



edited by Algis Budrys

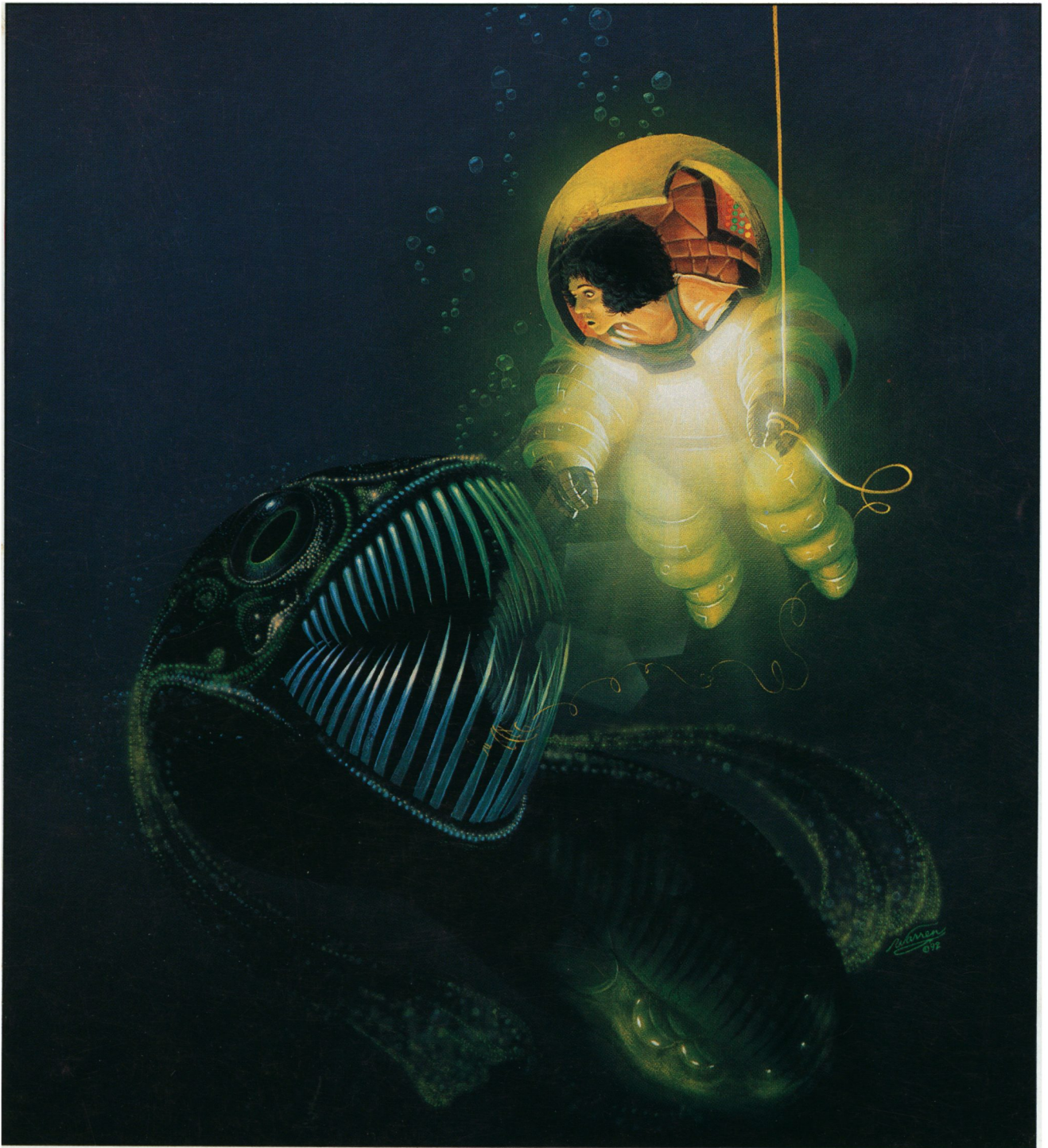
# tomorrow

No. 3

SPECULATIVE FICTION

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# tomorrow SPECULATIVE FICTION

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Editor and Art Director:  
**Algis Budrys**

Production Manager:  
**Kandis Elliot**

Editorial Address:  
**tomorrow**  
SPECULATIVE FICTION  
Box 6038  
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## EDITORIAL



“A professional,” a famous science fiction writer once said in print, “is simply one who gets paid for doing what an amateur does for love.” But this is not true.

An amateur creates for the sake of expressing himself; the professional creates with markets in mind.

An amateur may very well write stories which are superior to a professional’s at any given time; the difference there is that the professional met a deadline, probably many times, while the amateur took as long as it took to make one story feel right.

An amateur does not feel in control of how many stories he or she writes; the concern is with trying to write as many as the amateur has occur to him or her. The amateur can afford to spend years tinkering with a story. The professional must write enough to stay alive. If a story does not occur, he or she writes anyway, until one does.

The amateur says “How did I look to the audience when I wrote this?” The professional says “Did it work?” Above all, the professional goes on creating whether he or she feels like it or not.

The differences between an amateur and a professional, then, are profound. I think the professional knows a number of things that have not yet occurred to the amateur. He or she knows that creativity exists independent of state of mind. Some professionals do not, for instance, enjoy writing. But they do not know another way to make as much money with as little trouble and fuss. And, in the end, they usually enjoy having written. Most of them enjoy tremendously the fact of their being a writer. It is only the act itself that is unpleasant for some, but they can put up with it.

Another thing the professional knows is that he or she is not really in competition with any other writer, living or dead. The professional has carved out a niche for him or her self, and is utterly confident no other writer can ever fill it.

And in fact, once established as a professional, the professional can go on selling for a very long time, until age, infirmity, or falling hopelessly out of fashion finally make an end. But of these three, only age is inevitable. It is the amateurs who disappear when the markets shrink, as they periodically do. Somehow, they never shrink to the point of eliminating the professionals.

From the reader’s point of view, the work of a professional can be told from that of the amateur in only one way — there is more of it, delivered at a deliberate pace. Other than that, there is no distinction. Some of the very best stories are written by amateurs. Some of the very best stories are written by professionals with toothaches, bill collectors hounding them, bad spouses, booze or drugs impairing their abilities, and despite their fear of death. Equally true, some of the best stories are written by professionals in a good spell. There is no telling from the written product what the writer’s state of mind was. The amateur and the professional are equal as far as product is concerned. But only professionals normally have significant careers, because they are ones who keep writing no matter what.

In these pages, you will find the work of amateurs and professionals side by side. You will not be able to tell which is which on a story for story basis. but over the years, you will come to know who the professionals are. As will I. You will recognize bylines, you will remember that the owner of that byline always delivers a reliable product, you will be able to settle down with a byline’s work like an old friend.

In any given issue, you may be startled into particular pleasure by a story written by someone whose byline you have never heard before. And you will wonder if this person will be a professional; if he or she will be back many times over the years. No one knows. I can guess, but no one knows. I can hope.

— Algis Budrys

# tomorrow

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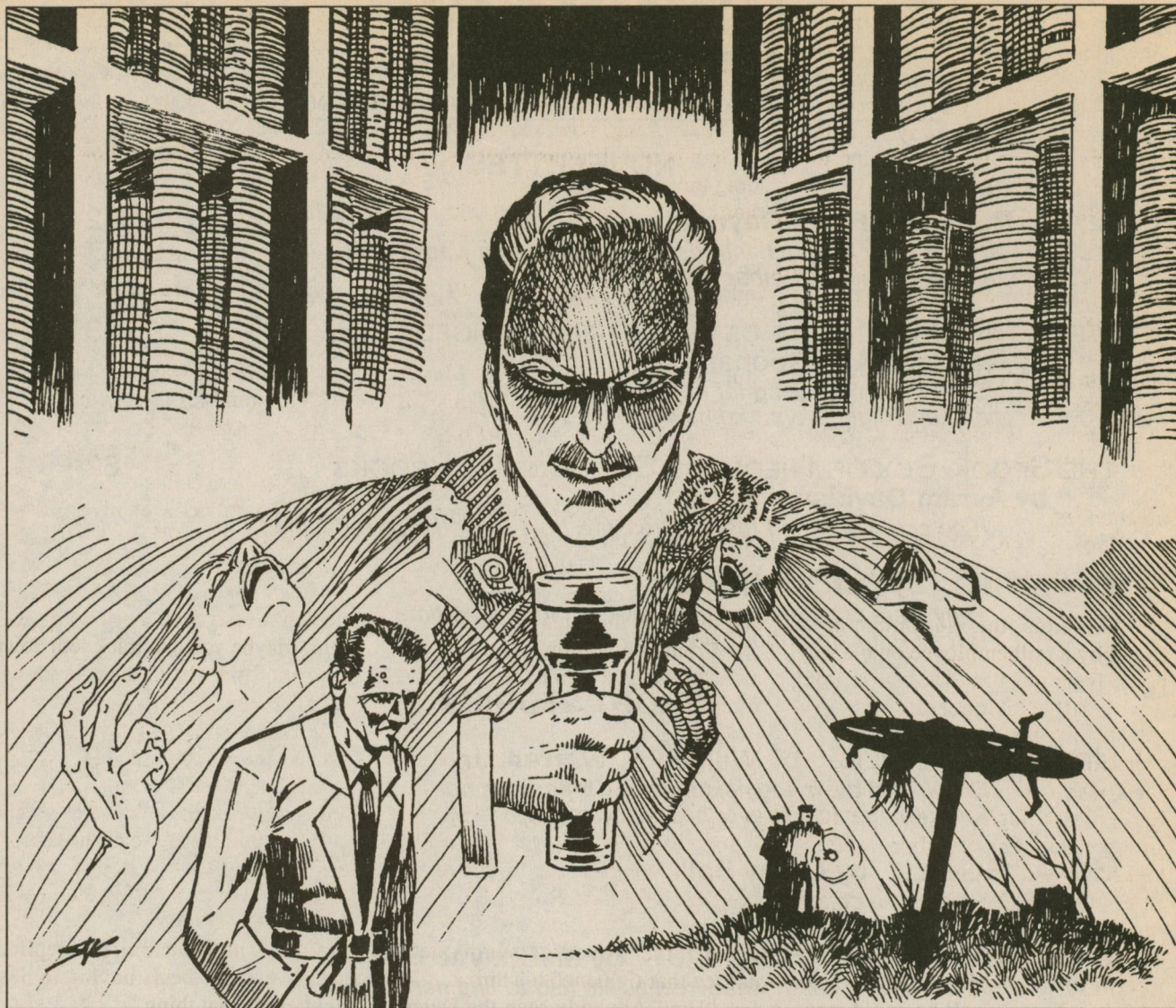
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illustrating "Up From The Deeps." Illustrations by Christopher Beau,  
Susan Van Camp, Kandis Elliot, Kelly Faltermäyer, Bob Hobbs, Judith Holman,  
Rachid Idriss, Margaret Ballif Simon, and William R. Warren, Jr.

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# AUTO DA FE

Barry Reynolds

Illustrated by Susan Van Camp

*He was pain. Other people were concerned with something else*

Detective Ed Pool wiped the vomit from his chin with a handkerchief and dropped the stained cloth on the ground; then, after a moment's hesitation, he bent over, picked it up and reluctantly stuck it back in his overcoat pocket. *Still the good cop*, he

thought, blinking tears from his eyes. *As if it matters now.* Worked his tongue over the inside of his mouth and spit.

The wind was gusting cold, scattering dead leaves and whooshing through the branches of the ancient

oak trees that gave the abandoned park its name. Pool tilted his head back, imagining he could feel the tightness of the malignant lump in his neck (though, in truth, he couldn't), and stared up at the top of the hill, backlit now by halogen

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spots from cruisers parked on the other side.

He had wandered down to the foot of the hill mainly to heave in private, partly to get away from the uniforms and the tech crews and the just-arrived Suits. He wanted to spare the boys their obligatory niceties and himself the humiliation of his own "dead but don't know it" status as a terminal cancer patient. But even down here, probably too far from the scene to find any evidence, he wasn't alone, as dozens of uniforms searched among the oak trees and across the field of knee-high weeds, their Maglites flashing.

This time, the Suits were taking no chances.

Pool sighed. *First the Murphy girl and the bag of cats, now this madness.*

This time, the victim had been found by a mill employee on his way home from the graveyard shift. Pool could still remember the voice on the 911 playback—breathless, flat, cracking. And now, having seen it for himself, he didn't wonder why. Earlier, standing close enough to be splattered by her bloody rain, Pool had removed his pocket memo pad and wrote: *twelve-foot post of pressure-treated wood sunk four feet into the ground, Leaning under the weight of a spoked, ersatz wagon wheel....* That was all he could manage; nothing in his policespeak lexicon could accurately describe the mutilated, bone-splintered remains of the young Jane Doe twisted around the spokes of that wheel. And he was beginning to sense—though not yet understand why—that nothing anyone could write or say would capture the deeper significance of this macabre tableau, not the technical jargon that would later appear in his report, or the detailed profiling by the D.C. Suits, or the coming sensationalism of the morning news. He frowned, still groping for words, for knowledge he did not yet have. He felt small and naive before the horrific power that caused this sacrifice to be made; felt as if he had stumbled, with all his twentieth century rationality, into an ancient

temple where dark, evil gods from another age still nourished.

He turned away and shivered. Watched the Maglites jerk and weave, looking, now, like torches in the hands of religious fanatics, circling the hill in votive submission to that grotesque monument. He reached into his pocket for the memo pad and, without the aid of his flashlight, scribbled, RESEARCH WHEEL—LIBRARY, P.M. Then he replaced the pad and waited; wondered how much longer the Suits would leave her hanging there. The halogen spots seemed an unnecessary insult, sucking out what little color remained in her skin while intensifying the colors—blood-red, bone-white, muscle-pink—of her mutilations. Even from where he stood, Pool could see jewel-like glints as dripping blood caught and reflected the intense light.

From behind him, safely anonymous in the dark, came the distinctive sound of someone groaning. *Well*, he thought, *at least I'm not the only one*. He balled his toes and hunched the London Fog tighter. *Though I'm surely one of the oldest cops on record to loose his lunch on a ten-seven*. Seconds later, he heard the familiar grunt, followed by a soft splattering. He clenched his jaw against the waves of sympathetic nausea that tightened his throat.

"Hey! Anybody seen the Detective?"

Pool looked up, grateful for the interruption, and singled out a uniformed officer standing at the edge of the hill, peering down into the darkness. "Over here!" Pool shouted, switching on his flashlight and waving it above his head.

The uniform turned in the direction of his voice, stared for a moment, then began sidestepping down the slope, Maglite swinging wildly as he fought for balance in the damp grass.

"We found tracks on the other side," the uniform was saying as he came to a stop beside Pool. "Looks like our man backed up...." He paused to catch his breath. "Backed up over there." Motioned with his Maglite; his white rubber gloves, Pool noticed, were smeared with blood.

"Probably had a jeep or four-wheeler. We figured he used some kind of winch to hoist her up. Either that or he's one strong bastard." The uniform spat. "Jesus, what a mess. I've never seen anything like this. You want us to...." He paused, searching for the right word.

Pool grinned. *Unravel her?* "No," he said. "The Suits want to save that little chore for the ME. You meter maids did call the ME, didn't you?"

"He's on his way here now."

"Outstanding. And what about witnesses? Any luck?"

"What witnesses? We're out in the middle of fuckin' nowhere."

Pool motioned with his flashlight. "What about those?"

"Parked cars? So?"

"How about you take a walk over and run the tags; find out who owns them. Maybe you can track 'em down at work; find out if they saw anything."

"You wouldn't want me to harass them on the job, would you?"

"Hey, that's what cops do, remember? You know, wake people up in the middle of the night, embarrass them in front of their friends." Pool started to grin. "Ruin their social standing."

"Suits me," the uniform replied, turning away. "Beats having to help peel her off that thing."

Pool watched him cross the field and gradually disappear into the darkness that waited patiently at the edge of their little circle of man-made light. He stared after him for a moment, absently counting the pairs of red reflectors on the cars parked alongside the road, believing that the owners were all legitimate—factory workers carpooling on third shift—but wondering just the same if the killer had been there, watching the uniforms arrive, then quietly pulling away, unnoticed. Tried to remember if he had read about that aspect of their nature, or if he were just quoting lines from some made-for-TV cop show. Shook his head. "Should have taken those continuing education classes."

He turned back and watched his men on the crest of the hill, their bod-

ies black against the false dawn. Thought about the paperwork pile-up on this one and caught himself reaching for the cigarettes he'd given up six months ago—a little too late. The boys upstairs and the junior achievers would be tailgating him from now on, crowding him on every shit detail, just waiting for the chance, for the excuse to pass him by. Now that he had "gone terminal," his weight in the department was diminishing as rapidly as his flesh. Like those on the force who'd turned in their retirement papers and were waiting out the last three months, he was rapidly becoming a non-person.

"Hey, Ed," someone from the hill shouted, "does this mean you'll get to be on *America's Most Wanted*?"

Somebody else hooted.

Pool grinned. He hated to admit it, but the wiseass had a point. Now the Inquisitor, or whatever the papers were calling him this week, was his problem. Media attention and all. He folded a stick of Juicy Fruit into his mouth, mixing sugary sweetness over the bitter residue of vomit. "Can the shit and get moving," he yelled back, between chews; then, softly, to himself, "before I have to explain to some passing citizen about the real meaning of police humor."

"Yuck, looks like a brain," Maureen Howard observed, taking an involuntary half-step back from the shelf.

