolutions.

The magazine is open to science fiction, fantasy, and horror with a fantasy element, at any length. There is a bit of a bias toward newer writers, but we will in practice take anybody who writes a good story.

Similarly, we will take anyone who draws a good picture. The picture wants to be in pen and ink — no washes, no tones, no pencil. Why? Because I am emphatically not convinced that tones reproduce well on newsprint, which is what we use. And if they are going to reproduce in a mediocre manner, we choose not to use them. We will also, of course, use one full-color cover per issue.

In the case of either stories or artwork, we buy First North American Serial Rights only. Why are they called Serial Rights when very few serials are involved? In over four decades of work in this field, no one has ever told me. What the time-honored phrase means is that we will buy the right to reproduce the story or artwork once, in one issue of the magazine, which we will distribute only in North America. The moment the issue appears, all rights revert to the authors and artists, and their work is returned in the case of the artists. (Writers are presumed to have kept another copy.)

When it comes to stories, we want pieces with a beginning, middle and end. For more information on that, see my series on Writing, which starts in this issue.

When it comes to illustration, we want a picture that will make us want to read the story. We are not interested in impressionism or page decoration, no matter how well done; we want an illustration, in which the artist has read the story, selected the most dramatic moment, and depicted that moment in a clearly comprehensible manner, without giving the story away. There are other ways to handle illustration, we know. But not for this magazine.

We pay variable rates for stories. If it's relatively short and by a mighty name, we will pay 7 cents a word. We pay less for longer work, and less for work by people who have yet to prove themselves in the marketplace, but we always pay at least 3 cents per word, usually more, and we have a \$50 minimum, no matter how short the story is.

Rates for artwork are based on \$100 per page, but we rarely use a full page illustration, as you will see. In this issue, you will find the same bias toward younger illustrators. One of them, Rachid Idriss, you have never heard of before. Rachid got paid at the same rate as everybody else. Why, when writers get paid on a scale? Because an illustration is; it succeeds in doing its job, and that's all there is to it.

In future issues, we will have a letter column.

And that's it. Welcome to tomorrow.

—Algis Budrys

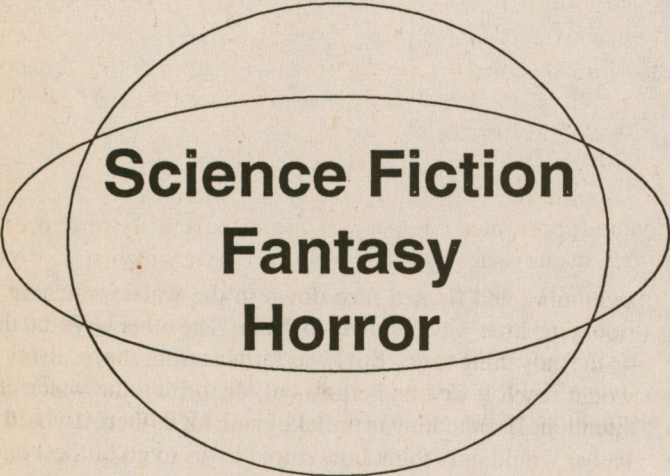
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Night Games

M. Shayne Bell

Illustration by Kelly Faltermeyer

He was a child, really, barely turning into a man. But he was a hunter.

“The sun!” Ara shouted from shore, angry. All eight of us swimming in the lake didn’t understand. We were safe till the sun dropped below the city wall, and I could still see the sun over the tops of the trees on shore. Brec lunged for me, teeth ready, but I was the stronger swimmer. I swam so far out in the lake Brec wouldn’t follow. If Brec had bitten me I would have become the karac, and I was tired of chasing boys, tired of trying to bite them. I wanted to watch Ara get dressed. I turned in the water and faced shore.

Ara had pulled on her blouse. Damn, I thought. Who knew when we’d have a sunny enough day to get Ara in the water again? The other boys started splashing, swimming hard near shore. Ara shouted again and pointed at the sun. No one was listening. I couldn’t understand her. We had agreed to go home through the forest at dusk. The bounty had climbed to three gintum for an eyespider, five for a pliht. Dawn or dusk were the best times to stab such things and carry them back into the city. But she kept shouting. I turned to look at the sun.

Clouds.

The storm had blown up. We had known rain was coming, but the storm had looked to strike after dark when it would be dark anyway and it wouldn’t matter. Wind gusted through the trees, made ripples on the surface of the lake.

I was cold, suddenly. I started to swim slowly to shore, disturbing the water as little as possible. With the least darkness, creatures of the night come out in the forests, in the lakes — come out hungry.

Ara stopped shouting and took cover when the clouds covered the sun and the forest became dark. Any movement in the water would draw attention. The water of the lake became dark. I stopped

swimming and floated face down in the water, watching below, riding the little waves slowly to shore. The other boys did the same — the only thing to do. But I was farthest from shore; all my friends would reach it first and climb out, disturbing the water, drawing attention. If something in the lake came for us then, it would get me. Father would only think how stupid I was to go farthest out.

Something dark and big swam slowly along the lake bottom below me, heading for shore. I looked up at the others, leaving my chin in the water so nothing would drip from it, move the water, make something look up at my head, and tried to call out a warning. “Something’s down there,” I yelled.

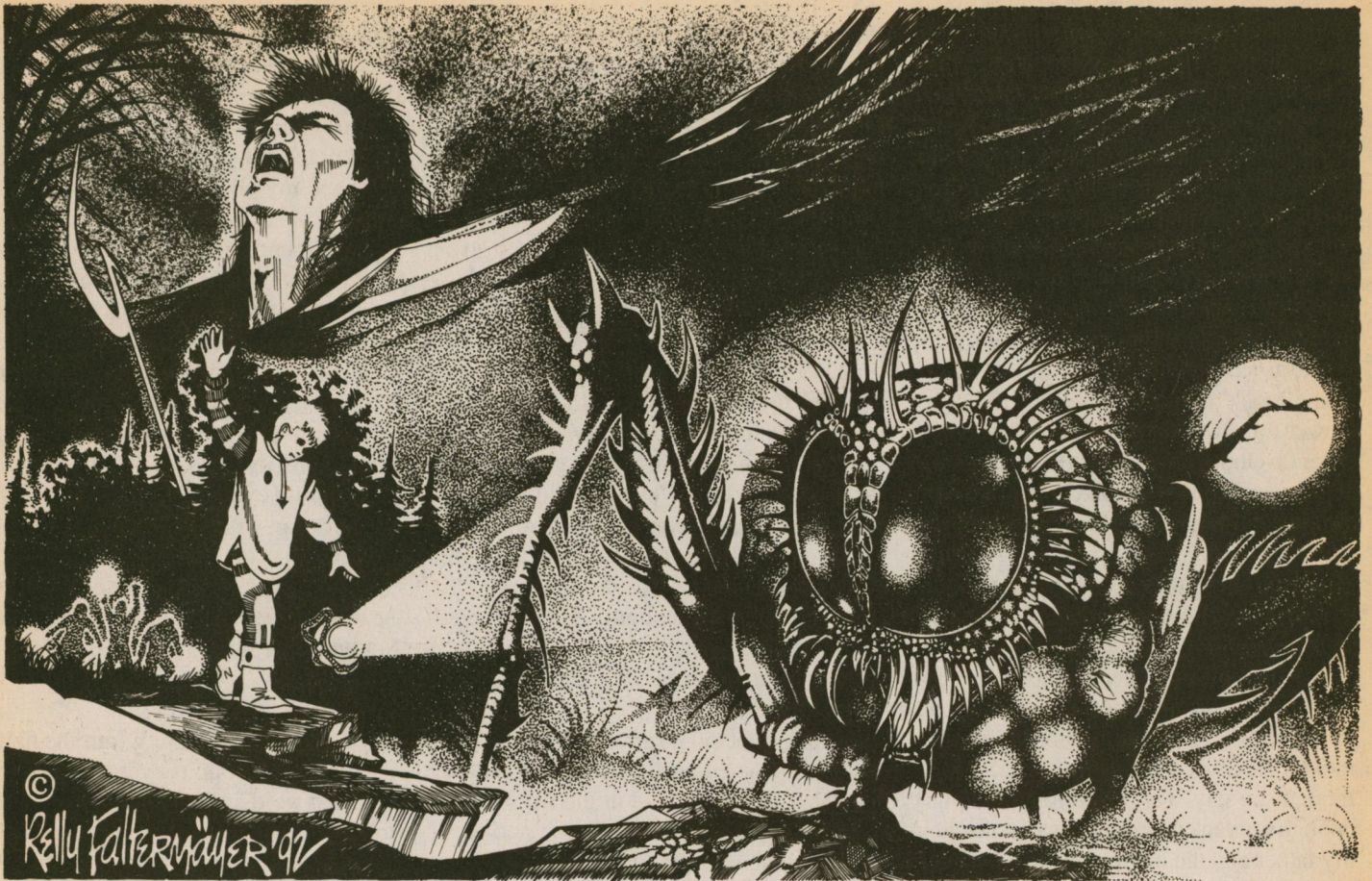
Nothing happened. I kept counting the boys as we drifted toward shore. The first sheet of rain spattered the surface of the lake. Brec started to swim, just ahead of me, suddenly. Water bulged up under him, lifted him up —

I swam hard, as hard as I ever swam in my life, expecting something to bite my stomach and hurting, hurting in my stomach where the bite would come so that when my hands touched mud along the shore I screamed, not believing it was mud I had touched, but then I was in the mud. I crawled through it, fighting my way to the grass, to my clothes, to pull Ara and the littler boys away from the shore Brec never reached.

Mother slammed a pot on the table and sat down. “How can you let them swim in the lake?” she asked my father.

He looked up. “How else can they learn?” he said, again.

I could hear rain pummeling the roof, the steady drip of water in a pan in the corner where the roof leaked, the crackle of the fire. Mother picked up my bowl, ladled soup into it, held it out to me. “So what have you learned?” she asked.



I took my soup and said nothing. Mother ladled soup into her own bowl, pushed the pot toward Father.

“To learn the forest,” Father said, “to learn the lake — to have work when he’s a man — we can tell him, we can explain, but — ”

Work, I thought. My dreams were slipping away as I got older, dreams of being apprenticed to a merchant — of getting out of Laeden — of never being a hunter like my father.

“So how did it get in the lake?”

“Broke through the grate when we opened the locks — you women complained of the lake being low, of walking through mud to fill buckets.”

“And no warning — fishermen on the lake, women getting water, children, children swimming — and no warning?”

“All Laeden knows by now.”

I could feel my parents’ worry heavy in the house. When Father stirred before dawn, I got up too, dressed quickly, sat waiting by the door to go with him. He was keeper of the city’s preserve — a forest and part of Lake Mereum walled inside Laeden and kept for its wood and water when no one could go outside the walls. He and his men had to hunt and kill whatever got over the walls or through the grates. He was responsible when anything got into the city.

He was what I would become.

He looked at me when he came down to the fire, scratching. I moved aside as he brought the firebrand to the door, unlatched and slid open the shutter, thrust the fire through the hole to scare away anything in the shadows under the eaves, anything that hated light.

When he opened the door, the smell of wet earth flowed in, chill and fresh. “Cloudy still,” was all he said.

A hard day to hunt. Even so, I thought of the things I might kill on such a day for the bounty.

“I’ll need you on the docks,” my father said.

I nodded. I had my pike and baskets ready. “Take your night gear,” he said.

Mother cut us bread and cheese, put out dried fruit. We ate. I built up the fire, and we left, my father and I. We wore our neck guards, leather boots that came to our knees, goggles to keep out the eye-spiders that crawl underneath eyelids to suck fluid from your eyes.

The path to the lake was muddy. I fell behind my father though I tried to keep up. Men were talking by the lake, in the still of the dawn, and a cow was bellowing. By the time I got to the docks, the men had cut the cow’s throat. She lay kicking at the far end of the dock. Before they had let water in the lake, I could have crawled under the docks to where the blood would have fallen on the mud, to kill the things that came for the blood; now the blood fell in the water, and everyone stood back from the end of the dock, watching.

“It’ll be hungry now,” my father said.

“Not if the boy was as fat as they say,” someone said.

I looked up. Brec had not been fat. But the man was only joking with other men, and no one really cared whether Brec had been fat or not. I walked off the dock and up the beach to a clump of bushes, started poking the shadows with my pike.

They cut the cow open and laced her entrails with poison. As

the other boats pulled away from the docks, two men in my father's boat tied a rope around the cow's hind feet. They dragged the cow into the middle of the lake and cut her loose. She floated on the surface, a brown smudge against gray water, the white boats bobbing around her.

I speared an eye-spider before noon and carried it to the market to collect the three-gintum bounty. I put two gintum in my pocket to save and took the other and bought a small sack of ginger nuts and a bright red flower for my mother. Mother appreciated color on cloudy days. The girl who sold me the flower carefully pulled back each petal with gloved fingers, looking, before she let me take it.

Mother put the flower in a vase on the table and heated the leftover soup for my lunch while the nuts roasted on the fire and the smell of ginger filled the house.

It was raining when I walked back down to the lake. The boats had not moved, and most of the cow was still in the water. Cloudy though the day was, nothing was hungry enough to attack the cow — at least not what my father and the other men were after.

My father was moody after they rowed back at dusk. He said nothing to me, but he called the other men to him after the boats had all docked.

"The bounty goes up tomorrow — one hundred gintre in gold."

Gold.

One hundred gintre would make one thousand gintum.

"If we can kill it," one of them said. "An ahwylyfan, they say. Those things creep up on a man, hypnotize him, eat his stomach out before he knows it's gone —"

"If he looks at the eyes," my father said.

But one thousand gintum. I could buy five apprenticeships with that.

I started for home, to tell Mother, and met Ara.

"Come with me," she said.

"Where?"

She walked off without answering, but from the direction of her walk I knew where: the place where Brec had died. I pulled her back. "Why?" I asked.

"I think it will come back there. If we know where it's staying, we can come back and kill it and get the reward. Besides, it killed our friend. We owe it to Brec."

"The men have the cow in the lake for

bait. We don't have anything."

"And the cow's been dead in the water all day. It will want something fresh. It will look where it fed yesterday. You've got to think like your prey."

She would make a good hunter. "Do you know what it is?" I asked, because I knew, and I didn't think she'd want to go on if she knew.

"I know, and I have my light," she said. "Don't be a baby."

We walked back to where we had swum the day before. I was afraid of the beach, afraid of finding a finger or an ear from Brec washed up on it. But when we got there, the beach was clean. Waves lapped the mud. The sun had sunk below the walls, and it was night. Ara unlatched the cover on her light, but I stopped her before she opened it. "It won't surface if it sees light," I said. I picked up a rock and threw it in the lake.

Nothing happened. I threw another rock.

"Maybe it did go after the cow," I said.

Ara shouted once and threw a rock in the lake. All the sound in the trees stilled when she shouted.

And the ahwylyfan came up behind us. We heard it before we saw it. Ara drew the cap from her light, and it was there, black on the bank above us, green eyes looking down. Ara shook her light so the bugs inside would get angry and fly harder, making more light to reflect off the mirrors in the back and sides.

I thought we would die, even with Ara's light.

Ara kept the light trained on the ahwylyfan's eyes. It shook its head. Suddenly it jumped over us into the lake. The splash from its jump drenched us with water. We scrambled up the bank.

Green eyes were watching us from the water near the shore. Ara stared at them, and I pulled her back. We hurried home through the darkening forest.

But we knew where to find it. The men didn't. And if we killed it, we'd get one hundred gintre and be able to buy our apprenticeships. We were young; we had heard our fathers talk of hunting — had gone with them on hunts — and we believed we could do it.

We could kill the ahwylyfan and buy our way out of Laeden.

The next day, Ara took three boys to

stack dry wood around the edge of a hollow back of the beach. When my mother left for the market after lunch, I stole a good cross-bow from my father's chest, better than the one I practiced with. I sharpened its three bolts and my pike, left to find Ara and the boys.

We spent the afternoon building blinds, letting small fires burn down to embers and hiding the embers in pits, stacking wood — not all of it dry, but everything we could find — and lacing the wood with straw and dry leaves. We hunted in the trees and under the rocks around our trap — we wanted no distractions in the dark — and filled two baskets with eye-spiders, plihts, and even a small banfag with its tiny horn intact.

But when night came, the ahwylyfan was not in the water. We kept the boys hidden in the blinds, wrapped tight in their night gear. Ara and I sat on the bank. But there was nothing.

"It will come," Ara said.

We planned to lure it into the hollow, where I'd shoot out its eyes with my cross-bow, and we'd kill it with the pikes and the fire.

Ara had brought five lights from her home, one for her and each of the boys, and I had one tucked inside my pants against my stomach. I could feel the insects buzzing against the casing. After a time, I stood up and threw a rock in the water. Nothing happened. I threw another and another.

"It will come," Ara said. She was trying to convince herself. She wanted money for an apprenticeship with a cook. I thought of myself as a merchant's apprentice, but at night, away from home, such work seemed far away and only hunting seemed real — hunting was all I could let seem real, then, if I wanted to succeed.

We heard the boys getting restless. Ara stood up and threw a rock.

And something big jumped for it, we couldn't tell what. I stood next to Ara, and I could feel her shiver. We heard movement around us in the dark. "Other things have watched us come here three times," I said.

She nodded.

I took out my light, but didn't pull off the cap. Ara reached down for another rock, threw it in the water.

And it stood up. Big, even from thirty feet out. It could have capsized all the boats if it had gone for them, but we had brought it here. It stood on four legs, and its body

seemed all head, all mouth. Its green eyes stared at us.

"Don't look at the eyes!" I shouted.

The forest grew quiet. Suddenly Ara jumped down the bank to the water's edge. "Ara!" I yelled. I tried to pull her back, but she broke away from me — she'd already looked too long at its eyes — and I lost my balance, fell down the bank into the mud at the bottom. I dropped my light in the fall. I pulled on my gloves and felt around for it, careful of what I touched, but frantic. I found the light, pulled off the cap, shined it out over the water — and it was there, at the water's edge, staring down at Ara. I shined the light in its eyes, and it did not move. "Ara!" I shouted, and I threw mud in her face.

She moved, then, trying not to look at the eyes, but it followed her up the bank, watching her, not blinking though I kept the light shining in its eyes.

"Your light, Ara!" I shouted. She pulled it out, fumbled with the cap. I couldn't work my crossbow one-handed, and I didn't dare take the light off the ahwyllfan's eyes. I scrambled up the bank and threw a rock at one of the eyes. It crouched down, looking like a four-legged spider, huge.

I got to Ara, tore the cap from her light, gave the whistle we had agreed on as the get ready signal. The ahwyllfan followed Ara and me into the trap, crouching all the way, wanting to jump on us, but still wary of our lights.

Ara was shaking. I whistled again, and three boys with lights came out behind it. It whirled from one point of light to another. I pulled Ara behind the piles of wood, and the three boys started lighting the fires.

The fire blazed through the straw and the leaves, and the forest around us grew suddenly bright with light.

But too much of the wood was wet. The fire burned down, fast, went out in some places. The boys ran to build up the fires, and I armed my crossbow. Ara stood shaking beside me.

The ahwyllfan jumped up to a spot with no fire, but one of the boys shined his light in its eyes, and it jumped back, startled by the light.

I set a bolt in the crossbow, aimed for an eye — and missed. "Build up the fires!" I shouted. Ara ran to help with the fire, coming out, finally, of whatever the eyes had done to her. The ahwyllfan kept jumping from one edge of the fire to another, and I

wondered if it could gather courage for a jump over the light and the heat.

If it ever managed to get away into the trees, we would not dare walk home. And we did not have enough wood to keep a fire burning all night. When the fires went out, it was not the only thing that would come for us.

A spider dropped on my arm. I brushed it off, stomped it. Ara came up to me as I set another bolt in the crossbow. "Two more bolts?" she asked.

"And the pikes," I said.

She was white, afraid. We were all afraid.

"Lights!" one of the boys shouted.

There were lights on the lake, coming toward us. The men in the boats had seen our fires, maybe heard us. Some boys cheered. But I thought of the money. If we killed it now, we could still get the money. I fired my crossbow, and the arrow hit an eye.

It screamed and shook its head, jumped over the fire and ran down the bank.

We could hear it thrashing on the shore, in the mud and the water. I ran after it — to shoot my last bolt at its other eye — but I couldn't see it. Ara and the boys ran up with their lights, and we shone them up and down the beach. The lights of the boats on the lake were closer. Then I saw one green eye in the water below us. Only one eye. I lifted my crossbow and aimed it at the eye, but my fingers suddenly felt numb and I kept watching the eye, only watching it, and Ara kept saying, "Shoot! Shoot!" and I did and the eye was gone and I could see only the black, black water —

Ara slapped my back — then kissed me. She and the boys pulled me back by the fires, and the boys stood around us with their lights. "You killed it," she kept saying. "You killed it!" But how did she know? I stood still and listened to the wind in the trees, the hiss of wet wood in the fires, spiders falling into the grass. The spiders could not see well in the light and were trying to drop into the shadows.

"There's a spider on your neck," Ara said. She shined her light in its eyes, and it fell into the folds of my shirt. I brushed it out before it could bite me again, but my neck bled so Ara cut it and sucked out the poison.

"Where's the ahwyllfan?" I asked. I hadn't understood what had happened, but I was just beginning to understand that the ahwyllfan's eyes had affected me.

Ara laughed, and the boys laughed. I thought then that we had failed, that we couldn't even sneak safely home and had to wait instead for help from the boats

But when the boats were close to shore, Ara led me back to the beach, and the ahwyllfan lay there in the mud, a bolt in each eye, one deep enough to hit the brain. Ara and the boys had thrown their pikes into it.

And it was dead.

It was dead before the boats touched shore.

But all the men jumped out and stabbed it with their spears and their knives again and again and again and we could only stand on the beach and watch them do it.

My father slapped me in front of the mothers and lectured us all for taking stupid chances.

Two days later, the city quorum insisted that the adult hunters not take all the bounty, that we "children" be given part of the bounty: two gintre apiece — twenty gintum — not enough to buy an apprenticeship or even one cook's lesson. Only enough to save.

But one of my father's men told me we had done a brave thing. My father himself took me out the next day to teach me how to throw a bolo. "We've got to speed up your training," he said. I developed a good arm, a good aim. He told me so.

In the autumn, Ara met me in the market. "Something's in the cemetery," she said. "Digging up graves, eating the bodies."

I smiled.

"They can't get it," she said. "But they're only looking behind tombstones or in the crypts, not in the air — I think it flies."

I held onto the bolo tied in my belt. Bolos can bring down anything that flies.

"There's a forty-six gintre bounty on it — twenty-three gintre apiece for you and me."

Not enough for an apprenticeship. But money to save with the rest I'd earned. And, for now at least, Ara and I were hunters. No matter what we eventually did, the only way we had of getting money for an apprenticeship was to hunt. So we had to know what the forests and lakes held — had to know what was in the cemetery and learn how to kill it.

If we were hunters, we had to be good.

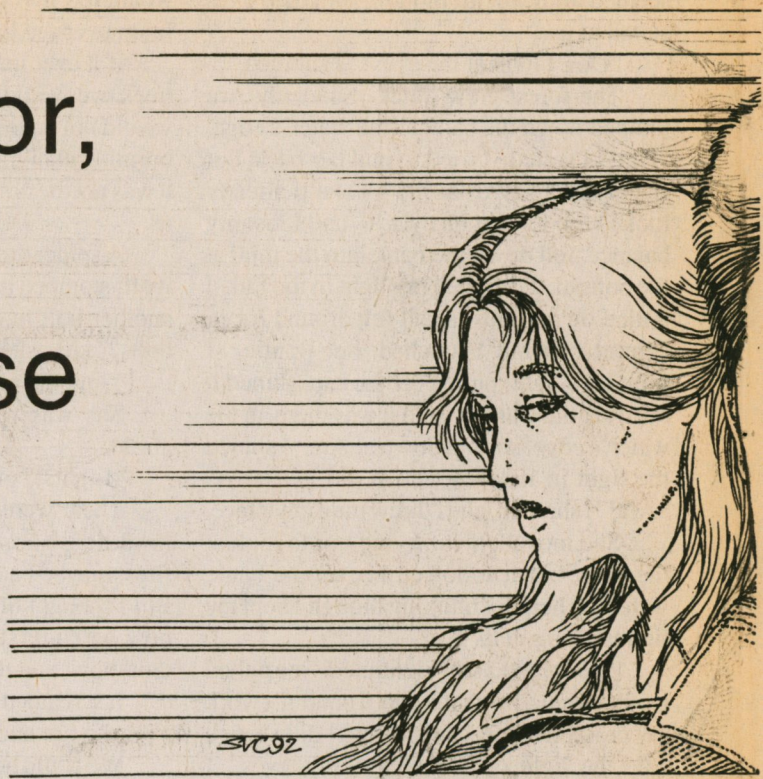
"Which cemetery is it robbing?" I asked.

The Alien Visitor, Probably from Someplace Else

Lionel Fenn

Illustration by Susan Van Camp

Kent Montana did not want to meet with Cooper Killov, or with Vanessa, and he certainly wasn't sure he wanted to meet the alien. But sometimes things just happen.



The stranger, who was tall but not all that tall, and he certainly wasn't very dark either, walked into the crowded BlueBird Music Tyme Lounge in Johannson, Kansas, checked the several dozen customers seated at the squared tables, at the long ebony bar, and on polished wooden benches in front of the empty bandstand, sighed, and wondered what he was doing here in the first place, much less searching for a man who might, given time, destroy the very fabric of his well-knit world. Actually, it wasn't the first place, because he'd gotten lost on his way over from Kansas City and had to ask directions several times; but it was close enough, as his mother might say, for jazz, and he still didn't want to be here.

Especially when he saw the little man sitting in the corner.

Ordinarily the stranger didn't mind little men. They were just as obnoxious as big men when it came to exchanging valuable information for too much money. Sometimes they were even more obnoxious because the more undisciplined among them liked to prey on the guilt of innocent people like the stranger — guilt, that is, for not being little; although, to be honest, if the stranger's mother had anything to do with it, the stranger would not only be little, he'd be dead.

Such, he thought resignedly, is the life of a man dedicated to the Noble Art of Acting, even as his mother was dedicated to assassinating him so she could steal his title, sell off the family estate and winery located on an unnamed Hebrides isle, and vanish into the teeming fleshpots of Majorca before she grew too old to remember what they were for.

The little man, who wore a long black coat, a large black hat, and smoked a stubby black pipe, spotted him and beckoned.

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The stranger considered leaving. It would be, all things considered, the prudent thing to do. By leaving, not only would he save himself a ton of money, he'd also probably not get into trouble.

On the other hand, if the rumors he had heard since his arrival were correct, leaving would also mean the end of the world, or at least those parts of it that the stranger cared for, being those parts he happened to be in at the time.

A deep breath. An unconscious brush of his hand through an embarrassing amount of quiet ginger hair, and he wove as somberly as he could between the tables until he stood in front of his man.

The little man didn't stand, or if he did the stranger couldn't tell, but he, the little man, did tip his hat. "Evening, your lordship," he said in a gravelly voice.

Kent Montana nodded, pulled out a chair, and sat.

"Long time, no see," the little man said, cupping his hands around a beer stein.

A burst of laughter popped across the room.

The bartender belted a drunk with a rubber bat.

"You're looking fine, if I do say so," the little man continued, albeit nervously by this time.

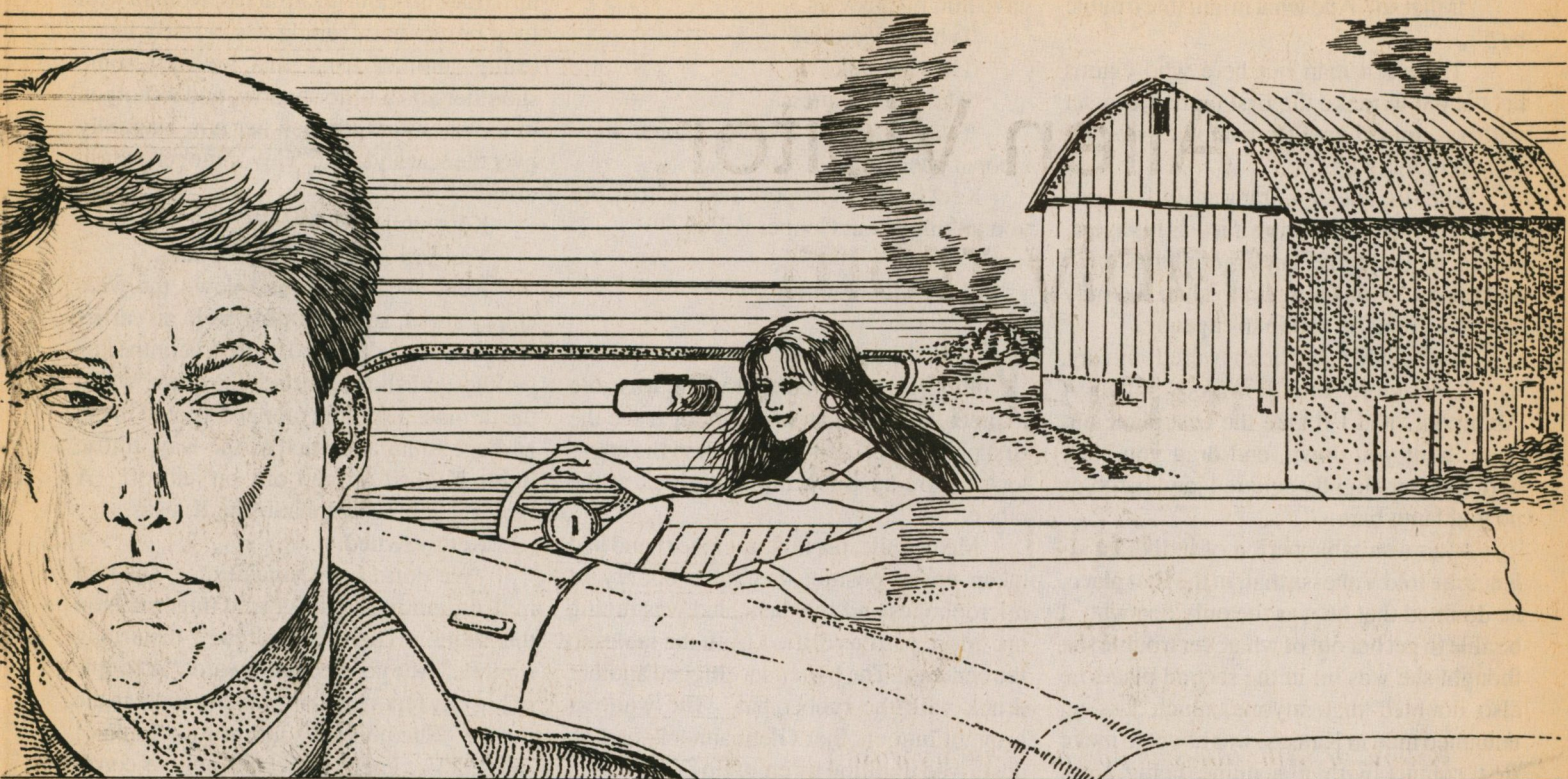
Kent nodded; he said nothing.