Arthur Knight moved the flashlight closer, inspecting the jar's murky fluid. "Pig's brain, to be exact," he said, reading the stylized, black Magic Marker lettering on the freezer-tape label.

He stood and turned; dusty specimen jars glittered as the beam swept over the wooden shelves.

Maureen touched his arm. "Hey, go back. What does that say?"

He turned the flashlight and held the beam steady. Tacked to one of shelf's end panel was a sheet of yellow legal-size paper with the words "Do Not Remove! Still To Be Classified—Nesbit" written under a hand-drawn arrow that pointed vaguely towards the deeper darkness.

"Jesus," whispered Maureen, reading over his shoulder. "Think he really means to come down here and catalog this stuff?"

"He is a dedicated librarian," Arthur observed as he reached up and worked the tack out with his fingernails, letting the sheet of paper fall. "Old Ichabod makes quite the role model for your chosen profession, wouldn't you say?"

"Oh, sure. I can't wait to grow old and gray and poor and have slumped shoulders from a lifetime of filing catalog cards."

Arthur laughed. "Then you should come over and let me teach you computer programming."

"Hey, I've been waiting for you to ask."

"Then consider yourself invited," he said. "Come on. Let's see what's back there." He moved deeper into the stacks. The space between the shelving gradually narrowed and the aisle became cluttered with boxes and stacks of old books. He stepped over a grocery bag full of *National Geographic* magazines and stopped.

"Find something?" Maureen asked, stepping over the bag and pressing close to him, trying to see.

He felt the balled softness of her breast against his back and leaned into her, increasing the pressure, the sensation...felt the enveloping darkness, the narrow, claustrophobic space, felt it tempting him (wondered if he should give in to it, here and now, because it was always there for him, easily revealed)... *All you have to do is hurt yourself a little*.... He pushed the thumbtack into the heel of his palm, to channel the arousal away from the rising, empty lust, and angled the flashlight up, into his face...there was a soft, static roar in his ears...he stared into the lens, eyelids closed to narrow slits, squeezing the light into thin, bright lines—the light under a door in a darkened room...slowed his breathing, searching through the smell of basement dampness and mold spores...beginning to sense it...*the damp room, the rusty chains, the raw, rotting stench of suppurating wounds*....

"Hey."

The words seemed to come from above him. "Back so soon," he whispered.

Maureen gave him a nudge. "Back where?"

The static roar dissipated. Arthur tilted the flashlight away from his face and blinked at the green afterimages. "Back...more back here," he said, his voice thick with emotion. He swallowed. Felt sweaty, weak. Reached out and touched the shelf, quickly reorienting himself.

"What is?"

He pointed the flashlight at a row of jars and, still squinting through afterimages, read their labels: "Opossum intestines, pig embryos, shark embryos...eye of newt and toe of frog, wool of bat and tongue of dog."

Maureen dug a finger between his ribs. "Cut it out," she said, squeezing by him and into the light. "No spooky stuff. You promised, remember?"

"Yeah, I did, didn't I." He watched the sheen of light in her hair. "But you have to admit this place does have the atmosphere for it. All this suspended death," he said; "just what you need for the science display."

"I don't know," she murmured; picked up a jar, turning it carefully in the light. "It's all so..." A pale, mucous blob drifted slowly towards the glass. "So..."

"Yucky?"

"Yeah." She set the jar back on the shelf and turned, brushing the dust from her fingers. The light glittered in her dark eyes. "Hey," she said, raising a hand to shield her face.

But he kept the light steady, feeling her blindness, her sudden sense of helplessness. Felt the pulse in his throat.

She reached out and pushed the flashlight away. "Don't be a jerk."

"Sorry," he said, blinking. "Wasn't paying attention." He swept the flashlight over the shelves one more time. "Sure you don't want to use some of this?" he encouraged. "You know the junior high kids; they really go for this kinda gross stuff—you know, gelatinous goop with venous eyeballs."



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"Well, let 'em go to the movies. Come on, let's get out of here. This place gives me the creeps." She lowered her voice. "No wonder Mr. Nesbit spends so much time down here."

Arthur shifted the flashlight from his bleeding hand and directed the beam under his chin, haunting his face with shadows. "Fitting, don't you think?" he said in a soft, slow, Karlovian accent. He ducked and bobbed his head, imitating librarian's trademark spastic jerk, then lurched towards her with a menacing chuckle.

Maureen involuntarily stepped back and stumbled, knocking over a stack of long forgotten *Harlequin Romance* paperbacks.

Before she could even try to grab hold of the shelf for balance, Arthur was there, gripping her arm, pulling her to him. "Hey, take it easy. I'm just kidding around. Why so spooked?"

She pulled out of his grip, absently rubbing at the impression his fingers had left on her arm. "I don't know." She reached down and refitted her shoe. "Guess it's all that stuff on the news."

He nodded, helping her step over the books. "You mean the Murphy girl?"

She shivered and folded her arms. "Have you heard what they're saying? I mean, about what that guy did to her? Burying her alive, a bag of cats tied to her face." She shook her head. "They said the cats went insane, tearing their way out...." She pressed her stomach as if she might be getting sick. "It's like something out of a horror movie... worse."

"I'd chalk some of that stuff up to an underworked reporter's overworked imagination."

"Yeah, but even so, to think that a murder like that could happen in this dinky little town. I mean you see it on TV or in some big city; you never think about it coming this close to you." She shivered. "Jesus, I hope they catch him."

"They usually do. Besides, I heard that they're going to bring in specialists from the Behavioral Science Unit at Quantico for a profiling." He pulled her along with a hug,

pressing his palm against her shoulder, driving the tack deeper, smearing blood on her dress. "Don't worry. Deep down, most of these serial killers really want to be caught, or be killed. For some of them, it's the only way out."

"I see, just the boy next door working out the effects of an abusive childhood, right?"

"The boy next door," Arthur agreed, smiling.

They made their way back through the narrow stacks, stepping over boxes of uncataloged gift books and around the hulls of discarded microfiche readers.

"Great place for the wheelchair-bound to be if the building catches on fire," Arthur observed, as they stepped out of the stacks and into an open area used for storage books.

"God, Art, you've got such a sick way of thinking—" Maureen stopped and pulled Arthur back. "Damn it!" she whispered. "It never fails. Every time I talk about somebody...."

"What?"

"I'll feel guilty for the rest of the day, wondering if he heard me."

"What the hell are you talking about?"

"Shhhh!"

Maureen leaned out from the stack and pointed. Arthur peered over her shoulder.

There, by the door, sat a man on a footstool. He was hunched over, reading, skinny legs splayed to support the book, knees angling up nearly level with his bowed head. All around him were overloaded book-trucks and an assortment of grocery store boxes, some empty, others packed full of books.

"Ah, Mr. Nesbit himself."

"Where'd he come from?"

Arthur shrugged.

"You think he heard us?"

"What if he did? He's not the kind of guy who'd confront you with it, anyway. You've been around him long enough to know that. Besides," he said, giving her a push, "there's only one way out and old Ichabod Crane guards the exit."

They walked up to Mr. Nesbit and stood behind him, unnoticed.

Arthur looked down at the barcodes spilled from torn-open boxes and scattered about the old man's feet. Dirty brown footprints tracked across the gleaming black-and-white sheets. Arthur frowned, somewhat surprised by the mess. Mr. Nesbit was the consummate cataloger: for him, disorder was anathema.

The old man nodded his head vigorously, suddenly animated by what he was reading. The legs of his polyester pants rode up over loose black socks, revealing pale, skinny, hairless calves. Arthur could count the bony vertebrae pushing against the cataloger's thin, over-washed shirt. The cataloger bent closer to his book, still unaware of their presence.

Maureen touched Arthur's arm and made a "what's going on" expression. He shrugged, but then suddenly realized the answer for himself. As part of the director's automation project, which Arthur himself had been hired to manage, every book in the library had to have a barcode, a scannable identifier, attached to its inside cover. Because these particular barcodes were "smart"—their data strips pre-configured for specific bibliographic information—each had to match the bibliographic information of the book in hand. The job of matching up barcode with book was easy enough, if the books were in correct Dewey order; but the older titles stored in the basement had been carelessly shelved for years. To sort them out and barcode them was an unenviable task—and for a professional librarian like Mr. Nesbit, it was a form of punishment, which he was not likely to accept. Thus his revenge—being disorganized and sloppy.

Arthur nodded to himself. *If you're not guilty....*

Suddenly, Mr. Nesbit chuckled. "A bit messy that way...."

Arthur touched Maureen's arm and winked; but before she could stop him, he blurted out, "What is?"

Mr. Nesbit jerked upright, trying, simultaneously, to stand and turn. The stool, now free to move on its casters, rolled between his feet, tripping him.



He windmilled his free arm, trying to regain his balance, but could not disentangle his feet from the stool in time and stumbled backwards. Desperate, he swung out with his other arm, lost his grip on the book, and hurled it, pages flapping, at Maureen, causing her to jump back with a yelp.

The cataloger fell heavily against a stack of double-faced shelving, elbowing several volumes through and off the other side, where they hit the concrete with loud, flat, slaps.

"Oh, gee, we're sorry, Mr. Nesbit," Maureen said, as she bent to pick up the book. "We didn't mean to startle you like that." She turned to Arthur and mouthed, "Asshole."

Arthur ignored her, his attention suddenly riveted by the book, *Gray's Anatomy*, the latest edition. He pointed at it with the flashlight. "Planning some elective surgery?"

The cataloger blinked his eyes down. "Just curious about a few points," he said. He tried to smile, but his raw, chapped lips split and began to bleed. "May I?" He reached for the book.

"Would you like some Chap Stick?" Maureen asked.

Mr. Nesbit tilted his head, exposing the liver spots under his grey, thinning hair. "No, thank you," he said, accepting the book. "I'm afraid it's a little too late for that." He gave a soft, nervous chuckle, and licked off the thin lines of blood.

Maureen looked away.

Mr. Nesbit smoothed out the creased pages and chuckled softly, shifting his weight from foot to foot. He made no attempt to continue the conversation.

Arthur stared at the old man, watching his frail body gradually animate itself with a variety of nervous twitches and marionette-jerks, movements that always reminded him of those animal mating rituals he'd seen on the PBS program, *Nature*.

Maureen finally broke the silence. "So, how's the deselection going?" she asked.

Mr. Nesbit ducked his head and hunched his bony shoulders, "'Deselection,'" he repeated. "That's the second euphemism I've heard today."

The cataloger took an aimless step to one side.

"And the first?" Arthur asked.

Mr. Nesbit tilted his head down even farther. "Early retirement."

Arthur ignored Maureen's glance.

"To answer your question, Ms. Howard," the old man continued, nodding at the sheet of barcodes scattered across the floor. "I'm running somewhat behind the director's schedule."

"Yeah, I guess it is pretty boring," Maureen noted.

"Not so boring, Ms. Howard, as depressing, seeing so much knowledge sold to the flea market scavengers for a dollar a box." He shifted *Gray's* to one hand and turned to a booktruck marked SALE. Ran a finger over the dusty, hubbed spines and read the authors' names aloud. "Shalom Aleichem, Kierkegaard, Marlowe, Johnson, Paine." Chuckled. "These were marked for discard because they hadn't circulated enough. And so have become...outdated and useless." His mouth continued working for a moment after the words had stopped. The last words, Arthur noticed, were those favored by the director during recent staff meetings on changes in collection development policies.

"You've got a point," Arthur said, as he reached over, carefully keeping his bloody hand at his side, and set the flashlight on a shelf. "You can never tell when the knowledge in an 'outdated' book will be useful."

Mr. Nesbit inspected the crushed corner of *Gray's*. "Interesting observation," he said, pinching and molding the board with his fingers. "Not what one would expect from a believer in the paperless society."

"Just because I believe in modernization," Arthur said, "doesn't mean I don't respect the old ways. We all need to keep something of the past alive."

Mr. Nesbit ducked his head and smiled, splitting his lip again. Thin lines of blood reappeared in the dried cracks.

"But don't this make your work a lot easier?" Maureen observed. "I

mean, if you throw all this old stuff away before you start barcoding, you won't have so much work to do. It'll free you up for a lot of other projects."

Arthur tried not to smile.

Mr. Nesbit shifted *Gray's* again, this time to the crook of his thin, but wirily muscular forearm. Sweat stains were beginning to darken the old man's shirt, whose long collar, along with a tie wide enough to serve as a napkin, placed his last shopping spree in the early Seventies. Arthur breathed the scent of soured Old Spice. The cataloger chuckled and shuffled his feet. He ran a chipped, yellowed fingernail down the fore edge of the book and slit it open. Chuckled again. "Yes," he said softly, "other projects."

There was a moment of awkward silence, with Maureen making intimations with her eyes that she wanted to leave. Arthur tried to ignore her, suddenly interested in seeing more of the page under Nesbit's bony fingers, but she made a show of looking at her watch and reached out for his arm. "Well, I guess we'd better be getting back," she said, giving him a sharp tug. "There's no one working reference for me, and it's almost time for the junior high kids." She pulled Arthur along. "See you later, Mr. Nesbit."

Mr. Nesbit nodded, but did not look up as they left. He ran his fingers over the color diagram of a torso's exposed muscles and bones, arteries and internal organs. "Other projects," he whispered, and rolled his split lip in over his teeth to taste the blood.

As they climbed the stairs to the main stacks, Arthur began listing the cataloger's nervous twitches, mimicking some of them—ducking his head, hunching his shoulders, taking aimless steps, chuckling.

"Would you stop picking on him?"

"His obsessions interest me."

She made a face. "You're so weird sometimes."

He smiled. "Did you know that one way to protect your house from a

vampire is to spread thousands of mustard seeds on the roof or along your window sill?"

"What?"

"Legend has it that the vampire will stop and try to count every tiny seed. By the time the vampire finishes, it's always nearly sunrise and too late for him to do you any harm."

Maureen started to reply, then just shook her head. "Whatever," she said, as they turned on the mid-level landing. "Anyway, did you catch what he said about early retirement? He's the last person I figured to retire. He doesn't have his thirty years in yet. He'll lose all his benefits. Think the boss got got him?"

He nodded. "Yeah, looks like Ichabod's been given the pink. Probably the only pink he's had in a while, too."

The joke went past Maureen. "But can she do that? I mean, force him out?"

"You know the policy." He shook his finger. "Keep only what circulates," he said in his best library-marm nasal. "We're not an archive, you know."

"I guess that goes for old employees, too." She folded her arms under her breast. "I'd hate to be in his shoes. Out at his age. After all the years he's put in. It's really unfair."

"If you're not guilty," Arthur said softly, holding the door for her as they reached the top of the stairs, "we'll beat you until you are."

"What?" she asked, stepping past him and into the hallway. Then, before he could reply, she wheeled about and said in a clear, projecting voice, "Well, if you do find them, let me know before Friday."

Arthur stared blankly at her for a moment, before picking up on the exaggerated roll of her eyes.

Ms. Windom, the director, was headed down the hallway toward them, a stack of green-striped, fan-fold computer print-outs in her arms.

With skill perfected by the necessity of other such inopportune meetings, Arthur quickly picked up the fake conversation.

"I'll make a copy and leave it on your desk."

Ms. Windom looked at Maureen without smiling. "The display case is still empty."

"Yes, Mam. I—"

"Your program starts tomorrow, doesn't it?"

"Yes, Mam. Arthur and I were just in the basement looking at some old realia that might work."

"Good." She turned to Arthur. "I'd like to see you in my office."

"Let me wash up," he said, watching Maureen hurry away, the smear of blood marking her shoulder. He reached down to the heel of his palm and removed the tack; held his hand up, turning it, directing the trickle of blood down his wrist, careful not to let it stain his cuff.

Arthur stood by the window in Ms. Windom's office, looking down on the library's reading garden, a stone courtyard with wooden benches, wisteria-covered trellises, and thickly mulched Bradford Pear trees, their leaves burnt the color of arterial blood by cold, autumnal fires.

"So, you're really going to get rid of Mr. Nesbit," he said, smoothing out the end of the Band-Aid on his palm. He heard her shift in the leather seat.

"How did you know? Did he say something?"

Arthur shrugged. "Not in so many words, no."

Ms. Windom sighed. "There was no other way," she said. "I tried talking him into taking the bookmobile position, but he wouldn't. I tried making the job miserable for him in hopes that he would quit or retire. He wouldn't budge."

Arthur watched a patron hurry through the reading garden, head bent, arms folded against the cold wind. Dead leaves tumbled across the brick walkway.

"I don't know," he said, turning. Movement brought the heat of the late afternoon sun through his starched, Oxford-cloth shirt. He squinted, marveling at the sunlight that reflected brilliantly along the beveled-edge surface of a glass-top conference table. Ms. Windom's office decor had the clean-lined,

chrome and black-lacquer modernism of an ad in *Architectural Digest*.

"We've been through this before, Art." Ms. Windom swiveled her chair to face him. She was somewhere in her thirties, thin and salon tan, with frosted hair just brushing the padded shoulders of a trim business suit. She wore large, red-frame designer glasses, instead of contacts, to accentuate her CEO image; her only jewelry was a golden ankle bracelet. She never took it off, even in the shower. He smiled, remembering the soft intake of breath she'd made in the dark as she ran her hand over his naked, scarred back, breaking open the scabs.

"Mr. Nesbit is from the old school," she said. "He refuses to modernize; he has resisted my every attempt to automate tech services; you know yourself he sits in his office, hunched over his desk, rifling through the Dewey tables, wasting time doing original cataloging on materials that have already been cataloged, records that can be claimed at the push of a button from the OCLC database. He's archaic and absurd, and I can't deal with him any longer. I want to move this library into the electronic age, and I can't do it with people like him getting in the way."

She was quiet for a moment. Arthur noticed that her desk, usually neat to the point of being an existentialist set piece, was cluttered with stacks of blue, green, and red hanging file folders. Pink and yellow Post-Its in various sizes curled from the edge of her desk, from pages of green-striped computer print-outs, even from the screen of her IBM, where a spreadsheet displayed overlapping, multicolored windows.

She slipped off her glasses and set one earpiece against her delicately cut lips, revealing her most arresting feature: pale, ice-light eyes, so bright they seemed to glow. He wondered, abstractly, how long those eyes would keep their color once he cut them out.

"Have you decided how you are going to justify this if he takes it to the Board?" he asked. "They might see this leading to a grievance proce-

ture if you don't have something more tangible than 'archaic and absurd' in his personnel file."

"I don't plan to justify it to the Board. I won't have to. He will quit voluntarily."

Arthur made a face.

She put her glasses back on and opened a folder on her desk. Handed him a sheet of letterhead stationery.

He read for a moment, then chuckled.

"You're kidding, right?"

"Dead serious."

Arthur read the letter again. "Did she really say this?"

"She signed it."

Arthur shook his head. The letter, written by a former high school page, alleged that Mr. Nesbit had made lewd overtures in her presence and was in the habit of "contriving" reasons to touch her; a pat on the back that gradually became a rub, accidentally bumping into her in the stacks, brushing behind her when there was space enough to pass. Arthur smiled. This was the same page Ms. Windom had helped win a scholarship.

He handed the letter back. "Did you show it to him?"

She nodded. "This morning."

"And?"

"He asked if the girl would make the same accusations in his presence."

"And?"

"I told him that I had already questioned the girl thoroughly and believed that I'd have to seek a legal opinion before setting up such a meeting. I told him that if he pursued it, I wouldn't be able to keep his name out of the newspapers. He finally accepted the situation and said that to avoid a scandal, he would turn in his notice."

Arthur frowned. "Pretty drastic, isn't it?"

She shrugged and wrapped the coils of the phone cord around her finger. "It has to be done." She paused, her lips working over a word he could not hear.

He waited quietly, watching it build within her.

She shook her head and let the cord unwind. "Did you know that half of the pledges from the fund drive never materialized? Do you know

what that means for us? Especially when you consider the fifty-percent cut in state aid slated for the next fiscal year. It means I've got to go crawling to the localities for money to pay for our little automation project we're already committed to. The last thing I need is Mr. Nesbit showing up at the Board meetings arguing for a return to the cheaper way." She trailed off for a moment, and when she spoke again, her voice was low and hard. "There's talk of the state librarian's position opening soon. I need this automation project to go through. I need it on my resume. I need the edge."

"It's your move, of course, but... if it goes bad." He shrugged.

"If it goes bad," she said without emotion, her composure back as quickly as she'd lost it, "I may need you on my side. Remember, your job as head of automation depends on my being able to keep the Board convinced of the necessity to automate."

Arthur stepped out of the sunlight and started towards the door.

"Are you with me on this?" she asked, not looking up.

He paused by her chair. "Of course," he said. "You've trusted me with your other secrets." He reached out and pushed her hair back, revealing her neck and the faintly distinguishable bruises, almost blue under the heavy makeup. "Third dresser drawer down, under the black lace..." Gently raked the skin with his fingernails.

She flinched. "Don't!"

"An accident," he said, softly.

She brushed his hand away. "So you keep saying."

"But you didn't notice until afterward, remember?"

"Don't get the wrong idea about me, about us," she said. "This is just a—"

The intercom beeped. She cleared her throat. "Yes?"

"Ms. Windom? There's a gentleman here to see you."

She glanced at her empty appointment calendar, frowning.

In the hallway, Arthur stepped aside for the gaunt man in the rumpled,

off-the-rack suit. The man kept his neck stiff, his head leaning to one side. Blue and purple lines mapped his cheek and neck like a tic-tack-toe board. The skin within the lines was red and peeling, as if from a bad sunburn.

Arthur pointed to the office he had just left. "Just knock and go right in."

Detective Pool whispered his thanks through a tight jaw.

"Cancer?" Arthur ventured quietly.

Pool stopped and turned, studying Arthur for a moment. "Squamous cell carcinoma."

Arthur nodded, respectfully. "I understand the treatment can cause painful blisters to form inside your mouth."

Pool grunted. "Nice of you to remind me," he said, turning away.

Arthur ran his tongue along the inside of his mouth and nodded.

The reference desk was nearly hidden by patrons standing six-deep, mostly high school students popping gum and talking too loud, and a few older patrons with documents in hand, frustrated by the complexities of the copier. A harried Maureen caught Arthur's eye as he was signing out at the circulation desk and motioned him over.

"She's next," she said, as he came around the desk and waved off her whispered thanks. Arthur shrugged back out of his coat and nodded to the student. "Need some help?" A girl in her early teens wearing a neo-hippie, tie-dye tee shirt, smiled up at him. As she moved, her henna-red hair coiled across her shoulders like oiled snakes. "Uh, yeah, uh, I need something on the Inquisition. Uh, something I can check out." Her breath smelled of grape bubble gum.

Arthur blinked. "Which Inquisition?"

She frowned. "Uh, well, I don't know. My teacher just said the Inquisition."

"Do you need to use the computer?" Maureen asked.

"No, thanks." Arthur shook his head. "I know this one. Come on," he

said to the student, "let's go back and take a look at what's on the shelf."

"Actually, there were three Inquisitions," he was saying, as they moved down the aisle. "The Mediaeval or Papal Inquisition, beginning with the suppression of the ascetic, dualistic Cathari and the Waldenses in southern France. That was middle twelfth century, before Pope Gregory IX had the power of trial and punishment of heretics made sole prerogative of the Church, enforced by the Inquisitor." He began scanning the shelves. "Then there was the Roman Inquisition, aimed at the Protestants." He pulled down a title. "And then of course, there's Torquemada and the Spanish Inquisition." He studied the contents page for a moment, then flipped back to the bibliography, scanning the titles. "This one gives good background. But not much on the actual tortures themselves. We don't have much on that in this library."

"Oh."

Arthur handed her the book.

She stared blankly at the cover.

"Did you want something on the tortures themselves?"

"Well, I don't know." She giggled. "I guess this will be all right."

"I mean, there are books that go into more detail."

"No, I think this will be okay," she said again and turned to go.

Arthur watched her move down the aisle, making a mental note of the title she would be checking out. "Much more detail, as you'll soon see," he whispered, then froze at the sound of a book being slid back onto the other side of the double-faced shelving. Through the space between the bookshelves, he caught a glimpse of someone walking quickly away. He stood for a moment, fighting panic, trying to think back on what he had said. Had he given himself away so easily? And to whom? Suddenly, he remembered Pool; the detective could still be in the library. But it was too late now to conceal himself; anyone who had overheard his conversation would know, by what he had said and by the way he had talked to the student, that he worked here. He

started down the aisle, moving parallel with, then passing the figure—glimpsed through the shelves only as a shirt sleeve—but stopped just before coming out of the stacks. He stood, tensing, as the figure moved out of the aisle. He bit down on his tongue, felt the sharp charge of pain, and stepped out...falling in right behind behind Mr. Nesbit.

Arthur veered off quickly, unnerved, and walked over to a cluster of empty study carrels. He leaned against a carrel to steady himself and watched the cataloger as he crossed through the general reading area, his head bobbing like a walking pigeon, his thin arms straining to keep balanced a stack of books. Several of the students, Arthur noticed, made faces at the old man, mocking his walk, after he passed their table. Arthur smiled. Anything overheard by that harmless old man, oblivious to all but his obscure interests, was as good as forgotten. Arthur touched his tongue to the back of his hand and studied the smear of blood. *Such a waste. he observed, shaking his head, of good pain.*

Twenty minutes after the library had closed, Arthur sat alone in the air-conditioned computer room, staring at the console, a thick operations manual on his lap. Empty boxes, plastic straps, wedges of Styrofoam packing, and wooden crating lay scattered around the new equipment. He studied the screen for a moment longer, then typed in another series of commands, entering and changing addresses until he achieved the proper on-screen prompt. He leaned back, closing the manual, and set it on the shelf behind him. He was ready to run the shutdown program. But before he started that sequence, there was one little search left to enter. At the PROCESS LEVEL, he typed in the title of a book on the Spanish Inquisition; watched the bibliographic information scroll up and display the alpha-numeric code that identified the name of the individual who had checked it out. A few more keystrokes and he had that code entered, matched, and the patron information scrolling up the screen.

He wrote down the street address on a junior legal pad.

"Working late?"

Arthur flinched and turned to see Mr. Nesbit standing behind him, nervously shuffling the weight of his bony frame from one foot to the other. Between the hissing of cold air through the ceiling vents and the white-noise hum of the computer fans, Arthur had not heard the cataloger come in.

"I thought everyone had gone," Arthur said. He tore the sheet off the pad and crumpling it into his jacket pocket.

Mr. Nesbit folded his arms over his sunken chest. "Just tying up loose ends," he said. "It always takes longer than you think."

"Yeah," Arthur said, turning back to the console. "I heard what happened. For what it's worth, I'm sorry it's going down this way."

Mr. Nesbit chuckled and ducked his head.

The printer chattered out a line.

Arthur studied the prompts and entered the next command. "Have you thought about what you'll do?" he asked, not looking up from the screen.

The cataloger took a step back, unfolded and folded his arms. "Well, I don't have much choice, professionally. Having a charge of sexual harassment on your permanent record is not something you can easily explain away," he said. "And at my age, there's little chance of getting retrained for another profession." He was quiet for a moment. "Funny how one comes to identify with his job. It becomes a part of you after awhile. Take it away..." He shrugged.

The printer began chattering again. When it stopped, Mr. Nesbit asked, "Do you know what information anxiety is, Arthur?"

Arthur feigned interest in something on the screen. "Hmm? No."

The cataloger smiled. "I always saw my job as bringing order out of chaos. Find the source of the chaos, break it down, organize it, control it. Describe, classify, fit within a scheme. Kind of like religion, if you think about it: the fight against entropy, against meaningless disinte-

gration." He unfolded his arms and held up his hands, turned them over. "Easy to do with a book or a stack of paper, but how do you apply such a philosophy to the uncertain future? Or to the whims of people in control...."

Arthur detected a subtle change in the cataloger's voice and looked up. Something about the old man was suddenly different: his nervous tics had stopped; his lank, awkward, ever-twitching body seemed to settle and harden; muscled furrows creased the length of his forearms. The posture struck Arthur as threatening, somehow. He'd seen such a dichotomy once before, in the stillness of an old Chinese man being harassed by a kid on a street in downtown D.C., just before the tottering old fellow steered the kid (wrist doubled back) to a more respectable position on the pavement. Mr. Nesbit held the pose for a moment, then, as if suddenly aware that he was being watched, let the tension slide from his body; hunched his shoulders, ducked his head, and gave a slit, red-meat smile, careful this time not to break the scab on his lip—transformation complete.

"You were right earlier," Mr. Nesbit continued, "in the sense that one must keep the past alive but live in the present if one is to survive." He leaned against the cabinet that housed three humming Winchester drives. "I failed to follow my belief in the Cartesian world view," he said, extending his fingers and studying his nails. "My senses deceived me; I got caught up in the same chaos I've spent a lifetime trying to manage. I failed to accept the reality-shift of the 'new paradigm,' as you young librarians call it, failed to react until almost too late...." The cataloger chewed off a sliver of fingernail and held it between his yellowed teeth, muscles of his jaws knotting.

Arthur turned away, but not quickly enough...*looked down at his hand, strapped with duct tape to the arm of the wooden chair. The bloody, saurian-efficient mouth of a pair of gas pliers chewed at his fingertip, pinched and peeled the nail back, then ripped it free, exposing*

*bloodpink flesh to cold air, burning like acid....*

He gasped out loud and barely muffled it with a cough.

"Can it tell you what a person has checked out?"

"What?" Arthur blinked and tried to swallow.

Mr. Nesbit turned his hand and studied his fingers, as if debating which to taste next. Arthur glimpsed the fresh, pink meat exposed from the old man's torn nail and shivered.

"The computer," Mr. Nesbit said. "Can it tell you what books a patron has checked out?"

Arthur started to speak, but the words were meek and too low to be heard. He bent over, huddling, concentrating. "Current stuff," he managed, louder. He fought the urge to slide off the chair and kneel. "Just type in the person's name at the PATRON INQUIRY prompt."

"Everything that person has checked out?"

"No." He balled his fingers into a tight fist, feeling the phantom burn. "When the books are checked back in, the record, except fines, is wiped clean."

Mr. Nesbit watched him for a moment, then asked, "And interlibrary loans?"

"No. They still have to be done the old way."

"So if I wanted to check someone's interlibrary loan records—"

"You'd have to check Maureen's back files," Arthur interrupted. He made a soft, whimpering sound in his throat.

"Ah." The cataloger smiled and nodded. "Never too late to learn, is it Arthur?"

Arthur glanced over at the printer, which had just stopped. "Yes," he replied, trying desperately now to wrap up the conversation, "it's too bad there's just not that much need for original cataloging these days, not with a database of twenty million records from which we can draw." He reached over and tore off the fanfold printouts. His hand was trembling.

"Oh, I don't know," Mr. Nesbit replied. "There's still the odd piece

of realia that will always need original cataloging. Remember: A bit of the past into the present." He smiled and tilted his head. "Goodnight, Arthur."

Arthur watched the door slowly pull itself shut...trying to hold himself back...but was already up, running...caught the door just as it clicked shut and immediately jerked it back open, feeling an overwhelming surge of relief, like a drowning man breaking the surface at last; he closed the door, then opened it, closed it, opened it, closed it, opened it....

He switched on the light and descended the basement stairs; moved through a narrow hallway framed-out in two-by-fours and partially covered with cheap paneling. The air was damp and cold; and under the pungent, not unpleasant smell of sawed lumber and the dying sweetness of an old Renuzit aromatic was the taint of something rotten, like the elusive smell of a rat decaying in a wall. He stepped over and around the construction materials—coffee cans full of nails, a skill saw, a leather tool pouch, boxes of sheathed cable. At the end of the narrow hallway, he unlocked and opened a steel door.

The air that flowed out was thick, slow-moving, almost sticky with the smells: old sweat, urine, feces, pus, rotting blood. He pulled the door shut behind him and stood in the darkness, listening. Chains tinkled. A rope strained and creaked. He walked among them, hands out, touching, turning their cold, wet bodies, eliciting soft, plaintive moans. Moans that gave way to louder cries as consciousness returned. He paused and ran a finger up a blood-and-urine-coated leg. Smears the cold paste between his thumb and forefinger, thinking about the serologist who would be analyzing these remains, looking for clues; but would find none; no pubic hair, no semen, nothing.

He did not choose them for that.

He reached the wall and felt his way down to the metal cot. Removed his clothes and stretched

out, feeling the cold, sharpened metal springs cut into his scarred back, dosed his eyes, listening to the cries in the dark...

...tried to reach out, but the chains held him: metal cuffs cut into his raw, scabby, bleeding wrists and ankles...something nibbled at his toe and he flinched. but was unable to kick it loose...a scream echoed down the corridor...gradually softened to a whisper, a pleading moan, then heavy silence ... a shadow passed through the seam of light under his door: he heard the jingle of keys: fixed his eyes on the light, his breath going short and sharp, waiting for the sound of the dry, rasping hinges ... waiting ... whimpering....

Detective Pool waited in the small outer office, listening to the plastic click-click of the secretary typing on her computer. Since there weren't magazines, he busied himself by playing a cop's game of noting details; started with the book shelves (*MS-DOS, A User's Guide, Webster's Ninth New Collegiate Dictionary, Webster's Secretarial Handbook, Rodale's Word Finder*, two prosaic houseplants), grew bored with that and turned to the pictures drawn in crayon, taped to the filing cabinet (green two-dimensional houses with blue trees, black stick figures with balloon heads and red lips). He found himself trying to piece together the secretary's life: a working mother of two (the grade-school pictures of two little girls pinned to the bulletin board); he leaned forward until he could see her hands; no rings: divorced, maybe, or separated. Ambitious? Probably taking classes at night (The thick, wire-ring notebook protruding from a small backpack shoved under her desk). He winced and sat back, giving up. *Staying sharp for what?* he wondered. Leaned his head gently to one side to ease the pain. Felt a bleak anxiety twist his stomach. Everything in the room seemed suddenly gray and lifeless. He blinked and looked down at his memo pad, at the list of questions he needed to ask; noticed the appointment tomorrow morning with

the attorney about his so-called estate. His fingers were cold.

The door to the professor's office opened and out stepped a tall, thin, energetic man with shaggy white hair falling to his shoulders. He wore pleated gray slacks, a white cotton shirt buttoned to the collar (no tie), with an incongruous wrinkle running like a scar from shoulder seam to the fourth button.

The professor handed the secretary a folder and bid Detective Pool enter.

Pool kept glancing over at the professor as the video played. He was always curious about the way civilians reacted to uncensored death. So far, the professor's only outward reaction was one knee going like a piston.

"Sorry to have to show you this before lunch," Pool said. "But I need you to see this wheel thing."

The scene changed.

"The coroner said she would have lived through most of this."