Barons, in his experience since he happened to be one, of the Scots variety, were damned good at not saying anything, especially when they didn't know what to say until they knew what was going on. Which he didn't.

"I suppose you'd like to see the pictures."

Kent sniffed, ordered a double Glenbannock from a passing waitress, and realized that if he saw the pictures there was no turning

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back. He would be trapped. He would be forever enmeshed in the plot at hand until it was either over or he was dead.

He was not enamored of the choices.

"Well?" the little man asked impatiently.

After a long moment's silent condemnation of his own stupidity, his ignorance, his predilection for going places where no man has ever gone before and, if he had the brains, wouldn't have gone in the first place anyway, he nodded. "Hand them over, Cooper," he said resignedly. "What the hell."

After glancing around the room to check for eavesdroppers and snoops, Cooper Killov reached into his black coat and pulled out a large manila envelope which he placed on the table between them. "No offense, your lordship, but..."

"None taken," Kent replied, reached into his denim jacket and pulled out a thick legal envelope which he placed on the table between them.

Killov grabbed it.

Kent slid his envelope toward him and, while the little man greedily hefted his prize and mentally counted the bills enclosed therein, he toyed with the flap.

Then he opened it.

Then he slid out the first eight-by-ten black-and-white glossy, looked at it, slid it back into the envelope, and closed his eyes.

Son of a bitch, he thought.

It had begun only a week ago:

Kent was in New York City, trying to find his agent so that he could kill the sonofabitch for not getting him any new acting jobs

since being fired from his English butler's role on *Passions and Power*, a continuing daytime drama of some repute, but with a snotty director. Everything he had worked on since then, he had gotten on his own. Killing his agent therefore seemed eminently more sensible than firing him. Unfortunately the agent was extraordinarily elusive, one might even say invisible, and Kent spent much of his time killing time instead in his not very luxurious hotel room.

That's where he'd gotten the call.

Late one evening, dark and dreary, while he pondered, weak and weary from tramping all over the damn city in the rain, the telephone rang, Kent answered, and a female voice said, "Kent? Kent?"

"Aye."

"Kent, it's Vanessa."

He hung up.

The phone rang again.

"Kent, we were cut off."

He hung up.

The telephone rang.

"Damn it, Kent, knock it off."

"You'll keep calling, won't you," he said with a sense of fatalism usually reserved for those about to meet the electric chair.

"Yes."

Kent was fatalistic about such things as Fate and Destiny; thus far he hadn't been able to avoid either one. And so he lay back on the bed, crossed his legs at the ankles, and dared her to make his life miserable.

"Kent, there's big trouble. Really big trouble, and only you can help me."

"Is that so? And what might that trouble be?"

"There's a man out here who claims he's about to make the first human contact with a genuine being from another world."

Kent hung up.

When the telephone rang again, he stared at the receiver, wondering if it was his agent, calling to apologize, cut his commission in half, and vow never again to shaft the only baronial client he had in his agency.

He doubted it, but he answered anyway.

"One more time," warned Vanessa Abington, "and I'll take the first plane out there, hunt you down, and drag you back here by your slightly squared jaw, baron or no goddamn baron."

After a suitable period of indignant silence, he told Vanessa that, in the first place, he doubted that he was the only one who'd be able to get her out of whatever trouble she thought she was in; in the second place, he also doubted that anyone, much less an unnamed man in Kansas, was about to make first contact with a genuine being from another world; and in the third place, even if the first two places were true, he wasn't exactly sure he wanted to get involved. When she demanded to know why, he told her, quite simply, that he didn't want to get involved, that he was too busy trying to find a new role, that the last time he'd gotten involved with her, her father had tried to clean his rifle by shooting bullets through the barrel.

"That was a long time ago, Kent."

"I still have the scars."

"He never hit you."

"Mental scars. I still get twinges when it rains."

"Kent, this is serious, you idiot. We can't let this opportunity for Mankind's potential progress pass without making some kind of effort to keep politics, religion, economics, sociology, psychology, and television out of it."

She begged him to think about the consequences, the knowledge, the help, the advancements to science, the publicity he'd get if he helped her.

Kent thought about it.

"Where's he from?"

"Kansas."

"The alien, Vanessa."

"Outer space."

Kent looked at the ceiling. It was a fairly nice ceiling, plastered and all, but it

gave him no answers.

"Is he dangerous?"

"He's a drunk."

"The alien, Vanessa."

"I don't know, I haven't seen him. Cooper has, but —"

Kent sat up. "Cooper? Jesus Christ, are you talking about Cooper Killov?"

"Yes."

"I'll be there tomorrow."

Which he was, but he'd gotten lost, and so it was a week before he was able to meet the little man in the lounge, see the first photograph and put it back in the envelope before he was tempted to look at the others.

Meanwhile, the nine-member band had taken up its position behind a battery of microphones and speakers, and was tuning up. More patrons drifted from the tables to the benches. The bartender slugged another drunk with the rubber bat. The waitress brought him another Glenbannock, and he destroyed tradition by emptying the glass in a single swallow. When the tears cleared from his eyes, he folded the manila envelope and tucked it into his jacket.

"You don't believe it, do you," Killov said.

"Pictures can be faked."

Killov grinned nastily and held up his envelope. "But I've already got the money."

Kent stood slowly, leaned over the table, and smiled mirthlessly when the little man cringed away from him. "It's in sterling, Cooper. Pounds. English pounds. By the time you can change it, I'll know if I've been snookered." He leaned closer. "And if I've been snookered, Cooper...."

Killov was out of his chair and halfway to the exit before Kent could finish. Which was all right with him. Killov was not only a drunk, as Vanessa had said, he was also a pathological liar who happened to have a pretty nice camera. If the shots hadn't been faked, Kent was in publicity clover; if they had been faked, he wasn't out much because five-pound notes looked like a hell of a lot more than they really were.

The band began to play a c&w madrigal, and a few customers hastily got up to dance.

Kent paid the bill and left, reaching the sidewalk just as Killov ducked into a rented limousine and sped off into the night. A few seconds later, ashiny white convertible pulled

up to the curb, and an attractive woman with long brown hair, sunglasses, a fairly interesting summer frock that revealed some shoulder and a little shadow, and a shotgun in the back seat, draped her arm languidly over the seat and said, "Hey, stranger, new in town?"

Kent smiled.

Vanessa Abington smiled back.

Kent checked up and down the wide empty street, still gleaming from an earlier shower. Neon distorted itself in shimmering puddles, oil slicks swirled like rainbows on the tarmac, a spotted mongrel rooted in the garbage in an alley across the way, traffic lights blinked on and off, on and off. A typical evening in Johannson, Kansas.

Kent yawned.

"We don't have much time," she told him, drumming her bright red fingernails on the seat. "There are already disturbing rumors." She pointed northward. "A couple of big city reporters have taken a room in the motel." She pointed southward. "I think I saw a TV camera crew and remote correspondent setting up shop in the boarding house." She pointed at the bar. "That music is awful."

He agreed, stepped into the convertible without opening the door, and with a gesture directed her to drive him to wherever she was going to drive him, which happened to be, as it turned out, out of town on an empty highway that, even in the dark, stretched to the horizon.

"So," he said, the wind and a few gnats rustling through his hair, "what's an intelligent woman like you doing in a place like this?"

"I own it."

He nodded.

A train whistle sounded forlornly in the distance.

"Hear that train a-coming?" she said sadly.

He peered into the night. "Coming down that track?"

She nodded. "Scientists, most likely, and probably from the government. We don't have an airport." She sighed heavily, much to Kent's consternation and distraction. "It'll be a media circus by tomorrow night, you can bet on it. Johannson as we know it will be destroyed forever. Next thing you know the army'll be here, closing off the roads, checking people's papers, stifling free speech and a free press...it'll be



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hell, Kent, unless we beat them all to it and let this information out to the world. It's too big for just one country to handle."

"Excuse me," he said, "but I thought you said there were only rumors."

Vanessa shrugged, and looked at him over the top of her sunglasses. "Sometimes rumors can be very powerful."

He frowned suspiciously. There was something wrong with all this, something he couldn't quite put his finger on, but if he did he'd probably get slapped into Nebraska and so settled back instead and thought.

He thought, for example, about actually meeting a being from another world. How does one greet it? Him? Her? He'd seen all the movies, hadn't brought a portable organ or a double-barrel machine gun/grenade launcher, and although he had learned several languages as part of his baronial training, he doubted the being from another world was conversant in any of them. Sign language might work, if he only knew some. Maybe there should be some sort of carefully controlled environment, wherein the being from another world could see and examine pertinent samples of Earth's civilization and perhaps even recognize some of them, thus giving them both a common ground for future discussion and exchange of ideas. On the other hand, maybe the being from another world was wise beyond all human comprehension, already knew everything anyway, and was only here on vacation or something. It would make the controlled environment business look pretty damn silly, not to mention the sign language.

It was a puzzlement.

Then he thought about Vanessa's father and hoped the hell the man was out of town.

Then he thought about the electrified barbed wire fence erected along the right-hand side of the road; about the impressively huge stone gate and archway that loomed ahead of them in the barbed wire fence; about the casual way Vanessa spun off the highway and through the gate and onto a long dirt road that lifted a cloud of dust behind them; he thought about dying and decided not to think anymore.

Then he changed his mind and thought about something else: "If this is supposed to be the first meeting with that whatever it is, how did Cooper get those pictures?"

Vanessa placed a hand on his thigh.

Kent placed a hand on the hand and shifted the hand back to the steering wheel.

After a long moment, Vanessa sighed. "We lied a little."

Right, he thought.

"How little is little?"

"A lot."

Surprise, he thought.

"So the pictures were faked, after all."

"Oh, no. The alien and Cooper accidentally met at an abandoned grain silo out on the north forty about two weeks ago. They were both taking refuge from a tornado that had touched down just outside of town during a thunderstorm. Cooper managed to take those photographs before the alien fled, although not before it managed to rustle up an official rendezvous with the human race."

Kent tried to imagine Cooper Killov actually communicating with a creature from another world, tried to imagine the reverse, and had an unsettling feeling that knowledge of interplanetary travel was evidently not necessarily an indication of high intelligence.

"So when is this official rendezvous supposed to take place?" he said, patting the bulge in his jacket.

She checked the dashboard clock. "An hour."

"What?"

"You got lost, remember? If you'd met Cooper a week ago like you were supposed to, we would have had time to plan."

Damn, he thought; there's always something.

The convertible shot over a low rise, and Kent raised an eyebrow at the huge ranch house before him. It was big. It was lighted in every window. It had a limousine parked in front. It was upon them before he could even think about bailing out, and then it was beside them as Vanessa deftly applied the brakes and flattened an evergreen shrub that hadn't been doing so well anyway. Before he could catch his breath, she was out of the car and at his side, tugging him out of the seat, up onto the porch, and into the living room where, he noted without much surprise since he'd already picked up on the limo, Cooper Killov lounged on an overstuffed couch.

He had a gun.

It was aimed at Kent's chest.

Vanessa had a gun too, but it wasn't aimed at anything in particular.

In fact, aside from Kent, the only one in the room who didn't have a gun was the young woman seated in a Victorian wing-

back chair to one side of a fireplace large enough to make pig iron for the war effort. She was slender, blonde, of a figure that was without ostentation, and in a white summery frock that made ostentation superfluous. She smiled wanly, her hands clasped tightly in her lap.

"I tried to stop them," she said desperately. "Honest, Baron, I really did. But they threatened to kill Father if I didn't cooperate."

"Shut up," Killov snarled.

Vanessa muttered something about refreshments and vanished into an adjoining room.

"I did," the woman pleaded. "I really tried."

"Shut up!" Killov commanded.

"It's all right," Kent said, walking toward her until Killov stopped him with a gun-like gesture.

"Are you sure?" she asked.

"Absolutely," he assured her. "Who are you?"

"Doctor Vicky Abington."

Kent blinked. "Abington?"

"Vanessa is my twin sister."

A thunderous orchestral chord blossomed from the expensive stereo system built into the far wall.

Kent recognized it immediately; on *Passions and Power*, it meant that someone had just revealed to someone else that someone else entirely was not who anyone thought she was, but someone else so totally different that all hell was going to break loose unless someone did something pretty damn soon.

It was, Kent thought, one of those damn omen things that kept following him around.

"I'm a space scientist," Vicky continued.

Of course, he thought.

"I'm the one the Visitor contacted first."

Naturally, he thought.

"I was in the barn when it happened."

Kent thought nothing; he had drifted beyond thought into a mild, but not fatal, form of stupefaction.

"That's enough," Killov warned, pulling back the hammer of his revolver.

The telephone rang.

The little man instantly ordered Kent to sit on the arm of the chair Vicky was sitting in and don't try anything funny, then hurried to the desk on the other far wall, picked up the French Impressionist receiver, listened,

spoke a few words, listened, spoke again, and hung up.

"Reporter," he growled as Vanessa returned with a tray of cookies and a decanter flanked by small crystal tumblers. "The *Times*. It's gonna be close, Miss Abington. And some government agency has taken over the radio station, something about national security."

Angrily Vanessa plunked the tray onto an antique serving table and shook her head. "Damn." She checked her watch. "All right, Cooper, take these two out to the barn. I'll get Spike and meet you there."

Spike? Kent wondered.

"Her boyfriend," Vicky answered un-nervingly. "He was my lab assistant until Vanessa seduced the truth out of him, started the rumors, and set the trap."

Trap? he wondered gloomily.

"For the Visitor."

He looked down at her and smiled gently.

"I wish you wouldn't do that."

Her eyes lowered. "Sorry. It's a habit."

He patted her shoulder.

Killov snarled, growled, sneered, and ordered them to their feet. Kent obeyed, but missed nothing as he and Vicky were marched through the immense house to the back door in a kitchen large enough to feed the men who made the pig iron in the fireplace. Once outside and after his vision had adjusted to the night, he saw an equally large but differently shaped building a hundred yards away. The barn, he supposed, and wondered how it was that Vicky had contacted an alien visitor in there. It must have been tricky.

Vicky took his arm and leaned closer. "I was conducting an experiment on radio wave refraction and distortion, elongation and omega simplification, when he called me."

He looked at her.

She shrugged, albeit prettily.

"I thought it was a joke at first. Then he — the alien, that is — sent me the pictures you have in your jacket pocket. Radio wave frequencies being what they are, they weren't terribly clear, as you can see, but they were clear enough that through a method of triangulation and supposition I invented myself, I deduced that they had originated on a small planetoid Moon-like thing on the near side of Saturn." She smiled somberly. "Although his English wasn't very good, his intent was perfectly clear."

"Hey," Killov demanded from behind them. "What are you two talking about?" He hiccupped.

"Nothing," Kent told him.

"Okay. Just so I know."

"Then," Vicky whispered, leaning closer, "he told me he was going to arrive. Tonight. I tried to contact him, to tell him how dangerous it might be, but it was too late. Apparently his on-board communicator is unable to communicate with the barn radio. Anyway...." And she glanced meaningfully at the sky.

Which was, Kent noted when he followed her gaze, filled with lots of stars every place there wasn't a Moon or black space. It was beautiful. It was romantic. It was a harbinger of either the greatest event in the history of Mankind, or the portent of Earth's fairly complete doom, depending on the greeting the Visitor received.

He glanced back at Killov.

Doom, he thought; definitely doom.

"What about Spike?" he asked as they crossed the dusty barnyard to the high barn doors.

Vicky shuddered.

Ah, he thought, instantly recognizing the signs. The woman had loved him once even though he's her intellectual inferior, loved him for his wit, his willingness to sacrifice his own career so that hers might be advanced, for his tenderness, his adoration, his ability to clean beakers and vials without leaving smudges, for his devotion, his honor, and his honesty; at least until Vanessa seduced him and destroyed it all.

"I understand," he said.

"Thank you."

Killov ordered them to stop while he struggled to open the little barn door in the middle of the big left-hand barn door.

"What I don't understand is why I'm here. And why your sister corrupted your...assistant. And why, if this is supposed to be a secret, she started the rumors that have brought the government and all those reporters to Johannson?"

"Inside," Killov snapped.

If the barn was large on the outside, it seemed doubly so on the inside. It was, Kent knew, largely a matter of visual perspective; it also had a lot to do with all the scientific equipment spread across the length and breadth of the building — from lab tables to specially designed refrigeration units to several web-like satellite dishes aimed at the

sky where the middle of the roof used to be, to the sinister titanium cage in the middle of the floor, to the banks and rows and several ranks of transspatial radio equipment jutting out from the right-hand wall.

Awe and apprehension in equal amounts struck Kent between the eyes, made him blink, made him gasp, made him dizzy until he stopped being awed and apprehensive and became annoyed instead.

He had a feeling he knew why he had been brought here.

He had a dreadful premonition bordering on fair certainty concerning the reason he, and no one else, had been chosen to see all this stuff even if he didn't understand one damn winking bulb of it.

Yes.

Yes, he, Kent Montana, Scots baron and potentially pretty good actor, had been chosen to make First Contact with a Being from Another World...*not* because they both probably talked funny, and *not* because they would have instinctive natural abilities to communicate, and *not* because they would, upon exchanges of protocol, be equals.

No.

No. It was because the Visitor was an unknown quantity. If he was friendly, Kent would be instantly killed as an alleged precaution against alien assassination, thus endearing the Visitor to Vanessa and her cohorts for the duration of his stay; or, if the Visitor wasn't friendly, Kent would be killed as a test of the Visitor's superior firepower and alien weaponry, thus giving Vanessa and her cohorts a chance to fight back, destroy the alien, save the world, and become rich and famous.

God *damn*, he thought angrily, having long since left annoyance behind.

And he had a feeling that the First Contact would take place inside that cage.

At that moment, a couple of rather important things happened, not exactly simultaneously, but close enough to confuse Kent into another moment of indecision:

First, the little barn door opened, and Vanessa strode in arrogantly, followed by a tall, lanky man in a stained, ill-fitting lab coat, and wire-rim glasses; he also carried a shotgun. Vicky choked back a sob of humiliation, betrayal, and disgust.

"Are we ready?" Vanessa asked sharply.

"I think so," Spike Youngboy answered

deferentially, his voice deep, his nose hooked, his lips taut, his shotgun aimed. He looked at Vicky and his lower lip quivered. "I'm sorry, Victoria, I truly am. But this is the only way I'm going to make a name for myself, don't you see that? This is the only way I'm going to be able to stand on my own and not have you constantly looking over my shoulder, carping, nagging, pointing out my mistakes. This is the only way I'm going to be free of the confining shadow of your brilliance."

Vicky nodded as if she understood.

He smiled his gratitude.

She grabbed a glass jar from a row of glass jars on the table behind her, and threw it at him.

He ducked.

When the jar shattered, the liquid that used to be inside ate a smoking hole in the floor.

"Nice," Kent muttered.

"I was aiming for his balls," she grumbled.

"Enough!" Vanessa declared, still not aiming her revolver at anyone in particular. "Spike, get the radio turned on and the homing device activated. Cooper, take off that stupid hat and help him. Vicky, get over there to that microphone and be ready to talk to the Visitor when he's within range." She smiled broadly. "Kent, get into that cage."

I knew it, he thought; damn, I hate that.

But he didn't move, and defiantly grabbed Vicky's hot, moist, sweaty, soft, pliable hand to keep her from obeying.

Vanessa's eyes narrowed. This time she aimed the gun. "You will do as I say, Baron, or you will die. And that, my friend, is no lie."

"If you shoot me," he answered confidently, "you won't have anyone to use as a guinea pig to test the Visitor's true intentions."

"How...how did you know that?"

"I figured it out."

She nodded. "Clever. Very clever. But are you clever enough to realize that if I shoot you, I can still use Vicky as the guinea pig, and maybe even hope that she'll die a horrible alien death?"

Nope, he thought.

"Of course," he lied. "But are you clever enough to realize that I have already concluded that you already plan to kill the Visitor whether he's friendly or not, so you can sell First Rights in his body to television

and make a fortune, after which you'll donate the body to science and make a lot of powerful and influential friends in Washington, after which you'll level this lovely little town in a perfectly legal manner and build a health spa and amusement park in its place?"

Vanessa tilted her head back and laughed. "A spa? In Kansas? Surely you jest, Baron."

At which point Kent noticed that the second of the two almost simultaneous things happened: A bright, intense, near unto celestial white light suddenly filled the barn through the hole in its roof, and the unmistakable sound of an interplanetary traveling vehicle filled the barn too.

Vicky looked up, gasped, and threw herself into Kent's arms.

Kent embraced her, and looked up.

Cooper Killov cowered by the radio equipment.

Dr. Spike Youngboy swore at the intrusion, and twiddled dials, tweaked knobs, and slammed down levers as he stared fearfully over his shoulder.

Vanessa, however, sauntered directly to the cage, threw a hidden switch, and giggled as the topmost bars swiveled menacingly to one side. "Come into my parlor," she said to the spacecraft with a laugh.

The barn throbbed with vibrations from without and within; the white light changed to a soft, not inappropriate blue lightly touched with summer gold and, around the edges, a cautionary, perhaps even troublesome, purple.

And beyond the light, the vague shape of *something* that was not of this Earth.

"Kent," Vicky said urgently, "you have to do something!"

"Okay. What?"

She stared at him.

He hated the way she stared at him. People always did that when they expected him to do something and couldn't believe he'd just as soon go home and revive the ancient art of wenching with the village twins.

But he realized with a deeper, more ingrained sense of humanity, that the wenching would have to wait. Yet the only thing he could possibly do was somehow frighten the Visitor off before it was too late and the Visitor was either fried by the electrified cage, which he had just realized was electrified, or the Visitor fried them all with what-

ever frying rays he had when he discovered that his innocent voyage to the third planet from the Sun had been, after all, a game of entrapment. Of course, he'd also be ticked if he had been the one doing the entrapping and realized he'd been discovered, or thought he had been discovered.

Either way, it wasn't good.

Therefore, calling upon his Highland ancestors who had had absolutely no experience with anything remotely like this unless you count the English, he leapt upon the nearest table, snatched up a jar of acid in either hand and threw them — one at the area of the radio equipment which Dr. Youngboy frantically twiddled; and the other at another area of the radio equipment. Then, as Spike screamed when the acid bounced off the radio equipment and splashed into his face, Kent jumped to another table, a third, and a fourth, then sprang into the air and tackled Cooper Killov just as the latter was about to fire his gun.

They tumbled to the floor.

The vibrations intensified.

The spacecraft lowered.

Vanessa cackled.

The light changed from blue to mint green, with more than a hint of black in angry spots.

Killov grabbed Kent's throat in both hands; Kent kned Killov in the groin because there was no time for a decent clean fight; Killov choked and released his hold; Kent grabbed the gun from the man's hands and shot him in the leg as he staggered to his own feet; Vanessa whirled and fired, exploding a vat of acid on one of the tables, spilling the corrosive liquid onto the floor and setting fire to a pile of straw that hadn't been cleaned up yet but no one had noticed it until now, and it was too late because now it was on fire; Kent fired back, hitting Vanessa in the right shoulder; Vanessa fired back, grazing Kent on the left arm and subsequently hitting Killov square in the chest; Kent ducked, realized he had ducked too late, ducked again this time in time, and fired.

The spacecraft filled the open roof, even if it was only a vague blur in the mint green glow that turned blacker by the second.

Vibrations shattered test tubes, beakers, the faces of dials, and two of the supporting rafters.

Vicky ran.

Spike tried to chase her but tripped over

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the dead Killov and fell into Vanessa, who, having been winged a second time, was trying to change gunhands.

It was too late.

The two illicit lovers, in a fatal frantic embrace, tumbled inexorably, and probably inevitably, into the highly charged electrified titanium cage just as many different parts of the radio equipment and one of the satellite dishes blew up.

Kent was thrown to the floor.

Vicky grabbed his arm and pulled him to his feet.

Together, as the spacecraft was caught in a raging pillar of flame that rose from all the explosions and fire and burning acid and a couple of fried scientists, they raced for the little door in the big door.

Smoke filled the barn.

The spacecraft whined and lifted.

The vibrations lessened.

The lights went out.

Kent and Vicky stumbled arm and arm out of the barn and across the open ground toward the house just as a helicopter with a photographer leaning out the door flew overhead, and several tanks, an Armored Personnel Carrier, and a long black Cadillac with a flag fluttering on either front fender, charged into the barnyard.

The barn blew up.

The helicopter crashed just out of sight beyond a rise behind the barn that had already blown up.

And then, suddenly, there was silence.

Except, in the distance, for the sweet trilling call of an unseen bird heralding the

coming of dawn.

Kent and Vicky found themselves in the middle of a cornfield.

They were lost.

They had run from all the excitement and near death in such a panic that they hadn't looked where they were going.

They lay on their backs now, staring up at the lightening sky. It was going to be a beautiful day.

"I wonder if he made it," Vicky said wistfully.

Kent shrugged.

"I mean, I wonder if he'll understand what just happened here."

Kent shrugged.

"I mean, being a scientist and all, I'd like to think that he'll be back someday, if only out of curiosity for what he missed. That he'll understand that we're not all venal, ignorant, and disgusting down here. That we are, in sum, a pretty nice race of beings. That we can, given time and patience, learn how to live with people who aren't like us."

Kent rolled onto his side and stared at her.

She stared back.

"She shot me," he said.

Vicky blinked.

Grimacing with pain and making sure she knew it, he reached into his jacket, turned the manila envelope over several times, and then, with a slow shake of his head, he tore it into pieces, and tossed the pieces to the wind.

"Kent!" Vicky exclaimed.

"They'll never believe us," he explained ruefully. "No matter what we say, it'll all be

hushed up. Like I told Cooper, pictures can be faked." He smiled ruefully. "It would have been interesting, though. It would have been very interesting."

"Yes," she agreed softly.

"And your twin sister shot me in the arm."

Vicky frowned. "You said that already."

He nodded. "And I didn't get any sympathy the second time, either, did I?"

She grinned. "No. You're the hero. You're supposed to get hurt."

Right, he thought, and rolled onto his back again and sighed at the tranquil blue sky, the birds flying over in perfect formation, the sound of tanks busily harvesting corn, the cry of a confused general proclaiming peace in the world.

The nightmare was over.

Maybe the world had been saved and maybe it hadn't; maybe he was wrong for destroying the evidence, and maybe he wasn't. Probably he wasn't. First Contact or no First Contact, he really didn't think the world was ready for aliens that looked like his mum on Sunday morning after a long Saturday evening down in London.

It was better this way.

And, in his dreams, in the deepest recesses of his mind, he would always know what he and Vicky Abington had actually pretty much almost met or had been killed by a genuine being from probably someplace else. All in all, it felt pretty good.

"It sucks," Vicky muttered.

Right, he thought; right. ■

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Starlight

Paul Janvier

Illustration by Rachid Idriss

They had searched the stars, and found nothing. They returned, finally, to Earth; three ships not named the Nina, the Pinta, or the Santa Maria.

The three ships were not called the *Nina*, the *Pinta*, or the *Santa Maria*. They were not called anything in particular; their radio call signs were their captains' names. Martindale's ship had a 52 painted on the hull near the bow, and Santurce's and Halligan's had their identification numerals as well, but they had not needed them. In the dark between the stars, they had simply said "Martindale," or "Santurce." They had not said "Halligan" for a long time; Halligan had been dead a long time, and his ship was run by remote control from Martindale. Martindale was the chief captain.

They were not particularly large ships. They did not have to be; their cargo was embryos, and they don't take up much room per unit, and they pack tight. Their crews were solitary — Martindale in his ship, Santurce in hers, and the late Halligan.

The late Halligan had died when a bank of embryos ruptured; they heard the sound of him trying to control the rush of cryogenics into his living space, cursing. He had not even had time to grow desperate; he was still working when he froze to death. It was too bad that an organism as large and complex as a full grown man could not successfully be preserved by supercool fluids and gases. He was dead forever, and if the individual cells of his body in some sense continued to live, they had forever lost the ability to cooperate with all the others in the organism called Halligan.

The three ships came out of FTL be-



yond Pluto, and moved steadily Earthward on reaction drives. They were not particularly sophisticated ships, either. They were simply the best Earth could do at the time when a wave of popular expansionism swept over the public, and they had been fired out by the score in all directions, each laden with its embryos — sheep, cats, cows, eagles, dogs, moles, people and the like — to find a landing if they could.

Martindale's three couldn't. They had delved among the stars, searching in vain for Earthlike planets, and they had come home, finally, reaction mass nearly exhausted, FTL controllers increasingly cranky machines — these three were failures, without even a planetfall to their credit, their captains older — well, Martindale and Santurce were old enough — the bitter taste of defeat in Martindale's mouth even though they had known that if even one ship found a planet somewhere it would count as a victory for all. He did not in fact know if victory in that sense was theirs; their radios were silent except for each other. Even now, approaching Earth.

"What's wrong?" Martindale said querulously. He sat in his chair and scanned the radio frequencies again. Still nothing. Off the port bow was Jupiter, a brilliant light. Dead ahead lay Earth, an only slightly less brilliant light because so much closer. And nothing. The silent constellations and gas clouds gave a glowing backdrop that he had long ago grown tired of, and nothing. "Santurce," he said. "Do you get anything?"

"Such as what, Captain Martindale?" Santurce's voice simmered with suppressed rage.

Martindale sighed. "Do you hear anything on the radio?"

"My set is the same as yours, Captain. If I heard anything, you would hear it."

"What do you think?"

"I don't have to think."

Martindale sighed again. Santurce had wanted to go on; expend the last of their mass, try one more jump on the controllers, keep searching. He had vetoed her urgent suggestion. He had taken over her controls and was manning her ship by remote, as he was Halligan's. She had nothing to do all day but sit, and watch. Watch nothing.

He should not, after all, have been surprised at her attitude. And to tell the truth, he was not; she had displayed it often enough over their long journey home. But if nothing

else he was going to bring the three ships home, perhaps to be refitted and sent out again...or perhaps not, but in any case he was home, or almost, and ready to lay his burden down. But there was nothing on the radio. He had hoped, he supposed, that Santurce would be sufficiently intrigued to participate in his puzzlement, but apparently not.

He did not know how long they had been gone, by Earthly clocks. Several hundred years, he imagined — perhaps a thousand. Perhaps — for no one knew exactly how the FTL worked — perhaps he was home before they had left. Perhaps he was before radio. It was possible, perhaps.

He did not, in fact, know much. Martindale pinched his nose. He was an average man; you did not need a genius to crew a one-man starship. He had done it because it was a good job for one of his capabilities, and he had been a bachelor and furthermore not inordinately interested in sex of any kind. Despite the media, there were plenty of others like him, of both sexes, and Santurce and Halligan had been two others.

The reason he was chief captain was that he had a couple of years on the others. An unexceptional man for a job that was mostly routine, with the chance of being the father of his kingdom, so to speak. Nurturing the embryos, watching them grow, on some exotic world, and going to his reward much revered. That was the whole of it.

They came closer. And he saw that the Moon was subtly different, and the Earth was very different indeed. He stared at them in disbelief. They hovered over a large land-mass that he had expected would be Africa, and looked at a Mediterranean whose coastline was all wrong. Barely recognizable...if, indeed, this was Earth; an Earth transformed. An Earth without space stations, without cities, without any visible trace of the works of Man.

"Oh, God!" moaned Martindale, and checked his navigational data a dozen times before he finally admitted that this was Earth, and that was the Moon, and it was all, horribly, wrong.

"Santurce!" he called, and got back laughter; hysterical, shouting laughter without a trace of humor in it. And that was all.

He reasoned. He reasoned, finally, that the FTL controller had brought them back to

an Earth. Not his Earth, which was lost forever in an infinity of Earths. And he thought to himself that they were all lost. All the ships of the armada. The lucky ones were the ones who did not return; they thought Earth still spun and hummed in the center of things, and so long as they did not attempt to make actual contact with it, they could go on believing. But his universe was wild, and infinite.

He got out the shuttle, finally. Left his living quarters, put on the suit, squeezed down the narrow corridor between the embryo banks and the fusion unit that maintained the temperature controls, came out the other end of the ship and got into the shuttle, and plunged Earthward. He still saw no trace of the works of Man.

He stood on land that was reassuringly correct; black with uncounted millennia of leaf-mold lapping like the sea around the rocky outcrop on which he had set the shuttle down. But everything else —

The sky was subtly the wrong color. The vegetation, waist-high, was green and healthy looking, but it was like no vegetation he knew, broad-leaved and pulpy. He stared about him. There had not been a trace of towns or roads; he might as well set down in one place as any other, and he had.

His atmospheric analyzers had told him the air was breathable; lower in carbon dioxide than the Earth air he knew, and a shade higher in oxygen than was normal for this altitude, but certainly breathable. He took off his helmet and stood holding it under one arm. He sniffed. It was all right; the worst of it was the unfamiliar smells, with a taint of something particularly acrid but only a taint. It was all right; he could breathe it, and for the first time in years he breathed something that had not seen a scrubber or a tank.

He turned full circle, and it was all the same. And then the acrid smell suddenly got much worse, and the vegetation nearly beside him rustled. A brown snout parted the leaves and lifted in his direction.

He stared at it as more of it became revealed. It was the size of a pig, or slightly larger, and vaguely pig-like in form as well, though its hide was segmented like a rhinoceros, and there was no tail as far as he could tell. It had two eyes, or what passed for them in the center of two dark spots high on its skull, and its jaw was flat and mobile, strands of vegetation still caught in its yellow, stumpy

teeth. It stood on four short limbs which terminated in round pads. And it stank. And it was coming closer, and behind it, he now saw, was a whole herd of like creatures, who had been below the level of the vegetation, all coming closer, and stinking.

He ran. He fumbled the helmet back on, eyes watering, and he ran back to the shuttle and slammed the airlock shut. He sat panting in the control couch, fogging his helmet, trying to wash the horrible smell out of his lungs, and gradually succeeding, and then he took the shuttle up, without regard to whether he fried any of the creatures or not, and shuddered.

He tried several more landings; on something that might have been South America, on something that might have been Australia. It was the same — the creatures were everywhere, and they were the dominant form. And they built nothing, they understood nothing, as far as he could tell; they simply ate the vegetation and, presumably, bred. He caught glimpses of carnivores, and of lesser breeds, but none of them looked familiar, and none of them could hope to outnumber the pig-like things. The planet belonged to them. He went back up to his ship.

“Santurce,” he said, “we’ve got a problem. This Earth went through dif-

ferent evolutionary things, and it isn’t anything like the Earth we know.” He struggled with the language; he had no vocabulary for the things of science, beyond astrophysics and home nursing. “Santurce?”

He got back laughter.

“Santurce,” he said humbly, “please.”

He got back laughter. And then a rustling of her getting up from her chair. He heard the sound of the door to the central tunnel being opened, and the laughter fading, and then cut off as the door closed. And after that, nothing. She was getting into her shuttle, to check on his observations, he decided. But he knew she would find nothing different.

He sat in front of his instruments, his head in his hands. They could not leave to go elsewhere; the ships were too depleted. And what elsewhere, in any case? He looked out the observation glass at the stars, and it was as though he were the first man, standing in the first twilight of Earth — his Earth — wondering what they were, suspecting they were unattainable. Down on their Earth, they did not even wonder, he thought. The stars were, if anything, just lights.

He heard Santurce’s door open again, and the rustling return to her microphone. She was still laughing, softer by a little, but still without joy. He was alone, Martindale realized. Completely alone in this universe,

and the universe he had been born in was lost, forever, possibly even the moment they went to the FTL control the first time.

He raised his head. He had a shipload of embryos.

Of course! He would start a new Earth! They would have to overcome certain obstacles — the smell of the pig-things, for one, but that would not really be a problem for long. And Santurce’s ship. They would each take half the planet, and —

“Santurce! Get ready to enter the atmosphere!” he said urgently. “We’re going down and begin deploying our nurseries.”

Santurce’s laughter stopped. “Ah, no, no, Captain Martindale, you can’t. This Earth belongs to the creatures that live on her. You cannot simply co-opt — ”

“Ten, Santurce. Nine. Eight. Seven....”

“Captain Martindale,” Santurce said in a surprisingly clear and steady voice. “I jiggered my fusion reactor a few minutes ago. I think we have no time left.”

Martindale looked at Santurce’s ship. And it was blooming into a bright star, and the star was reaching out to Halligan’s ship, and Martindale’s ship.

“Oh, my God,” Martindale cried, “She’s wiped out the whole human ra — ”

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Pictures of Daniel

Virginia Baker

Illustration by Greg Petan

He was gone. Daniel was gone, and he stayed gone, and bit by bit Gillian Fields went, in her own way, mad.

“You worry too much,” he told her, touching the tip of her nose with his forefinger; that finger, plump and grimy, that was so much smaller than her own. He held his finger up, as though pointing to the open sky, and she saw whorls of brown on the pad of his skin, dirt etching the map of him, of his genes and all that made him Daniel, as singular, and so startlingly beautiful, as the solitary shapes of snow flakes or ice crystals.

“Where have you been?” she asked. She reached out to shake him, to shake him hard, hard enough to slam into him some of the sense of terror she had come to know, but the moment her hands touched him and grasped the solidness of his small boy’s body, she only hauled him close to her and spent her tears silently in his fine dark hair.

“I told you I’d come home,” he said, and wrapped his arms, just beginning to lose their baby-like plumpness, lengthening into boy, around her neck. He kissed her cheek, and it was then that she noticed how cold he was, and how dirty.

“Where have you been?” she cried, and this time she did shake him, not hard, but sharply, almost as sharp as the cold that sat sudden and silent in the middle of her chest. “Where?”

He began to fade then, becoming insubstantial in her arms first, and, when she tried to hold him, only a shadow in the darkness of her dream, a face that only he could have, but dirty and somehow terribly cold.

Touched by that cold, she began to cry: “Daniel! DANIEL, where have you been? Where are you?” Waking herself into that half world between perception and dream, when his image faded to a small silver moon just outside her window. The moon was a pale

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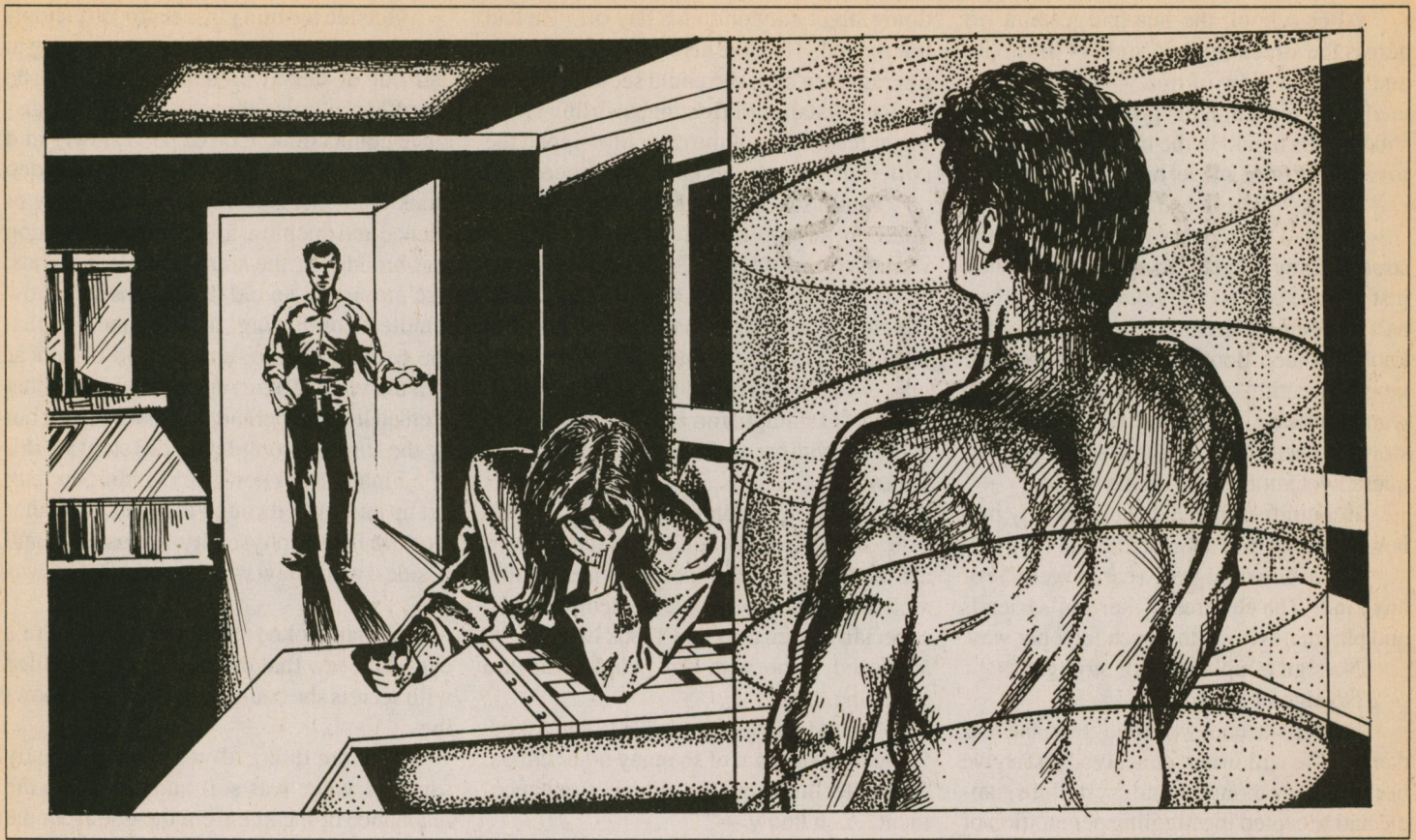
shape, a profile where its two biggest craters became dark spots on a face, became his eyes, large and bruised. Then he was gone, and all she had left was the contour of white in her window.

Even on the moon’s face, she could see tears.

“Yes, the Inspector is expecting my call. I don’t see how he could do otherwise, since I’ve been calling for him all morning,” she said (for the third time) into the wide screen of the video-phone by her bed. She hugged her arms too close to her chest, too tight, she knew; it would hurt by evening, but such a small hurt when counted with the others. She couldn’t stop the shaking, the tremors that started at the center of her body and rippled out in small but violent shudders, as though a stone had been dropped into a pond and the echoes of its impact continued to strike her, rippling out to the surface of her skin. “Fields, Gillian. Ms. I’m on a special list. He told me that if I thought of anything, I was to call immediately. Look, I know he’s there —”

He was there. Wolfe’s face darkened the screen. Though she might have considered him a good-looking man in other situations, they had not met at a party or at the art gallery or the park. They had met yesterday, where she had seen him through a haze of sedatives and informatives, talking in endless litanies about her son (things that she herself would not remember until later), while Wolfe sat and listened with the patience of a holy man. In the confusion of the drugs and her own pain, she had even thought him a priest; thought the process in the station to be her own last rites. It had felt much like dying.

His face was darker than it had been then; weary. The start of
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stubble drew the planes and angles of his face in rough hues and gaunt shadows. His eyes were tired; he squinted into the viewer and did not even try to give her a smile.

"You found something new?" he asked.

"Yes. His identity kit. I don't know why I didn't think of it before —"

"I asked if you had one," Wolfe said. "You wouldn't have forgotten, under the drugs."

"You asked if I had it. I don't. But his grandparents do. We took his fingerprints and did the pictures last summer when we were up in Maine."

She keyed in their address, which Wolfe immediately took. He nodded and told her he'd have it by the next day.

"So long?" she asked, hugging her arms around herself even tighter.

"So far, nobody's invented warp drive or transporter beams," he said, and this time he did smile. He did not mention that she should have had the kit with her, not in Maine, hundreds of miles away. She tried to smile back, but couldn't. He told her he would try to get someone on the next shuttle out, that he would call her if the kit gave them any new leads.

The next morning she sat outside of the glass cubicle that was Wolfe's office, waiting there alone on a narrow vinyl bench. The main area outside his cube was crowded with people; she watched as police escorts brought many others into the station.

Not all who came were criminals, she knew; it didn't take her long to know which were, and which were like her, here because they

were the victims of the others. Two worlds had opened up for her in the past forty-eight hours, splitting her down the middle between them. Here, outside of Wolfe's office, the images of those worlds became clear, recognizable: hunter and prey; toxic creatures, all of them. The venomous and victims alike, infected by contact with one another.

Hell, overtaking Paradise.

Soon she stopped watching the ones like her, who, shocked and bloodless, sat as though somehow taken outside of themselves (the women without makeup, who had cried it all off or smeared it into tight balls of Kleenex clutched in their hands; the men, ties skewed, pale around their mouths). Instead, she looked at the others; sat watchful and quiet on the bench as they came into the station.

Some strutted in, laughing, but Gillian could smell on them both ignorance and fear; their hands, held behind them in magnetic cuffs, were not as free as their smiles and taunts. Others sat quietly in long benches as their names were taken down; they answered questions in low voices, their eyes blank, dead-like, empty of hope or maybe just tired. Some, a very few, cried softly. She imagined that these last were the first-time offenders, who had not yet recovered from realizing how quickly the smallest incident could turn ugly, get out of hand.

She knew. She was here because of it.

Two days ago, she had put her son on a microbus that traveled, on a burly tube of charged air, straight to the neighborhood school. The air the bus skated over was set; the bus would not deviate from its assigned course. She had seen him off. His teachers had seen him on again at the end of the day.

After school, the bus had let him off across the street, in plain sight of his house and her own view of him — yellow-slickered, with his hat in his pocket and his rain shoes in his hand. In the time it took for her to reach the door and let him in, he had gone.

Where? *Where* had he gone?

She had looked down both sides of the street, asking herself this question. At first just perplexed. At the houses around her, half a dozen children were reaching for the knobs on their doors or dragging out their keys or greeting fathers or mothers who had warm, enticing scents in their kitchens and stories to hear from children who had conquered yet another day in the world.

Her confusion had dawned slowly into bewilderment and some irritation.

There was no sign of a car, no vehicle of any kind. The children — her son's friends and playmates — didn't even look her way.

No sign of upheaval, of struggle.

No sign of her son.

Before she had even thought it, the fear came to life within her, conceived just above her womb, as though some crystalline gamete had accepted the niggling penetration of another: Not just gone. *Taken*.

It had been two days.

Now she sat at the outer edges of the police station waiting room, listening to the bluster and weeping and the hopeless silence of those who had been caught, who were as familiar with this place as she was not, waiting for Wolfe to come to her with whatever news would stave away the images of Daniel, cold and crying and wondering why she didn't come.

A tall man laughed raucously, a harsh sound that jerked her around on the bench to stare at him, at his dusty leather jacket, around the station at the people there who waited and laughed, argued and cursed in this strange world they knew so much better than she did. As she looked, she wondered, suddenly, if any of the faces she saw there now could have been the last face, the last living thing, her son had seen.

Her glance caught on a man with safety pins pinned like medals in neat rows down his entire chest, where the skin around the needles was, in many places, red and pussy with infection. The dread she had been carrying in her belly stirred like a quickening child again.

Wolfe opened the door and gestured her in. He wore a T-shirt and rough jeans, either

doing street duty or on his day off. He had not shaved. He gave her steaming coffee in a ceramaden cup; she could see some of the coffee crystals still floating, swirling slowly in the middle of the cup. She sipped the coffee anyway; it was hot and it braced her.

Wolfe sat down behind his desk. Littered on the top of the cheap wood-grain were pictures of Daniel, glossies and slides of his fingerprints, even a tendril of his hair, which she knew she had cut on his first birthday — a small ponytail, caramel-colored, with flashes of gold sprinkled through it: glints of sunlight formed from the days he had spent with her on the beaches off Martha's Vineyard.

"The prints didn't help much," Wolfe said. "They usually don't. But the pictures are our best bet. You'd be surprised at how well they work. People remember kids, especially when they don't look like they're supposed to be with the people who are attending them."

"Is that all you can do?" Gillian asked. "I mean, I've heard of so many other things. Computer imaging. Aging him by enhancement. You know —"

"He's only been gone for two days," Wolfe said gently. "He's not going to age much in that time."

"He may not age at all if you don't find him," she said; the words snapped out of her, harder than she thought she could be and before she could stop their coming. Instead of apologizing, she deliberately remembered how cold her son had been, how dirty and miserable he had seemed in her dream. She didn't know if he could be that hurt inside and still live; she didn't want to think that he would have to be, and she thought that if he were going to hurt that much, then please, God, just let him be dead, let him be safe with Jesus or even Buddha, she didn't care which, just not with someone so soulless as to make him hurt that way.

After a long moment, Wolfe said her name softly, and then nothing more for a long time. Once again she thought of how he was letting her off, letting her steel herself in any way she could, letting her yell at him instead of at herself again.

In that silence, she raged against thinking, against all thought; each wave of it was a hot breath that stirred in her chest and fluttered there, around her heart, tightening it, painfully hard, and heating the skin on her face, inside her throat.

Outside the thin glass enclosure, shouts and obscenities came and went, wavering in and out of her awareness, as though she heard every noise through a bad long-distance connection. Coffee peed slowly into an electronic coffee pot; the silent video clock on Wolfe's wall radiated a clarity of silence and opening, a quality of connection that broadened the small room's horizons, like movies or an old TV; it was somehow mindless comforting: a hole in the wall that she could step into, almost, and disappear into the vibrant blues and reds, the face that seemed lit from behind, not just by light, but by the sun of a completely different world.

Finally she knew she couldn't do that: get up and walk through the wall to another world. It was physically impossible, and besides, who knew which world Daniel was in?

Gillian looked up then and met Wolfe's eyes, and saw that they were sad and filled with secrets she could never live with knowing.

"We are doing all we can," he finally said; his voice was soft and very low; the resonance of it came from the gut, from the center of him, she knew; but with that tone of truth she could also hear the fear, the same wild fear that hated to state the obvious but could not hide from itself nonetheless; a glimmering of the secrets she had already seen filling in his eyes.

Gillian could read the odds of her son's survival between the two of them. She knew then that it was over before it had even fairly begun. She stood and left Wolfe's office without looking back at him. On her way out, the man with the safety pins smiled at her, with the sweat of a sick man's dreams on his skin.

On Thursday, she went to the school to beg answers from the place he spent most of his time when he was not with her. Teachers remembered him in class Monday morning, and again, saying his polite good-byes as he was tagged for the bus; classmates recalled playing *Stick* and *Reach the Monkey* at Skills Hour, and *Find Mr. Bell* at recess. A boy with blond hair that was almost silver confessed that he and Daniel had stolen out of the third bay door to catch a quick glance at the Cacklejays lined along the fences, singing songs made up of triad notes. Daniel had been impressed with the notes, this boy remembered.

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She and the school board members had been impressed only that a door had somehow been left open, its alarms disarmed, so that any child could have walked out into the schoolyard alone. Or any stranger could have walked in. But the boy said they had seen only the birds.

Gillian stopped, on her way back to her car, to watch the Cocklejons gather on the silver fence around the school. The sun was bright; hot on her face. The birds sat in small groups, preening themselves, and singing. Children at the school knew that the birds had been artificially constructed, bred out of feathers and bone during the last decade's attempts at genetic replication. From their perspectives, where everything was strange and new, they didn't see the mistakes the adults saw: the zoetrope feathers, the fish-like eyes that were almost always blue; the imperfect replication that had failed to duplicate original components but had, instead, created a species that was entirely new.

To the children, the birds seemed created especially for them. Their cacophony of bright sound mocked the other birds, who could never hope to produce the Cocklejons' music: the high-low trilling of triple registers, all three notes coming at once from one throat with each sound that was sung.

Standing alone on the blacktop parking lot, Gillian wondered if a child, made from bone and hair, would speak in hues of variegated tones and call her *mother* in sounds sung like that.

After six months, she had to fight to keep anyone working on the case. After a year, her parents gently suggested that she choose a plot at the Deep River Cemetery and finally put Daniel to rest. Over hot chocolate, they took her hand and said it would be best. The shock of it made all the pain she thought she'd controlled come back to her vitals, like a ferret let loose in her belly again.

Friends didn't echo her parents' advice, but they thought it, she knew. Even some part of her own soul begged her to do it, to let him go and leave it some peace. Still, she didn't think she could. Hold a funeral. Not for a child who could still be alive. To lower an empty coffin (no more than 50 inches long) into the earth and declare to the world that he was there, beneath the grass and flowers and the cold gray headstone that could only read:

Daniel Spencer Fields

Born: September 25, 1998

Died: ???

Slowly, maddeningly, Daniel's file was filed further and further back, until finally one secretary let it slip that it was no longer active but archived.

She demanded to see Wolfe.

He came. He stood in front of her and said nothing; gave her a tentative smile that died quickly, as though his face could no longer allow him a joy of any kind or even simple mild pleasure and couldn't hold the weight of it for very long. He still had compassion for her, and for Daniel, she could tell. It was in his eyes, in the way he said nothing but knew what she wanted from him just the same. In a moment of unusual clarity she saw that this job was killing him.

She knew about the file; he knew she knew. She could see, in his eyes, that he would tell her; but she could also see that the truth of it would hurt them both. So instead of asking, she asked to see him privately.

His eyebrows rose; he nodded and led her into his office. There, he twisted a clear pole by the window; the blinds shut, making his office a warm, dark place.

He stood close to her, put his arms on her shoulders. "What do you need?" he asked quietly.

He held her while she cried, and said nothing while she released in his arms the year's roller coaster of hate, anger, fear, and worst of all, its impotence.

She was unable to drive home, afterward. He took her home; put her to bed. They made love and in those hours she was separated from the pain, the grief.

She watched as he slept, afraid to sleep herself. Above the dark curve of his shoulder, the moon rose to fullness outside her window.

They would see each other as often as time and emotion would permit; between her job and his, it wasn't often.

He asked to be with her on Daniel's birthday; she declined. And so she was alone in the house when the flowers came, sitting in her dead-quiet living room and slowly drinking glass after glass of wine. The red of the wine glowed at the bottom of her glass, soft embryo colors.

Then they came. The flowers. They

were delivered by a girl from FTD Direct: white roses, pale tulips, and pussywillow. One ivory orchid with a streak of red down its throat. Tied in ivory ribbon made from watered silk.

The delivery girl couldn't tell her who had sent it; didn't have a name, just the description: of a young boy, about ten, who had come into the shop.

This boy had paid with cash.

Watching the replay of the investigation of the store, Gillian saw Wolfe and his team seal the FTD store and go over it with instruments he couldn't even begin to explain to her. She watched as one woman poured concentrated light onto the shop floor like water; under that light (even second-hand, seen on the photofax), every filament, every fragment, was wildly enhanced: dirt stood out like the mountains; hair wavered under the force of the light like skinny worms desperate to go to ground; bits of glass and paper shone in delicate colors, the paper swirling up around the light's heat like multicolored moths.

His team picked up everything on the floor, on the counter. Though any fingerprints they might have had had been obliterated by now, they picked up each hair and the flakes of skin and even measured the floor for its heat ratio to gauge how heavy its traffic had been.

She watched the video fax, which wavered with its not-quite-perfect resolution, while Wolfe grilled the shop owner and the delivery girl. He asked what they had seen, and they described a boy of about ten, with blond hair and dark skin.

"Blond?" she asked, confused, and looked at Wolfe.

He paused the fax. "We've checked the fibers; they match. The color is different, but then it would have to be, wouldn't it, or we'd have found him by now. It's Daniel's hair, Gillian. He's *here*, somewhere."

Gillian sat up stiff and straight in her chair, and leaned close to the fax replay. She reset the PAUSE, and it began to play again. There, in the fax replay, Wolfe was saying to the owner: "But no one else?"

The owner shook his head. "Just the boy. Said the flowers were for his mother. To celebrate his birthday. Said his father gave him the money."

Gillian's heart stopped; she looked wildly toward Wolfe, who keyed up the file

on her old lover, Daniel's father, and gave it to the sergeant waiting behind her.

"But we've already checked Seth out," she said. "He's on the other side of the world. *You said he checked out.*"

"I doubt that Seth *does* have him," Wolfe said. "Precautions, Gillian."

"Are you telling me that Daniel thinks some stranger is his own father?"

Wolfe sat down and faced her over his desk. It was hard for her to believe, watching him across the fake wood, that they had been lovers or had even spent time together. His face was hard with his own frustrations; distant, as though half a dozen thoughts were running in his head.

"Did you ever tell Daniel about his father?" he asked.

"Of course I did."

"Did he ever see pictures? Holograms? Any sort of likeness?"

She shook her head on every one.

"Then how was Daniel to know that this man *wasn't* his father?"

It took her a moment, but finally her hands came up to her cheeks; they had gone cold, the skin on them clammy and pale.

"Oh god," she whispered.

Seth checked out. In the outback of Australia, of course, he could have hidden anything. But he couldn't have been in two places at once, and the aborigines that he worked with were happy to testify that he hadn't left, and that the only child he had was his own: a slender brown girl with blue eyes, gotten with the aboriginal woman who kept his house and cooked his food while he worked on her people with strange medicines, some of which actually did some good. No doubt he had worked his medicines on her, too, Gillian thought, too tired for jealousy but unable to avoid the bite of its irony, bitter in her soul, like the aftertaste of bile.

No other leads. A few people at the mall had seen the boy, had given descriptions. Beyond actually bumping into him themselves, though, what else was there?

She didn't see Wolfe for a long time after. He stayed away, and she knew then that, in his way, Wolfe considered himself father to Daniel, a child he had seen only in photographs and police drawings. A moment's jealousy made her almost hate him. That faded with the days and the long nights; with it went the isolation she had lived with for so long.

She waited, alone, for both the man and the boy to return to her. Eventually, the man did.

The next year, on Daniel's birthday, she once again received the flowers. White roses, pale tulips, a pussywillow. One ivory orchid with red at its throat. Tied in ivory silk.

They came without warning. This time, they had been wired in, using a stolen credit card, now untraceable.

She dried the flowers in silica and kept every one.

After two years, she stopped harassing Wolfe about Daniel's file. It wasn't worth the quiet pain that rippled over his features and made his skin pale and tight over his cheekbones and jaw. She knew; hadn't he told her? They had thousands of cases like this, every year, and only a few hundred people to work on them. In her dreams, she saw a sea of children.

The leads on Daniel's case had dried much like the flowers on the counter; the hull of hope might still be beautiful, in that fragile way of flowers rooted in silica; but empty, for all the fullness and color that seemed to defy their dying.

Daniel's file finally reached that cabinet which, except on those rare occasions when a body had actually been found or a child positively identified, remained forever closed.

Two years, eight months. She kept her job mostly through her boss's good heart; was unutterably weary every day of her life.

She'd let her garden go to weed, and was determined to get it right this year, someday, when she could get to it. Things she could do without slid; the things she needed, she held on to, hard, and felt the strain of their weight as many of them slipped by her as well.

The kitchen plumbing broke down. She called in the repairer from the complex, a man named *Jimmy* or *Timmy* or *Tony*, or something with a mumble and then a lilt at the end; she never could figure out which. He came to fix it, the first time she'd seen him for nearly two years in her house, not puttering harmlessly around the complex.

Taller than average, with gray eyes in which worlds seemed to whirl, he smiled at

her weirdly and she remembered then that he wasn't quite right; a little slow, maybe; good with his hands but not with people.

Jittery with someone in her house, she shut the bedroom door and paced the living room, unable to sit down, to relax at all or even read a book.

It took him a long time to fix the sink; longer than it should have. This thought came to her several times, nagging at her nerves. Finally she came into the kitchen to see how much longer he would be at it. His tools were neatly packed away; he had even wiped up the counter and sink.

He stood, swaying so slightly that it was almost imperceptible, in front of her last picture of Daniel.

She tried to speak and found her throat too dry for words, the words too harsh for the sudden weirding of a place so familiar as her own home. She tried twice, then finally said, "*What are you doing?*" in a hoarse whisper.

He turned to her with a beatific smile and said, "Nice boy you got there."

The world swirled in colors of gray and a dirty, bruised black; she felt herself falling, but was unable to stop it, even when the man, with his strange bright eyes, barked a startled "*Ho!*" and caught her as she fell.

Coming up, out of a murk so thick she could only move slowly, if at all. Thoughts collided so painfully she could almost see them strike and flash against one another. Coming awake, but not quite; that last step, like a chasm: too far to cross, in such a dark place.

Her head hurt. Vaguely; in a disconnected way.

She heard his voice above her, crooning, as though to a child: "Now then, pretty lady, it's all right. I can make it all right. That's what I do. I can fix you. Shush, now, little baby, don't you cry..."

She tried to struggle against his arms, against the fingers that stroked her hair away from her face, that traced the curve of her cheeks and chin and wavered just above her lips. But for all her fear and sudden loathing, she found she could only move inside herself.

"So pretty, like petals," he was saying. Then he sighed and shifted her away from him, onto the floor. She couldn't quite wake (couldn't open her eyes, make herself move), and she didn't know why. Heard him stand and listened, terrified in her dizzy, half-

consciousness, for the sound of him unloosening his belt buckle, unzipping his pants. He never did.

Instead, she heard him sigh again, heard his hand rustle against the leaves of the birthday flowers she had dried, which stood, shrine-like, in a crystal vase on her counter with a light hung just above it.