The professor nodded, suddenly animated, and stubbed out his cigarette. "Yes. It was a favorite method of torture throughout Germanic Europe from the Middle Ages up to the early Eighteenth century." He spoke quickly, mechanically, as if reading from lecture notes. He rose and began rummaging about in the drawers of his desk. His jerky movements and gangly build reminded Pool of James Coburn in those *Flint* movies. The professor took out a bottle of Jack Daniel's Black and a college-booster mug. Looked up at Detective Pool. "On duty, right?"

Pool smiled. "You've been watching too much TV," he said with a smile and accepted the mug, while the professor went back to the drawer and, after a moment, produced a plastic cup for himself.

"What, exactly, is it?" Pool asked, trying unsuccessfully to swallow and keep the alcohol away from the raw blisters. "I tried the library, but the director told me that I needed a specialist and to try here."

The camera held steady, picking up the drops of blood that glistened as they fell, like red rain.

"It's called, obviously enough, the wheel," the professor replied. "The expression commonly used was 'breaking with the wheel.' The victim was usually staked to the ground, with wooden crosspieces placed under the wrist, knees, ankles, hips. Then, depending on the country, an iron bar or the wheel itself was used to break the bones in the victim's legs, wrists, hips, shoulders. None of these breaks were fatal, of course. Hang on a minute." He set his drink down. "I think I've got a drawing." Turned and moved along a wall of cluttered bookshelves, mumbling a title. "Here we go." He pulled an oversized volume and set it on the desk. Switched on the desk lamp and began flipping through the heavy pages. "Come have a look."

Pool stood up and switched off the VCR.

"These are prints from a German eyewitness."

Pool leaned over and studied the page. The engraving showed a bearded man laid out in the manner the professor had described. Standing over him was the executioner, wheel poised above an unbroken arm. The victim's mouth was open, screaming. Jagged splinters of bone jutted from the legs and arms already broken. In the background, other victims writhed on similar wheels.

"Once they broke the bone," he continued, "they braided the limbs onto the spokes of the wheel, like this," he moved his arms in a twisting motion, "and then set the victims up, where the crows pecked away at their flesh and their eyes. The victims often lived several hours after the breaking. It was the part of the horror of the punishment that made it so effective."

Pool frowned at the caption under the engraving. "What's it say?"

The professor leaned closer, one hand holding back his hair. "'*Rohw, schleying und formlos Fleisch wie di Schleuch eines Tundenfischs.*'" He smiled up at Pool's quizzical stare. "'Raw, slimy and shapeless flesh, mixed up with splinter of smashed bones.' A prescient description."

Detective Pool set his empty mug on the desk. "So. What have we got?"

"Surely, your department has psychiatrists—"

"Lots of them." Pool smiled to soften his sudden rudeness. "But no historians. You've seen the wheel, but maybe you haven't read the stories about the other instruments our Inquisitor used on his victims, like the woman in Iowa found strapped into some kind of specially designed chair that crushed her spine with a spike while slowly choking her to death with a garrote; or the student who was found on the beach in Saint Augustine, Florida, staked out under a wooden, hand-cranked contraption that had been used to wind up the intestines from her slit-open abdomen...like rope from a well; or the sixteen-year-old girl found on a hill within sight of the Blue Ridge Parkway, sawed in half, hanging upside down from a cross. Why? Why would anybody go through all the trouble using these particular methods? What's this guy's obsession?"

The professor picked up his cup, swirling what remained of his drink. "As for the devices, fakes though they may be, they represent classic instruments of torture, more horrific in our imagination than the cattle prods and electrical wires and sleep deprivation cells used by half of the Third World governments today because the stuff your killer uses—the wheel, the Catalonian garrote, the vaginal pear—are tools from the dark dungeons of our past, both in a real and a metaphorical sense." He shrugged. "What I mean is that your man is exploiting a primal fear, the fear of helplessness in the face of unremitting cruelty and pain. His obsession is with suffering; his victims', maybe his own, too. Maybe he's been changed by it, somehow."

"How's that?"

He paused a moment, then said, "Ever see the movie, *The Deer Hunter*?"

Pool nodded.

"Remember the scene in the prison camp?"

"The game of Russian roulette?"

"Right. Well, remember what happened to the three Americans?"

"I think they escaped and were rescued."

"And?"

Pool frowned. "Two of them went home and one guy stayed behind."

The professor nodded. "Stayed behind and kept playing Russian roulette."

Pool was slowly shaking his head. "I don't follow."

"Some experiences are so powerful, so overwhelming, that they change you, whether it's hearing the voice of God, surviving an airplane crash, or having bamboo splinters shoved under your fingernails. The rest of your life may be a search to interrelate the meaning of that experience." The professor nodded to himself. "'When you look into an abyss, the abyss also looks into you,'" as Nietzsche said. He smiled. "Sorry, Detective. But you should never ask a professor to theorize." He drained his cup. "Doesn't give you much to go on, does it?"

"Hard to say," Pool replied. "Every little bit of relevant information helps. The pieces are suppose to add up, eventually." He reached over and pressed the rewind button on the recorder. "There are no perfect murders," he said, "just stupid cops."

Mercury vapor security lights were just beginning to flicker on as Arthur approached Ms. Windom's house. Cold wind scattered leaves along the sidewalk at his feet. The front door had been left open for him, just as the muffled (but male) voice on his answering machine had assured him it would be. Bluish light glowed softly against the living room window's sheer curtain. He walked on past the house, measuring off his pace by the expansion cracks in the sidewalk, a crack coming up under every second step. He covered six cracks, then turned, paced back to his starting point, turned, paced six more, turned, paced six, turned...a passing car slowed; he realized what he was doing and stopped; bent over, feigning interest in something he

might have dropped, until the car was out of sight, then he stood and started up the driveway.

As he moved alongside her property fence, he noticed an errant locust, newly sprouted from under the weathered slats; he reached over, broke off a quarter-inch thorn, and pushed it under the fingernail of his little finger; blood pearled and dripped from the tip of the splinter. He waited a moment for the pain to take hold, to focus him, then turned and walked across the small, well-kept yard, stopping to pick up the evening paper.

The warm draft flowing out the open door was heavy with the sweet smell of the recently dead. He stepped inside, feeling the oily residue of decomposing blood cling to his exposed skin. Blinked. The dead TV channel hissed, filling the room with bluegray light. Through the smoked glass of the entertainment center, he noticed LEDs still burning red on the videocassette recorder. Videos, torn from their boxes (as if by someone looking for just the right one), lay scattered about the floor. The camcorder, still mounted on its tripod, had been removed from its customary place in the bedroom and rolled out in the middle of the living room floor. He realized there were noises coming from the kitchen...the tinkling of a chain and the meaty sound of...lapping.

He tossed the newspaper onto a chair and took a step back. As he did, something crumpled beneath his foot. The sounds from the kitchen stopped. He looked down and saw a sheet of the library's letterhead stationery on the hardwood floor, a dark impression of his footprint soaking through. He bent down and peeled it off the floor, feeling the cold, sticky dampness of blood on his fingers; held it up and read the typed words—"To Be Cataloged..." Stapled to the letterhead was a pink duplicate from a multi-part interlibrary loan form, signed by him. It was for a title he had requested. A book on torture.

The chain-tinkling grew louder. He looked up and saw a dog standing in the living room, its ears pricked,

its muzzle glistening with black blood.

Arthur stood outside the library staff-entrance door, peering through the wire mesh safety glass at the security panel; the row of indicator lamps burned green, meaning the system had been disarmed. He unlocked the door and stepped inside. Stood for a moment, listening, one hand easing the door shut behind him. He was on the mid-floor landing: to his right, steel steps led down to the basement stacks; in front of him, steps led up to the offices and general circulation area. He let go of the door knob and flinched as the latch seated with a metallic click. Felt the itch of prickly heat along his shoulders. He closed his eyes and fought down the claustrophobic urge to turn and shove the door back open, to prove to himself that it wasn't locked. "My door," he whispered, digging into his jacket pocket. Felt the reassuring cold of the pipe cutter's metal spine, let his fingers play over its oiled threads, its razor-edged wheel...and grew calmer. "My dungeon," he said in a low, clear voice, and started up the stairs.

A moment later, Mr. Nesbit walked up out of the darkness and stood in front of the security system panel. He punched in a four-digit code and watched the green lights turn first amber, then red as the system armed itself. He opened the staff-entrance door and set it with a wooden block. The door's sensor contact broken, an alarm buzzed softly on the panel for fifteen seconds, then the ARMED STATUS light started to blink.

Several miles away, in the Municipal Police Department, an alarm went off.

Arthur moved quietly through the hallway, glancing into the darkened offices, careful not to focus on any one point, to keep his eyes sensitive to movement. Saw nothing. At the end of the hallway, he opened the door and walked out into the circulation area. Night-lights illuminated the library entrance. The bookdrop, he noticed, was jammed again, forc-

ing patrons to pile their books up in front of the glass doors. The heat came on suddenly and the drop ceiling crackled with the change in pressure.

He crossed over to the reference desk and, after a moment's searching, found the file box where Maureen kept the completed interlibrary loan forms. He flipped through the K's, since she filed them by the patron's last name, but found nothing. All of his interlibrary loans were gone. Taken. And he knew Maureen did not have them.

There was a sudden whisper of hard breathing, followed by a slightly louder gasp, as of someone straining desperately in the darkness. He closed his eyes, listening. "The cry of a revealed soul," he whispered, shuddering. He reached into his pocket again, gripping the cold metal, and started back across the circulation area, towards the dark hallway, knowing where to find him.

The door to Ms. Windom's office was open. Stepping inside, Arthur found the cataloger standing by the curving wall of windows, staring out into the darkness, or, more likely, he thought, at the multiple reflections of what played on the video monitor, the only light in the office. Mr. Nesbit, Arthur noticed, had a Manila folder in his hand.

"That would be your personnel file," Arthur observed, nodding. "Smart move. With Ms. Windom out of the way and the page who accused you paid off with a scholarship, sure never to come back here to complicate her good fortune, all you had left to do was remove any motive you might have had."

Mr. Nesbit turned, eyes down, and took an aimless step to one side. Behind him, a dozen Ms. Windoms continued disrobing in the window reflections, pearl satin negligees sliding down like waves of mercury over dusky, Caribbean skins.

"I'm surprised she let you in," Arthur said, turning to watch the monitor.

The cataloger was studiously looking at nothing. "Outward appearances are deceiving," he said softly.





Arthur nodded. "Yeah, look at us." The image on the screen jerked and settled as the camcorder was repositioned. Ms. Windom writhed, her head moving in and out of frame as she became more preoccupied with her pleasure. Arthur recognized his own hand as it came into view on the screen, reaching up to touch her breast. She looked down into the camera and opened her mouth.

Arthur crossed over to the monitor (aware of Mr. Nesbit moving in deliberate counterpoint) and touched the screen. "I know why you killed her," he said, "but how did you find out about me?" He ran his finger down the middle of the picture tube, leaving a brighter image in the track. Studied the dust on his fingertip.

Mr. Nesbit frowned. "I'm an old style librarian, remember? A relic." His voice had just the slightest trace of sadness. "Old style librarians tend to be sticklers for details."

"And what details led you to me?" Arthur forced himself to wait, letting the old man reveal his method. There might still be a way for him to work this to his advantage.

"Bagatelles, really. Your little lecture in the stacks caught my interest. Especially in light of the Inquisitor murders." He ducked his head and chuckled nervously. "And a man is what he reads, to some extent. From time to time, even the CIA wants to know what patrons check out at the local library. So I decided to find out about you. About your subject interests. I couldn't check it through that...computer," he waved his hand, "as you so graciously pointed out to me, but, as it turned out, your interlibrary loan records were much more revealing." The cataloger laid down his file and took several interlibrary loan forms from his shirt pocket. "You've requested quite a few specialized titles from overseas libraries." He began to read. "A bilingual guide to the exhibition of *Instrumentos de Tortura* from the Biblioteca Nacional; reports from the Archdiocese of San Paulo; documents from Amnesty International; the complete engravings by Jan Luyken of Amsterdam of the *Theatre of Martyrs*

and Jacques Callot's *Les Miseres*. It goes on. A bit of an abnormal interest, wouldn't you say, for a computer specialist."

"Circumstantial."

"Seems so, at first. But I also made a few inquiries to the American Library Association, plotted your jobs on a map, then traced the Inquisitor murders through the newspaper indexes. An interesting pattern emerged, made much more interesting when I pulled your resume. Seems you spent time in South America during the early Seventies; your name even appears in the *New York Times Index*, in a reference to an article about Americans detained for inciting political agitation."

Arthur turned and took a step toward the cataloger. "I prefer women," he said. "They tend to sound better in the dark."

The cataloger folded the interlibrary loan forms and stuck them back into his pocket, then picked up his file from Ms. Windom's desk. His hands, Arthur noticed, were steady; in fact, even though the cataloger's eyes were cast down, Arthur could see that the old man was grinning. He hesitated, sensing again, as he had in the computer room, the subtle change in the old man: the deliberate shift in posture; the nervous, yet calculating look, the control....

There was a sudden, sharp hiss from the monitor and the naked bodies in the windows winked out, replaced by dead-channel snow, then another scene, ghostly and unreal. Arthur turned and stared at the screen. Recognized Ms. Windom's kitchen. The camera jerked about, swinging up and down, across the floor, and back up to the ceiling, leaving lag and burn lines as it swept past the light fixture, before finally being locked down on a tripod; the automatic focus sharpened and revealed Ms. Windom.

"Well, well," he said, with a begrudging nod of respect. "You really have done your homework."

She was tied, naked and spread-eagle, to a dining room table propped up at a forty-five degree angle against the refrigerator. A rag had been shoved into her mouth, possibly even

into her throat. Arthur could see her nose flaring as she tried desperately to breathe. Her throat constricted periodically, as did her abdomen, which sucked in hard enough to outline her ribs. Arthur made a mental note to remember the gag reflex. It had potential. "Never too late to learn," he whispered. The camera was rolled back and tilted so that only Ms. Windom's face, torso, and upper thighs were plainly visible. Gloved hands and a smock-covered body moved into frame. The face, seen only for an instant, was hidden behind a dime-store monster mask, one made in the likeness of The Shape from the movie *Halloween*.

A scalpel flashed in the dim light.

Arthur watched Ms. Windom's eyes widen. He nodded to himself, knowing that her senses were slowing down time, absorbing every detail—the scrape of the man's clothes as he moved, the sound of his breathing, the hum of the refrigerator at her back, the way the light gleamed along the blade, the smell of her own raw fear. Each moment a lifetime, a universe of meaning. He shivered. Her sweating body strained suddenly against the nylon rope that bound her at the wrists and ankles and crisscrossed her chest, causing one breast to swell. Quickly, yet crudely (Arthur thought), the scalpel sunk in and carved a drooping, horizontal slit, a hideous red smile, from hip to hip, just below her navel. Blood poured out from the sagging lip of the wound, matting her thick pubic hair; brightly dark beads traced lines down the inside of her tan thighs and dripped out of frame. She jerked hard against the rope, back arching. The VCR picked up her dry, muffled, whispering screams. The man stepped to one side, momentarily blocking the view. He leaned down a little, one arm moving in and out, digging. Then he stepped back, pulling something with him. Arthur watched the stark insanity cloud Ms. Windom's eyes as she watched her own intestines—pale pink, smooth, glistening—being unwound and dropped onto the floor.

"Such a waste of good pain," he whispered, removing the pipe cutter from his jacket. "There are men," he said, fitting it over his left wrist, "in dark, humid rooms deep in the bowels of South America, in the *sals de discipline*, who could teach you much about the art of pain. Did you know that in the Operacao Bandirantes of San Paulo, the ritual of torture is known as the 'spiritual seance'?" He nodded to himself and began turning the screw-key, driving the razor-edged wheel through his skin. "And it is, you see. A kind of mystical venture, a communion with the deepest reaches of your own soul; a revelation, complete with epiphany." Tightened the screw another turn, wincing at the pain. "One hour in the shadow of the torturer will teach you more about yourself than a lifetime in the cold, stone silence of a Tibetan monastery." He closed his eyes for a moment, then said softly, "They let each of us see a small courtyard, flooded with white, tropical sunlight...just once, before the forever darkness of the cells, knowing that we would dream of that light...and we did." He blinked, frowning. "It has a smell, you know, the revealed soul; sticky-sweet and just a bit metallic; the smell of ankle-deep pools of blood on a cold tile floor in a windowless room. And it sings when it passes your locked door at night."

He turned, slowly, knowing the cataloger would not be there. Stared for a moment at the empty room. "It's easy to experience it," he said, nodding. "You just have to hurt yourself a little, and listen..." He glided across the carpet and into the hallway, dripping blood.

The door to circulation was closed but not locked. He opened it and walked over to the counter. Stood, waiting, listening. Heard the door pull itself shut behind him; heard the low hum of florescent lights, the hiss of air through intake registers. Tightened the screw another half-turn. He could hear the scuff of feet across carpet, someone moving towards the children's room; he smiled, waiting for the sensations to take over; felt the warmth of his

own blood flowing over his fingers...waiting....

The telephone intercom beeped.

"Interesting characteristic about serial killers," Mr. Nesbit said, his voice sounding small and flat in the tiny speaker. "According to the articles I pulled from *Psychological Abstracts*, your kind tends to go through phases: aura, trolling, wooing, capture. An elaborate ritual that gradually isolates you from the real world, leaving you to the compulsive fantasy that gives you release. Timing, surrounding, type of victim—it all has to be just right. Otherwise, it doesn't trip the wire that sets off your diseased instinct. Without it, you're just committing another boring, empty murder. That makes killing me a problem for you, doesn't it, Mr. Knight. I mean," the voice paused for a moment, "can you do it sane?"