She struggled against the floor, trying to get up, to open her eyes, to wake up, dammit: nothing in her head translated to actual movement, and a pain, just above her left temple, bolted sharp through her head. She realized then that she must have hit the counter on the way down. She wanted to moan, to thrash and scream, but the world bleached itself white every time she tried.

"Such pretty flowers," the repairman murmured above her. Then she heard him step over her, open the door, and leave her home. Her relief washed through her like a hard and sudden rain. She heard herself crying, felt the tears on her cheeks, cool and wet, like rain; then her senses washed pale and grainy, the light under her eyelids whitening with the rising of a sliding inner moon. The storm of it took her back, to dreams of Daniel with two faces, laughing and crying both.

She woke up hours later on the floor. "God," she whispered to herself, "what have I become?"

The corner of the counter was spotted with blood; her temple throbbed where a small, sharp gash had dried almost closed. She sat up and took the world one swirl at a time. Wiped the counter off, later, and put

herself to bed.

She didn't call Wolfe. What could she say? That she'd scared some poor disabled handyman half to death with her own private obsessions? Wolfe knew enough about her fears; more than he could stand, maybe.

God, she thought, *how am I supposed to live like this?*

Late that night she was awakened by a voice she thought was from her dreams. The sound of it came up from the air above her head and rose like a ghost into her bedroom's darkness.

"Your son is Daniel?" a man's voice asked.

Gillian woke with her heart pounding, badly disoriented in the darkness; she had no idea where anything in the room was, wasn't even sure of the shape of her bed. Then her eyes adjusted, her panic began to subside. She knew where she was, and once she knew that, she remembered the voice she thought she had heard in her dreams. She sat up and breathed in great, shuddering gasps, then broke down and sobbed into her hands and the thin acetate sheets. God, she half prayed, half cried, *if I can't have my son, take away the dreams then, too, please —*

She was wiping her face clean with a towel from the bathroom when she heard a low buzzing, so soft she had to listen hard for it, a whisper of white noise in the dim light of her bed lamp. She was baffled by it for less than a few heartbeats. Then she followed the noise back to her bed, to the alcove above her pillows where the video screen hummed softly on active mode. The screen

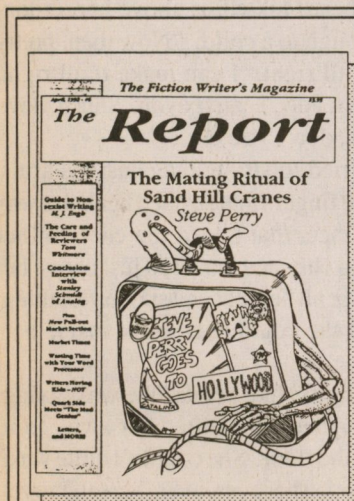
had been blacked out from the sending end; she knew it had been done deliberately, because her own mode was set for visual as well as voice, always. The connection from the other side had just been broken; the time was indicated on the readout, and corresponded almost exactly with her return to the room. Her side of the connection had not been broken, however; it was still receiving, still recording. A small, red light on the console blurred softly on and off, telling her that the voice she had heard had not come from her dreams.

She touched the replay and played back the message in the machine's memory, and that ghost of a voice lifted once more from the speaker console and out of her dreams forever:

"Your son is Daniel?"

She was getting tired of sitting in his office. She wanted to pound the streets, to patrol with his officers: She would know her son, even after two and a half years, after more than that; between seven and nearly ten there were years of growth, inches of it, maybe more than only inches. She remembered her own pictures, how her ears had finally fit closer to her head, how her legs had grown four inches to a gangly pre-teen's length, how her face had lengthened and deepened with personality and thought and the firming of her features which were growing full-tilt into adolescence and then to womanhood.

Who would know her son's face besides her? Hadn't she seen her own transformation in the mirrors at home in Maine?



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Surely she would know him, she thought; surely.

But Wolfe had called her in to talk about the pictures, the ones they still had of him from the file years ago, when the fullness of his cheeks showed that he'd only just gotten past baby fat and his face had still been so very small. She looked at the pictures and could only think of how small everything was in the picture, in his face: how small the scale of her son had been at seven; small enough, she remembered suddenly, to press against the slight mound of her belly when he snuggled against her.

"These won't do any good," she said, and Wolfe nodded; he seemed patient, but underneath, as she had learned to read him, she saw a growing excitement and purpose.

"Imaging is sketchy when they're this young," he said. "No pun intended. Our artist has worked hours over these pictures. Even the computer's enhancement can only make an educated guess."

He passed a printout to her over the desk. The face on the paper was almost familiar — part stranger, partly known. Its flat dimensions could not hold the warmth she remembered in Daniel's eyes. This face was smiling, because all of her pictures of Daniel had been smiling; what else could the artist do but have him smile in this computer-generated rendition? But she wondered; if he smiled at all now, was it twisted with any pain, any sorrow? By any of the memories he had of her? There was no sunlight on the face of this child staring up and beyond her, looking out to a place where there was no longer any camera to capture his image. His hair didn't shine and there was no color in his cheeks or his eyes, and no wind blowing to catch the strands of his hair and lift them into a nimbus around his head.

"This isn't my son," she said; looking at the flat image of him, a halfling Daniel whom she did not know, she felt the world slide with a sickening lurch; she dug her nails into her palms and hung on, grimly, to the picture Wolfe said looked like her son, now.

"The computer can only approximate," Wolfe said. "I have people out looking for your son with this picture, but I'm not any more satisfied with it than you are." He leaned over the desk and looked hard at her, perhaps, she thought, to measure her as she had so often gauged him. "There's one more thing we can do, if you're willing. I won't



tell you it will be easy. It may be the hardest thing you've done yet."

"The hardest thing is never knowing," she said, and he nodded.

"Good," he said. "Can you give me back the hair from his kit?"

"His hair?"

"Yeah, hair. Like that ponytail of his you keep by your bed. A few strands would do it. Or if you don't want to use that, do you think you could find some at home, some single strands of it? Even if you've vacuumed his room or changed it —"

"I haven't."

"Well, if you had, I could have brought in a team. Flakes of skin, toenails — whatever."

The absurdity of what he was asking left her without wind, sluggish, almost; unable to follow him. "What has this got to do with finding my son?" she asked, focusing on his eyes as that watchful quality in them grew.

Now Wolfe, her new lover, her sometime lover, wanted to give him back to

her: her son, but not the way she had thought he would.

She stared at the holo deck for a long time. Sound poured from it, sweeping a force that was almost physical around her, a storm of words and music that came like a strong wind from the deck around her. Word had it that TV was going to be replaced with holo, too, even the big flat-screens; it was only a matter of time. What would she look like on holo, she wondered? What would her parents and friends look like?

(What would Daniel look like?)

Slowly she turned the lock of his hair over in her hands. She'd had it for these two and a half years; had kept it, almost shrine-like, in a crystal box by her bed. Wolfe now had three single strands of it, each too thin and fragile to thread a needle with, almost; but enough to hold a world of genetic coding.

He had not suggested cloning; its science was still too inexact. Gillian thought of the Cacklejays and their triad notes: so beautiful, so wildly exotic. But she still

wasn't sure she regretted that the option had not been quite there for her, yet. Even if they could have given her another Daniel, having that child still wouldn't have made her sleep any easier over losing this one: *this* Daniel, *her* Daniel, who she still wept over and prayed to God that he was not hurting or in pain. She still had no idea who had that child; didn't know, even, if he was alive; if this last year had not taken him from her entirely.

To suckle another Daniel, to birth him whole from the remains of his own hair, before she knew —

But Wolfe thought he was. Alive. And with that thread of hair they could build a picture of him, as exactly Daniel as Daniel would be himself, down to the texture of his skin and the way he smiled. Even with a bit of the soul captured, Wolfe had said. Listening to the notes from the holo, feeling them move against her skin, she thought now that she knew what he had meant: not perfectly, the soul from the machine; not with the stamp of experience or memories. But the facsimile of intelligence would be soul enough; the exactness of his image perfect enough. What she would see would be Daniel, at any age she chose, in the purity inherent to that single instant of one moment's captured existence.

"I don't know if I can do this," she'd told Wolfe. To see him and not touch him. To watch a machine manufacture his movements, his smile; to have it be perfectly him. But of course she would; what else had she been left with?

At the fulcrum of this thought, aware-

ness struck her: The video console was on. A picture dimly lit the screen.

Gillian turned off the holo music. Silence, or something near it, replaced it. The audio console whispered its white noise again; beyond that, she could hear the faintest sounds of breathing. She heard the man on the other end of the line gasp, then hold his breath. She knew immediately that he was about to disconnect.

"No!" she cried. "*Please!* Don't leave me!"

She crawled as quietly as she could to the video screen and crouched just below the camera's line of sight. She touched the volume-adjust lightly. "Please," she whispered. "Talk to me."

From her crouch she could see darkness on the visual, but not the kind of darkness that came from blanking out the screen. She could make out, in vague lines, the silhouette of a man sitting in that darkness. He held a blanket to his face, covering it; after a moment, she became aware that he was crying softly into it.

"I'm sorry," he wept. "I'm so sorry."

"Please. Where's my son? It's all right; it's okay. Just please, give him back to me. Nothing else matters."

The man cried harder, wrenching the blanket against his eyes and face.

"I *can't*," he finally said. "Not now. He's so beautiful. So beautiful. I loved him, I swear. I just wanted you to know."

"*What have you done to him?*" she said, crying herself now. "Please, don't hurt him. *Please.*"

"I just had to tell you," the man said; his

low, deep voice was muffled in the blanket and with his tears.

A bubble came up in her thoughts, like a giggle let loose under stress: that his voice would be beautiful under ordinary circumstances. That it was now twisted in some terrible agony; she could hear his hurt; it echoed almost perfectly with her own. And that the tones, so slow, almost slurred, were somehow familiar. She thought of the man who had held her on the kitchen floor and crooned to her about her beauty, then thought of her son, her own beautiful child, and how this man would have inflicted this agony of his on that child many times now.

No pleading now. She lifted herself up and stood in full sight of the screen.

The force of her own energy slammed up through her; her heart beat too fast and her breaths came one on top of another and she screamed at the screen, clutched it with her hands and rocked it on its stand, crying and wailing and screaming obscenities. In one breath she would accuse him of all the horrors that had battered her hard, night and day, in dreams and awake, and would then beg him to give her back her baby, for God's sake, *please....*

He gave no answer; just sat, silent and quietly listening.

When the scraps of her reason finally returned to her, she felt her knees going, turning weak and rubbery. She slowly collapsed to the floor and rocked in a small, softly crying ball there in front of the video. He spoke, then. All he said was: "I'm sorry. I am. You had a beautiful child."

She lifted her head and looked dumbly

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back up at the screen. He held on the line long enough for her to realize the past tense of his words and then hung up before her voice stopped echoing in the room, when her throat found itself past the noise it could humanly make and became only a storm of sounds with death flying hard through the center of them.

Pale in his office, she sat at a computer terminal that had been loaded with her son's genetic code and waited for the holograph to appear before her. Wolfe loaded a clear, strangely shaped cube into one of the computer's connections. He reached to turn on the holo, and she stayed his hand.

"Wait. I need to know some things first."

Wolfe nodded. She took one deep breath and asked him: "Is he still alive?"

Wolfe bent his fingers around hers and held her hand firmly. "I can't answer that," he said, "because I don't know. We knew he was alive last year. But the conversation you recorded last night refers to Daniel in both the past and present tense. That could mean anything. It could also mean, simply, that Daniel's kidnapper is intelligent and wants to keep us off our guard. He may give conflicting signals just to keep us off balance."

"Then why does he call at all?"

Wolfe shrugged. "I won't know that until I have him here. You can never tell, Gillian. There is no pattern with people like this, not really. I could tell you that he feels guilty about depriving you of your son and is trying, in his own way, to make amends. Or it could be a deeper psychosis. It could be that he isn't satisfied with just hurting Daniel anymore and now he wants to deepen the effect by hurting you, too. Or — and I hope this is it — it could be that his guilt over taking Daniel has worked on him over the years and has made him want to give all of this up. He just may not know how. At least, that seems logical to me, or he wouldn't have taken so many chances."

"Is that why he let his room be filmed?" she asked.

"Yeah, I think it is," Wolfe said. "I've got the FBI computers working on every hotel's visual image in the country. If he's in one, we'll find him."

"What if he's not in a hotel?" she asked.

"Chances are good that he is. You knew him. You could identify him now. He's got

to keep moving, don't you see? Gillian, it's the best lead we've had in this case so far. Don't give up on us this close to the end of the game.

"What do you think he's done to him?" she whispered.

Wolfe didn't answer; he blew out a hard breath from his mouth and turned his face away from hers. Then he said, "I don't know. But we can both pretty much guess, can't we? We've known it pretty much all along, haven't we, even before last night's conversation? He's a beautiful kid, I won't lie to you."

"He's been abused? Sexually?"

"There's more than a likely chance of it. Sometimes women take kids so they can have one of their own. But men usually don't, especially if they're drifters."

"Is he gay?" she asked. When Wolfe raised his eyebrows, she said, "Because I've heard that gays aren't usually violent, aren't prone to sexual abuse, even less so, maybe, than other men. But he said he *loved* him, and the way he said it —"

She stopped; she had to. The banshee sounds of last night were threatening to bubble up again, boil past her throat, out and up into the room. This time, she was sure it would kill her.

"He may be gay," Wolfe said, "but he doesn't have to be. Some people are just sick, Gillian. If anything is equal in this life, it's in how sick *anyone* can be. As far as I can tell, a sex offender's only sexual preference is 'small and helpless.' Gender really doesn't enter into it, at least while a child is still young. In fact, in all probability, Daniel's kidnapper is most likely straight, or else he would definitely not risk us taking Daniel away from him now. If I'm right, and he wants to let Daniel go now, it may have more to do with Daniel's growing into adolescence than it does with guilt or a conscience."

He didn't say what she'd already thought of, every minute since last night's call: that Daniel had been here, only miles away from them, from her, all along. She thought about what Wolfe said, and knew that whatever had happened to Daniel, it didn't matter to her anyway. Wolfe was right: They were close. They knew it; "Jimmy" or "Tony" or whomever he was had to know it, too. She nodded, and Wolfe keyed in the holo.

Color and light erupted in the air in front of her. More controlled and tightly focused than the audio holo, this image flew like a

small bird from the deck and hovered just a foot over it: pink. A curl of embryo. Its heart beating deep inside its chest; she could see it, past the clear flesh, the body transparent: lines of blue and that deep red ball in the middle, beating furiously with the light and energy of a small sun.

Gillian caught her voice in her throat, unable to breathe. Then she laughed shakily and looked up at Wolfe. She smiled briefly and said, "This is a lot better than the sonograms. All I could see then was that he had his hands in his crotch." The buds that would grow into arms vigorously tried to move, and her stomach lurched with the echo of its emptiness, the only reality she really had now. "That's how the nurses knew he was a boy," she said, almost whispering.

"Can you do this?" Wolfe asked, touching her shoulder.

She nodded. "I have to do this. He's given us no other choice."

"I could do it myself, raise the age to ten and just give it to my people."

"No," she said. "I have to do this."

Wolfe nodded and began keying in commands to up the age of the image. He had any range of selections before him; she watched as he entered in the strings, which were surprisingly simple: 00 (for the focal base, he told her) 10dd5 (for what must be Wolfe's personal code, she thought) and the age number, which had started at .02 (two months in the womb, set at that point automatically as the lowest the setting could go, he explained). He keyed in the sequence for Daniel's current age: 00 10dd5 10.

The image changed, molting and growing into something entirely new. From one strand of Daniel's hair came the boy himself, or something in his image, at least. He looked nothing like what she had expected, but everything that was so utterly *him*. The beauty of it, so individual, was far greater than she could have imagined. A likeness of a child becoming a young boy swirled into shape before her and she suddenly recognized how the lines of his child's face had changed, elongating here, widening there. He was tall, like her, already 4'11"; but his honey-colored eyes had darkened almost to black; his hair was still dark, here, in its pure, unchanged form: brown with deep red highlights, but straight and very thick, with no snatches of gold because the sun, in this likeness, had never touched him.

His skin was perfectly golden, without a scratch or scab; it had never been touched, nor ever known injury.

She watched as Wolfe slipped his hands into the smooth, transparent gloves at the end of the tube-like connection. Though they only covered his hands, with them, he could maneuver the image into dozens of poses.

"How are you doing that?" she asked.

"Impulse-based," he said, and grinned at her; in that smile she saw in him a much younger man. "Watch."

He closed his eyes and she could see him thinking. And the image moved: Daniel smiling, waving, holding a basketball, laughing. Wolfe stopped at each pose and froze each one for a printout of Daniel's likeness. And, because he had to, last of all, of Daniel crying; then dry-eyed and used.

A woman knocked on the door behind them and opened it. She wore the same uniform Wolfe did. "Captain," she said, "we've found him." Then she looked at Gillian and the transported image of the boy and said, more formally, "We've located the hotel, sir, where the Bourne man may be staying."

"The repairmen?" Gillian asked Wolfe. "You're sure?"

Wolfe nodded (to her or the officer, she had no idea which) and got up. He took the other officer out into the corridor. Gillian could hear them talking in the background, though faintly. Every other sense was taken up with the sight of Daniel at ten years old, looking out at the space within the glass office with weary pain in his eyes.

Wolfe stepped back into the room. "Look, this may be just a wild goose chase. He could have already left — probably has, in fact, since he made his call last night. He didn't show up for work this morning, and we're pretty sure he's our man. But the hotel registry captured on the computer last night is no more than ten minutes away. If he is there, and he's the one, it means he's been close by all along. *If* he really is this repairman, this Tony Ray Bourne. I'm going right now."

"Let me come with you," she said.

Wolfe shook his head and sat her back down in the chair. "You've done enough," he said. "I have no idea what I'm walking into at this place. He could be armed; he could be damned dangerous. I don't know. Just let me do my job. If he's there, I'll bring

him back to you."

She didn't have to ask who the "he" was in Wolfe's last words; the tone of Wolfe's voice had changed at the end, if the gender hadn't, from a merciless unknown to a warm and familiar reference: to Daniel. Who he meant to bring back was Daniel.

He left and she turned around slowly, she and the chair seeming to drive the room's gravity as gracefully as an underwater ballet. For a full half hour, she simply sat and thought nothing; just felt: the possibility of hope, of joy to come, slowly warmed themselves from the grave she had put them in. They began to warm her, too; when they began to come, she realized that she hadn't known, before, how cold she had been.

With the warmth, the numbness and the peace fell away slowly. Gillian surveyed Wolfe's office, this room she had come to know so well; suddenly, it seemed foreign to her, an unnecessary place in history and time. The man who lived there would still mean something to her; he always would, she knew. An energy took hold of her then: the energy of waiting; an anxious, almost painful force of containment.

Gillian stalked Wolfe's office; made inquiries of the front desk and the officers on duty. No one would tell her anything, and she couldn't read the looks in their eyes, those practiced, quiet eyes that said nothing so politely.

In a rage of excitement, she returned to Wolfe's office. Daniel stood in front of her, lit shining up from the grill on the holo deck. The terrible sadness was still on his face, pulling his full lips down, pulling his whole body and soul down with the weight of its burden.

"Oh, baby," she crooned.

She sat down at Wolfe's console, moving as slowly and carefully as she had when putting him in his crib, ten years ago. She slipped on the gloves and began, inexpertly, to manipulate the image. First she keyed in the sequence: 00 10dd5 1.6. Immediately the image flickered, shrinking down to Daniel at one and a half. The terrible sadness was still on his face, but on an eighteen-month-old, it seemed more like simple thunderclouds: tears on the horizon, coming soon but not quite there.

She closed her eyes and thought of him the way she remembered: a happy baby, always grinning, even when he was teething and his gums were sore. When she looked

up, she saw that her memories had turned her son's face from sad to smiling again; no tears, but a gleeful smile around wet gums and chewing on his forefinger.

She aged him, then, as he had been the last day she had seen him: seven years old. Precocious; strong and lithe; intelligence in his eyes and a bit of mischief too. This last she didn't know if the holo projected or if she had simply put it there herself.

She looked long and hard at the little boy she had known nearly three years ago. He would be changed. The world would have done a great hurt to him, and it might be many years before she would see him smile again. But he would still be there, not entirely Tony Ray Bourne's anymore. He would be hers, and she would make sure he still had a life to look forward to.

The thought of him growing thrilled her, as his movements in her womb had once thrilled her. Alone in the office, undisturbed, she began to age her son: twelve, fifteen, seventeen: he grew into a tall and handsome boy, with her long legs and her lover's wide shoulders; nineteen, twenty, twenty-one: college age, his face was sensitive and still very strong; twenty-five, twenty-eight, thirty-two: an adult, close enough to her own age; Lord, but he was beautiful. He stood as an adult before her, completely naked, and she felt nothing more than the pride that burned everything in her pure and almost omniscient.

She stopped the holo at thirty-two and looked down at her own hands for a moment. They were shaking, but still young and strong; not yet the hands of the mother of a grown man. She clutched them together and wept over her fingers until she felt the dead tired calm of peace she had so recently found come slowly back to her again.

Wolfe came into the room just as she had gathered her courage and recovered from the joy enough to see her son as older still — thirty-five, forty, maybe even forty-five. What she saw filled her again with that almost perfect awe: Daniel at thirty-five, young and strong and far more beautiful than she or her lover had been by themselves.

She felt Wolfe stand behind her; felt something else, too.

"Gillian?" Wolfe said behind her.

She froze at the hurt in his voice, at the truth revealed there; knew him too well not to hear it. But still wouldn't take her eyes from the image of Daniel, thirty-five, hover-

ing just out of her reach.

Lit by the glittered haze of the holo-light, the glass walls of Wolfe's office became a mirror, and she saw his face come up behind her, behind her son's: a ghostly apparition that was pale in the reflected light, all shadows and darkness around his eyes. He looked like a ghost; her face and Wolfe's, in the windows around her, lit with Daniel at their heart.

Here he was: He was alive and smiling down at her.

Then Wolfe's voice was like a dry typhoon in the room, quiet, but tearing around it viciously, burning everything it touched. With the words, the face in the holo spoke, not the son but the mask that was Wolfe's face, out of synch with sound and tortured by the light shining from the deck. This time, she knew, he would have to tell her. He had become the Oracle, as solid and silvered as cooled metal or the moon above her bed

outside her window. His mouth moved and the words moved in the room and swept her up in the wind tearing around in it. The words said: "*Daniel is dead*" and she began to cry with open eyes beneath the image of the boy as a man. The rest were bats, leaves scattering around the room from the crisp Connecticut falls when he and she had raked these leaves and scattered them again across the lawn by the power of a breath they had breathed between them. They tangled in her hair and stung her eyes, and she felt the heat of the tears on her face before she would admit that the sound of his words and the terror in them had any meaning for her at all; none at all.

Wolfe was saying to her: "Bourne killed him, then came back for you. He had the body. *God*. He was holding a funeral. With Daniel on the bed. And flowers, like yours. *Gillian?* Daniel is dead.

Can you hear me?"

She didn't answer him; didn't respond in any other way but to put her hand up toward the likeness of her son as a man. As she moved, the image moved with her: Daniel's hand rose with the exact grace of his mother's; where their fingers touched, lines of color burst into white light, the pads of his fingers disappearing into hers. Her face and his, perfectly pale, frozen perfectly still in a terrible smile of light and grief.

Wolfe knew that grief, knew it would be with her. Always. Well, so would he, he knew. He had been through this — so many times. But the first step was to let go.

Wolfe closed the door quietly behind him and left her with the bright light of the holo and the memories she would need to bury him with: man and boy. ■

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Useful Phrases

Gene Wolfe

Illustration by Rachid Idriss

It was a simple phrase book, with statements such as "Are you familiar with these caverns?" in Tcôvese.

I. Show Me Something Better

I found the phrase book in my pocket. That itself seems to me extraordinary and significant, for I have a great many books, both at home — to confess the truth, my small apartment is furnished with little else — and in my bookshop. I need not, I hope, describe my shop to you, who have been in it so often. There are a great many used books there, as you know, a few new ones, and a small rack with magazines. There is a cat asleep in the window; her name is Lafiondahlinda. There is the aspidistra, the cash register, and me. Mine is the last bookshop in the city, and has been for many years, to wrap purchases in brown paper and tie the package with string. I have some customers who give me their trade for that reason alone.

I frequently buy entire grocery boxes of books, when they can be bought cheaply enough, without examining their contents very thoroughly. After all, if I can get the whole boxful for three dollars, and I've seen two books that should bring five or more each, why shouldn't I? When I have more time, I go through the box with care, put the junk into the twenty-five cent bin I set out on the sidewalk on fine days, and (alas!) take home a book or three that I imagine I may someday wish to read myself.

No doubt the phrase book reached my pocket by that route, though I have no memory of having put it there. On a day in late winter or early spring, I must have purchased such a box (I wonder what else was in it?) from somebody who was moving. (I think I can guess, now, where he was going.) It must have intrigued me, even then, though not so much that I remembered it when I reached home. At the tail-end of October, when the first ice storm swept in from the plains, I wore my winter coat again and discovered it.

It is small, and by no means thick, with a handsome blue cover I take to be simulated leather. The odd script on this



cover means (as I now know) no more than "Useful Phrases" — *Tohish Ablar*. The full title, from the title page, is TOHISH ABLAR SENS-ORRIYYA ERT, that is to say, "Useful Phrases for Piteous Visitors to Earth." (I am guessing at the final word, which does not occur elsewhere; but this identification seems to me very probable.)

At first I could not make heads nor tails of the writing, of course. But opposite each phrase in the script of Tcôvé, the book supplies both a phonetic translation (likewise in the fifty-three characters of the diloveta, naturally) and a plain, written version in the terrestrial language involved: *Tem um melhor?* for example, which is "Show me something better" in Portuguese.

I concentrated on the English and French at first, for obvious reasons, and they provided me with the pronunciation of the characters of the diloveta, six of which are pronounced alike (as *P*) but one of which is pronounced in five different ways (*K, Q, CH, CH* in German *ich, X, and VK*) depending upon its position in the word and the word's in the sentence. As was only to be expected, I supposed then that the language was a merely terrestrial one with which I was unfamiliar.

Even so, many of the phrases thus translated struck me as peculiar. Who would wish to say, "You no longer recognize her," "Mine is a similar address," or "I will tell the trees to be quiet"? I studied all these phrases diligently, however — so much so that I sometimes found myself murmuring in my bath, *Pava pacch, tîsh ùtra. Neéve sort duffi.* "How like a ghost are the fountain's waters! The flood carries away my riches." The paper is marvelously thin, and yet completely opaque; the print sharp-edged even when viewed through my best magnifying glass.

All this time, I should explain, I was fairly itching to put my bookplate in the book and index it as a permanent part of my library, neither of which I felt that I could properly do until I learned the location of Tcôvé, the linguistic group or groups to which its tongue belonged, and something of its history. I consulted atlases and encyclopedias, and found all equally unhelpful. Tcôvé, I decided, was surely one of those nations (like Deutschland and Hellas) which we call by quite different names. Still, I persisted in my determination. *A pêpennes tilyat scêmpterrissomatya oto dommrosmor-*

eii, as has been so finely said: "I shall know the names of the angels on the peaks of my homeland."

II. The Three Visitors

A year or more passed while I studied and planned (though only for my own amusement at first) the advertisement I eventually ran. Should I offer a reward? It could not be a large one — a hundred dollars, perhaps, or five free books. Should I include no more than my telephone number? And if so, should it be the number of the store or that of my apartment? What about a coded box at the newspaper, such as one sees in the Personals? In the end, I settled for the wording I give here:

HESITANT SPEAKER OF TCOVESE WOULD
WELCOME ACQUAINTANCE OF NATIVE
SPEAKERS & DISCUSSION OF LANGUAGE
AND CULTURE
PREVIOUS PAGES BOOKSHOP
444 1/2 N. WASHINGTON

I was greatly tempted to write the ad itself in Tcôvese, as you may imagine; but it would have lost half its force (or so I felt) in the Roman alphabet, and would almost certainly have been disfigured by the printer.

My first visitor arrived on the first day my ad ran. He showed me a badge, and asked to speak with me in private. I took him into the little back room I call my office. He asked how I had found out about Tcôvese, and I asked whether he spoke it.

"Just a little," he said. "A few words."

I confessed that it was the same with me. *Naja pouvrei.*

"You could be useful to the Department," he told me. "We could pay you a little something. Not much."

The fixed stare of his narrowed eyes told me he was lying; I wished that I'd had a better look at the badge he showed me.

He pursed his lips. "Let's say twenty-five a head, fifty if we need you to ask them questions."

I indicated that additional income was always welcome, and asked what he wished me to do.

He gave me a business card. (I have it still; it identifies him as Detective Lieutenant James J. Ropinski. The address is that of the Eighteenth Precinct, but the telephone number is not theirs.) "First off, I want you to call me anytime somebody comes in about that ad. Give me a name and a description,

and tell me everything he said. Try to get an address and so on. Any hard information that you can. The Mob's been bringing in hit men from Tcôvé. We need to know about every one of those guys."

I nodded, although I had already decided that I would not cooperate.

"Am I the first one?"

I asked what he meant.

"The first one that's answered your ad."

I assured him he was, and asked what Tcôvese looked like, in order that I might recognize them. I had visualized small orientals.

"Pretty much like you," he said, "or like me. Regular people."

I addressed him in Tcôvese, employing one of the phrases from the book: *Retop embrasôneia minmias costenti sus?* "Are you familiar with these lovely caverns?"

He stared at me and shook his head.

When he left, I looked up the number of the Eighteenth Precinct in the telephone directory, called, and asked for him. I was told, as I expected to be, that there was no one of that name.

My second visitor arrived almost a year to the day after my advertisement had appeared, long after I had surrendered hope of any further response. He was a very tall black man, exceedingly well dressed.

"I come for what you have say here." He extracted my advertisement, much folded and refolded and soiled, from an elegant ostrich-hide wallet. "I am consul Tcôvee. You hear? Not here this city, 'nother city. For me a long trip. You hear?" His hand shook as he held out the torn scrap of paper.

I addressed to him the phrase I had so often rehearsed: *Semphonississima techsodeliphindera lafiondalindu tuk yiscav kriishhalôné!* "How delightful to discover in the shrinking sea a crystal blossom of home!"

He dropped my advertisement and ran from the shop.

My third visitor arrived only last night; it is due to that visitation (if I may employ so pretentious a word) that I am writing this account for you.

The day had been dark, as winter days here so often are. At six, when I inspected the cat's food and water bowls and locked the front door of the shop, and pulled down the blind, the street lights were on. The thought of my cold, empty apartment with its waiting stacks and boxes of books, held

no attractions. I lit the gas-ring in my office instead, and filled the kettle.

Then, settling into my old, wooden swivel chair, I mused upon the possibility of night hours. What if I were to close each day at two, nap, and reopen at night, remaining open till midnight? Might I not soon discover that I had acquired a new clientèle? Or however it's pronounced. Might I not increase my income sufficiently to afford a vacation? I wanted very badly to go somewhere, though I did not know where.

After a moment or two I rebuked myself for wasting my time when I might, if I had gone to my apartment, be studying TOHISH ABLAR, then remembered that it was in the pocket of my overcoat and got it out.

Ensueshh nemblar sissert va? "Where may strangers erect their pavilions?"

Nemit mirrya orriy sus. "You will be my wife while I am here."

Arbitorri Tcôvesessit tanyat sklora. "Le paradis perdu n'est pas celui qu'on pense." *Affuwttelle togong bluté.* "I hunger for taller trees."

I dozed, and it seemed to me that I was walking beside a little rippling stream whose water was so pure as to be almost invisible, and so cold that flecks of ice tumbled in its current, flashing in the sunshine. Minute fish with wide wings of polychrome gauze that were in fact their pectoral fins leaped from the freezing water to catch flying seeds that seemed to know and fear them, darting this way and that like tiny green helicopters, then plunged back into the stream to breathe. The trees to either side of the stream (no doubt they were inspired by the last phrase I had read) were fifteen feet or more through the trunk, and seemed almost to touch the sky. Springs gushed from about their roots, bordered by flowers that turned their blossoms toward me as I walked, as though eager to be seen; each was like the beautiful face of a young woman — I do not mean that they had eyes, noses, and so forth, but that they evoked the same response in me. I knelt, discovered that I was holding a small knife with a crooked blade....

And woke.

The shop was dark, and silent except for the hissing of my gas ring and the bubbling of the kettle; and yet I knew that I was not alone, that someone had entered while I slept, turned off the lights, and remained, waiting.

I got up and went out into the public part

of the shop.

"Trifor nemell?"

Remember me?

A soft voice, vibrant and haunting. "No, no," I said, "I don't even know who you are!"

"A temmenti nogivé sus."

I forgive you.

"Who are you?" I shouted. "Where are you!"

"Qibbeia susentifeda sus shoondend? Nebor?"

Why can't you forgive yourself? Please?

By that time I had reached the light switch. I shouted something more (I do not remember what I said) and turned on the lights.

I was alone, still old, still dressed in my old tweed jacket, which badly needed cleaning. (As do I, I suppose.) Nothing had changed. My cat, Crystalflowermaiden, trotted busily about the shop, peering behind each freestanding bookcase, obviously looking for someone who was no longer present. When I returned to my little office to take the kettle off the gas-ring, I found that someone had already brewed a cup of tea for me, and that there floated in it, briefly, a tiny pink-and-white blossom like those in my dream. As I watched it melted, filling that dusty little room with an indescribable fragrance. Which vanished too in half a minute or less.

III. The Hidden Page

It was very late before I could bring myself to leave the shop and walk the five blocks that separated me from my apartment. Perhaps I should not include this here, but I was mugged, knocked down from behind by someone I never saw who took my money and my watch and searched me frantically, while I lay sprawled on the sidewalk, for something that he never found; I remember that he searched my left coat pocket twice, tearing it away to make certain it was empty.

Dazed and bleeding, I reached my building at last, locked and bolted the door of my second-floor apartment (for I was very much afraid my assailant had followed me, though I know how irrational that sounds) stripped and showered, contrived a clumsy bandage for the wound at the back of my head, which was still oozing blood, poured myself four fingers of Scotch, and took the phrase book from my ruined coat's remaining pocket. I cannot explain how it came to be, but I felt

now that I could paste my bookplate in it, and index it, too, acts that I had longed to perform ever since I (re)discovered it. I had advertised for speakers, but found no speaker more fluent than myself. I had walked through a forest of Tcôvê, if only in dream. Why not?

Bookplates are, as you are doubtless aware, properly attached to the inner surface of the front board, at or slightly below its center. Mine I designed myself, and had printed at a little shop not far from my own; thus they are not gummed as the commercial products are, and I am compelled to spread the back of each with thin mucilage before I attach it. I then close the book in question and put it under several others, usually until morning.

On this final occasion I did not wait so long. As I was preparing for bed, I realized that I had forgotten — though I had once known — the Tcôvese word for *love*, and a few minutes ago, unable to sleep, I surrendered to the impulse and got the TOHISH ABLAR from beneath its little stack of odd volumes.

A half drop of mucilage had escaped from beneath my bookplate and so gummed what I had believed to be the back of the front board to the flyleaf. When I opened the book, the false back was thus pulled away, revealing a black endpaper upon which someone has written, in silver ink, a name that is NOT mine, in the characters of the diloveta.

Thus I write to you now as I do, for I feel that I will not be with you much longer. Twice the telephone has rung. On the first occasion I answered it with "Hello?" as I usually do, and the caller hung up. On the second — but I will not tell you that.

Again and again I find myself drawn to the window; clouds gravid with snow hang low over the city, hiding every star but one.

I will finish this before morning, take it to my shop, and place it in an old book, or a new one, or perhaps in one of the magazines upon my little rack. There you have found it.

(That pinpoint of golden light!)

And I, I hope, have gone. May your torment, too, soon be ended.

(At noon! She said at noon!)

I will leave the book behind for you as well, my unknown reader and customer. You may know it by my bookplate.

Dejahheerna!

Writing

Part One

Algis Budrys

Illustration by Algis Budrys

The first in a series on writing.

Writing began at some early point in human history, and at that point was undifferentiated from science.

It certainly predates the discovery of fire. A man or woman tried to understand some aspect of a largely bewildering universe, and probably failed. Unlike most people, they did not then surrender to “practicality” and concentrate for the remainder of their lives on the things that were knowable. Instead, they told themselves something that *might* have been true. The chances are overwhelming that in fact it wasn’t true, but it was an attempt to explain.

Some of the people who did this became scientists — hewers of rock into new shapes, experimenters with wood and cord, bringers of fire. Others told stories, and at some early point began to tell stories to others. These stories probably were for the most part exercises in imagination — earth, air, fire, and water were personified, and shown in action, to explain, or, rather, to account for what had happened — as distinguished from the usually more mundane and more “real” researches of scientists. Although the audience would contain both future writers and future scientists among it.

That audience — readers — were also apparently different from the general run of population. Most people did not overtly read, then or ever, and if asked would say that reading is useless. But in fact everyone reads, if we understand “reading” to mean not the decoding of written symbols but simply listening to another person who has something vital to say; how to wire a lamp socket, or how to wash a dish, for instance.

The only difference between “nonreaders” and readers is in the kind of thing they will admit to reading. It is really impossible, down at the basic levels, to separate writer from scientist or reader from “nonreader.” (It is actually worse than that, but we have to draw the line somewhere.) We are all, in fact, pretty much the same at bottom; our various learned specialties are what differentiate us, rather than anything basic.

We have, of course, come a long way from our beginnings. Or perhaps we haven’t really, but the number and kind of specialties have become so large that we think we have.

At some point, for instance, speculative fiction developed a

branch — descriptive fiction — which for the past century or two has taken a serious look at “the real world,” with interesting results. It is a fruitful subspecies, and will probably survive. Most of its writers and readers will have little to do with the far older speculative fiction, and speculative fiction in its own turn has split into various kinds of fantasy and, since the Industrial Revolution, into various kinds of science fiction. Some readers of one kind of speculative fiction will have little to do with readers of another, as a general rule. Most will happily partake of many branches of the tree.

And so it goes, as we continue to specialize. For another instance, we have in the past five thousand years or so developed “writing,” so that now stories in most, though not all, cultures are “written down,” in order that they may be read by someone at a distance from the “writer”...provided, of course, that someone learned the same system of coding and decoding that the writer used.

We have, in many ways, in fact overspecialized. But that can’t really be helped, because cultures are still, to this day in some cases, isolated from one another, and develop their own peculiar “speech,” and “writing,” unaware of what may be going on elsewhere. In a way it is unfortunate. But in another way, what one culture misses about the universe may be picked up by another, and there is something therefore to be said for “overspecialization,” if that is in fact the correct word.

But, with all that in mind but not overwhelmingly so, suppose you want to learn to write — to somehow transmit stories from your mind to the minds of readers. Where do you begin, and how difficult is it? Well, you begin, if you will, here. And it’s not very difficult at all.

Some teachers of writing, including some writers, have made writing a very complicated thing. They speak of “voice” and they speak of technical points like writing in “third person objective,” and they speak of “narrative” as distinguished from “dialogue,” and cetera. Well, in an abstract sense that language may refer to real things. (I think they are real, but have to do with criticism, not with writing.) But remember that *every* specialty develops jargon,

and remember that writing is one of the oldest specialties. Also, take my word for it, most of the people who are now so glib in discussing these matters *did not know them* at the time of their first sales, or, conversely, have never sold anything, but have simply learned the jargon.

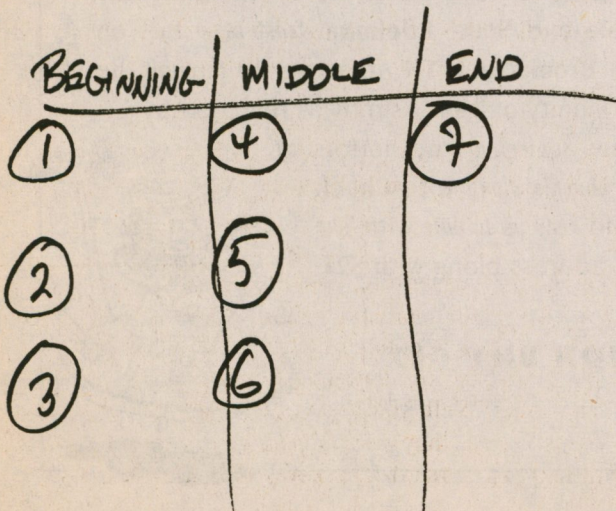
Writing is, in fact, a simple creative exercise. It takes practice, and with enough practice many people gradually learn the "rules" without any special jargon — picking it up later, as I said. But the very fact that they can learn writing by simple trial and error should tell you something. If you can learn it by trial and error, then all you need to do to shorten the process is to eliminate as much of the error as possible as early as possible — and that is what we are going to do.

Now, the kind of writing I am talking about is the production of work in volume for an audience — the kind you see in this magazine, for instance. And that kind consists overwhelmingly of stories. There are also vignettes, jokes, japes, and other small forms, which are small for various reasons, I think most of them transient.

In another time, the vignette, for instance — the slice of life, in which the characters are not subject to any process in particular — may become the preferred thing. Certainly it has a place in any age, and you will, from time to time, see vignettes published in many places, including this one. But what most readers want most of the time is story, and that is what we are going to teach you. Know how to construct a story, and you know everything you need to know.

A story subjects its characters to a process; to a growing up, or an enlightenment, or, in the case where a villain is the central character, to an enlightenment and a disaster. It is a reflection of the Judeo-Christian ethic, if you will. For whatever reason, it satisfies. It satisfies the reader and it satisfies the writer. And it has seven parts.

They tell you, if you listen, that a story must have a beginning, a middle, and an end. Well, this is true enough, but so does a note from your bank, which says: "Dear Mr. Smith, you are overdrawn \$18.75, pay or die." The simple statement that a story must have a beginning, middle, and end is no more useful than another old saying: Write what you know. (What do they mean by that one? How can you write about what you *don't* know?) To understand what is meant by a beginning, middle, and end, draw a diagram:



You will notice there are three story components in the beginning. These three are actually interchangeable; none is more important than the other two, and we can number them in any order. But for the sake of convenience, let's number them (1) A character (2) in context (3) with a problem.

You can, as I say, begin with a context, and introduce a character with his or her problem; you can even, in some cases, begin with the problem, and introduce a context and then a character. What counts is that all three must be present before the beginning is over.

(1) A character must be placed in (2) a context. If Joe walks up the side of a wall, it is vital to know if this is happening in downtown Detroit today or aboard a space station; two vastly different stories will result, much more from the context than from Joe. Then, Joe has to have (3) a problem; he has to get somewhere, or get something.

Now, perhaps obviously, you want to pick a character who's vitally interesting. But to do this you will quickly find you cannot avoid filling in the context to some extent, and then you very quickly come up against the problem.

The problem need not seem very large, at first; it's just that the character can't let go of it. But as the story progresses, the problem becomes more and more compelling. Its basic nature does not change, however. Put it this way: Laurine spots a white thread on her black dress. She pulls at it almost casually. She discovers, however, that it is endless, and while the part that showed was white, the rest is black, and her dress is unravelling. In other words, Laurine thought her problem was a stray thread, and easily solved, but it rapidly develops into another order of problem entirely — without changing the basic nature of the problem.

Similarly, the context cannot change, without motivated traveling, but we learn more about it. And the character cannot actually change, past the beginning, though we learn more about him or her, too. The purpose of the beginning is to lay the ground rules; establish the (1) character (2) in context (3) with a problem, and then go on. Once the beginning is over, you can't call in the cavalry, you can't have the character develop a rich uncle, you can't have the character decide the problem doesn't hold his or her interest anymore. If you want the cavalry at the end, you have to have the character wave at a friend in a cavalry patrol in the beginning, or else the totally unforeshadowed arrival of the cavalry will (A) jar and (B) make your hero look ineffectual.

And that brings us to the three parts of the middle. Here is where the story develops.

(4) is an attempt to solve the problem. This attempt must be intelligent and logical, and represent the character's best guess as to the nature of the problem and an adequate response. The character mustn't think that the problem is overwhelming, because at this stage it apparently isn't. He produces a nice, easy response — and (5) encounters unexpected failure.

Well, if the character could solve the problem immediately, it wasn't much of a problem. So, despite the seeming intelligence of the attempt to solve, it must fail — and as a result of that failure, the character learns more about the problem, and begins to learn a little more about himself.

He does not actually change, mind you, because that would be false to the reader's observation of people. People reveal hidden facets of themselves, from time to time, under stress, but the facets

all fit in with what was known before. So you must put your character under stress, and reveal hitherto concealed facets, but they must fit. The character reaches a little deeper inside himself, makes another attempt to solve the problem, which is revealing additional aspects of itself in turn, and fails again. And again. Three times.

Why three times? Because anything less is unsatisfying, because anything more is redundant, because Aristotle and Lewis Carroll said that what I tell you three times is true. Three times, on a rising scale of effort, commitment, and depth of knowledge of the problem and one's self, is the correct number. Human beings believe that three times has an effect which two does not. Conversely, four creates overkill.

All right. (6) is victory. At the last possible moment, wagering everything, in a do or die situation, the hero wins. Conversely, if he is the villain, coming closer and closer to his goal results at the last possible moment in defeat snatched from the jaws of victory, because of some flaw in his

character.

So the middle of the story consists of (4) effort to solve, (5) repeated failure or increasingly near-attainment of the goal, and (6) victory or death.

You must make sure that the reader understands it is victory or death. Even in a story about winning the garden club prize, you must get to the stage where the aging, widowed and lonely woman realizes, near the end, that nothing is more important than the prize; that if she fails to win it, she will spend the last of her declining years disappointed, with nothing to look forward to except the grave.

But since victory or death has been achieved at the end of the middle, according to this diagram, what is left for the end?

What is left for the end is (7) validation. Someone who has no other vested interest in the story has to step forward and say, "He's dead, Jim," or, "Who was that masked man...I wanted to thank him," or the like. Think about it; all through the middle, it always looked like things were going to

come out well, but they didn't. Certainly, now the villain has plunged from the top of the Empire State Building and is lying splattered on the terrain below. *But...* But. The possibility exists, however slight.... And that is what the independent authority forecloses. He is the one who actually validates the fact that the story is truly over. Until he speaks, even with something so seemingly clichéd as "Who was that masked man?" the story is not truly over in the reader's mind.

What have we learned? We have learned the seven parts of the basic story, including part (7) validation. Next time, we will learn that the manuscript is not the story, that writing is not the reverse of reading, and other useful things, including a demonstration of how the seven parts work. But you have already learned more than enough to get started on your career. ■

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Replay

Mike Christie

Illustration by Rachid Idriss

Suppose you could sell parts of your mind — your German, or your law, or your piano lessons. There wouldn't really be any harm in that, would there?

Arkwright didn't look dangerous the first time I saw him. I remember I was sitting in the bar of the Prince Albert, near King's Cross station. I'd just come from an erase — I think I was selling German at the time — and I was getting quietly drunk in the corner. Arkwright stood in the doorway, wearing a tatty suit and no tie, looking around uncertainly. I watched him. I didn't have anything else to do — I was drinking alone.

When you're new at the game, like I was back then, you don't want company after an erase. You've spent two or three months studying like crazy, and then you walk into a laboratory, and walk out an hour later with a fat wallet and an empty head, and everything you learnt sitting in one of the lab's vials. You can get depressed about it, if you're not careful. Or you can get drunk.

There were four or five other erasers in the bar. Joey and Al were playing pool at the far end of the pub, and Sue and a couple of others I didn't know were with them. But Arkwright spotted me sitting on my own, and came over to me with a kind of sheepish look. He said, "Err...excuse me, I need to talk to a professional student...."

Only people trying to be polite called us professional students, and then only until they got to know we hated it. Mostly people called us head peddlers. We called ourselves erasers, or wipers, when we called ourselves anything.

Still, no harm in talking to him. "Yeah?" I said. He looked about thirty, maybe a bit older, and he had the slightly pinched look of a lonely bachelor.

"Can I buy you a drink? I'd like to talk to you." He had a high, nervous voice, and he couldn't keep his eyes off the scars on my

temples.

I shrugged. "Pint of bitter."

He nodded, and moved off to the bar. I looked across the room, to where Joey was standing by the pool table, cue in hand, watching me thoughtfully. I shook my head and spread my hands, miming *I don't know who he is*. Joey shrugged, and went back to his game. I knew he'd want more details later.

Arkwright came back with the pints, and sat. He put down the plastic shopping bag he had been carrying, and took a drink of beer. "Thanks for letting me talk to you. Er...I'm sorry. I don't know your name...?"

"Steve Tyler."

He nodded vigorously. "Right. Well, my name's Arkwright, John Arkwright, and I'm sort of doing a survey...."

"Not interested," I said contemptuously. So he was just another journalist.

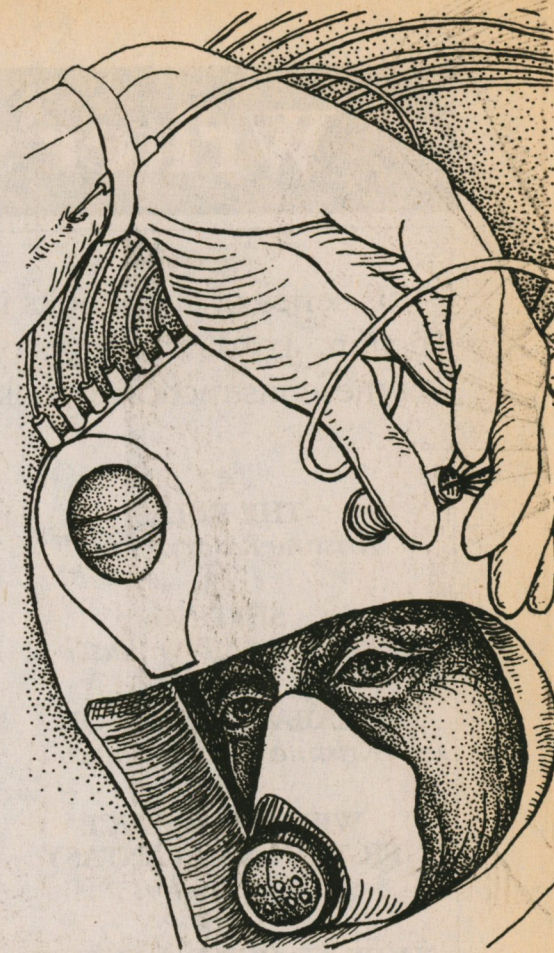
"No, no," he said, agitated. "You don't understand. I'll pay...."

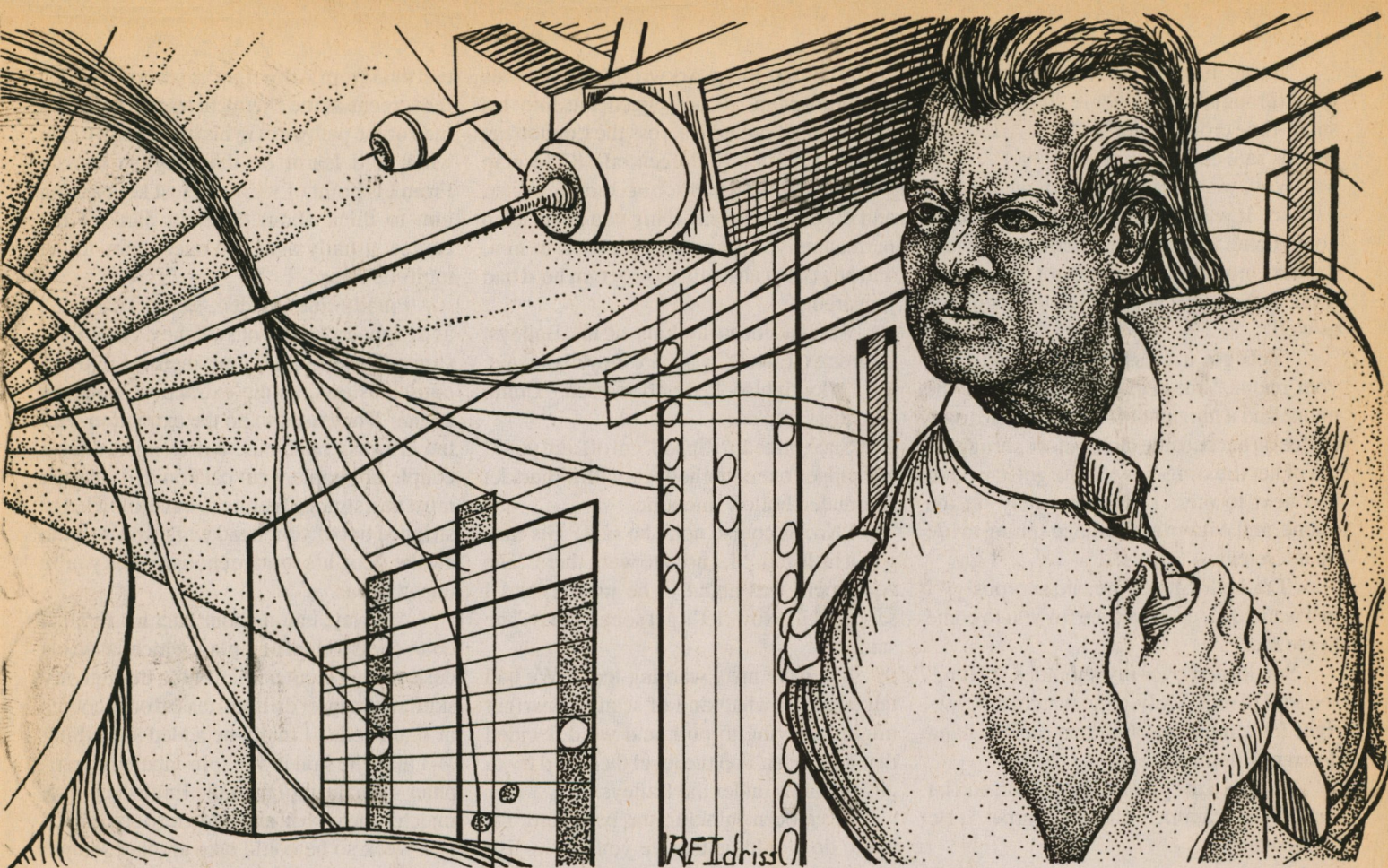
I almost laughed. Unless this guy was a crook, I earned twice what he did. But he seemed to guess what I was thinking.

"I'm a scientist, I'm doing research, and I need to look at the neurochemistry of people who use the Baileys." He managed to look confused and self-righteous at the same time.

I thought about it. All the research I'd ever heard about had been done through the Knowledge Transfer Marketing board. Usually there were formal letters, and all sorts of junk like liaison staff contacts and so on. Nobody is supposed to contact us direct for research work, so there was obviously some angle here.

"Why didn't you go through the KTM?"





He reddened slightly. "I'm an independent researcher." I must have looked disbelieving. "I run off my own funds," he said, almost defiantly. He ducked his head after a second and took another sip of beer.

I pulled at my own pint and thought about it. It meant he was probably illegal, and that made it much more interesting: I'd been an eraser long enough to hate the KTM. I hung on because of the money, maybe because of Sue, because of other things. Because no eraser ever quit.

"What do you want to do, then?" I asked.

Arkwright relaxed a little. "What I'm after," he said, "is synapse formation—I mean, in professional students. I need to take a sample. You wouldn't know it was gone," he added, and then winced. Maybe he thought that was tasteless, to an eraser. "I mean, I'd take only a few cells, less than you're killing with that pint. And I'd want to inject you with some labeled replay, and then take a few more cells. And that's it." He stopped, like he'd run out of words.

Christ, Arkwright could never sell his own ideas. I suppose that's why he never made it as a regular scientist. But back then, I wasn't as independent as I liked to make out. I was bruised from the transition from normal life—even my sister stopped talking to me when I became an eraser—and I didn't yet know the London crew all that well. I guess I was vulnerable to someone coming along with a use for me. Anyway, that time, I just felt what the hell, and after another pint I said okay. I thought he was going to pop when I agreed, he looked so pleased.

After he'd gone, Joey came over with Sue and sat down. "Who's your friend?" he said.

Joey's okay. He looks rough, and I've heard he's hassled people, but he's always been right with me. He never minded about me and Sue either, although I think it would have been different if I hadn't been an eraser. Anyway, I told him what Arkwright had told me, and he just laughed.

"I thought it was a new scrubber outfit, looking for talent," he said. "I've never heard of anything like this." He looked at me hard, then laughed again. "Wanted a total, did he?"

The total wipe, the one where they just take everything and leave your mind vacant, like a newborn baby's, is one of the erasers' bogeymen. It's illegal of course, but you hear about it now and then.

"That's right, Joey, he did," I said, straight-faced. "Asked me to find out the going price."

Joey grinned, but Sue didn't smile. "Joey," she said sharply, "you should know better than to crack jokes like that, even if Steve doesn't."

That slowed me down. "You knew someone who got totaled?" I asked.

"Yeah," she said. "I knew someone. There was a guy about four years ago." Her face was sad, remembering. "And there was a couple more, that I never met, but Joey did."

"What happened?" I asked, fascinated and repelled.

"The scrubber outfits that did it cleared out. We knew who they were," said Joey. "We always know. But we never found out who they did it for."

"So long as it's not this Arkwright bloke," I said.

"He couldn't afford it," said Sue. "The scrubbers must have made a packet out of it if it was worth them leaving town."

"Some bloody bio company, after a breakthrough," said Joey. "It wasn't any small-time crook scientist. Your Arkwright sounds safe enough to me."

Well, we got talking, and it went on for a while. It was one of the nights I ended up going home with Sue, I remember, because the next morning, when she got up to make some coffee, she came back with her phone as well.

"You got a message forwarded from your phone," she said. She handed me the phone and a mug of coffee, putting her own coffee on her bedside table before shrugging out of her dressing-gown. She got back into bed next to me. I pressed replay on the phone, and Arkwright's image sprang to life on the screen.

"Err, hello Steve," he said nervously, "I just wanted to, er, set a time for you to come to see me."

Sue leaned over my shoulder. "Him," she said dismissively. She watched Arkwright for a moment, and then ran her hand down my stomach.

I dropped the phone on the floor, and let Arkwright stammer into the carpet. He could wait.

As a matter of fact, I made him wait for several weeks. I told him I had to get up to date on my German and sell it pretty quick, and I didn't have time to help him. It was partly true; I did have to catch up on some studying; I'd been spending every day with Sue that she'd let me.

But I could have found time for him if I'd wanted. I just wanted to play around with him a bit, pretending to get cold feet — but he was okay on the whole and I finally figured, what the hell, and we set a date for me to go down to his lab. Sue agreed to come with me, partly because we were still at the stage of wanting to be together all the time, and partly for safety: I had no reason to trust Arkwright, and Sue felt it was a wise precaution. He had a big flat on Grey's Inn Road. I was renting a nice place north of King's Cross — erasers aren't poor — but his flat was bigger and in a more expensive area. He was obviously telling the truth about having a lot of money behind him.

The place was a mess, but his lab was uncluttered. There was a secondhand set of Baileys wired up on one side of the room, and a jerry-rigged control arrangement hooked into his own computing setup.

The first thing Arkwright wanted was my brain-map, so he logged me into his system and I pulled it across the London net from my slot on KTM central. KTM map your brain paths when you become an eraser, and it's about the only thing you get to keep permanently. I gave the seat back to him, and he started an analysis program he'd had prepared.

Sue had been looking at his Baileys. "These ex-EuroBC gear, are they?" she said.

Arkwright looked embarrassed. "Umm, yes, they are."

Sue grinned. "Ripped 'em off, did you?" She tapped one of the helmets with a knuckle: it sounded hollow, metallic.

"No, of course not," he said. His face was a little red. "I, I used to work there. The equipment was about to be junked, and I salvaged it. Now, let's get some replay," he said.

Sue gave me a warning look. We had talked about what kind of scam Arkwright might be trying to pull, and we'd decided that if he wasn't on the level then he'd try to get one of us under the Baileys.

"I've been thinking the best thing for me to do would be to give you an English course I took recently," he said, unconscious of our suspicions. "Can you run this equipment?"

I relaxed a little, and Sue and I examined the makeshift control panel. It looked like a haphazard collection of screens and switches to me — certainly nothing like the ones I was used to — but Sue nodded.

"Yeah, I know EuroBC," she said. "It was still standard when I started out."

"Good machines," said Arkwright, clearly pleased by Sue's knowledge. "The old Mark Twos. Wonderful rigs. I still don't really like the Japanese models they use now."

Sue shrugged. "They may be slower, but they're more reliable. Anyway, sure, we can work this kit."

"Great." Arkwright sat in the chair under the Baileys, and pulled down the hood. I went over to help him with the connectors, and then watched as Sue ran the location sequence on him.

The whole thing felt very weird. Sue and I spent a lot of time under Baileys, selling what we knew. I hadn't been on the controlling end of a rig since my training. The location was long and slow, like it always is. It was more interesting from our

end than from Arkwright's; we could watch the screens as the chemical tracers built up a map of the pathways in his brain involved in what he'd learnt on that English course. From his point of view, we just kept asking him to think about different parts of the course, usually over and over again, to get multiple fixes.

Finally Sue nodded, said, "That's it," and flipped a couple of switches. Arkwright slumped in his chair, anesthetized into unconsciousness, as the extraction sequence began. They used to do the extraction with the erasers conscious, but stopped after a couple of people went catatonic. I guess it must be a strange feeling to have knowledge stripped out of your head while you're wide awake. Shit, it's strange enough when you're unconscious.