Arthur felt a sudden shock of desperation. His lips worked, but the threat was breathless. He shook his head. "It's there, it's always there," he whispered. He gripped the screw key and ran it up tight, tighter, then, taking hold of the threaded bolt, began sawing the pipe cutter back and forth, driving the razor-edged wheel deeper into his wrist, the key suddenly wet and slick with his blood as the radial artery was severed. "Inside us...rotting, chained in darkness, waiting to get out...into the light...always there...because everyone is guilty..." He giggled. "And even if you are not..."

*"We will beat you until you are."*

He pulled the cutter one full turn over his wrist, the blade incising a red line through unbroken skin, scoring bone; then another turn, cutting deeper, into the median nerve. His thumb and index finger went cold and slack. He leaned toward the pain. Tightened the screw and turned the pipe cutter again, taking sharp, deep breaths, tasting it...

*...cold, damp air...the thick stench of feces, sweat, stale urine...*

"There..." The floor softened and he sank, spinning to his right, hunching over in the dark...

*...trying to stand, chains contorting him into a bent, twisted, fetal*

*position—never standing. never sitting—metal cuffs scraping his raw, scabbed, blood-caked wrists and ankles...someone was screaming, screams echoing down the dark corridor, rising high, shrill...then nothing...that heavy silence...he shivered and began urinating, the hot fluid burning as it ran over the open sores on his legs...the sound of a metal door closing, of keys jingling...coming closer...his breath short and sharp now...eyes fixating on the light under the door...waiting for the shadow-step to pause, for the door to open...again....*

The door to circulation opened.

Arthur looked up.

A Maglite flashed in his eyes, nearly blinding him. Behind the light was the unmistakable silhouette of someone in uniform.

"Back so soon?" he whispered, and giggled.

The police officer moved quickly to one side, leaving the door open, the corridor beyond unguarded...Arthur smiled...*the door open, the corridor beyond unguarded...* For hours, days, weeks, months, he had played it out in the darkness of his cell, every detail invested with light, color, sound, smell...*the door would open: the guard would step off to one side, distracted by stench, leaving the hallway unguarded: he would pull down against the chains with sudden, comic-book hero strength and peel the metal cuff from his wrist (even now he could feel his blood-slick hand sliding free); then he would lunge, slamming the bewildered guard into the wall and stumble out into the dark corridor...shots would be fired: some might even hit him (even now he could feel the shock-dulled thump of pain in the center of his back); but it would be too late, too late...*

*...because he was deep in the corridor now, following its gradually narrowing, maze-like turnings, leaving the sound of gunfire far behind, and the pain, all the pain...up ahead he could see the small patch of light growing larger as he moved towards it...a window...a door-way...he paused for a*

*moment at the edge of the opening, feeling the warmth on his face, the cool damp darkness pushing against his back, then he stepped out at last into the brilliant, blinding white light of the courtyard....*

Pool stood in a corner of the basement (already dubbed the "Meat Locker"), breathing through his mouth—despite the two bummed cigarette filters in his nose—and thumbing clumsily (his surgical gloves sticking to the damp pages) through an Amnesty International report on the Khmer Rouge. For the moment, he was trying to stay out of the way of the crime technicians and medics and uniforms who moved about in a kind of whispering numbness, dusting, photographing, mapping, bagging body parts. He slipped the report into an evidence bag and tossed it in a box. Reseated the filters and began following the conversation between two paramedics on step stools, as they discussed how best to remove the body in question from meat hooks driven in on either side of the spine.

Two masked policemen set a gurney down beside him and waited their turn at the door. Even with the filters, Pool could smell the reek of the girl's feces and dried urine and the putrid menses that mingled with the pus from her festering leg wounds. *Still alive, at least*, he nodded, but wondered if that might not be a far worse torture. He frowned, noticing a glint of light through the dark, sweat-matted hair that partially covered her face; knelt beside the gurney and pulled loose the lank, oily strands. He felt a muscle in his face twitch. A brass name tag had been pinned to her eyelid, now swollen shut and sealed with a crust of blood. He leaned closer, squinting, and recognized the library logo; read the name out loud.

"Maureen?"

She turned toward the sound of his voice and looked (it seemed to him) at something over his shoulder; her eye wide, staring. "It's all so... yucky," she whispered, and gave a short, sharp giggle.

The blood stains remained in the carpet long after the yellow tape marking off the area around the circulation desk was gone (despite various salesmen's best attempts with "new and improved" shampoos and squirt-bottle cleaners). So Mr. Nesbit had that section (and a much larger one in the hallway) sliced out and replaced. But the new pieces didn't match exactly and quickly became something of a legend among the high school kids, who would come by after school, sneak behind the circulation desk and stand and point. To step on the spot was considered bad luck, and jokes about the "librarian's severed hand" still played well among students and the new staff members.

Several weeks after Ms. Windom's memorial service—the body was never found, so a photograph of her was placed in a wreath of white mums—the Board promoted Mr. Nesbit to the position of library director, other applicants found lacking. A few days after the announcement, Ed Pool stopped by to drop off an overdue book and check out three more. It was one of his rare ventures out since the operation. He found the former cataloger at the glass display case removing specimen jars and placing them carefully into boxes on a book truck.

"More questions, Detective Pool?"

"There are always more questions," Pool said. His pronunciation was slurred, as if he were talking around a cigar. "But not from me, not this time." He set his books down on the edge of the booktruck and held a tissue up to cover his mouth. "Sorry," he said, "I lost some control when they cut the nerves. My mouth tends to wander. The cold weather seems to make it worse." He blotted the spittle that flowed over his sagging lip, something he found ironic, given the constant dry-mouth he suffered from having lost a salivary gland to the radiation.

"Then you are satisfied with how the case ended?"

Pool shrugged and immediately regretted it. He tilted his head to one side and held it there, waiting for the

deep pain to ease and the hot needles to begin their pricking. "This one didn't fit the pattern," he said, "but then neither did a lot of the other stuff about this case."

"Oh?" Mr. Nesbit set another jar into the box. "How so?"

"Like why Arthur Knight was in the library that night, watching the video; or how the alarm managed to reset itself after he had passed through, or why the back door was so conveniently blocked open for the patrolman...." He was rushing the words again, just like before—at the office party, at the retirement dinner speech, at the attorney's office, at his relatives' houses—trying to keep it going, to get it all out, because deep down he realized that if he stopped, the emptiness and futility behind it all would become unbearable. So he tried, one last time, to force it, to make it mean something, tried to catch and hold the librarian's eyes... "Or how you appeared, in the library, without anyone having called you or having seen you enter the building...." But the needle-pricking sensation grew steadily worse, radiating out from the deep-cut depression under his ear and moving up over the side of his face, towards his eye. He turned away and wiped his eyes. "Anyway... who can figure a psycho, right?"

The librarian closed the lids of the box, taped them neatly shut and set another empty box on top. He glanced at the detective's books, reading their spines—*Retirement Places Rated*, *Living With Terminal Cancer*, *Fodor's Florida*. "There is a newer edition of this one in the back," he said, pointing to the *Fodor's*. "If you'd like to wait, I can have it processed for you."

"That's...okay," Pool said, breathing hard. He balled up the tissue and threw it at a nearby trash can. The tissue hit the rim of the can and fell onto the carpet. He stared at it for a moment, but did not reach down to pick it up. "Details don't bother me that much anymore."

Neither spoke for a moment.

Mr. Nesbit took down another jar. "You'll like the weather," he said

at last, "lots of warmth and sunshine."

"How's that?"

"Your trip to Florida."

Pool tried to smile back. "The elephant's graveyard."

Mr. Nesbit frowned. "Excuse me?"

Pool didn't respond; he was thinking again about what the professor had said: *Some experiences are so powerful, so overwhelming, that they change you: the rest of your life may be a search to interrelate the meaning of that experience.* Nodded. "You know," he said at last, "I've spent most of my life asking other people questions, trying to reconstruct their motivation, to figure out what made them tick...guess it's time I profiled myself, before it's too late." He dug out another tissue. "You never clean out your locker until the last day of school." He looked up at the librarian, who was stepping back and forth aimlessly, obviously uncomfortable with this sudden burden of self-expression. Pool worked his mouth and pointed at the jars still left on the display shelving. "Not exactly the kind of thing one sees at the local library, is it?"

The old librarian ducked his head. "We put the display up in conjunction with the science fair. Usually, we change it every month, but this one was so popular with the kids that we left it up a little longer."

Pool studied the jars, each bearing its own typed, identifying label. Recognized a human heart drifting in thick, clear fluid. "What do the numbers mean?"

"Classifications," the former cataloger said. "Here." He pointed to each in turn and described the scheme. "611.12—that's the human heart, including ventricles, auricles, endocardium, myocardium." He pointed to the small intestine, shriveled and pink-gray, looking like a wrinkled hose. "611.341, including duodenum, jejunum, ileum. And here, the large intestines—that's 611.347, including colon and sigmoid flexure. The ears, 611.85. And, of course, the brain, 611.81."

"Where'd you get this stuff?"

The former cataloger hunched his bony shoulders. "It was a donation

from a biological supplier."

Pool wiped his lip. "I didn't know you could classify parts of the human body." He reached out and took down the smallest jar, immediately regretting the effort.

"Oh, it's a pointless exercise, really," Mr. Nesbit said, looking down, smiling. "But I do so enjoy original cataloging. We older librarians don't get much of a chance to do that these days, with all the automation."

Pool leaned his head to one side then moved it back, as if trying to avoid the needles probing under his cheek bone. Every night since the operation, he had dreamed of a dentist leaning into his face, grinning the grin of the insane; and woke each time just as he caught a glimpse of the needle. He blinked, trying to focus on the jar and the grotesque beauty of what floated in the clear fluid...there was something familiar about them...he frowned, trying to remember where he had seen their like before...but there was a sudden, sharp pain as the hot needles drove up under his eye, causing him to wince and suck his breath. He looked away, his face contorting in pain, and nearly dropped the jar.

Mr. Nesbit reached out quickly and took it from his hand. He waited a moment, watching the detective recover his composure, then asked, "Think they'll ever find her? Her body, I mean?"

"Hard to say," Pool blinked his vision clear. "One of these days, maybe, after a heavy rain, a dog will dig up a strange bone, or a hunter will stumble across a skull with a patch of dried scalp and a few wisps of hair still clinging to it." He pushed at his slack lip and made a soft, slurping sound. "Who knows."

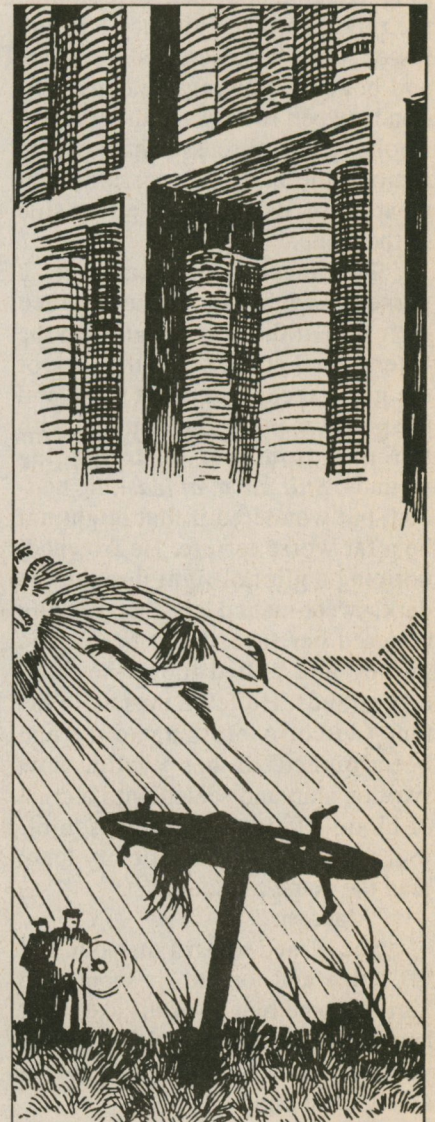
The librarian tilted the jar slowly, first to one side, then to the other, as if he were stirring up a toy snow globe.

Pool reached down, stiff-necked, and gathered his books. "Either way, it's over—for me, for him. I guess he finally found whatever he was looking for in that abyss they opened for him in South America." He glanced

out the window. The first snow of the season was beginning to fall. "Or maybe what was in the abyss finally found him." He started towards the door, then turned and gave a crooked smile. "As the man said, you can't look into the abyss without it looking back."

Mr. Nesbit watched the detective cross the street towards the parking lot and gradually fade into the thickening, snow-gray light. He stopped turning the jar and held it up. Someone at the circulation desk was calling his name. He blinked, but didn't answer...just stood there, watching the two pale orbs drift towards the glass on stringy nerves, their haunting, ice-light irises staring back at him.

His face twitched. ■



# UP FROM THE DEEP

William R. Warren, Jr.

Illustrated by William R. Warren, Jr.

*Nothing exciting ever happened to her, much*

*It seemed to her that somewhere far above her, beyond all reach, the Austral Crux bobbed in the sun-dappled water, a line going into that water. And she... She was clamped to that line, an unimaginable distance below, hanging on by one pincer on her deep-diving suit, and Simon was being maddeningly blasé.*

“Oh, God!” Constance pleaded, “Hurry!”

Simon’s voice filtered through the thousands of meters of ocean remaining between her and the safe, warm, sunlit surface. “We’re right on schedule, Connie.” His voice was a comfort, even as the hash and garble that distorted it served as a reminder that he was still so very far away. “Keep an eye on your mixture.”

She forced herself to focus on the bright array of telltales. Embed-

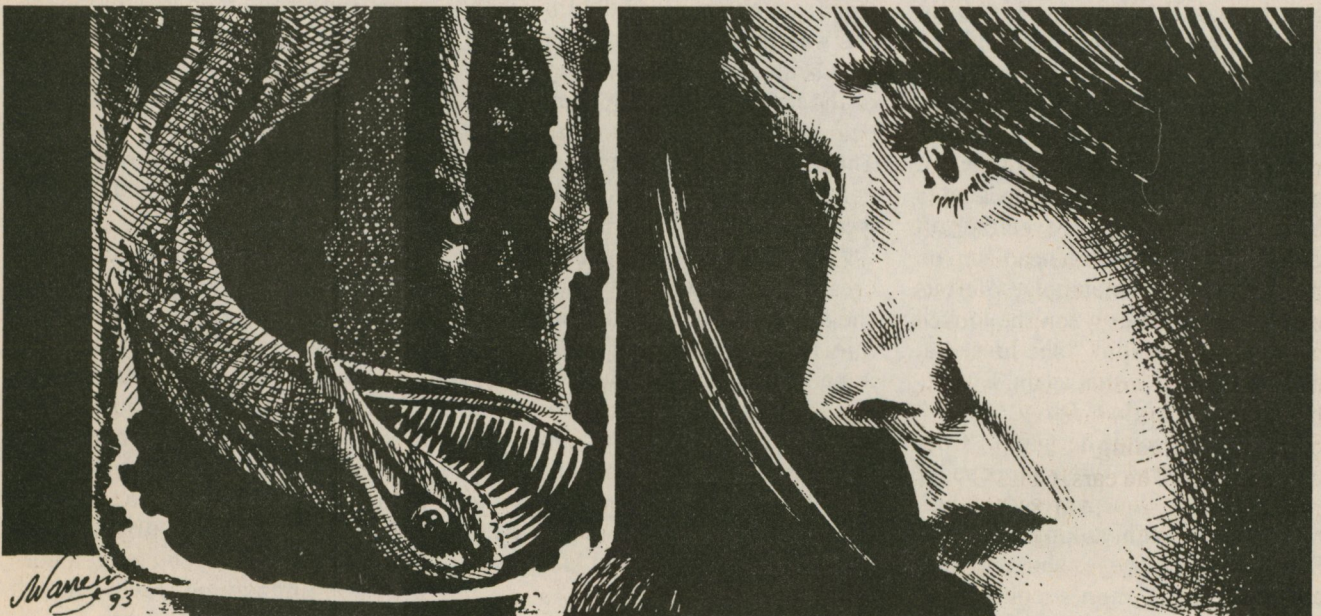
ded in the panels arrayed around Davy Jones’s bubble head, they assured her that everything was nominal. Her mind raced for a moment—“What does he see? What am I missing?”

She realized that she was missing nothing, and that Simon’s remote panel had to be showing exactly what she was seeing. She comprehended that he was trying to take her mind off the situation. Her rising panic instantly transformed into a flash of fury.

“Don’t patronize me, Simon! I’m not a kid any more! Now get me topside, if you can!” Pausing for some smart-alecky response that came only from the depths of her own subconscious, she heard her heart drumming in her ears and realized how rapidly she was breathing. She took a few slow, deliberate gulps of air and felt the adrenaline subside.

Simon’s voice returned, even more soothing than before. “Feel better, honey? Trust us; we’re pulling you up as fast as we can. The *Ballard* weighs a lot, even under water. Everything’s going to be fine, though. Stay with us, now.” Maybe it was. But Simon was not only trying to reel her in, he was trying to reel in the *Ballard II*. It was *Ballard’s* umbilical she was riding.

She had gone down this far trying to free the snagged submersible, when her tell-tales reported a knee joint on the verge of failing in her suit. She didn’t dare flex it to make it back to the surface by herself. The only option was to hang on to the umbilical while Simon tried to reel in everything without burning the motor on the winch. Maybe he could do that before the joint failed entirely and water came crashing in to the *Davy Jones*.