Anyway, half an hour later his English course was a phial of replay, which sat on his desk while he cut a micro hole through my skull with a laser drill and teased out a couple of brain cells. Finally he added something — I think he said it was spin-labeled tryptophan — to the replay of the English course, injected me with it, and told me to come back in a week so he could take another sample and pay me the rest of the money.

That first set of experiments was over in a few days, and that should have been the end of it. Business relationship, over when there's no more to it. But there aren't that many people who'll talk to an eraser as if he's a normal human being. I guess I was glad of the company. So we kept meeting in pubs, mostly eraser pubs because the scars on my temple got me trouble as often as not, where the pubs didn't ban me outright just for being a wiper.

We talked about all kinds of things. He told me a lot about himself. He was the sort of guy who could easily have ended up as an eraser: a bit rebellious, very quick, sharp, and a good learner. But you have to have a lot of go-to-hell in you to sign the KTM contract. He was just a bit too nervous, a bit too afraid of authority, without really respecting it at all. He squirmed every time he thought about all the illegal things he was doing, but he went right on and did them.

I think it was because he always seemed vulnerable that I could talk to him. I've never liked talking about myself, but there was some intangible sense in which I felt I had a hold on him that allowed me to talk more freely than I would with my other

friends.

I even did a few more experiments for him. Of course I charged him a solid amount each time. He could afford it. The other erasers got used to him; when Joey asked me I said I'd vouch for him and he passed the word to the rest. They let us alone, though no one except Sue would join my table if Arkwright was with me.

He got into trouble a couple of times. Drinking in the Albert wasn't smart if you weren't one of us. I could protect him from the occasional drunk eraser who felt like picking an argument, but there was nothing I could do when the local skinheads decided to drop in on us, which they did every few months. He got roughed up a little — he'd never been forced to learn how to act submissive under pressure, how to be invisible, how to disappear quietly before the yobs picked him out. Those are skills an eraser can never afford to sell.

I remember how he reacted when he first saw someone come in from a scrubber's wipe. The scrubbers don't pay any of the overheads that the legal operations do, but they sure don't spend the money they save on cossetting us. They kick you out as soon as you can stand up and know where you are, with the money in your pocket and a locked door behind you.

Anyway, Sandy came in. I knew she must have just sold her tax law to the Lane crew, who worked just up the Caledonian Road. She was new, and wanted to raise money quick; some family crisis or other, medical treatment for a brother I think. But she hadn't realized what it was going to be like. She was weaving slightly as she came through the doors. It's not dizziness. It's just that there's a lot of things confusing you

when someone's just wiped you fast and rough, the way the scrubbers do. But she made it to the bar okay, and ordered a pint and then turned around and saw me and Arkwright. She started to grin, and then stopped.

I could see she had forgotten my name.

Her face suddenly filled with an inward panic, a look I've never seen on people in any other circumstances. I knew what the desperation on her face meant. She was searching her mind, discovering how much she had lost, and realizing she would never know; that she never could know. She stared at me in dismay and anger, and then turned away and went across to the pool tables on the far side of the pub. I hoped she still knew how to shoot pool.

"What was all that about?" said Arkwright. I looked at him blankly. "Who is she?"

"That was a friend of mine," I said, finding my voice. "She wanted to come over and say hello." My throat clenched unexpectedly.

I saw comprehension and pity in his face. "She was scrubbed, wasn't she..." he said softly.

Suddenly I lost my temper. "Yes, she's just been fucking scrubbed," I hissed, with just enough control left to keep my voice down. "She's just had her tax law ripped from her brain by a bunch of cowboys with shit Baileys and no trunks, and she's lost my name and who I am and a lot of other shit and she doesn't even know yet what they stripped out of her, and she's got a fucking right to look like whatever she wants, okay?"

Arkwright stared at me in shock. I couldn't stand his company. I must have been crazy to think it was worth talking to

someone who wasn't a wiper. I glared at him, and then got up and walked out. He didn't call after me.

I headed home, fuming. Arrogant bastard... wanted to say "poor Sandy," did he? Well, screw him. We were all erasers by choice — that was what people never understood. The hassles were our own business.

Eventually I calmed down, and after a couple of weeks I started drinking with Arkwright again. He knew about scrubbers, but he hadn't realized how bad it could be.

"You mean these scrubbers don't target the correct memo-complexes before they start?" He looked as if he couldn't believe me.

I shrugged. "Well, they have to, otherwise they'd just get mush. But they stop as soon as they know they're in the right range. They don't even bother to filter out background personality noise, or at least not as much as KTM do. The only thing that makes them fine it down at all is that no one would ever go to them if they weren't close to being safe. It's just that the crew that Sandy went to are some of the worst; they live off the newer wipers. If she'd asked Joey or me we could have warned her." I took another drink. "She was pretty sassy, though. I heard she was going to the Lanes, and the guy who told me said it was because they paid the most and she needed the money."

"They pay the most because they take the least care?"

"That's it. And that means their margins are bigger, so they can afford to pay more."

"But don't the — uh, buyers, don't they object to getting echoes of your life in their replay?"

I shrugged. "I guess not. Besides, most

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of them don't have much choice, not if they want the kind of things scrubbers sell."

A look of comprehension appeared on Arkwright's thin face. "So she was selling something illegal."

"Yeah. Tax law, this time."

"But that's not illegal," said Arkwright, surprised.

"It is if you want it to include all the loopholes. Especially when some of those loopholes are illegal themselves. Besides, she's not licensed to sell tax law."

Arkwright was subdued for a while after that. But over the months, we saw a couple of guys come in from bad wipes, and he got more energetic about it. He said if enough research was done, we could all get off the treadmill. I didn't believe him. It was when I said so that I found out what his real interest was.

"It's true, Steve," he said. "I know.... It's what I'm trying to do myself."

"What — get erasers out of the gutter?" I said, annoyed, and not quite hiding it.

He nodded vigorously, not seeming to notice the sarcasm. "Right. I'm looking for a way to copy replay, so you could use it over and over again; maybe indefinitely. So only one wipe would be needed, and then everyone could just jack that in, and that would be it."

"It's impossible. They've proved it." That was common knowledge. You just couldn't copy replay, it was too subtle, too complex, too delicate. Hell, it only lasted a day before decomposing, anyway. How were you going to keep it around long enough to deal with?

Arkwright just grinned. "Yeah, well. I had a ridiculous idea. I checked the literature, and I know no one else is working on it. And I was in bad with the KTM board. So I figured, get out and do it. Don't worry about the government. And if I succeed, I'll get the Nobel prize. That's for sure. And you lot won't have to take the shit you do anymore."

I dismissed that last comment. "You mean, this stuff you've taken out of my head — that's been used for this research?" The thought made me cold for a moment.

He nodded again, smugly. "Sure." Then his expression weakened a little. "I'm still a way off though. If I get a breakthrough... then we'll see. But I'm going to need months more before I can even settle on the right course."

I didn't want to believe him, but I knew

him too well to think he was lying. I knew he couldn't possibly succeed, though. It was impossible. It had to be.

I let him talk a while longer, and then I changed the subject. He was happy with that. I think he was sorry he'd mentioned it, and the subject didn't come up again for a long time. But now that I knew what he was doing, I could understand his reactions to some of the things he saw a bit better. Like whenever someone came in a bad way from an illegal erase he'd get really uptight. I suppose he thought he cared about us. I used to wonder whether it was for real, or just because he could see himself getting famous on solving all our problems.

I even got curious enough to learn some biochemistry, although I wasn't licensed for it. I can remember Arkwright explaining a lot of his work to me, but after a few months I sold all the biochemistry I'd done to the North mob. I got a good price, too: there was a big demand for it. I've often wondered what I really sold that day.

Then one day, two years after we first met, he rang me up to say he had some good news for me, and we arranged to meet that night.

It was raining when I reached the Albert, a dull gray London drizzle. I stepped inside, and looked around for Arkwright, but just as I spotted him, hunched over his beer in a corner, someone called my name.

"Steve! Come here."

It was Joey, standing by the pool tables, with two or three others. I walked over to them, surprised at Joey's peremptory tone.

"Hi, Joey," I said. "What's up?" Liz Cormick was there, another long-time eraser, and Dave Styles, and one or two others whose names I didn't know, but who I recognized as friends of Joey's. They looked grim, and I began to feel worried, as if I'd somehow sinned and didn't know it and Joey was about to pass sentence on me.

"You seen Sue today?" asked Joey, his eyes hard and unfriendly.

I shook my head. "Haven't seen her since yesterday. She left a message on my phone last night, but she wasn't in when I called her back this morning. Why? Has she disappeared?"

Liz nodded. "I saw Jack Lane coming out of her flat last night," she said. "When Joey went over this morning, he found her door open, with the lock broken. She wasn't there."

"Christ, no, Joey," I said. I couldn't think. "What... what can we do?"

"Sandy and Mac have gone over to check out the Lane place," said Joey. "They should be back any time. We were hoping someone else had news." He nodded, dismissing me.

I was in shock. After a second I headed for the door, then I stopped again, remembering I didn't have my car with me. My imagination was on fire with images of Sue being kidnapped, raped, killed. I'd almost suggested calling the police, but I knew it would be worse than useless — they'd be much more interested in how we knew the Lanes were an illegal scrubber outfit than in finding Sue. And anyway, the police hated us as much as everyone else did.

Arkwright's voice jolted me out of my black thoughts. "What was that all about, Steve?"

For a second I couldn't figure out what he was doing there. Then I remembered, and I shook my head. "It's a... a friend of mine. She's in trouble."

"Yeah, I overheard," he said. "I couldn't help it — I came up to say hello, and there you were, talking to that big guy." He glanced at Joey. "What good is watching the Lanes' place going to do?"

"I don't know. Maybe they'll spot Sue."

"I guess the police are out of the question?"

"Right."

"Well — " he paused. He seemed hyped up; wired. "I've got my car here. You want to go look at this place yourself?"

It was only five minutes to the Lanes' place. They worked out of an old warehouse; they ran a front business, selling and buying pharmaceutical goods, which I'd heard actually made them a bit of money. But the real business was carried on in the basement, where the illegal Baileys, the control gear, the drugs and the computers were. I'd been there twice, when I'd been very new and had needed money fast. I'd never planned to go back.

We parked a few yards down the road from the big double doors that opened directly onto the gloomy street. Almost immediately, a dark figure detached itself from the wall and drifted over to us. It bent down to the car window, and tapped. In the darkness I could just make out the features of

Sandy Lennox.

"Steve?" she hissed, just loud enough for me to hear through the glass. I rolled down the window, remembering the time the Lanes had been a little careless with her memories.

"What's happening?" I said.

"Hey, I'm glad it's you. I thought I recognized your pal's car." She sighed. "We ain't got nothing, Steve. There's been a light on down there for hours, but nobody's been in or out. Mac's waiting in the car, down that way." She pointed back the way we had come.

"Any more ideas on what they're doing?"

She looked around, as if checking we were alone. The narrow street was empty, its darkness broken only by the widely spaced pools of orange light cast by the ancient street lamps.

"About fifty yards further down the street," she said quietly, glancing at Arkwright briefly, "is a car Mac and I both recognize. It's a red Mercedes Contessa, with left hand drive. Ring any bells?"

I shook my head, although Sandy's words scared me for some reason I couldn't name.

She squatted down by the car, and sighed again. "Can't be too many cars like that in London, I reckon." She sounded resigned, fatalistic. "I've seen it in the KTM car park underneath the Lombard Street offices; and Mac says he thinks he's seen it at the research center."

"KTM? Are you serious?" I said.

She nodded. "Oh, probably not officially. But when one of their research scientists manages to get hold of some kind of illegal replay, I bet they're happy to see the results. They don't give a shit about us."

There was a grinding noise from the Lanes' warehouse, and the doors started to roll open. Sandy swore and quickly moved back into the shadow of a doorway. Arkwright and I slouched down in our seats. The doors rumbled apart, releasing light into the dim street, and stopped with a clang. A car started its engine with a stuttering cough, and the glare of headlights briefly lit the dirty brick wall of the building across the street as a small minivan came into view, nosing cautiously out onto the road. I didn't recognize it. It turned right, away from us.

Sandy reappeared, just long enough to hiss, "Get after them!" through the car win-

dow. The doors were already grinding shut again, and as they met with a crash she sprinted past toward Mac's car.

Arkwright had the car moving immediately, no lights on until we reached the end of the street. "Left," I said, hoping it was correct. We turned, and spotted the van's tail-lights at a traffic light fifty yards on. Arkwright switched on his sidelights, and we drew up behind them.

"Let them get a bit ahead," I said. Arkwright nodded, and stayed back as the van pulled away. They turned again, and we followed, dropping even further back. There were more lights behind us which I hoped meant Mac had found us too.

"Don't go in there," I said, as the van turned again. "That's a dead end. There's only a foot passage through to Grey's Inn Road from there."

"Should I stop?"

"Yeah," I said. "I guess so. They might be checking to see if we were really following them — I don't see how they could have known about Sandy and Mac. They're probably just paranoid."

Arkwright pulled in and cut the engine and lights. Mac's car went past, and pulled over on the far side of the road. I opened the car door, and quietly got out, then pushed it to, trying to make as little noise as possible. Arkwright did the same. But we had barely made it halfway to the corner of the road when the van reappeared, swung right, and roared off back the way we had come.

Arkwright immediately turned back to the car, but I yelled "Wait!" and ran to the corner. My blood was hammering in my ears, but within the black mouth of the alleyway at the bottom of the dead end street I could hear someone crying.

She was still wearing the jeans and black leather jacket I'd watched her put on the morning before. Then she'd kissed me and thrown me out so she could study; now she looked at me as though she'd never seen me before in her life.

"Sue?"

She stared vacantly at me, tears running down her cheeks. There was fresh blood in the jack scars on her temple. Her arm came up uncertainly, and she pawed clumsily at me, like a baby. She stank of urine.

My throat went dry with fear.

"Sue? How — how old are you, love?" I put my arm around her shoulders. There was no comprehension in her face at all, and

after a moment she began to wail again, long wordless howls that told me what I already knew.

"Jesus," said a soft voice behind me. I stood, letting Sue go, and looked round to see Arkwright and Sandy and Mac were crowded into the narrow passage behind me. Sandy stepped past me, and knelt by Sue, holding her, swearing quietly.

Mac looked at me. "Is it a total?"

I nodded. "We've got to get her to a hospital." Even as I said it I knew it was useless. But there was one thing left to try, and I turned to face Arkwright.

"You want to help save her mind?" He understood immediately.

Sandy looked up from where she knelt on the floor. "We'll take care of her, Steve."

"Right," said Mac. "Get the lead out. We'll tell the others as soon as we can."

I looked at Arkwright. "You up for this?"

He nodded, and we sprinted for his car.

We must have been back at the Lanes' within fifteen minutes of leaving, but the red Mercedes was gone. We walked stealthily from Arkwright's car to the double doors, and found them ajar, a dim light showing from the far side of the cavernous building. A cold wind whipped past us as we stood hesitating on the pavement, and then I stepped quietly inside. There was no sound at all. The building was a huge empty space, and we were flies crawling along the bottom.

Arkwright followed me to the back of the warehouse, where a bare light bulb burned above the narrow stairs that led down to the basement. We waited at the top of the stairs for a minute, listening to the quiet, before starting down. It was impossible to be completely silent. My coat slithered against my jeans; my breath was deafening, my footfalls were thunder. There was a scurrying noise, and we froze for a second as a rat bolted for its hole. Then we slowly made our way down the short corridor, past padlocked storerooms, to the room where I had once sold part of my memories to the Lanes; the room where I knew the Lanes had stolen Sue from me.

The door was open, and the light from the stairs showed a deserted room, cables trailing from the wall and ceiling where the Baileys had been removed. Some cardboard boxes, two chairs, and an empty cupboard, the doors hanging open.

We had come too late.

“Sandy was right,” said Arkwright, his voice bleak and angry. “It has to be the government. No one else could afford to pay for a total.”

I turned and walked back down the corridor. Arkwright’s footsteps echoed behind me as we crossed the empty warehouse floor.

Back in his car, I stared out of the window, and finally said the words out loud. “There’s nothing we can do anymore. She’s dead.”

He glanced at me, and let the engine idle for a second. “You’re coming home with me,” he said. “You need a drink. And I still have something to tell you, when you feel like listening.”

I nodded, uninterested, uncaring. All I could think of was the vacant expression on Sue’s face. Everything we’d done together, everything we’d shared, syringed out and put in a bottle for some fucking government scientist to play with.

We didn’t speak on the way to his place. I woke up slightly from the trance I was in, enough just to start to guess at what he was going to tell me. Maybe that helped.

When we got in, the place looked the way it had the first time I’d been there, nearly two years before. It was still a shambles apart from the lab. Arkwright cleared off a bench for me to sit on, and disappeared for a moment, returning with two mugs of whiskey. He put one of them in my hand, and said, “How much would you give to be able to prevent something like that ever happening again?”

I must have looked blank, because he shook his head and looked around the lab. “What I’m trying to tell you, Steve, is that I’ve finally done it.”

“Done what?” I said, though I suspected.

“Copied replay.” He paused, but I didn’t say anything. “Look, Steve,” he said earnestly, “this is the invention that will save you. It would have saved Sue. You’ll be free of all the shit you take —”

“I don’t believe you.” I felt savagely angry with him, but I managed to make it look casual. He was just interfering, poking around, and now he was pretending he could save us.

He looked astonished. “This will save you all from the scrubbers—from the shakes, the bad wipes, the people who won’t talk to you, all the hassles.”

“You’re lying,” I said venomously.

“Prove it.”

“Right.” He was angry too, I could see now, the first time I’d ever seen him really irritated. “I’ll take some replay from you and copy it right now, okay?”

“No way.” I knew what to say without thinking. “You could fake that. You let me take something from you and you copy it; then I’ll choose which replay to take. Then I’ll know.”

He hesitated. “Can you remember how to work the Baileys?” My contempt must have shown. He looked uneasy, and I laughed.

“I knew it. You’re just a small-time fake, nothing but long words and bull-shit —”

“Okay, okay. We’ll do it your way.” He glared at me, furious that I was unawed by his announcement. “You can have my maths — since I’ll get it straight back.”

He sat down under the Baileys and swung the mesh down, and started snapping the connectors together. I hooked up the IV and went over to the dials behind him. He turned on the IV and said, “Okay. Ready when you are.”

There was a small black switch with a guard over it, labeled “Terminate location sequence.” I removed the guard and flicked the switch.

Arkwright said, “Steve?”

A red light started flashing at the top of the console. Next to it was a button saying “Confirm — start freeze sequence.” I pressed it, and the IVs trembled slightly as they took the freeze fluid down.

You always get a second’s warning when the freeze hits you. It was enough for Arkwright to draw breath for a scream, as he realized what was happening, but no sound escaped. He sat slumped unconscious in his chair. I went over with the jack kit and carved the hole for the one-shot jack — the scar on his temple from the last time was now just a faint white dot. I went back to the console, and pulled down the Baileys master switches. They started to hum.

Erasers never hear that sound. I hovered over Arkwright, transfixed as the search chemicals trickled through his brain, not attuned now to anything at all, scouring everything they could find, picking clean every pathway, destroying, smoothing, wiping out. Erasing.

The console started to bleep at me. I turned. It must have been half an hour, but

it had felt like moments only. The “Start extract sequence” switch was flashing its light. I flicked it down, and the note changed, deepened a fraction.

I don’t think I thought of Sue at all, that whole time. I kept obsessively remembering all the wipes and scrubs I’d ever had, all the money I’d earned, all the studying I’d done. The pints on my own, the mudslinging, all the shit erasers take from the rest of the world. I remembered how once I’d been beaten up, just for the jack scars on my temple. I remembered signing on with KTM, doing it because it was money, notoriety, something I couldn’t get any other way. I’d been beaten up because I was in a job that no one wanted, when almost no one else had any kind of job at all. Now it was the only thing I had left in the world, and Arkwright had been planning to take it away from me.

The console beeped again, this time to let me know the sequence was complete. I pulled out the jack and uncoupled the IV, and then reached down inside the heart of the Baileys and pulled out the phial of replay. I held it up. It was oily, slightly translucent, almost colorless. I looked at Arkwright. His head lolled forward on his chest. He was drooling, his jaw loose.

The rage that had filled me earlier suddenly came howling back. “Well fuck you, then, you arrogant bastard,” I screamed, my lips and arms and legs shaking uncontrollably, and I threw the phial at him with all my strength. I was shaking so badly that even from six feet I missed, and it smashed on the helmet above him, and splashed across the room. It started to drip off the helmet onto him.

I calmed down a little. I knew where his kitchen was, and I managed to find some matches. I crumpled up all the papers I could find, lit some of them, and left. I heard afterwards the place burnt to the ground. The cops never came for me.

These days I drink with Joey, mostly. I haven’t told him, and I think maybe I never will, but of course I saved his life.

Perhaps he wouldn’t understand, but I saved the lives of all of us. ■



Just for Tonight

Rob
Chilson

Illustration by Susan Van Camp

*It was just a collection of old
home-canning jars, and they were
empty...until they were opened.*



Just for you grandkids, the jar said. Andy Sterrett snorted, touched and amused. It took him back to his childhood. Grandma Sally had been famous among her grandkids for her “just for you’s”: special surprises, often but not always gifts, always appropriate. Sterrett replaced the empty Mason jar on the shelf and turned to his left. A stair led further down into the cellar. This was the side-room, where the empty jars were kept, rows of dusty tops and faded, water-stained labels.

“Andy! Where are you? We’re ready to start!” Marcia’s voice.

Andy climbed the short flight of stairs up from the side-room — the cellar was dug into a slope, and the side-room halfway down it. Atop the cellar was a neat one-room cabin of the same cement-block

walls as the cellar, built on up. To the left of it again was the house, in the same neat cement block as the cellar and “woodshed.”

Marcia Wertz awaited him, hands on hips. She’d never been very pretty even as a child, and now she was in her middle forties. She reminded him unpleasantly of about three of his worst school teachers. Andy nodded curtly and followed her into the neat, old-fashioned living room. Here all the chairs and divans were covered with crocheted doilies and antimacassars. One was completely covered with a kind of crocheted sheet in a colorful block pattern.

Will Sterrett, his brother, and Ernie Kunkle, the other two surviving grandkids, were waiting. Ernie, just arriving, grudgingly submitted to a handshake. He’d always hated to be touched. They

were all now in their late forties, a collection of jowls and bald pates that were totally out of place amid remembered youth.

Strange how the colors of youth are so much brighter than anything later, how so few a tale of years can so shape a life maybe ten times as long later. They'd all been deeply shaped by the woman who had lived here.

Grandma Sally. Sarah Kunkle, R.I.P.

"I think we're agreed then on keeping the place?" Ernie said. "We can use it as a vacation resort ourselves, and our folks can settle here unless they need care taken of them."

"Sounds good to me," Will said.

Andy nodded. "Mom and Dad are talking about retiring and moving to the country. Ernie, I don't know about your parents, if they'd like to move here, but there's room in this big house for two couples."

"I don't know if they'd like to move this far out," said Ernie a little pompously. "But I suppose they and your parents will get along famously if they do."

Andy didn't suppose anything of the sort, but nodded.

"And if my mother wants to come down here, she can stay in the cabin," Marcia said, her shrill combative voice causing her cousins to wince.

Andy winced most. He'd spent his honeymoon in that cabin — it had been converted from a woodshed for them. The thought of Marcia's shrill nagging bag of a mother moving in was almost too much, but he managed to nod, hoping it would never happen.

"Now: to the other things," said Will.

Andy suddenly wished Grandma Sally had left her things to her children. But the will specifically bequeathed everything to the grandchildren, share and share alike. He wished he hadn't come. But he'd been vaguely afraid that the others would sell the farm, or something. Turned out they had no more intention of that than he had.

The "other things" he didn't so much care about, though Grandma's place wouldn't seem the same without her old clocks and crocheting, the ancient treadle sewing machine Marcia had been eyeing avidly, the very ancestral pictures on the walls. How long had it been since even Grandma Sally had thought about Uncle Young Coones?

"If nobody else wants it, I'd like to have the little strike clock," said Ernie.

Andy frowned. Grandma Sally'd loaned that ancient thing to him for his honeymoon. Some of his fondest memories were wound up with the mellow sound of that clock's chime: every hour and half-hour, all through the night. He sighed. It was going to be a long day....

About the middle of the afternoon they took a break, all feeling hoarse. Andy carried his glass of tea — Grandma Sally had left a couple of gallons of her iced sun tea in the fridge — out to the cellar again. The door to the cellar proper was warped with moisture, as it had always been, and he had to force it, as always.

Turning on the light, he inhaled the cellar odor. There were no longer vegetables or fruit in the bins, but their odors lingered. Beyond that was a damp smell; despite the waterproof paint, moisture leaked in through the block walls. The room was about thirty feet square and so cool as to seem chilly after the heat of the Midwestern midsummer. Rows of Mason jars gleamed in the light, all different colors of jellies and jams first catching the eye, then canned fruit and vegetables. They looked rather dull beside the preservative-laced and color-enhanced commercial product, but he remembered flavors he hadn't tasted in a decade and more.

He supposed that this would all have to be divided up. Maybe they should leave it for their parents. Or each take a sample and leave the rest. He found, as with the clock, that he couldn't simply leave it and walk away. Just to taste for one last time a hint of his youth — Grandma Sally's canned blackberries or her wild-grape jelly —

It'd be so much easier if I could just chuck all this and walk away. Tell 'em to do what they want. But I can't, he thought, looking around. Too much of me is here. Maybe it's mid-life crisis or something. Funny how much weight the old place has on me. Can't just let go.

I never could. Used to fight with Will all the time. And he was as bad. Grandma used to beat us pretty regularly as kids, and I guess we both deserved it.

He'd been seeing the stubborn look on Will's face this afternoon that had figured so largely in their battles as youngsters. Andy sighed, turned off the light, and forced the door shut.

What did I come down here for, anyway? Maybe one last touch of Grandma Sally's hand, one last "just for you," a

memento perhaps of lost youth.

He went up a half-flight of stairs and looked around the side-room again. Row after row of empty, clean Mason jars, covered with dust, but waiting. They would wait forever for her....

Curious, he thought. Most of the jars had had the labels washed off, but not all. Mostly behind the others were rows of jars with neat-looking labels, printed in Grandma Sally's old-fashioned script. Andy picked one up. 6-19-59, the label said, but it didn't say what had been in the jar.

Nineteen fifty-nine, he thought. Replacing it, he looked over the shelves. They were all like that. Dates, no hint of what had been in them. And no room on the labels for anything more. Andy picked out another. 8-19-52. He'd been fourteen that year....

But what had been in the jar? He twisted the band off. It gave stiffly, with a gritty feel of rust. Must not have been touched since '52. With the back of a pocket-knife blade he popped the cap: it was still sealed. He tore it off, got a faint whiff of stale air.

Underlying it was an odor of summer.

Of course it was summer all around him. But this was a later smell. The flowers change in late summer, the weeds are different and taller and older; the year farther gone. This air smelled of late summer, of August — of an imminent return to school. There was a melancholia about it, an end-of-summer air. It was sad and lonely and full of the crushing, bittersweet odor of lost time, opportunities gone now forever.

It was evening in August, the sun going down on another day, a day full of the immediacy of life for a fourteen-year-old, alternately absorbing and boring. And now it was gone, the clouds fire-shot from behind, one clear band of light going forever up. School hung overhead like a fateful shadow: less than a week. Bone-deep sadness accompanied the thought. Here he was, fourteen years old, and what had he done? Who was he? Would he ever amount to anything? Already some of the leaves were turning, long before the first frost, used up by the hot summer sun. They'd had their day, and used it. So had he, but what had he done with his summer? He hadn't even gone camping, and as for that trip to the lake....

The cattle made a mournful noise as Jake went out to milk them, deliberately rattling the bucket to attract them. Royal, the cat, came by, looking up at the evening

flights of birds. Grandpa Bill was chopping a few final sticks of firewood, somewhere out of sight.

And always in background, Grandma Sally: a clatter of lids and dishes and a smell of steam and fruit, as she did her canning.

"Andy! What are you doing?"

He came back slowly to the day.

Marcia advanced down the steps. "You were just standing there with a silly look on your face, holding that old empty jar."

He stared at her, took a breath. "I was back in the past."

"Hmfm. You were just standing there like a silly kid —"

"*I was back in the past!* Marcia, here, look at this." He showed her the label. "I was back in nineteen fifty-two! It was August, in the evening...I saw the sunset and I heard Grandpa Bill chopping wood—"

"Andy Sterrett! Do you really expect me to believe that?"

He supposed not. "No, I guess I don't. Here." Turning, he picked up a labeled jar at random: 2-16-57. Marcia watched skeptically as he twisted the band off and with some effort sprung the lid. He thrust the jar into her hands, retreating a step.

"There. Open it and sniff the contents."

Marcia looked at him sourly, visibly decided to humor him, and did so.

She became young.

At first her sour expression gave way to one of intense surprise and she glanced in his direction. But she was already too caught up to see him. She smiled — it had been years since he'd seen her smile; Marcia didn't smile much even as a child. She was too bossy to smile. But now she was smiling secretly, as if caught up in some pleasing private fancy. Her whole face relaxed, the tense lines smoothing out, all harshness flensed away by the magic of reversed time.

"Mmmmm," she said, drawing it out. The smile broke but did not drain away, despite the look of retrospective sadness she now wore. She seemed to be looking back fondly on a sad and troublous time.

Then it ended.

Marcia took a deep breath, brushed away tears, and smiled tremulously at Andy.

"Oh, Andy! I was back here! In the winter, and I never got to come here in the winter! Did you ever crack black walnuts on a stick of firewood with a hammer, and drink cider on Friday night? I know you got to visit in the winter. I think you were there.

Grandma and Grandpa were there, naturally, and the cats — remember the big Siamese? Royal?"

"Yes. Uh, how long were you there?"

"Oh, all evening. Three hours at least. Why, how long has it been?"

"Two or three minutes," he said, looking at his watch.

"Andy, do you know what this means? It means Grandma Sally spent hours saving time! And here it all is — stored up in these jars!"

"Yes," he said, dazed by the knowledge, looking at the labeled jars. "Here it all is."

"We've got to tell the others!"

"I wouldn't have believed it if I hadn't been there," Ernie said, awed. He held an empty bottle; Will stood next to him, equally shaken. Marcia stood on the other side of the bottle, smiling, serene.

"How long were we gone?" Will asked, hoarse.

"Two or three minutes." Again Andy hadn't taken part.

"Amazing! I was gone all day."

"So was I," said Ernie. Marcia nodded.

Andy looked at the jars. "It's really amazing. There must be dozens of jars there — a hundred at least, maybe more."

"How about the bottom shelf?"

"I think those are all later dates, sixties and seventies. Now, I'm only interested in the fifties...."

"Me too."

"So'm I."

"Backward, turn backward, O Time in thy flight," Marcia sang. She had no voice for singing. "It's not like my adult life has been worth reliving, either. So how do we divide them?"

They looked at each other warily, old antagonisms surfacing. Neither Andy nor Will had liked Ernie; Marcia they saw only in summers as a child, thank God. For that matter, they had hardly gotten on with each other. Will had always been obstinate, and he had that stubborn set to his mouth now.

"I want one date in the winter of '58 especially," said Will.

"The time you and that blonde chippie supposedly got stuck in the snow, I suppose," said Ernie snidely. "Well, you're welcome to it. Now I've got to have May 20, 1958."

"Your graduation?" Marcia hooted.

"My God, it must be for all those scrolls and awards—you sure never scored *that* night!"

"Christmas!" Andy cried. The exclamation was wrung from him by the sight of a block of jars with, written on the labels: *Chris. 1955; Chris. 1956; Chris. 1958...*

"Migawd, yes. Seems to be complete from 1952 through 1961," said Will.

"Grandma Sally never would write Xmas," said Marcia.

"Let's open one now!" Ernie cried. Christmas had been their favorite get-together. The rest frowned at him.

"We'll have to divide them evenly. Who wants 1952?" Will said.

Better ask for the moon if you want to get at least a piece of cheese, as old man Swanthold used to say, Andy thought. "I want 1958," he said.

They scowled at him. "Why you?" Marcia said. "Why always you? Just because you're the oldest, you always have to have your way. I'm fed up with *your way*. Why not one of us? Why not me?"

"Why not 1959?" Will asked snidely.

That'd been a bad time for him. "Don't want it. Look, maybe we'll have to flip coins or something. I'm willing to gamble on it."

"My God, *The Lake, 1956!* You see that? The summer we were all at the lake! God, we were so young. I want that one!"

"There's two of those. I want one!"

"Oh my God, December 14, 1959! How'd she come to save *that* one? I've got to have it!"

"Look, let's each make our own selections of the general ones, then look over what each other has chosen and deal. Then the Christmas ones and other specials we can divide by lot. How's it sound?"

"I'll tell you how it sounds, Ernie Kunkle," said Marcia shrilly. "It sounds to me like you have one of your schemes up your sleeve. Just because you're so smart, you always get your own way. A spoiled brat!"

"Damn right," Will grumbled. "I always got blamed for what you did, and here you go again."

"Oh come on!" Ernie cried. "Andy, talk sense to them. We've got to have some reasonable way of dividing these things up. Propose your own method if you don't like mine."

"You always used to tell me to talk sense, just before you took me for my last marble," Andy said resentfully.

"Well, I'm not going to depend on any of Ernie's schemes — or any of Andy's either!" snapped Marcia. "I'm taking my share now!"

She started snatching jars from the shelf and loading her arms.

"Me either!" said Will, following suit.

"Hey!" said Ernie. "That's not fair!" He too stepped up and started grabbing blindly.

Andy saw him seize a jar labeled 6-22-59. Andy had been married on the 20th, three days before... how like Grandma Sally to save, not the clumsy eager first night, but the third, when they'd gotten to know each other —

"Hey, that's mine!" Ernie cried.

"No, that's my honeymoon! I've got to have it —"

"Wait a minute, '55 — October? Is that the big Halloween party —"

"You can't hog all those —"

"Hey! Hey, you guys! Look at this!" Will held up the first bottle Andy had seen: *Just for you grandkids*. They hesitated, stopped, looked at each other.

"Just for you." They could hear the smile in her voice as she said it. Quite possibly Grandma Sally was the only relative they all had truly loved. Or who had truly loved them all.

Andy had to have it.

So did the others.

In a moment they were scuffling one-handed, each with an armful of Mason jars. "What're you *doing*?" "You sneak, you

tattled on me and now you're grabbing all the good stuff!" "I've put up with a lot from you, but this is too much." "*Cousins.*"

"*Watch out!*" "*Oh God!*" "*No.*"

The jar smashed at their feet and Grandma Sally towered among them. A sharp pain went through Andy's ear; he twisted his head to ease her grip.

Her voice was sharp as she shook him. "*What did I tell you?*" "*I've warned you before!*" "*I'm not going to tell you again!*"

Many, many of the times that Grandma Sally had had to punish him poured over him again. Fear, guilt, shame, sadness overwhelmed him. It was as always: he had disappointed her, had let her down, caused her more pain than she would him. That knowledge hurt more than the spankings, which he never remembered anyway. But her chastisements he had never forgotten.

In the midst of it came the crash of breaking glass from a long time away. And times began to flit over Andy's head, times of youth and gaiety, autumn days like sky rockets, winter days pure and clear as glacial ice, the scent of new-cut grass, new-fallen apples, cattle being milked. Spring was tender with youth, summer pregnant with promise, fall sad with Time on the wane. Hobgoblins cavorted on fleeting Halloweens, turkeys roasted modestly in pans, firecrackers banged and small boys ran shrilling with sparklers in the sparkling night. Young love was there, sharp and painful as biting into lemons, bringing tears to the eyes, pleasure so great it stabbed. All from times before,

and all gone now. All gone now.

Andy came slowly back to Now and saw similarly stunned looks on the faces of Will and Marcia. Broken glass lay all around their feet. Ernie had stumbled backward and fallen, an old man in a pile of broken glass and dreams. Marcia was the only one who'd saved any jars. Half a dozen held in the crook of her arm, she fled, sobbing wildly, up the stairs. One fell; they were too far away to smell it. She stumbled at the top of the stairs and Andy heard the rest of them crash.

Will turned away after a mournful look at the shelf, wiping his eyes. Andy sighed, more like a groan: there were only a couple of jars left from the fifties, neither with dates that meant anything to him. Ernie was sitting with his wrists on his knees, staring blankly at the shelf.

Shambling like an old man, Andy went to Ernie, bent over, hand extended. His bones ached, Ernie, who hated to be touched, permitted himself to be helped.

"We'd better see about Marcia —" Will said, turning.

She sat wanly on the top step, wiping her eyes and holding out the one remaining jar. "Christmas, 1956," she said. "Shall we share it?"

"Better tonight," said Ernie. "After we've divided everything else up —"

"O Time in thy flight, Make us children again, Just for tonight," Andy murmured. "Thank you, Grandma." ■

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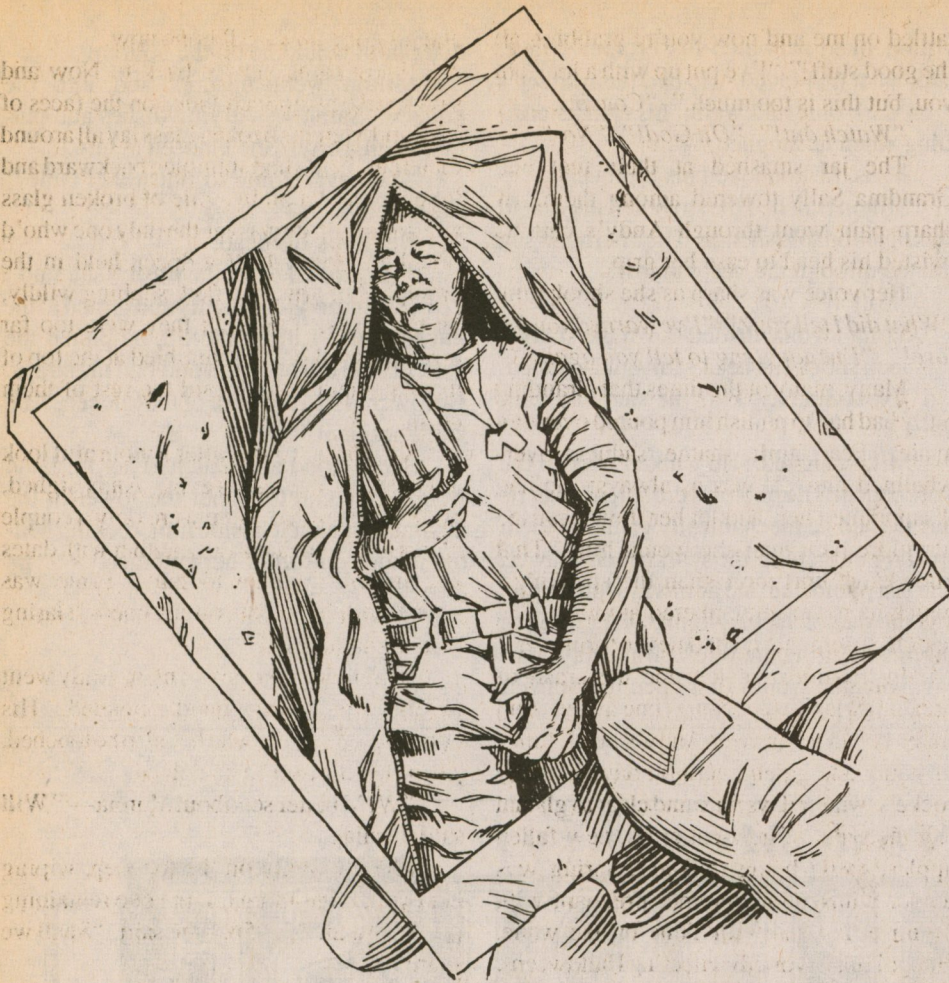
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Body Bag

Cathy Ball

Illustration by Greg Petan

It was a simple Sunday afternoon ritual; Milton and Jack building a table, Jack showing pictures from Vietnam.

Jack would show Milton the pictures. There was always that broken, half savage grin on his face when he would shove them at him. The photos would be fanned in both of his hands and Jack would hold them inches under Milton's nose, his hands almost touching Milton's chest.

"Take a look, take a look, Bro," Jack urged.

Milton hated it. But he looked. Anything to get his big brother past this part of their Sunday afternoon ritual. Anything to get Jack out of that dark mood. And there was a certain fascination, no matter how many times he saw the pictures, something that drew the eyes.

Milton stared at them, the cheap Polaroids worn and smudged on the edges. Rows of the dark bags, the handles flopped to the sides of some, tags unreadable from the distance. Swirls of dust were frozen in midair in some of the photos, kicked up by unseen helicopters. No people were in the

pictures at all, unless you counted the shapes in the bags. Or the single shot of Jack himself, lying in an open bag and smirking for the camera, a joint clutched in his right hand, his left hand cupping his crotch.

"Okay, okay, I see them," Milton said. He pushed Jack's hand away from him. Jack looked down at the photos and tidied them together. He reached over and dropped them on the workbench, all but the picture of himself.

"This is what did it," Jack said. He smiled down at the photo. "This is what got me home."

He leaned over and dropped the photo on top of the others.

"The other guys thought I was crazy, ya know."

Milton nodded. He had always thought Jack was crazy, anyway. Perfect, but crazy.

"Jesus, Jack," Milton said plaintively. "We going to work on this or what?" He gestured at the half built table on the floor of

the workshop. Milton could hear his wife, Sarah, upstairs in the kitchen.

Jack grinned at Milton again. He picked up the table leg he had been sanding and began working on it.

"Every one of the other guys went home in a bag," Jack said. His tone was always quiet, always low.

Milton nodded. He had heard this from his brother before. Over and over, every Sunday in the coolness of the basement workshop.

Jack never showed the photos to anyone else. He had mailed them to Milton after being overseas for seven months. No letter. Just the pictures.

Jack stopped sanding and rubbed the smooth surface of the table leg, as if enjoying the cool white pine.

"I got no war stories," Jack said. "None but this. And only for you, Bro. 'Cause you used to write me. No matter what."

Milton smiled at Jack.

"Pretty dumb stuff. Letters about junior high," Milton started. Jack shook the table leg at him gently and interrupted.

"Ya kept me sane, kid," Jack said. "Tell me about that English teacher again, the story about the dead frog."

Milton shook his head and made a face.

"Jesus, Jack," he said. "You've heard it a million times."

"It's a good story," his brother said.

"Rather hear your one story," said Milton. "Even if it isn't eloquent." Jack grinned.

"All of that was preventive medicine."

Jack nodded at the picture on top of the others. "Take the edge off the fear. Whistling in the graveyard. Worked pretty good, too."

Milton began his story about the teacher.

Jack listened carefully, his hands busy on the surface of the wood, handsanding the pine. He laughed at all the right places.

Milton liked to watch his brother's face. Jack's tan had faded. He had their father's eyes, dark blue and warm, his cheeks crinkling when he laughed.

Jesus, Milton loved his brother.

Milton finished the story and they sat in a companionable silence. The afternoon sun slanted through the one window.

"Milton?"

Sarah's voice drifted down the stairs.

Jack shook his head sadly and grinned.

"Next Sunday, kid," he said and vanished.

Milton sighed. He walked over to the workbench. The photos were spread over its surface and he mechanically gathered them up and put them in the workbench drawer. The last photo, the one he always left on top, was the one of Jack. No one went into the basement during the week. But every Sunday, when he would first open the drawer,

that photo would be on the bottom.

Milton went upstairs and into the kitchen. Sarah was drying dishes and putting them away. She glanced at him.

"You ever going to finish that table?" she asked.

He shook his head.

"Time to take out the trash," she said.

Milton nodded silently and turned to the kitchen bin. Lifting the lid, he pulled the dark plastic trashbag out and tied the straps. He lowered it to the floor of the kitchen. And knelt beside it.

Sarah stood and watched her husband weep. She carefully put the towel in the dishrack and knelt beside him, rocking Milton in the comfort of her embrace. ■

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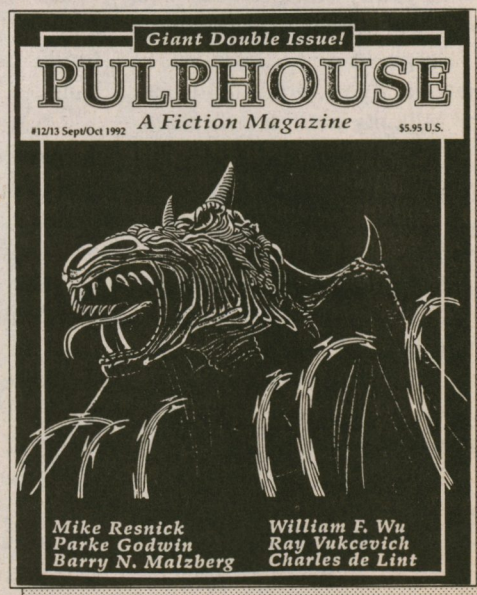
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Someday I Shall Rise and Go

Richard Bowes

Illustration by Kelly Faltermeyer

They sent her out to get a straight job. What she found was the magic.

The woman across the desk was a kind of witch with strange powers over the spaces in the middle of sentences, the gaps in time that couldn't be accounted for. "And what have you done recently, Miss Thayer?" she asked Chris. "There are ten months, I believe, yes, April 1967 through the present, unaccounted for."

Chris stared, fascinated, at the interviewer and rummaged in her memory for lost job hunting techniques. Finally, she said, "Well, my major in college was drama lit...and I wanted to get into making movies."

The witch gave a little smile and saw quite easily the months that Chris and Jon had spent tripping around Manhattan, researching the way sunlight fell on deserted Sunday morning business streets, how faces in doorways were shadowed as if by masks, the inhuman bleakness of midtown and the sadness of gargoyles on condemned buildings. The interviewer understood better than Chris herself that the entire movie existed only in their heads, would survive only until drugs washed away their memories.

"Your background is varied, very interesting in fact." The woman's smile looked as if it would tear her lined, cigarette smoker's face. She stood up, came around the desk to indicate that the interview was over. "My dear Chris," she said, touching the young woman's arm. "You wouldn't be happy in this office job. Oh, you could do it, I'm sure. But you wouldn't be happy."

Chris started to protest but felt herself propelled toward the door by a minor spell and the words, "Now, I will keep you in mind in case a time ever comes up when I can use you." Then Chris was outside the office door minus a few secrets.

Down the hall in a ladies' room, Chris's hands trembled as she

pushed back the long blonde hair brushed last night and done up so carefully this morning by Sandy, examined the plain white blouse, the conservative blue skirt that fell just above the knee, the lipstick and makeup used today for the first time in many months. Solemnly, she looked into the mirror, searched her own eyes for the key, the opening to her life that the witch had found so easily.

Then Chris stepped into the stall, reached in her purse, pulled out a jolly fat joint and took half a dozen flicks to jumpstart the cheap lighter. The garage smell of unburned lighter fluid got smothered in the stench of grass. Chris's senses suddenly were magnified. She heard somebody in high heels outside the rest room. She mashed the joint out on the sink, stuck it in her purse, dropped the purse as she fumbled with the raincoat which she hadn't worn in a year.

Tottering in borrowed shoes, Chris burst into the corridor in a cloud of smoke. The witch who interviewed her stood near the reception desk. She and everyone, receptionist and job applicants alike, paused and watched Chris fly out the door and into the street. "Hippies," someone said.

"Smoking LSD," someone added with great disapproval.

The agency was in a quiet stretch south of the Village. The avenue widened there unexpectedly and in its center stood a small park with wooden benches and a couple of cement tables. It was a dismal winter day, chill and drizzling. Chris ran through traffic to sit on a bench under the single skimpy, leafless tree.

The world's noise and color came in waves. Three boys in bright, slightly out-of-date Carnaby Street outfits crossed the street, paused near Chris to wait for the light. Craning their necks, looking in all directions, they rapped in voices too high pitched and speedy



for most people to catch.

But Chris found herself easily able to understand the elf language that they chattered and shrieked. She learned that one of them had just gotten the office job she had applied for. When they skipped away joyously, she was left sitting dazed and cold wondering what to tell Jon.

That evening, Sandy sat on the edge of Chris and Jon's couch, smoking a pipe of Chris's grass. She did that without asking because they shared everything that came into the place on East Seventh Street. "They" were Sandy and Wes her old man and a girl named Terri who was into politics and wasn't around much and Chris and Jon and whoever else was crashing at the moment. The lease to the apartment was in Wes's name. Chris and Jon hadn't contributed anything toward the rent and utilities in the four months they had stayed there.

Wes paddled through barefoot, head and face an explosion of dull red hair out of which small eyes of almost the exact same color darted suspiciously. Sandy waved the pipe in his direction but he shook his head. "Good grass," Sandy said. Chris had changed into borrowed jeans and sneakers. She leaned against the wall and refused the pipe.

"I hope," Sandy said, "that it's cool saying to you what I'm going to say." Sandy was big, taller than Wes, heavy in the ass and thighs, like one of those ancient stone madonnas recovered from caves. "Wes is, like, bugged by the way Jon is doing scag. And by his dealing. You know, people show up all the time looking for him. Yesterday Wes found someone had used one of the spoons to cook up with. I know it's a hassle, and that Bad Jon is just trying to get

by in a world the pigs made, but..."

Chris nodded, hearing the voice from a long way off. Under the couch was a suitcase holding all of her possessions. Everything else she owned when she met Jon had been abandoned, destroyed, bartered, stashed in places she could no longer remember. Each move got easier because there was less to take.

Part of Chris knew that she had to get along for the moment. That was her old brain, the one parents and school had implanted over twenty-one years. Her other, smarter brain, the one Jon had spent a year giving her, knew the situation in this pad was too regular, that it ran from day to day like a railroad track with times to eat and sleep and wake. That brain knew that Wes and Sandy were so hung up on money that they wanted to send her out on an office gig. Through Jon, Chris had discovered another kind of time, one that existed in the holes in peoples' lives, that went in all directions and could be used any way you wanted to.

"I'll tell Jon it isn't cool to have connections by here," Chris said.

Later, she went looking for him over at Harpur's. She approached the building hesitantly. Harpur intimidated her: not him so much as the kind of aura that existed in his presence. As she went in the downstairs door, Shadow, black and thin as a stick figure, stormed past without seeing her. Harpur used Shadow as a drug runner and go-between. He looked mad and scared at the same time. Under his breath he said, "Him and his hound thing they're almighty. All they are is ghosts!"

Upstairs, Harpur's door was ajar. Blue light came from inside and music played softly. Chris knocked, the dog barked three times,

and she let herself in. The outer room was empty, illuminated only by blue light coming from the bedroom. Pillows and mattresses lay against a wall covered entirely by a mural of a flight of stairs twisting its way down to a garden full of bright flowers.

In the bedroom, Jon sat slumped against a wall, smiling fixedly at his host who lay on a white water bed next to a large, black Doberman. It occurred to Chris that just as she had fallen under the magic of Jon and acid so had Jon succumbed to the more powerful spell of Harpur and heroin. Only the dog glanced up when she entered. It gave a short, low bark, almost a grunt of approval. Chris thought of the Doberman as something between a familiar and a kind of seeing eye dog. She had never heard Harpur refer to the animal or call it by name.

A pre-release copy of the Notorious Byrd Brothers played softly on the stereo. Harpur himself, tiny, baby faced, thirty plus, with a wild tangle of hair, bathed in overhead blue lights, looked almost as if he had died and been laid out for public viewing. He did promotion work for rock musicians, an acceptable form of gig.

"Bummer," Jon replied when Chris got his attention and told him what Sandy had said. "Pigs. Landlord pigs," Jon said tonelessly. Then, "We got to take Wes and Sandy out to dinner. You get that gig today?" he asked, not looking in her direction. It was as though he had forgotten all about the new brain he had spent so much time giving her. In this room he seemed totally submerged in the pulsing blue light.

"When are you coming home?" She put her arms around Jon, rubbed his chest, tried to get his attention.

"Bummer. Bummer. Bummer," was all he said in the same flat tone. "We need a gig real bad, babe. You got anything to pawn?"

"Even what I've got on is borrowed."

A pause ensued. Then from the bed a husky but somehow sexless voice said, "There's a place called Creative Associated Research. Or Direct Research Creation. Something. Over on Grammercy Park. I know them." Chris looked at the dog, who stared back at her. Harpur didn't stir from his lying in state pose as he continued, "Ask to speak to a Mr. Stanhope. He's Mr. Outside over there, a minor mesmerist, not the real power in the picture. But he can hire you. Use my name. Be careful to pronounce

it Harpur and not Harper."

Late the next morning Chris stood outside the office and tried to remember the other things Harpur had said before he and Jon nodded out and the dog escorted her to the door. The building might once have been a mansion or a club. A discreet gold plated sign beside the ornate glass door read, "Association for Research in Creative Direction." Or something like that.

The weather that afternoon was bright but cold and Chris shivered in the raincoat and skirt as she pressed the door bell and was buzzed in. "You've got the looks, luv," Harpur had said in his remote, trance voice. "Dress up. Wear high heels, Peter Pan collars. Make them think you just got into town." She found herself in a high ceilinged reception room with full length mirrors, crossing thick carpets toward a distant desk and two receptionists.

Chris mentioned Harpur's name, pronouncing it carefully, and the fact that she was looking for a job. Without blinking or commenting, one of the women handed her an application form. Chris noticed that both of them wore blouses with high collars buttoned up to their chins and had hair dyed exactly the same shade of brown.

Chris remembered to weave an acceptable fabric to cover the gap in her employment between her first job in New York as an apprentice at an ad agency and the present. Her life had changed when she met Jon one Saturday in Washington Square Park and dropped acid for the first time that very evening. Sometime shortly afterward she had moved out of the railroad flat she shared with three other girls and begun her travels to the couch in Wes and Sandy's place.

Then she handed the form to one of the receptionists, who said without looking at it, "Mr. Stanhope will see you immediately. Down the hall to your right, first door on your left."

Chris took a deep breath and remembered what Harpur had told her about the place the night before. "Some kind of non-profit status, intimate, with a nice amount of change to spend. But that's all a cover."

Mr. Stanhope was large and gray: suit, skin, tie, eyes, hair, all various gray tones. He stammered once every couple of sentences and when that happened, he reached his face forward as if he was trying to snap up the escaped syllable. The cold outside made

the dark wood and big chairs seem warm and comforting to Chris.

Stanhope glanced at her application, then said, "In trying to find someone who will work within the Institute's methods which are a bit unusual, I find it easier to trust to a sort of inst..." Here he went after the word, got it back in his mouth. "Instinct. We tend to work on little pet schemes, things that have sort of gotten under our skin. Ones that there's no getting away from."

A globe from so far back that the coastline of the continents looked wrong, the interiors were blank spaces, sat behind Stanhope's big, vague head. Maps of places she didn't recognize and what looked like old children's book illustrations, a collage of mind obsessions, hung on the walls. Chris's attention floated away as the cultured, soft voice trailed on. She realized that she hadn't eaten since the day before and that she was starving.

When she focused again it was to hear him say, "You would have to record what it is we've done on our project. We have a magazine which, of course, would want a report. As project director, I would have my name on it. You would get credit too. Research assistant, a fine credit in view of your being so young. It seems to me a good chance."

Chris recalled Harpur's telling her, "He'll talk some kind of uptight bullshit about research at first. But just be yourself, say what you're thinking and he'll show you the real stuff. He has a kind of limited, local power over time and space."

Stanhope had stopped talking, a man not used to hiring and firing. Chris realized she was now supposed to say something. All that she could think of was waking up in a crash pad, so hungry that she dreamed of food from Chinese places and fried chicken places and delis. She would lie there and starve because all that was in the refrigerator was decayed brown rice and a jar of honey someone's mother had sent weeks before. From Victorian children's books read as a kid, Chris had learned that honey was the ultimate good.

"Winnie the Pooh led me to a big disappointment with honey, when I was about twenty and actually had some," was what she finally said. She found Stanhope smiling tentatively at her.

That led him to talk about children's books. "Illustrations I saw when I was

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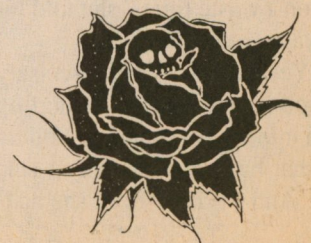
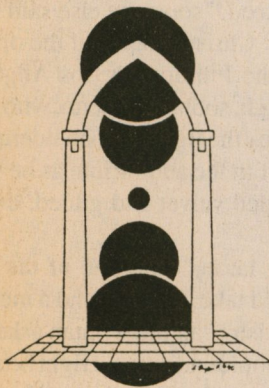
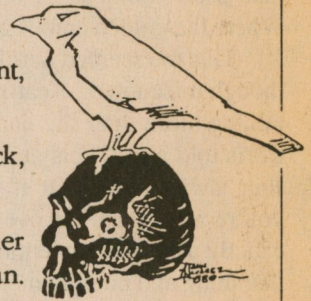
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young have stayed with me ever since, unforgettable but elusive. Even seeing the pictures again doesn't fully recapture them."

He turned slightly and Chris noticed two particularly brightly colored prints behind his head. One was of a blue sea full of islands with little boats sailing between them. The other was of a ruined castle under a bright sun. They were somehow evocative even though she couldn't remember having seen them before.

Stanhope watched her for a moment, then said, "And do you remember the poem that goes, 'Someday I shall rise and go/ Where the golden apples grow?'"

That too seemed familiar, but wrong as though misquoted. Realizing that she was talking more than she had in a long time, Chris told him, "This guy I'm living with, Jon, always says that if you know what you're after then it's over. When you're exactly aware of something, you have just that thing and nothing more."

He beamed, said, "Exact..." the lunge and the gulp, "Exactly." At some point a little later in the interview he told Chris, "The situation of the inhabitants of an island in the Caribbean has caught my attention. The whole area is fascinating, the geology, wildlife, everything. The island contains the ruins of the castle of San Juan de Figuera from which it takes its name. Before that it was the site of an Indian temple of Cro... Croa... baxa. There is a great deal of lore attached to the place. In the nineteenth century the island was abandoned. But in the nineteen-twenties, under the rule of Carlos Ballastereos, the Indians on the mainland suffered great persecution, almost a pogrom, that drove the survivors to the island."

Chris sipped a cup of tea which one of the women in the high collars had brought and thought of explorers in the nineteenth century sitting in a plush London club. Stanhope said, "I'm afraid some might think this a waste of time."

She smiled because everything he said showed that he was so in tune with a special pace that wasn't straight or day to day. "If you don't waste time," she told him, "time will waste you."

"Yes," he said, "yes, precisely." Then he stood up and said, "The starting salary I had in mind is two hundred dollars a week. Will that be agreeable? You start tomorrow." And Chris realized she had the job.

* * *

It was already dark when she got back to the pad and Bad Jon was very wrecked. "A check came from your mother today and I signed your name and cashed it. Hassle, took hours," he told her, sitting cross-legged on their couch and smiling like a cat getting stroked. "Don't worry about Sandy and Wes being pissed at us. I got tickets for the Joplin concert and we'll go to dinner afterwards."

Chris, not in the habit of questioning him, just nodded and asked, "Did my mother send a letter?" When she met Jon, he was an accomplished trip master, a wizard of inner space. Bit by bit, he had broken her away from the life she had lived. Now she felt herself floating free.

"Yeah. Bullshit mind games. The kind she's always played with you. It's here somewhere." No one else was home. Chris got out of her interview clothes, sat on the couch next to Jon and put her arms around him. She'd had boyfriends in high school, what she thought of as lovers in college. But never had she spent the time, in bed or out, with them that she had with him.

He shook her off without losing his cat smile. It was only after he suddenly discovered junk that autumn and ripped a few people off, that they started calling him Bad Jon and that she felt him start to slip away. Chris felt very lost and very hungry.

"I got that gig Harpur mentioned," she told him. The letter from her mother lay crumpled beside the bed. On the envelope in which it had been mailed were a couple of dozen approximations of Chris's own signature where Jon had practiced signing her name.

"Great, we need the bread," he told her. Then he said, "Harpur is real cool. He got me four house seats for the first show tonight."

That midnight, she sat at a table in Ratner's Dairy Restaurant on Second Avenue gobbling challa bread and sweet butter. Jon sat next to her with Sandy and Wes across the table. Friday midnight was after the early show at the Fillmore and before the late show let out. On the faded red carpets, tables full of kids in their late teens and early twenties, rich sojourners from the suburbs in velvet dresses and damaged jeans, members of city crash pads, grimmer, but more exotic, ordered kosher dairy: plates of scrambled eggs with mushrooms, matzo soup, strawberry shortcake.

Hair glittered, dayglow shone in the light from the hanging gold chandeliers.

New celebrities, rock critics, A&R men from the record labels, major dealers, street pashas and gurus of cults and tribes called to each other across the big room. Old waiters who had seen the rise and fall of the Yiddish theater rolled slowly on flat feet, sneered as they mixed the orders up.

The four of them had been stuck at a table near the kitchen. They had just seen Big Brother make its New York debut. Jon was cranky by that time. "Joplin was okay," he said. "But Big Brother is like all of them. They're selling out. They're co-opted by the system." He looked at Chris and Sandy and Wes, accusing them too.

At a table nearby sat old Jewish actors, men with bald heads and white manes, women with ancient furs over the backs of the chairs. To Chris they were an Elder Race sitting in judgment in this decaying palace.

"So I'm kvelling about getting a part," one of the men said. "Haven't I got the right? Ludlow has hired me."