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A soft chirp snapped her attention to the active sonar panel. The display pulsed like a slow heartbeat, refreshing the bright, hard lozenge of light that was the *Ballard II*, a hundred meters below her. Around that slowly rotating return, a foggy glow had appeared. With each refresh of the panel the glow changed, but it was a smoky, shapeless evolution.

The instrument was doing its best to resolve what it was seeing into something intelligible and report it. However, it couldn't seem to decide whether that might be multiple, widely scattered objects, or a single great mass with a bizarre signature. *Davy Jones's* built-in computer was trying to help, enhancing the clarity of the image with each successive return, but it was overwhelmed.

"Where robots fear to tread," Constance thought to herself, "trust wetware." She strained up in the deepsuit's internal webbing to press her face against the icy transparency of *Davy Jones's* head. Blinking to clear the afterimages of the instrument panel from her retinas, she peered below her into the blackness of the Puerto Rico Trench.

She caught a glimpse of foggy, glowing cones wheeling slowly beneath her. "*Ballard's* spotlights," she inventoried mentally. A straight, dark line eclipsed the cones, stretching between them and her. She caught a dull glint of a highlight along its length. "The umbilical," she noted.

Reminded, she glanced nervously at the portion of that same umbilical she had grasped in *Davy Jones's* prodigious claw. Her grip appeared to be firm and locked, but even the soft glow of her night-vision headlamp on the taut cable and manipulator left its imprint on her eyes when she looked back down. "Stupid," she hissed at herself, "Don't do that again. Ever."

"What was that, *Davy Jones*?" Simon's voice made her jump. "Connie, are you okay? What happened?"

"Nothing," she answered, embarrassed to be caught talking to herself. She squeezed her eyes shut and concentrated on Simon's comforting

voice, notably clearer now. "Everything's just peachy. I'm trying to get a visual." Peering below again, the faint familiar lights once again resolved themselves through the fog of afterimage.

So did—*something else*.

At first, she thought it was a shred of her own persistence of vision, but as it undulated slowly from side to side she realized it was getting brighter. A river of fuzzy, faint blue bubbles of light was wafting up from the Trench beneath the disabled submersible. For a moment, her mind couldn't agree with her eyes to interpret what she was seeing, so she reflected instead on how beautiful the scene was. The lights grew brighter as they rose, and she began to perceive that there were hundreds—no, thousands of smaller, fainter spots arrayed between those she had first seen. As more and more of the spots appeared, they began to resolve themselves into something incredible.

She had seen such things many times since coming to work at Wood's Hole, but for the first time since she was in grade school it filled her with fear. It was very much like a Viperfish—or, more accurately, *Photostomias guernei*, a snaky monstrosity adorned with rows of phosphorescent spots and preceded by a mouthful of improbably oversized teeth. She had nightmares about this monster from the sunless depths when she was just a little girl. She imagined being chased by ravening navies of the needle-toothed demons at the beach or the town swimming pool. Those terrible dreams had even kept her from learning to swim until she went to college.

There, all of her fears of the creatures had been banished when she saw a real one for the first time. She had been waiting with bored impatience for her turn with her biology professor for her mid-term review. Pacing in the classroom outside his office, she had been idly gazing at the bits of bone and stone and other once-living stuff on his shelves, and her eyes had fallen on a dusty bottle.

She stared at it for a moment uncomprehending, and suddenly recoiled with a gasp. Blushing, she glanced around to see if anyone else were present to witness her reaction. Seeing no one, she returned her attention to the thing on the shelf. Taking a tentative step closer, she felt her revulsion soften a little to become curiosity, and perhaps a touch of pity.

The monster stood on its head in a bottled sea of cloudy formaldehyde. Its oversized eyes stared sightlessly, blinded by the dazzle of daylight and the even harder dazzle of death. Its jaws gaped, as though awaiting some long-overdue meal, one which would never drift by in this microcosm of preservative. It had lost its resplendent color and glossy sheen, but even in death it retained a small degree of its magnificence.

The label on the jar stated that it was a fully grown adult.

It was a formidable seven inches long.

Her curiosity blossomed and eventually became interest, then fascination, and in time love—love for this and all creatures of the mysterious, quasi-mythical sea. She switched her major to Oceanography, pursued her new world's wonders through her Master's and Doctorate degrees, and picked up her additional post-docs while working at Wood's Hole.

Now, the roles were reversed. She was the little morsel in a bottle, a tiny flesh and blood creature in the protective enclosure of *Davy Jones*, the bright yellow deepsuit from the vessel floating above.

And outside, up from the deeps of her childhood night terrors, came the Viperfish—unimaginably larger. Its dagger-sharp teeth were as big as utility poles. They defined a maw huge enough to swallow not only her own tiny self, but the twin-sphered bathyscaphe *Ballard II* as well.

As she watched in fascinated horror, it proceeded to do just that.

It unhinged those incredible jaws defined by a ghostly Maori tattoo of glowing patterns, and struck with blind greed at the stricken submersible. A split-second later, a hollow gonging sound reverberated

through the skin of *Davy Jones* and assaulted all of her nerve endings at once. The creature had managed to get a purchase on the sub's hull, but was even then gathering itself for a lunge to improve that grip.

The umbilical suddenly wrenched in *Davy Jones's* grasp, slamming Constance back into her webbing and slinging the deepsuit around to keep her pinned against her restraints. Panic rose buoyant in her gorge and she heard herself scream, though she didn't will it. The gonging sound assaulted her again, followed by another wild writhing of the umbilical and the deepsuit attached to it.

It happened several times more. She lost count. All she knew was that if there ever were a pea rattled around in a tin can, this was what it felt like to be the pea.

She struggled to climb back to the transparency against *Davy Jones's* wild and unpredictable gyrations, found solid footing on the potassium superoxide canister in the leg, and boosted herself up to see.

What she saw made her blood run the same icy chill as the midnight sea outside: the umbilical had been wrenched almost completely from *Davy Jones's* gripping claw. She spun her stare out and down, just in time to see the hideous and beautiful monster lunge one last time and gulp down the stern of *Ballard II's* drive section, entangled drift net and all. Seeing it happen, she was better prepared for the gonging and the slamming when it came, and managed to maintain her vantage point.

Suddenly she became aware that through the syncopation of violence she was hearing something else. "Connie! Connie, answer me! *Austral Crux* to *Davy Jones*, come in, come in!"

"I'm here," she cried out to Simon, so near and yet so far away. "I'm all right..." (she rapidly reassessed her aches and pains) "I think I'm all right for now. But *Ballard's* gone! It swallowed it!"

"What swallowed it? What are you seeing? Our scopes are garbage."

The beast convulsed several times, forcing the *Ballard* down its incredible throat. She could see the shape of the submarine distorting the thing's belly, the more horribly because of the glow of *Ballard's* lights through stretched sheets of living tissue. Suddenly, the lights flickered and went out. She heard a great, bass twang as the umbilical parted, and was again thrown back into the webbing. She saw the thick composite cable wrench again in the grip of the pincer. The claw held, if barely, and she heard a sound that instinctively terrified her even more than the drama outside.

Seals were squeaking their high-pitched death rattle at *Davy Jones's* joints. The suit was losing integrity. She was about to die.

"Simon!" she exclaimed, and when she heard herself, she realized how calm she was. "Simon," she started again, and wondered for an instant what she would say next. She realized she knew the answer. She heard herself say, "My password is 'four'—that's numeral four—"

"Connie we're going to..."

"—'dash', maldehyde, as in the preservative. All my legal documents and will are protected there. There's something else that I want you to have there, too. It's in a subscripted..."

"Connie, we're on the way! We have two DSRV's that are within about two hundred meters of your..."

Whatever he was going to say was suddenly lost as the umbilical looped into view through her transparent faceplate, whipped against the plastic at almost supersonic speed, and began sawing through *Davy Jones*.

"Simon," she cried out urgently, "I love..."

Seawater slammed through the molten breach in the transparency and filled her mouth with...

Soapy, tepid water. She spat ... **S**it out and sat up abruptly, sloshing a good deal of the bath onto the floor. *Davy Jones*, her orange Persian cat, leapt with an agility

belied by his fluffy, aristocratic air onto the vanity. He licked his nose a couple of times, blinking at her with his typical "I-was-expecting-that" demeanor, and then began bathing the "expected" spatters of bath water out of his beautiful fur.

Constance surveyed the scene with a moment's disorientation, then sighed. She settled back into the tub, and as the waves sloshed back and forth, her eyes fell on something floating near her knees...

... *Damn! Her book!*

She plucked the soggy mass of paper out of the water with her thumb and forefinger, as though they were not already as wet as the book itself and she didn't want them to get any wetter. Leaning up into a sitting position to toss the book into the sink on the vanity (carefully aiming to keep from splashing Jones), she realized that all she had accomplished with her long, hot bath was to replace the dreary, ordinary aches in her shoulders and neck with new ones in her lower back.

Resignedly, she stood up in the tub and tugged the big sand-colored bath sheet from its rack. Jones watched her from beneath droopy lids as she dragged the scratchy material over her waterlogged skin. She dried her feet last, one after the other as she stepped out of the tub, and padded across the bright, steamy room to take her terry bathrobe off the hook on the door.

Pulling her robe on, she stepped out into the chill freshness of her room, rubbing the towel vigorously in her damp hair. As she crossed to the kitchenette, Jones padding along at her heels, she noticed the message lamp blinking on the phone. Changing course slightly, she stabbed the "play" button as she passed the machine.

It beeped, and Simon's voice filtered through the intercom speaker. "Hi, honey, it's me." She slowed to a stop as she listened, sensing what was about to come next. "I'm really sorry, Connie, but I got called up for a second shift. I'm not going to be able to make it for dinner after all. I'll give you a call when I get off if

it's not too late, to see if you're still up."

"Did I hear you say you were going to get a new sci-fi book?" He pronounced it "s-eye f-eye", despite her repeated efforts to educate him to the contrary. "I don't see what you get out of that escapist stuff, but if it's really good, maybe you will still be awake when I get off work...?"

She turned slowly to face the machine, disappointment lodged like a stone in her chest. This was the third time this week.... "Anyway, you know how busy everybody is trying to get the new section finished, and Roger asked me to fill in for him, sort of repaying when I asked him to for me last Tuesday. I guess it's his anniversary or something. I just couldn't say no."

"I'll make it up to you, sugar, I promise. Love you. 'Bye."

Constance draped the towel across her shoulders and crossed the room to the huge air bed, Jones padding silently alongside. She flopped onto the satiny cover, and Jones sprang gently into the radiant warmth of her armpit, purring and turning, settling, and thrumming against her breast.

She stared morosely at the ceiling for a while in silence. The dozing cat nudged her fingertips with a cold nose, returning her attention to her surroundings.

"You love me just the way I am, don't you, Jonesey?" she murmured to the cat. She rubbed the special spot between his ears, and his purring increased to a contented growl. "No monsters. No heroes. No adventures."

Jones stretched a languorous paw over her sleeve and sleepily flexed it, unsheathing his claws. Feline hunting daggers pierced the thick fabric and sent tiny thrills of pain through her bicep.

"Ow, you rotten cat!" she whispered, gently prying him loose from her flesh. She rearranged him gently to keep from seriously jeopardizing the pleasure of his company. "Be nice." Settling into a new position with the sleepy kitty, she gazed at the curtained window.

"Curtain," she said, "Open."

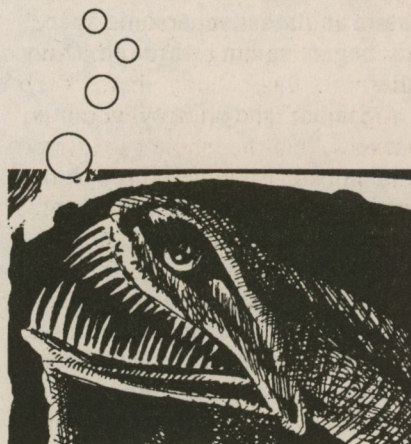
With only the briefest of pauses and the faintest of biomechanical whines, the sheer draperies obediently flowed into their assigned recesses. They revealed the slowly wheeling vista of stars, moonlets, rings, and the banded wall of Saturn itself. Constance felt a moment's disorientation at an unusual pattern of tiny spots of light. Then she recognized them to be the reflective surface of the fuel tank of the third Enzmann starship.

Somewhere over there, Simon was wrestling huge structural members or tanks or whatever it was that shipfitters wrestle, helping prepare the huge spaceship for its convoluted grand tour of the Solar System. Stealing speed from huge planets that would never miss it in their orbit, it would eventually fling itself to the stars.

She longed for a moment for the book. It was a novelization of a movie called "*The Abyss*," and it was replete with heroism and excitement and wonder and, yes, romance. "S-eye F-eye," she murmured. "Simon, any self-respecting high school twerp knows it's pronounced 'skiffy'."

She idly fondled the cat's ears as she drifted to sleep. "And why *do* I read that escapist stuff?" she quizzed her oblivious, purring audience.

Jones half opened a sea-green eye at her, as her own eyes drooped shut. "Maybe it's because nothing exciting ever happens to me," she sighed. ■

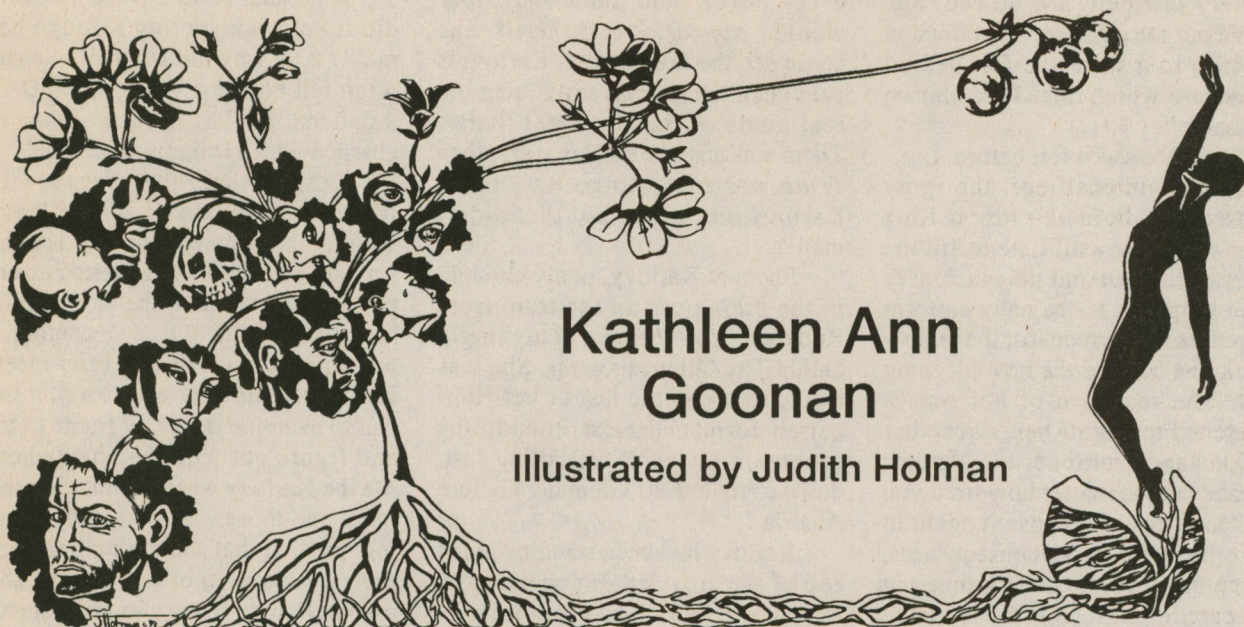


## Illustrators In This Issue

**Christopher Beau** several years ago entered L. Ron Hubbard's Illustrators of The Future Contest, and illustrated a story in the Contest anthology. He works as the manager of a factory in New Jersey, and does art as a sideline. **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. **Kandis Elliot**, *Tomorrow's* Production Manager, is a biological illustrator for the University of Wisconsin, where she received her MS in Zoology and taught biology for many years. Besides writing, typesetting, and illustrating science and science fiction, she has also sold stories to *Asimov's*, *Tomorrow*, and other publications. **Rachid Idriss** is a medical illustrator. He has recently been accepted as an MFA candidate in the University of Michigan's Medical and Biological Illustration program. **Kelly Faltermäyer** was born in El Salvador in 1965, and came to the USA in October, 1980, learning the basics of English during his first year of American schooling. He is a graduate of the High School for Performing and Visual Arts in Houston, TX and subsequently attended the Otis Parsons School of Design in Los Angeles. He first came to public notice in L. Ron Hubbard's Illustrators of The Future Contest a few years ago. He works as a Promotion Assistant for a chain of weekly newspapers in Houston. **Bob Hobbs** lives in Rhode Island, and is an emerging talent in illustration. Like many of our artists in this issue, he first came to public attention in the L. Ron Hubbard Illustrators of The Future Contest. **Judith Holman** has an MFA, but refuses to give details. She chucked all that to illustrate science fiction, and is currently doing work for *Pulphouse* and *Haunts*, as well as *Tomorrow*. She has done a jacket for the Brian Lumley book, *The Transition of Titus Crow*. She had a nearly sold out show at Philcon, with an award for the book cover. **Margaret Ballif Simon** has served two terms as president of the Small Press Writers/Artists Organization, is serving as president of the Science Fiction Poetry Association and editor of their magazine, and has won both the Best Artist and Best Writer/Comic Artist of SPWAO. Since 1985, she has also gained a number of publishing credits in poetry and prose, both fiction and nonfiction. **William R. Warren, Jr.**, is a good man; a tall, skinny, oftentimes personable fellow, whose main job until recently was as a computer animation specialist and technical illustrator for Boeing. For several years, he has also been an illustrator for *Analog*, *Alfred Hitchcock's Mystery Magazine*, and *Amazing Stories*, among others. He has been the preliminary judge in L. Ron Hubbard's Illustrators of The Future Contest from its inception, with Frank Kelly-Freas as his hero and mentor. **Timothy Winkler** is another Illustrators of The Future winner. In addition to doing illustration work for the University of Tennessee and other clients, he is currently a student in the art department. ■



# WHEN THE GRACE NOTE OF THE CITIES CHANGED



Kathleen Ann  
Goonan

Illustrated by Judith Holman

*It was only a wait for luggage, after all*

The dim cities of Europe feathered outward from Sandra's mind as she stood in front of the baggage carousel in National Airport. Rain darkened trees; black streets glimmered in front of small, odd shops and bordered markets in squares where blue, green, and yellow canopies flapped in the raw spring wind while people bought baguettes, goat cheese, hot coffee. Cities like music, each a different chord, went deep into her mind. Cacophony shimmered and lodged in her bones.