"Twenty years ago, Ludlow was a macher maybe," a woman said, "Mister big shot producer. Now, he is a nothing."

A sudden silence came over the room. All eyes in Ratner's focused on a boy with an explosion of blond hair. The arms inside his jacket, the legs in his bell bottoms, stood out like bones, his eyes were blown and swimming on his face. "Dylan!" hissed a speedy voice. "Lou Reed," someone else said in a stage whisper. Chris recognized the opening act from the Fillmore, a Los Angeles singer with a high, sobbing falsetto, who had seemed dazed by the lights, as bewildered at finding himself in the auditorium as he was now by the faded velvet and gilded, dusty chandeliers.

"Whoever he is," said one of the old men, "he should take a haircut and a meal."

"Is he Jewish?" an old woman asked.

Several people had entered right behind the singer. Among them, Chris saw Harpur, guiding his charge, scanning the room with burning, mascara-ringed eyes. While catching a waiter and getting his party seated, he stared right through her and found Jon.

Coming over to their table, he put his hand on Jon's shoulder, indicated the singer with a sweep of his hand, and said, "Wonderful, wasn't he?" Jon nodded enthusiastically, the others politely. "He is Love. In another year at the latest, his aura will equal Joplin's and Jagger's," Harpur assured them. Then he said to Jon in an urgent tone,

"Shadow's gone," and added, "man, there's a favor I need to have done," and jerked his thumb toward the singer who sat with a petulant look like he was about to cry.

Immediately, Jon was on his feet. Wes and Sandy looked disturbed. Chris told Harpur, "I went for that gig you told me about." He stared as if seeing her for the first time and she said, "The Association for Research in Creative Direction? Grammercy Park? They hired me."

Harpur nodded, tried to look as though he knew what she was talking about. The remote oracle of last night was gone. "That's nice, luv. Best of luck." Then he led Jon to the front of the restaurant, whispered some instructions, slipped him money and watched him leave before returning to his own table.

Their bill was staggering when it arrived: almost ten dollars. Among them Wes, Sandy, and Chris managed to scrape up the money with only thirty-two cents left for a tip. As Chris stood up, one of the old actresses told her, "That boy of yours is no good, dear." Their waiter's strangled cry of "Schmucks!" followed them out the door.

Outside, amid an aimless crowd, boys and girls in black leather jackets handed out cardboard crosses with "Oppression" inscribed the long way, "Death" across. In front of the restaurant the Doberman, standing as though on guard, spotted Chris. As she walked down the block Chris was aware of the dog following her with its eyes.

Sandy and Wes didn't say anything until they were back home. Then Wes said, "He invited us. Said he was taking us out to dinner," before stomping off to his bedroom. Sandy gave Chris a sympathetic smile and followed him.

Chris sat down on the couch, knowing that Bad Jon wouldn't be back that night. The sound of the late show on the TV in the bedroom reminded her of lonely nights at home with her mother and stepfather. She found the letter from her mother on the floor. The words were an archaic formula that meant nothing to her. What interested her was her signature copied again and again. It seemed that by doing this Jon had taken even her name from her.

Instead of being mad or frightened, Chris realized that she was lightened by the loss of the last piece of clutter. It felt as if she had finally given up everything she possessed. That night on the couch it occurred to Chris that since nothing bound her, she could have

anything she wanted. She knew that the first thing she wanted was for it to be Spring.

Next day, Chris woke up early, looking forward to work. Wes and Sandy were asleep. Terri who stayed in the tiny rear room was due back that night. She fed Owsley the cross-eyed cat, showered, dressed in the skirt, put on one of Terri's blouses, a blue one unwrinkled in the front. Before going out she thought of rolling a joint and realized that she didn't want it.

The streets were empty in the lemon light of Saturday morning. Two kids who looked about fourteen slept under a blanket in a doorway. Dingo brown dogs galloped in Tompkins park, clawed at the ten foot mound of dirt which had been consecrated as a sacred site by Alan Ginsberg the summer before. Old women in babushkas dragged themselves home from night cleaning jobs in skyscrapers. Coffee, when Chris tasted it in a Ukrainian place on Avenue A, was hot and bitter, flooding into her mouth and nose, seeming to hum in her ears, drowning out radio news of the Tet Offensive, the clatter of silverware.

Outside the building, she tried to get the name straight, Society for Creative Research Design? The front door was unlocked. The reception desk was empty. From far down the hall, a tall, stooped man bent over a wide broom, gestured her toward Stanhope's office on the other side of the building.

The door was open and Stanhope looked up as she entered, gestured for her to sit down. They talked for a while without Chris being able to hang onto anything he said. Then he asked, "Do you remember my mentioning that poem yesterday, 'Someday I shall rise and go/Where the golden apples grow/Lands of Cockatoos and Goats/Lonely Crusoes building boats'?"

He glanced over his shoulder at one of the pictures on the wall. Chris looked too at the islands with birds and beasts pecking out of dense jungles and little boats sailing in the water between them. She picked out Egyptian mummy toys and mosques and domed buildings and jungles with alligators' heads jutting out of streams that held some glittering mystery, each on its own little gold island separated from the others by a glistening blue sea. Then Stanhope said, "Wouldn't you like to go there? Don't you want that more than anything?"

Chris found herself saying, "My boy-

friend told me it's important not to want a gig because a gig you really wanted would be like a habit you'd live to support. All your time gets sucked into work time. You have no time for getting turned on and relaxing with your own head." But as she said this she thought of Bad Jon loping off to do Harpur's bidding.

Stanhope said, "Yes, precisely," and looked at the other story book illustration. Gazing at the picture, Chris saw a white sand beach and a ruined castle under a blazing sun. On the beach a tall somewhat stooped figure that might have been a young Stanhope stood talking to a man with dark skin and hair, a huge nose and tiny eyes set far apart on his head. He looked like a buzzard in a long black coat and a black wide-brimmed hat.

As she stared, Chris felt sand under her shoes and heard the talk of the buzzard man. The voice was sinister, full of whirrs and gulps. The buzzard stared first at the figure that might be Stanhope. Then he peered out of the picture directly at Chris. She felt as if the eyes looking at her from both sides of the head saw only flesh hanging on useless bones. But when she heard Stanhope ask again, "Wouldn't you like to go there?" Chris nodded and realized she had been holding her breath.

A little later, she sat in the office sipping tea, as Stanhope told her, "The natives' own name for themselves is best translated as 'the People,' and their name for this place is 'the Island.' It shows a lack of perspective, perhaps, but they are Central American Native stock, an Old People. Every change, reform and revolution as well as repression, worked to root out their customs, disrupt the patterns and rhythms of their lives. But the People hang on as if they would rather be ground into the land than chased off it.

"A cycle of revolts early in this century culminated in the Land Revolution of 1914, a massive native peasant uprising. President Wilson threatened intervention. The land owners brought in mercenaries, joined together and elected a strongman, Carlos Ballastereos, the founder of the dynasty that has ruled the country ever since. The fighting was vicious, villages were wiped out, until all organized resistance was crushed. A woman nicknamed La Lupa Blanca, the White Wolf, was the last rebel leader to be captured and killed."

Stanhope's voice was like a documen-

tary soundtrack. As he spoke, Chris felt herself sitting on a small boat heading toward the Island. The captain wouldn't look at her, but stayed in back nursing his engine, hoping to avoid incrimination by seeing nothing. Chris noted the churning blue water, the sun catching the light off the castle of San Juan de Figuera, heard the gurgling motor, sniffed the damp jungle smell. She knew that someone watched her from the shore, nothing serious, just routine observation of another ineffectual gringo.

"Finally, all that remained of the resistance," said Stanhope, propping his feet against his desk, stirring a mug of tea, watching Chris intently, "was a legend among the People about the She-Wolf. There are the usual secret shrines, the obligatory myths of miracles wrought in her presence, a continuing belief that in their time of darkest need she will return to lead the people. All this despite her very public execution in the market square of the place they now call Ciudad Ballastereos in 1919."

Chris felt herself standing on a beach next to a pier where she had docked and remembered what Harpur had said about Stanhope being a mesmerist with a certain control over time and space. Beyond the beach was the ruined castle. In its shadows she could see people huddled. A few old men, retired sailors, perhaps, hung around the docks. The Buzzard stood nearby watching. No one spoke. "You have an instinctive understanding of what we are trying to do," Stanhope said, "and you are an attractive young woman, with blonde hair like La Lupa Blanca, which will count for something with the People."

Stanhope wasn't present on the Island but his voice rode over the scene. "In order to finally destroy the People, the government has decreed that they can no longer fish in the sea. On dark nights they still do. But they are starving. Their women and children are starving. That man in black is, obviously, a government agent."

Then Chris realized that it had grown dark in the office. The tea in her cup was cold. "We have to help those people," she said.

"Well," here Stanhope gave a little shake of his head, "if we ca...can. But I'm more interested in what we can save in the way of records and art work. When you come in tomorrow, I'll explain."

"Tomorrow is Sunday."

"It is necessary to act quickly. You are the most astute assistant that I've had. Would you like an advance on your first week's pay? A hundred dollars?" Reaching into a drawer, he pulled out bills. Chris expected them to be crisp and new. Instead, what he handed her were ten faded and ragged tens. "Here." Reaching into his pocket, he gave her a key. "Use this on the front door tomorrow morning."

Saturday night was well under way when Chris let herself out the front door. Lights blazed in the full length windows on the ground floor of one of the mansions on Grammercy Park. Taxis, a chauffeured caddy, pulled up to the door. Women wearing velvet crushed to look like faded denim, wearing little John Lennon hats, gray-haired men in Nehru jackets and turtlenecks got out. They went up the stairs to the town house, giggling. One of the women, who Chris knew was older than her mother, kept repeating, "Far out man," as the other rich adults laughed.

Back at Wes and Sandy's pad, all was haze and smoke. Terri had returned with a guy, tall, bearded, and black whom she introduced as "Mystery Train." Everyone was smoking hash from a big brass hookah Terri had brought with her. Mystery Train was involved with Movement Politics and was going to move in with Terri. "You're going to be a little tight in that back room," Sandy told them.

Chris knew she was going to be asked to change places with Terri. She got up, put on a pair of boots she had inherited from someone, a thick sweater of Sandy's, and a pair of Jon's old patched denims. Folding the raincoat, putting it away, she felt the money. Taking out the roll of old bills, she counted out five. Before leaving, she gave them to Sandy. "A very beautiful contribution," said Sandy, counting them quickly. Wes across the room nodded grudging approval.

On the street outside Harpur's building, Chris paused. A figure, thin as a knife, came out the door. For a moment, Chris thought it was Shadow. Then Bad Jon spotted her and showed no pleasure or surprise. "You're looking for me," he said and Chris realized that she hadn't been. "Walk with me," he told her and turned south. "You got some money, I can turn you on. You want to stay with me you do scag. Ten bucks and we can use a clean needle they have upstairs."

Chris said nothing, just stopped on the corner on Avenue A. Half a dozen kids, silent, stoned, one of them wearing a high silk hat, shuffled past bearing a huge Ottoman couch. Jon asked, "The gig go okay?" She said nothing. He grabbed her arm. "What's wrong with you?"

They had stopped in front of a window shining with a purple and gray fluorescent light that made it look like a television set. Inside, sitting at midnight at a desk in a real estate office with STATE AND FEDERAL TAXES on the window, was a balding man who didn't look up from whatever he was writing. Jon said, "A man with a work habit so bad that he can't even bother to hide it." He rapped on the window a couple of times to try and get the man's attention and said, "Step right up, see the work freak in his natural habitat. You got any bread?" he asked her. Without saying anything, Chris handed him the rest of the worn tens. "Hey, great," Jon said. "Wait upstairs. I'll be back to turn you on."

Chris just stared at him, looking for the beautiful kid in bright rags who had walked up to her by the fountain in summer. Instead she saw quite plainly the skull under the white skin. It seemed they stood like that until the itch in his blood, the hum in his wires, got to be too intense for Bad Jon. "Fuck you bitch. I tried to show you where you could be." His hand moved faster than Chris could react, smacked her. "You're yesterday," Bad Jon said and walked away fast. The side of her face burned. Through tears, Chris noticed that the man in the window never looked up.

The front door of Harpur's apartment was ajar. Soft, red light leaked from inside and music played: guitars backed a wailing, lost child's voice. Chris knocked twice and got no response. Then she heard a soft padding, nails clicking toward her. She pushed the door open and faced the Doberman who looked her up and down then turned and headed back to the bedroom.

In the red light Chris made out naked forms on the mattress under the living room mural. One was the kid with the burst of hair who had opened for Joplin at the Fillmore. His album was playing on the stereo. He leaned against the wall, a girl face down on his lap, his hand resting on the breasts of another girl. The boy's eyes were wide open but unmoving. They didn't follow Chris as she passed by. The painting above him, she



realized, wasn't of stairs going down to a flower garden but of stairs descending into flames.

In the bedroom, the dog again lay on the bed beside Harpur who wore a caftan with a quarter moon and blazing sun on the front. Harpur stirred without opening his eyes when Chris came in. "You met Bad Jon downstairs," he said in the remote androgynous voice. "I thought for a while that Johnny might be a suitable recruit for Mr. Stanhope. But he's too dumb and numb. He's just about right doing what he's doing."

Instead of looking at Harpur, Chris met the eyes of the Doberman as she said, "I came to ask you about the Institute for Creative Design." She knew she didn't have the name right.

"Stanhope showed you the Island?"

"It felt like I was there. He wants me to go back."

"That was fast. I've sent lots of people to Stanhope. But I knew you were going to be the best as soon as you said you had no personal possessions. You saw the Buzzard?"

"Yes." Chris realized that he had been to the Island.

"Did Stanhope tell you what he wanted?" Harpur asked.

"Some art work."

"Pay no attention to that. It will do you no good, probably even be fatal for you. Get what I want from the Buzzard and you can have anything you wish."

"You can grant wishes?"

"Look at the boy outside. What he has now is what he's always wanted." A long pause followed. The record reached its end, the phonograph arm clicked once, twice, then started to play the side again. The singer sounded like a kid crying in his sleep.

Chris thought about it, then asked, "What is it you want?"

Harpur said, "Bring me the yellow bird and your greatest wish will be granted." Chris tried to think of what she wanted most. A dozen things came to her at once. Then the voice from the bed spoke. "Your wish is not one simple thing but a change in the season and the air and your life." Harpur went on to describe her own wish to Chris in all its detail.

She was amazed, and asked the dog and the comatose man who seemed like a single

entity, "If you're able to do that, how did you let this happen to you?" At the question, the animal half rose, eyes flashing red, short neck hairs bristling and teeth bared. For a moment Chris thought it was going to spring.

Then it sank back down and Harpur said, "When I first came to the city, I was a stupid kid with a couple of spells, a dime store talisman, and a puppy I'd brought from home as company. Stanhope sent me to the Island and the Buzzard got his hand on my soul. You can understand that. Look how hard it is to shake a street acid wizard like Bad Jon."

"And you want the yellow bird."

"The Buzzard has it. Bring it here and your wish begins. And all this ends for me." A silence followed, the dog rose, and she realized that the conversation was over.

Chris didn't return to the pad on Seventh that night. Instead, she walked the streets and remembered her wish, considered it until the vague edges were polished away and she understood it. The crowd from the late show at the Fillmore still clogged St. Mark's Place at four and five a.m., talking,

shuffling, smoking, as unwilling as she was to return home.

Ratner's restaurant glowed like the gilded ruins of a prior race while Chris ordered in her mind the chain of magic. As she had fallen under the spell of Jon and acid so had Jon to Harpur and heroin. And Harpur once upon a time had fallen under the dominion of the Buzzard as Stanhope must also have. She could just run away from the East Village and Bad Jon and all of them but that wouldn't end the claim on her soul. She had to make her power clear to them and to herself.

It was very early on a gray Sunday morning when she let herself into the building on Grammercy Park and found her way to Stanhope's office. He was there, expecting her. "I see you are traveling light," he said. "I expect Harpur has spoken to you about that."

He reached into his desk and drew out a wooden sample case and a bright silver scalpel. "It is important that we get something. Examples of the art of the People. Perhaps when the world learns of the treasures on their island, there will be protests, indig..." Chris thought she saw the word *INDIGNATION* appear as if in a voice balloon over Stanhope's head and get sucked back into his mouth.

Stanhope hesitated for a moment, then said, "If it is at all possible, try to get into the Castle of San Juan de Figuera and find the chapel. There is a painting on the wall, a certain saint. I'm sure you will recognize it if you see it. Try to chip off the face and bring it back as a sample." Chris nodded: all this was as Harpur had said. She tried to imagine Harpur as a bright kid standing in this very room.

She put the scalpel in her jacket pocket, held the sample case under her arm and faced the wall with the illustrations on it. Behind her, Stanhope recited the old poem. The next thing Chris knew she was rocking on the sea. The sun was so warm that she took off her sweater and tied it around her waist, took off her jacket and draped it on her shoulder like a matador's cape. The jungle was green, the ruins dead white. The boatmen did not look at her as they steered for the shore.

The Buzzard awaited her at the pier, sinister and calculating. He held out his hand to Chris and said, "What do you have for me? A memento, a keepsake?" Several

people, old men in wide hats, watched them. Chris walked up the beach toward the ruins of the castle. The Buzzard followed her, repeating, "What do you have for me?" He was taller than she was but so bent that his face was level with hers.

The wooden case was hidden under her jacket. As they reached the shelter of the ruins, she brought it out and showed it to him. The Buzzard's eyes lighted up and one long palm jutted out of a feathery sleeve to grasp the box.

"I want the yellow bird you took from Harpur in exchange," she told him and felt eyes watching.

"Exchange!" The Buzzard's exclamation was an angry squawk. "I give you nothing." The beady eyes revealed nothing. But one hand went involuntarily to a vest pocket. The other grasped the case but withdrew quickly as if burned. "This is not yours!" Suddenly he looked very closely at Chris and saw something. "Nothing you have is your own," he said and turned away quickly as if seeing a trap. "I will be back. With others."

Chris reached out to stop him and felt the scalpel in her pocket. Just as her wish had been revealed to her all in a piece, so her future without her wish. Chris saw herself back in the world with a piece of her soul gone, half dead like Harpur and Stanhope. She saw herself never getting free of Bad Jon, maybe shooting up with him, watching as he held a knife to a victim's throat in a dark hallway.

"Stop!" she said. The Buzzard moved faster. Chris went after him. He moved like a cartoon bird with feathers almost flying off and his tongue lolling out of his beak. Chris caught him by a bony shoulder just before he got out onto the beach. All the previous night she had honed and polished her wish. Now she spun the Buzzard around and held the blade to his throat. She felt what she thought was his heart beating as she reached into his vest pocket.

The Buzzard tried to writhe away. Chris struck and he fell onto the sand. She reached into the vest pocket and drew out a clear capsule inside of which was what looked like a tiny fledgling canary. The heart beat she had felt came from the capsule. It still beat in her palm.

When she looked down, the Buzzard was melting like a jellyfish dropped on hot sand. Chris stuck the yellow bird in her

pocket as the People approached her. The sun was unbelievably bright and there was a gritty sensation of sand in her shoes and hair.

The ones who called themselves the People called Chris La Lupa. They hid her in the ruins of Juan de Figuera when the soldiers with machine guns came to find out what had happened to the Buzzard. The soldiers were bent and feathery just as he had been. They seemed nervous and afraid to stay around when it was dark or to probe too deeply into the ruins.

Staying quiet in the caverns created by the collapsed walls and roofs of the castle, staring out at sun and sand, reminded Chris of hiding under a porch on an endless summer day, trying not to giggle when somebody's mother called, talking about starting a secret club then getting bored and losing all interest. She found the memory pleasant.

During those days, she went exploring and found what must have been the chapel. By shafts of sunlight through breaks in the walls, she saw fragments of decayed murals, saints and soldiers, faded halos and broken swords. On one figure, a young explorer in armor, she recognized Stanhope's long gray face. Chris chipped it off the wall and placed it in the wooden case. Her feeling was not so much that she owed this to him as that she didn't want him haunting her trail.

After the soldiers went away, the moon grew thinner each night. On the night that it did not shine at all, the People slid a boat out from under the ruins and onto the water. As Chris boarded, she grasped the yellow bird for luck and felt its heart beat. Several of the People, old sailors, steered the boat away from the shore and into the night.

Far in the distance was a pinpoint of light which grew larger and larger. When it was half the size of a thumbnail, the People saw it also. When it was twice the size of a postage stamp, they hailed La Lupa in the dark, slipped over the side of the boat and swam away. When the patch of light was almost the size of her palm, Chris saw in it the back of a head and recognized Stanhope.

When the light was page size, she saw him tired and sad, turn and look long and hard in her direction, but Chris knew that he couldn't see her. The light dimmed as Chris sailed toward the room, night deepened, then waned. Gray light shone in the office by the time the office filled the whole sky. The bright sun of early morning poured through

the windows when the boat bumped against the inside of the picture frame.

Chris leaped out, the box under her arm, her hand on the yellow bird in her jacket pocket. She paused for a moment crouched on the rug until she was sure that no one had heard her. Quiet as a thief, she placed the scalpel and sample box on Stanhope's desk, remembered the keys and left them too. Moving swiftly to the office door, she turned the knob.

Stanhope stood outside looking grayer than ever. He stared first at Chris and then at the wooden case on the desk. Brushing past her, he ran to open it. Chris turned once. The illustrations on the wall were dark blobs. Stanhope knelt crying on the floor in front of the open box.

In the hall outside, a man swept the far end of the hall. He looked up when she came out of Stanhope's office and said, "Hey!" The two receptionists were just coming through the front door. Chris brushed past them and out onto the street. In Grammercy Park, buds had just touched the trees. Red and yellow flowers bloomed. She ran over

to Second and flew downtown. At the corner of St. Mark's Place, a table had been set up with signs, "COME CLEAN FOR GENE," and "MCCARTHY IN WISCONSIN." Intense, almost wholesome kids handed out leaflets, asked her, "Please join us."

Chris didn't need to stop at Gem's Spa and look at the dates on the newspapers. As she headed for Harpur's apartment she could tell that it was Spring. And if it was Spring then she was about to bring back the yellow bird. The door on the street was open. Somewhere at the back of the building a guitar, badly out of tune, ran through scales. Somewhere further off a fighting cock crowed.

The door of Harpur's apartment was half open. Chris paused, knocked. For a moment she heard the click, click of the dog's feet. But she grasped the capsule tightly and drew it out of her pocket. The noise ceased. She pushed the door open all the way. The outer room was empty. Sunlight shone through an open window. On the wall was neither flowers nor flames. Just a fresh coat of cheap white paint.

In Harpur's room, the walls were bare. The water bed was gone. An old man stood on a ladder painting the ceiling. Chris had the capsule out of her pocket. The heartbeat inside it had ceased. All of what she wished: a spring day with hope in the air, with dead winter and Harpur, the dog and Bad Jon all gone, vanished without a trace, had been granted. Sandy would have saved her belongings too. They would be at the pad over on Seventh along with her mail. Harpur had shown her all of that at once; she had wanted all of it as a piece. As Chris stood in the doorway, it seemed that a voice sighed, "I have lived a long life for a dog."

She looked into the plastic cap. The yellow bird was a cheap plastic Tweety Bird, just the kind of thing that might come as a prize in a bubble gum machine. She put it on the radiator. The capsule rolled off and fell behind. The old man, who had no aura at all, turned at the sound and said, "You too early to look at the place. Tomorrow come." Chris smiled, the face muscles stiff from disuse, and shook her head. She wouldn't be back. Then she turned and was gone. ■

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Virginia Baker is Director of Marketing Communications for Folio Corp., a software house in Provo, Utah. Her previous appearance with fiction was in L. RON HUBBARD PRESENTS WRITERS OF THE FUTURE.

Cathy Ball retired from the Air Force as a captain and base security police shift commander. She is now the operational coordinator for a chain of used book stores in Oklahoma and Texas, and a 1983 Clarion Writers' Workshop graduate. This is her second sale.

M. Shayne Bell resides in Salt Lake City. A rising star in the science fiction world, he has sold to *Amazing Stories*, *Asimov's*, *Pulphouse*, and numerous anthologies, including WRITERS OF THE FUTURE, where he won first prize. He has published one novel thus far, *NICOL*, and recently won a Creative Writing Fellowship from the National Endowment for the Arts.

Richard Bowes made his short fiction debut in the May, 1992 *F&SF*. His novels are *WARCHILD*, *FERAL CELL*, and *GOBLIN MARKET*, from Warner/Questar. Other stories are scheduled for *F&SF* and *Pulphouse*.

Susan Van Camp came into SF art via comics. She's been drawing since kindergarten, when a teacher scolded her for rendering an elephant with its head emerging from its stomach. It looked right to Susan, and she's been proving it ever since.

Rob Chilson of course has credits too numerous to mention. He lives in Missouri, which enriches stories like "Just for Tonight."

Mike Christie is a Britisher living in Texas, where besides having a fulltime job having to do with computers he's a math undergraduate at the University of Texas and the Open University. He does not have much time to write, and "Replay" is his first sale.

Kelly Faltermeyer first came to public notice in L. Ron Hubbard's Illustrators of the Future Contest a few years ago. Born in Latin America, he works in advertising art for a Texas newspaper.

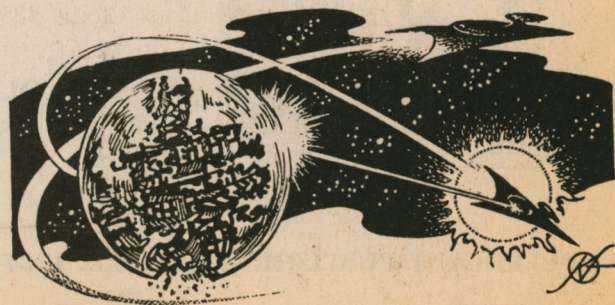
Lionel Fenn is the author of the *QUEST FOR THE WHITE DUCK* fantasy trilogy from Tor, and several books starring Kent Montana, the latest of which is *THE NEIGHBOR OF THE BEAST*, from Ace. He is currently working on a new science fiction trilogy called *THE VOYAGE OF THE TIME THING*, also from Ace.

Rachid Idriss, 33, is a medical illustrator in Evanston, IL. The son of Farouk Idriss, MD, a famous pediatric cardiac surgeon, he is currently working with others to illustrate his late father's textbook.

Paul Janvier has not published any work since the 1950s, when he appeared in *Astounding* with stories like "Nobody Bothers Gus." Recently retired as a PR man, he has returned to his first love, fiction.

Greg Petan is a very successful Chicago advertising artist. Some years ago, he helped illustrate two volumes of the WRITERS OF THE FUTURE anthology.

In a long and supremely distinguishing career, Gene Wolfe is the winner of two Nebula and two World Fantasy awards, has been a Philip K. Dick Award judge, and is currently a World Fantasy Award judge. He has taught at both Clarion and Clarion West. He is the author of, among many other novels, *THERE ARE DOORS*, *CASTLEVIEW*, and *CASTLE OF DAYS*. His latest book is *NIGHTSIDE THE LONG SUN*, out in the spring.



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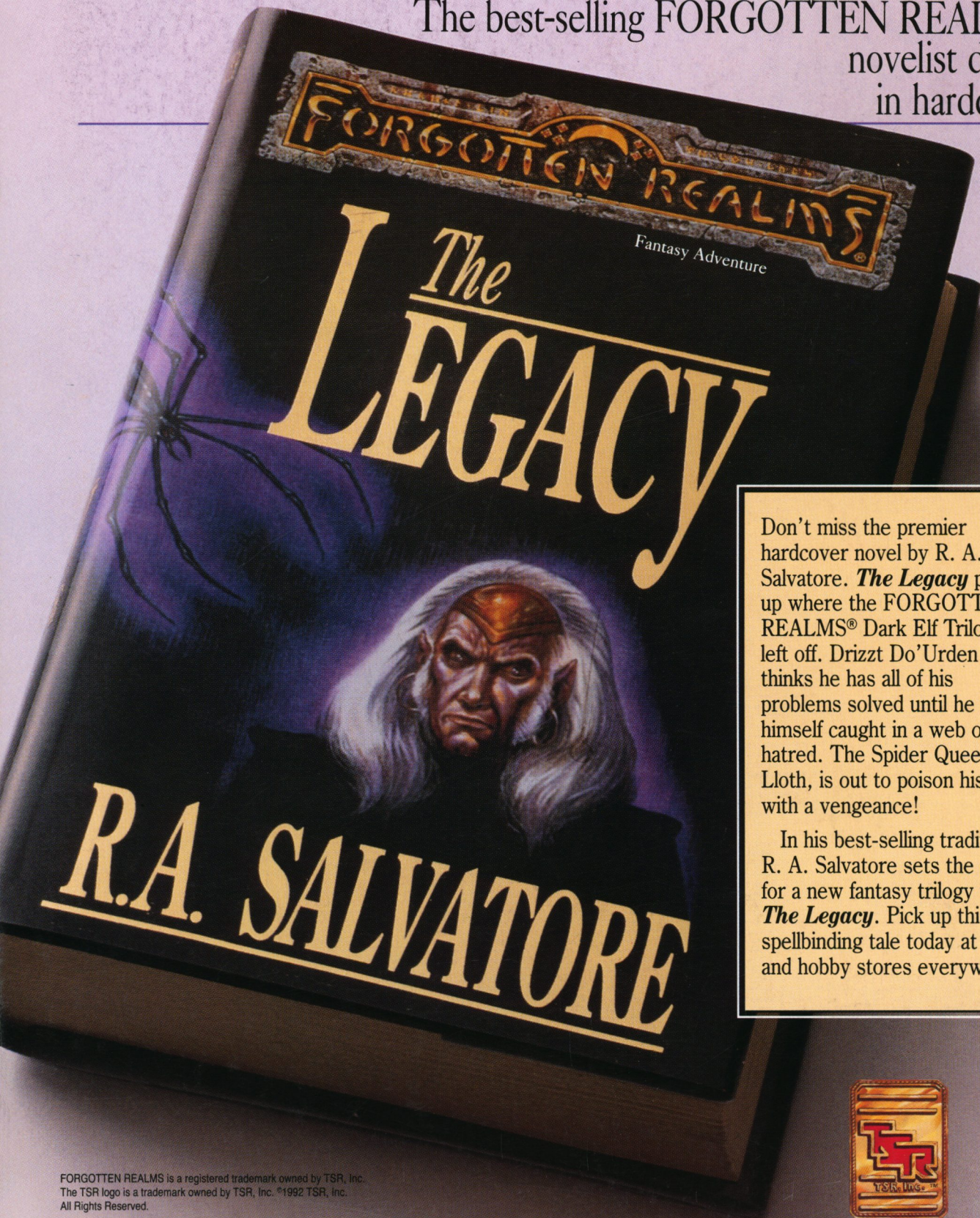
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