Then the cities and the music vanished, replaced by the face of a white man with pale red hair. Karlovy. He might be dead by now. But at least she had the tape. Not a flicker of interest over it at JFK customs, where her hastily booked Frankfurt flight had landed before her short hop to D.C. The tape was labeled Oscar Peterson. It was in the bag flung over her shoulder, along with her camera and notebook.

The baggage belt went round and round. The woman next to her wore a brilliant silk turquoise scarf over bright red hair; her gold hoop earrings swayed each time she lunged, saying "That's it! There it is!" and the man next to her pulled her back—"No, Janet, not yet."

Sandra felt the pack of cabs waiting above at street level like a mass in an upper part of her mind and wondered if Abdhul (but she still thought of him as Sam) had decided to park or was waiting out by the curb: Abdhul with his ebony bald head (wrapped in a stunningly white turban now) and the whole car littered with books. Books which she felt often gave the lie to his single-minded (stupid, in her opinion) commitment to his new religion. She wondered if it was all right to smoke here, three deep from the belt and crushed from behind, then saw a stainless steel cylinder off to her left with sand on the top, squeezed over

and fished a pack of Gitanes from her sweater pocket. Hurry, hurry, she thought. Come around, bag. Come around. Maybe she should go, get the bag later. The tape was all that mattered. She'd faxed a few brief quotes to Sam, all she'd had time for, but hadn't dared put anything in writing to keep on her person before customs.

Apprehension, so far delayed by motion, began to flower.

The baby next to her, low to the floor in the plastic carrier dangled by her mom, began to cry as Sandra lit her cigarette. The mother, a tall, fair woman wearing a pale green linen suit, looked over her shoulder and frowned at Sandra. Sandra returned her stare (never seen an Afro before, white lady? jibed a ten-year-old voice inside her, but the haircut she had now was called a double fade) and took another drag. The baby opened pale blue eyes; Sandra winked; the baby gasped, hiccuped a few times, then laughed.

Damn. When would her battered bag appear? Sandra's feet ached—these silly French high-heeled shoes for Sam! Watered silk, no less. She still didn't know why a Black Muslim liked them or why she cared if he did. They were stupid, stupid. They always felt fine in the store. Her last, her very last pair, she vowed. She ground out the cigarette and turned in response to a stare she felt behind her, a stare which raised the hair on her neck.

The stare she'd felt before.

Colors intensified: the gray exposed beams of the low ceiling under which they all listened to the clatter of the belt and the machinery which propelled it, the navy uniform and red tie of the redcaps, the yellow hair on the head of the now-sleeping baby. The response of her senses threatened to engulf her, sweep her away but she steeled herself. No time to space out, no matter how tired you are. This story. Compose it again in your mind, go over the consequences, try to pretend you're not endangering real people, exposing them to the possibility of riots, tanks, crack-downs, the whole spiel, by holding onto this story so you can break it yourself. And she knew she'd have to fight Abdhul to keep his particular bias out of the story—what a battle royal that would be. But that's what made their magazine, *Truth*, now in its sixth issue, so well balanced, so true.

Fuck off, she thought at the staring men, seeing them out of the corner of her eye then half-turning to give them a full dose of hate: two... men? Or was that one in dark glasses a woman? They both wore long gray jackets, white shirts, no ties. Hands in pockets. Faces expressionless. Following her, ever since Karlovy had left her, through hotel lobbies, bars, Eurail offices, a bank where she'd changed money. Retreating if she approached them, always returning. She called them Dee and Dum. They appeared indistinguishable to her. A brief, involuntary shiver passed through her. Don't kid yourself, girl, that no one knows that you talked to him. Don't kid yourself that

the tape you have is some little codicil on international politics. It's the body of the will itself. It's pivotal, history. And it's *ours*, our story. It will *make* the magazine. So what if getting it was complete chance? The best reporting often was. You had to be ready for it, open, prepared on every level, and then the story would...*appear*. Present itself. She could see the layout now, Karlovy's pale face, the sidebar explaining the real goals of the Sorbonne Party. There was a space for this story, then *Truth* was ready to go. Of course Karlovy was a nut, but that didn't matter.

She met Karlovy, oddly enough, in the dining car on the train from Budapest to Vienna, laughingly called The Orient Express. She was trying to spend the last of her Hungarian forints, useless outside the country, which was dwindling fast, down to its last 20 kilometers before Austria.

Karlovy had been standing at the end of the crowded dining car. Red hair, pale face, tall, an unknown man scanning tables for an empty seat.

The waiter had just brought the feast she had ordered, the finest the menu had to offer, and as Karlovy walked down the aisle unsteadily she pulled out her camera and fiddled with the zoom, it was suddenly so beautiful, while laughing at herself, what do you think you are anyway, a goddamned food editor?

She framed it. Morning sun illuminated the orange caviar and it glowed like a heap of planets; the roll was dusty with flour next to the yellow butter and the espresso in its tiny cup was black as black could be, and shimmered with the motion of the train next to the grainy white sugar cube on the small saucer. Bubbles rose through the champagne—why not, she had only to travel today and organize her notes—when he sat across from her and rested his elbows on the white tablecloth. "Mind if I join you?" he asked.

She thought it must be the champagne that made everything sharper, as if she had new, immensely powerful lenses before her eyes which

caused colors to intensify until they were more important than the objects they defined.

She was brought back to the airport by the coughing fit of the man next to her and stubbed out her new cigarette, thinking, once again, *Tunisia*.

A popular child's name, but why did it keep whispering through her mind? And why did she feel like she often felt before a Washington D.C. thunderstorm—as if the world were charged with exhilarating doom?

Despite that, she sagged with tiredness. Maybe she should leave without the damned bag. She felt the forward eddies of some weird current pushing on her mind, she didn't know how else to think of it, then continued her remembrance of that brief meeting on the train as if it were a film she had to examine frame by frame to try and figure out what had happened. Maybe Karlovy wasn't a nut. She felt more and more sure with each passing moment that something had *happened*, some subtext which she urgently ought to try and understand.

So. She'd clicked her breakfast and then clicked him, the white face, pink across the cheekbones where the skin looked thin and was lined with tiny cracks, the pale blue eyes framed with sandy lashes, the slightly red hair which fanned out around his face and continued into a short beard. He blinked.

"You have an interesting face," she said, put the lens cover on and set her camera on her lap. She broke open the warm roll, buttered it, and heaped it with caviar. "It's a good deal," she said. "I think this cost about a dollar."

"Let me have a bite of yours," he asked, surprising her, but she shook her head. "Get your own," she said, and took a sip of champagne. "How did you like Hungary?"

"It's kind of unusual for a black woman to be traveling around alone," he said. A question for a question. At least, she took it as such. Common in Europe, with all its unrest. Rumor was that war would break out in the next ten days, two weeks, who knows. She'd been traveling a month,

had interviewed common people and government officials, and it all still felt so soft and vague, so frustrating, with that edge of danger and intrigue everywhere, the militaristic fervor, the constant checkpoints, the fear. The modern, renewed fear of world annihilation. No one knew who had bombs any more, now that there were so many small countries, and squabbling over ancient borders and commandeering of trains and trucks carrying food was increasing at an alarming rate. The waiter came and the man said, "I'll have that" and nodded toward her plate.

"It's not so odd," she said. "Not here. I've seen lots more blacks traveling in Europe than in the States. Where are you from?" His accent was hard to place. English was not his first language.

"Oh, around," he said.

She looked out the window to avoid staring at him, and the espresso cup jingled against the saucer while the train traversed a rough stretch of track.

As she felt his eyes on her face the word *Tunisia* came into her mind—yes, *that* was the first time.

For a moment the word was like a small, perfect stone found on a remote, windy shore, then was gone, leaving her to wonder what it meant.

Finally his food came and she was able to study him as he concentrated on it.

He had sounded vaguely Slav, but the twist in his accent was French. His blue shirt was open at the collar and he wore a thick black sweater over it. What she would call well-dressed, even for a sunny dining car with fresh flowers. Present-day Europe was overrun with refugees from the Middle East, from the hemorrhage of the USSR, filled with horror stories which she'd collected from Rumania, Latvia, the former Yugoslavia. If such people had clean clothes, and that was rare enough, their clothes were still usually frayed and worn. There was also a class of computer people, mostly from Germany or the Netherlands, sometimes the newly split Czechoslovakia, and small factory owners crisscrossing

Europe, arranging deals. He didn't seem to fit into any of the usual categories, though. And he was not a tourist. He didn't have the slightly awash air. He didn't goggle out the window, not that there was much on this flat, semi-industrialized plain to goggle at.

But then they entered a short stretch of pine forest, and when they came out a sudden shaft of sunlight hit the gold ring he wore on the middle finger of his right hand, facing her as his hand wrapped around the fork.

She caught her breath. She wasn't sure. He glanced up and saw what she was looking at. Their eyes locked for an instant, during which she realized she ought to look away, so sure that the fact that she knew would be communicated to him.

"What do you do for a living?" he asked.

"I'm a travel writer," she said, and as she said it she wondered, didn't I say that before? And why did she feel that he knew that, and more? Absurd. The feeling subsided in the rush of concern: she could hardly hide that she was a writer, covered with the trappings as she was. A notebook sat in plain view, a tape recorder sitting atop it. If only she'd left it in her bag, along with her camera. She later realized that was *why* he sat there. He hoped—maybe even knew for a fact, she thought, in the crowded airport, with a twinge of apprehension like that of a stalked victim—that she was what she appeared to be. He *wanted* to get the story out, but was afraid that if he called any major news publication, both he and the story would be killed before that could happen.

But sitting across from him on the train, she had practically trembled with the weight of this possible story. If she were right about the ring. But she must be. The stylized sun, rays bursting outward, symbol of the Sorbonne Party, had been unmistakable.

"Had anything published?" he asked.

"Sure," she said. "My latest was in *Travel Times*, a story about the

Caribbean....

"Don't lie," he said. He nodded at the book on the table, *The New World Order*. A purely political text. Written, in fact, by one of her old professors. "I have a story for you. A real story. I know that you know who I am, or at least, what I represent. You recognize the ring. I don't remember the last time I ran across someone who did. You're a reporter." He smiled, and she wondered at the self-satisfied look on his face. "Someone is following me, I'm sure, and that's why I've got to get this story out. It's almost like—divine intervention to find you here."

He was bit off the deep end, it seemed. But perhaps that was normal, for Sorbonne Party members. "I don't know *who* you are," she said. "I do know that only members of a certain very rarefied political persuasion wear it. The group was originally formed in the Sorbonne in the 1920's, is that correct? June, 1921, in fact. And that you have to join to learn the agenda."

"The *process*," he said. "Go on."

"The process?"

"Just continue."

"Well, no one really knows how many members there are, or who they are—heads of state, the grocer on the corner, students. Many Surrealists, when there *were* Surrealists. Even..." she searched her mind, came up with the name, "Anton Murie. The man who won the Nobel Prize in Physics last year. For proving the existence of alternate universes all around us, even within our own, like tiny seeds, wasn't that it? Just waiting to grow. Waiting for what, though?" She frowned, trying to recall the gist of the interview she'd seen in the *Post* not long ago. "Something about branching universes, and about how there could be other universes with other people just like us sitting here talking?" She almost felt ridiculous saying such things.

He smiled faintly. "Something like that," he said, in a gentle voice.

"And there are rumors that many other prominent scientists are members too, I think. Is that true?"

"Yes," he said. "Many."

"Why?"

He glanced around the car. "I should tell you right now, before it's too late, that I may be a dead man. And you may be too, if you listen to me. It's rather bizarre that it's turning out this way, but this is how they want it. Things could go either way. *Many* ways. It's up to you."

She ignored the fanatic glitter in his eye and his insinuation that *she* could be important. What was important was the story, and *Truth*. "You've got to be kidding," she said. Don't pant, Sandra. "We can talk in my compartment." Any crackpot idea which could save the world was news these days—the stranger the better. And the world was damned curious about the Sorbonne Party, with their aura of deep secrecy.

But she grew uneasy as the train passed through the green fields of Austria and he betrayed his movement. Because he named top moles in every government in Europe, people that she knew, or knew of, people she had met as an interviewer from *Truth* in the past few weeks at glittering embassy parties or in hushed, immense granite bastions of government. He revealed the Sorbonne Party's powerful ties to the military of many countries, and their concerted plan to act in two days. "They're wrong," he said flatly, his eyes distant. "They know how I feel. What they want to do is against all Sorbonne doctrine and philosophy, but they've lost patience. They're not trusting the *process*. Or maybe it is," he said, his eyes going distant, "that they're simply so tied in to the present state of things that they do believe in the process, but want to sabotage it instead. They're *comfortable* here. Even *rich*."

"What process?" she asked.

He looked at her, opened his mouth, shut it again with a puzzled look in his eyes. "It's—it's very hard to say." He laughed wryly. "I would like to tell you, but it's not something that can really be put into a few short words. It is something that *happens*. Something that *will* happen, *can* happen...oh!" He threw up hands in frustration. "Telling you would amount

to initiation, and at this point of course I would tell you, we need every mind we can get, but that takes years of study. That is, until just before the end. We think."

"What do you mean?" She was very annoyed with him suddenly. He was a slippery one. "What *end*? You'll have to tell me, or else you're wasting my time and yours too."

He stared straight at her. "The process," he said, "is what some might call—tropes. Visual, auidial, verbal. *Organized* information, massed chunks of it, piled atop one another, mixed into minds until, with the correct catalyst, we push through to the next level."

Sandra felt a chill at the intensity of his gaze. "What *level*? And who knows...these tropes?"

"We *all* do," he said. "You, me—everyone. That has been our work. Preparing the minds of the people of the world, each in its own cultural language. A vast work, you can easily see. Now, we are rushing toward that knowing, that *change*, that final assembling of information before it all coalesces into the next stage, but right now, the process is fragile. Very vulnerable indeed. A political inferno could easily throw everything off. This opportunity might not present itself to humans for another thousand years. Maybe never. It is *unique*, you see!"

His voice had become quite urgent, he was almost shouting, his face full of fervor. He stood and gripped the luggage rack above his head with both hands, head bowed. When he started speaking again, his voice was normal, carefully controlled. "They've left me no choice. They're no longer pure. Generations of Sorbonne have worked so long on the problem, trying to bring to fruition this great, beauteous *idea*, which will truly *change* the world. Have you ever heard of morphic resonance?"

"What about it?"

He stared out the window for a moment. His eyes lost their hard focus and his face, for just that instant, had the glow of a saint she'd seen in a stained glass window of the Cathedral in Amiens. He continued.

"*They* want to act now, when it is still not time. But I have a plan too." His eyes glimmered. "There are—*were*—four of us, four main decision makers. Diedra—well, you want to stay out of her way. I'm trying to. I'll probably fail. She's a fanatic, the worst kind, one that has lost faith but wants to *force* things to go the way she thinks they should anyway. On one level. The only level she believes in any more." The sadness on his face made Sandra think that the break between them was more than philosophical. "This bloodbath they plan will suit her. They stand to gather even *more* wealth. I have just found out that she and many others have used their power to gain control of a few important multinational companies." He shook his head. "It's so difficult to believe that they could be this petty."

She asked as many questions as she possibly could, with the curtains drawn in the compartment and the door locked, testing his story from every angle she could think of. Like every ideology which would change the world, it seemed to her that from what he could tell her theirs was fundamentalist, though they thought it the height of enlightenment. Their heaven, like those in more conventionally religious trappings, would be brought about through sacrifice, and those who disagreed were less than human, quite expendable. The sheep and the goats, as usual. What was frightening was the power they had amassed. Temporal power versus spiritual power, she mused as she listened, the same ancient European struggle of church and state, in new guise, with the church—or the Sorbonne Party—sucking up money, blind obedience, confessions. Imposing a particular order which benefited them. Apparently their organization was fascist to the core in terms of unquestioning allegiance.

But somehow, he just did not seem to fit into the picture he'd described. She knew that he was holding things back. She wanted to ask more, but he was getting restless.

"You still didn't tell me much about the morphic resonance. Isn't

that when particular ideas are passed on? Kind of like culture?"

He smiled. "There are really no labels for it, but its much more than culture. It's the sum total of everything, all thought, all forms of thought. And even *I* don't know for sure—not until it happens, you see." Faith, she thought. Same old story. Nothing can happen until you believe.

He pulled the curtain aside and peered out the window. "We will be in Vienna in ten minutes," he said. He continued to look out the window and spoke rapidly in a quiet, pressured voice.

"In all the history of the universe—*this* universe—(and what other is there, she thought impatiently) there has never been consciousness before. It *must* have some effect on what is happening. It is intertwined with matter. It is made of matter. Ideas, you see, are a *human* invention. Built on observation, but at some point those ideas *can change things*. As in politics, my dear, to give you a very gross example." He turned suddenly and his smile was quite wicked.

"Can you give me a more subtle one?" she asked.

"I just *might*," he said, and laughed out loud. "More subtle and more powerful at once."

Why did fear knife through her?

*Tunishia.*

She shook off the feeling. The train slowed. No time for more questions, damn it.

"I need pictures," she said.

He shrugged, smiled. "Of course. Proof."

She took six rolls quickly and put them in mailers, planning to express them to Sam from different points, hoping they would get through. Some, she would carry with her. She wished she could duplicate the tape too.

He slipped off the train at the Franz Joseph station in Vienna. "Keep moving," he told her. "I've put you in danger, you know. But there's nothing you can do about it now." He smiled then, his slight, ironic smile. "You see, I'm just as ruthless as

they." Then the door clicked shut behind him.

She changed trains three times that day, pausing only to send film and fax Sam a hastily composed short piece about Karlovy, using a few direct quotes, then heading for Frankfurt. She leaped onto a sleeping car as it was pulling out of the station and got a sleeping compartment by paying the porter an outrageous bribe, and he would only take marks, but it was worth it, she was exhausted. She slept with the tape in her shirt pocket, her coat zipped up, the door tied shut with her belt, and woke suddenly during the night.

*Tunishia.*

Pulling up the shade, she knelt in the rumpled bunk and looked out the window.

The train was on the side of a river, and a city was on the opposite bank. What city? she wondered, fogged with sleep. A main thoroughfare ran parallel to the river, and old-fashioned streetlights punctuated the night and illuminated the stone wall which was the river's bank. The thin trails of light the lamps threw across the dark, limpid river were like quick strokes of a watercolorist's brush. Somehow haunting, unconnected to anything else, as if the vision were a stepping stone between her old reality and some unknown future Karlovy had infected her with, for she felt as if she was seeing things in an entirely new way.

Anxiety, she thought.

They were moving swiftly and soon it was dark again. What was it Karlovy had said? "It will all be quite different." She put her feelings down to the power of suggestion and plain old-fashioned exhaustion, and was able to sleep for an hour or two before they pulled into the Frankfurt airport.

Sandra looked over her shoulder. The two gray apparitions on the edge of the crowd *did* bother her. They might have been on the same plane, in first class, she thought, then scolded, don't be ridiculous. There is no reason anyone would follow *you*. What do you suppose, they think you're some world-class spy instead

of a clerk-grade lawyer working for the U.S. government because you didn't feel like putting in the extra hustle it would have taken to get your foot in the door at some decent firm? At least that's what her visa applications had said, lawyer, that had been her life two years ago and she didn't want it to be writer lest she be denied access to some countries. Even then it said nothing, of course, of the fact that her specialty was international law, with a Master's in Political Science from Georgetown.

The bag belt halted abruptly with a terrible grinding of unseen mechanisms. The sudden cessation of sound, the muffled groan that went up all around her, the wide blue eyes of the baby in front of her, looking over her mother's shoulder, blinking once, twice....

Some slight, delicate shift of focus took place within her. Without error. Without doubt.

She had lived this before. So many times that she *laughed* in the sudden silence.

She always did.

Her surroundings glowed and melded to her mind, wordless, beyond concept, infinitely depthful, the nexus of new beginnings, the constant conclusion of itself. The old scuffed beige linoleum with the black border running around like a snake following its tail was caressed by dim gray light falling from the high slit windows above the neon rental car desk signs. Everyone moved in a perfect, beautiful cadence, and she felt it when the man directly in front of her caressed the earlobe of the woman standing next to him, her mind skipped among minds like a stone across a pond and then sank in, suddenly, deep into the total mind, all in an instant, into that dimension when all knew everything and what would happen next.

This was the new, the old, and the constant world order. Politics at its inception. She realized that mind was always there. Always *here*, consciousness informing matter, what matter truly *was*. She moved beyond surprise into the shimmering instants which came thick and fast, full of

knowledge, falling into her like stars into the constant center of this essential space.

She watched her breathing slow, and turned as if in a ballet choreographed by a part of her she'd never remembered until this instant.

One of the men in the gray coats drew a gun and Sandra knew, in that instant, that she was a woman, not a man.

The impact of the bullet spun her around, so that before she felt it, she had hit the floor. Her shoulder throbbed and burned, and people around her were screaming.

Her mind raced, putting the information together swiftly, yet she still saw the steps her mind went through as if she were a little girl again building a tower of blocks, except the blocks were thoughts, and the tower was time, event, existence, consciousness. Just as Karlovy had said it would be.

It's all on tape, she thought, the dead man who will change the world to *this*. This *knowing*.

But how did she know he was dead?

Her shoulder throbbed as she tried to bend her arm, touch her bag to make sure the tape was still there, against her chest. Suddenly she knew that his exact wording, somewhere in that interview, had been the final trope, the precise and final catalyst, just as a different cosign, a brush stroke of a new and striking color, or a grace note changed the works they were dropped into. They resonated in her mind and crystallized concepts which had surfaced in literature, art, and science for decades. Changing her, changing *humans*. Changing their very *ability* to understand and relate to the space-time continuum in a revolution of consciousness, a global developmental leap as powerful and as inevitable as a child's first word.

She realized then that it *was* like a religion, and that she was a helpless fanatic convert. *Everyone* had to know.

Among the sea of legs one pair of dark pants knelt and then she saw the face of a man she'd forgotten then



remembered then forgot that this had all happened before and did he know one of these times he *would* and he pulled his sweater off over his head and said, "Lie still," as if she were raring to get up, and pressed down on her shoulder so hard that she screamed and he said sorry and the dining car flashed into her mind once again, the middle-aged man with the light sandy beard and cool blue eyes, ousted head of a shadowy trans-Euro-

pean political party which no one was sure really existed but she had the proof. She had the proof.

More shouting, and Sam bent over her. She smiled. He was wearing his turban, of course. *She* wasn't Black Muslim. Nonsense. Idiocy. Their new hobby was fighting about it, except for Sam eternity was the stake, eternity with her. His tears fell on her face and he pulled out his ever-present clean white handkerchief and wiped it.

"I've got a tape of Karlovy. He's real. He's the story, Sam. It's going to make our magazine. Bigger and better than *The Village Voice*, than *Mother Jones*—but it's more than that—did you get the fax—"

"Quiet," he said, and she read in his eyes that he thought she was going to die.

"Don't worry," she said, "I'll be all right. This has all happened before, Sam. Everything I'm saying—"

"God fucking damn it," he said. His face was wonderfully familiar. She had known him since he was ten. Don't try and *Abdhul me*, buddy. How beautiful this interval was, where there were no surprises. "Why did I let you put yourself in danger like that?" he said. "I told you to be careful. I told you to take no chances. You never listen to me."

The belt clicked on again and the mechanical whir resumed.

The men—but one was a woman—had been able to vanish into the crowd. After the man with the sweater took the tape.

She realized with a shock that she knew this, and that they would soon be picked up on a hit-and-run in Northeast Washington this afternoon after a kid recognized the victim's TV description of the car and called the anonymous hot line and the police checked their passports. She knew they'd be jailed for two years, and that then the black curtain would come down forever when one of them stalked her again on a muggy summer night as the Potomac shimmered like gray Jello lit by orange mercury vapor lights, and that nothing she tried to do (and did does try,

she always did) would change that scenario because revenge for her getting in the way of *their* New World Order didn't fade with time.

But until then there was Sam (Abdhul!) and the child she would soon be pregnant with, little Tunishia, and a year of arguments over the baby's future religion, and a tiny back porch lined with clay pots which overflow with red geraniums and lush green leaves, and a city back yard with three oak trees and the back of another brick house across the way and no money to buy a dryer while the magazine gets off the ground so the pulley clothesline is bent with clothes and the floors are polished oak and the furniture is spare and black whenever possible like they're pretending to be New York City and trendy people come to their house making deals talking Art. Before they kill her.

She saw this, lying on the floor in National Airport, in wispy, quick scenes, and saw too that she did try to run, she did that evening, that evening in another possible time, pull the gun she always carried now, I don't know why we have to live in this goddamned crack neighborhood now that we have a baby by god I don't *care* if we're part of The People...

And then she was there.

Sandra turns suddenly, tries to scream but fear closes her throat as a horribly familiar woman—the short, black hair always the same—points a gun at her, across the street from where Sandra is walking past the Flagship Restaurant. She is on her way to pick up Tunishia from the babysitter's.

The vertical aluminum geometry of naked sailboat masts glitters in the dock lights; Sandra sweats in the muggy Washington evening. She struggles to open her purse and pull out the gun *she* always carries now.

Memories, futures, alternatives, choices, airports, press in on her. I have to be here for Tunishia, she thinks, I have to *be* here, she says, remembering it all, suddenly, fully, futilely.

Because she is too slow.

*Too slow.*

Just like before and before and before and always....

“No!” she shouts out loud, lying on the floor in National Airport.

And the other possibilities burst upon her like a dazzling refraction of light, each ray like a line she can follow, a tunnel she can see down very much like a telescope.

Or the sight of a gun.

She feels them, all at once, each one passing through an airport, *some* airport, an airport in one of the many shining, the many *holy* cities of the world—yes, holy: Athens, Honolulu, Sidney, Tokyo, L.A., even L.A., every one she can find her way to, tape in her bag, and she stubs out a cigarette while the two take aim.

*This* is infinity, lovely, precise, and true.

*This* is Sam's heaven, everyone's heaven. And hell, for that matter.

From which there is no escape.

“But it's *not* futile,” she whispers to Sam fiercely as she sees the oxygen mask come down, as if they've been arguing about the whole idea for months, years. Sam doesn't like it, she knows he doesn't, can't accept her new, glowing being which can never go beyond death like he thinks *his* will, but only cycle through life forever, seeing more dimensions each time, feeling more of the grit, the pain, the beauty. She knows his questions: Where's the milk and honey, the high-breasted women, the streets of gold? What is life if there is not an afterlife? What do you mean, *this*?

On the other side of the world, they have just shot Karlovy.

But...how does she know?

She blinks, gasps. And stares. For now the signs around her are in Arabic.

No—Hindi.

French.

The crowd babbles in German, in Vietnamese, in languages she can't even recognize.

The hand of the gray assassin is able to reach into Sandra's purse and remove the tape of Karlovy. “We are more powerful than him,” she whispers in Sandra's ear. “This will not be. You cannot escape your fate.” Sandra has a glimpse of blue eyes, a fringe of short black hair hidden by the hat, pale smooth skin.

Then she is gone.

Sandra goes over everything in her mind. Most of the food is ready. The counter is littered with garlic skins, red pepper stems, white paper which wrapped the flounder she got at Pruitt's on Maine Avenue. Another dinner party tonight for their new publishing friends, her turn to prepare.

She plunges her hands into hot, soapy dishwater, staring out the window at the towering leafless oaks which rise from the dull yellow winter patch of yard. With the back of her wrist, she reaches up to rub an itch on her forehead, and Tunishia, who has just learned to walk, staggers to the back door and smacks it with open palms.

“No, honey,” Sandra says. “Mommy will take you out in a few minutes.” If I have time. Still got a lot to do.

Tunishia turns to go into the living room, which is open to the kitchen.

A brilliant red geranium on her windowsill, blossoms surrounded by deep green leaves that look like giant Italian parsley, glows against the gray which presages snow.

She grabs the slippery plate in the bottom, a blue Delft heirloom. It belonged to Sam's grandmother, and he likes to keep it locked up in the china cupboard. But she tells him nice things are meant to *use*. She picks it up with wet hands, and Tunishia trips on a toy and falls. Sandra hears the thump of her head as it hits a coffee table and the little girl starts to scream.

Plate in both hands, she turns and sees blood well from Tunishia's forehead.

The plate slips. Swifter than thought she kneels. Catches Sam's

precious plate on her knees. Reaches up and slips it into the dishwasher.

Sprints to Tunishia, scoops her up, and presses against the bleeding with tissue she grabs from the table.

In Kathmandu the floor, stippled with a stickiness she knows is her own blood, is cold bare concrete. No medical help will arrive.

Karlovy's assassination is on the news at this moment, coming over the loudspeaker in that peculiar Indian-inflected English they speak in Nepal; she hears everyone in the room gasp when they hear it. *Wherever* she is now, he is somehow well known.

A bystander nudges her with his foot, as if she were an injured dog.

"Ambulance?" she hears.

Don't bother, she thinks.

*Tunishia.*

She lifts the tissue and blood spurts from Tunishia's forehead. Pulsating. *Be calm*, she thinks, and presses harder as she runs to the phone. "It's gonna be okay, honey," she says, shifting the little girl to her other arm as she reaches for the phone.

In Paris smooth marble is cool beneath her outstretched fingers as she thinks, is Sam parking the car or will he leave it running, don't forget customs, Sam, that will take a while, you know how long the lines are, park, they'll tow it...but oh, that's right, no customs here, we're still in France, why does it hurt so bad? Sam kneels over her, his eyes tightly shut. Tears are flowing down his face. She knows the tape is gone. But they must get Karlovy's words out. His exact words. The ones she heard.

That won't happen. Not here.

She closes her eyes.

The phone, which Sandra is trying to hold onto her shoulder with her chin as she dials, falls onto the floor. "Damn!" she shouts. She is shaking. Tunishia has stopped crying. She looks slightly gray beneath the beautiful, glowing tan of her face. Blood is everywhere.

In Berlin Sandra wears a heavy coat and cannot feel the floor at all.

But she hears a voice, a single, English-speaking voice in her head, speaking with a slight twist of accent, wry, urgent. *Navigate*, he whispers.

Navigate?

*Navigate.*

She opens her eyes. She closes them. Several times.

The airports are gone. So is Tunishia. Each time there is only light.

But it is cracked, translucent, filled with a lacework of lines, like ice.

Where do the lines—go?

*Try one.* So urgent.

*How?*

She does not feel the hand which takes the tape, this time.

Try one?

She lays Tunishia on the floor, frantically pulls off her own sweater and presses it over the blood spurting from her forehead. She grabs for the phone and picks it up, punches 911 with sticky, trembling fingers, hears it ring, and ring, and ring, presses down hard on the bloody sweater. Oh god, how much blood can a little girl *have*?

In Bombay she smells chapatis cooking at the food stall next to her and an intricate tile mosaic presses through her thin cotton dress.

*Try...*

She gasps at the pain when someone roughly reaches into the purse she clutches to her chest, swiftly wrestles the tape from inside.

"This will not happen," the gray-coated woman whispers in her ear.

*Think. You can do it. It's a human thing. It's possible. We can change things. Now.*

*How?*

The avenues of light are ever more solid—

*Look at the whole.*

There are too many! Sandra is very cold. Shock? The loudspeakers play stylized ragas. Lives swirl in an hallucinatory dance, brilliant, teasing.

*Find a pivotal point.*

"Damn you, Karlovy," she manages.

She shoots down one glowing interstice.

Sandra stares out the window, musing at their good luck, as she washes dishes. She hopes the snow will hold off long enough for their party. They owe it all to Karlovy, the poor, dead idealist. The tape was stolen after she was shot, but she remembered most of it, and they printed it and said what had happened. Not verbatim, that was a shame. She couldn't help but feel that there was something in his exact combination of words that had been important, like a poem. Terrible wars broke out in Europe right after his death, and the world economy continued its downward spiral. They'd been taking young men for soldiers again and the city was filled with demonstrators every day, blocking traffic, sometimes violent. Karlovy seems to be always on her mind, a weight she cannot shed.

And there's something disturbing about these winter days. For instance, whenever she washes dishes, and stares out the window, *so*, it's as if something is pressing in against her mind, in a vague, troubling way, like a shout for help she does not want to hear.

She shakes her head impatiently. Tunishia toddles to the door and pounds on it.

"Later, baby," she says, smiling, and reaches for the last dish hiding beneath gray lukewarm water as Tunishia wanders across the dining nook into the living room.

Sandra looks across at the back of comfortable brick houses. Is that a dealer lurking on the corner next to the Janowski's? Is this unease she feels because of the neighborhood? She bought a gun. Sam keeps saying it's getting better. She picks the dish

Suddenly her head is full of airports.

Airports, and Karlovy.

"Negotiate?" she asks the listening air. It sounds like an echo. She stands poised at the sink, plate in her hand, and the red geraniums seem



urgent, intense, as if they *want something*.

"Alternatives?"

**A**lternatives, damn it! Find that point or die! And all the possibilities die with you!

It's too much, she thinks.

In Narita, they stick the oxygen mask over her nose and mouth. The tape is gone. No one will ever know.

But Karlovy holds Tunisia in front of her mind, limp as a rag doll, then two doctors in white coats who approach her in the antiseptic hallway with apology on their faces

and she tears off the mask and screams out loud, there in Narita.

The concerned Japanese faces drop back and there is Sam and she bears down, bears down, like you do when a child is born, and the pain is terrible, beyond belief, aren't they going to give me any *drugs*....

The blossoming seed universes stun her with light, with intensity. Suddenly, she knows.

She must *dare* to need, to *want to change things*.

And thinks she knows the point at which to do it.

Along the speeding lines of light, the cracks between infinities which cooled in sudden shifts after the big bang she flashes, unerring, *thinking understanding knowing choosing—yes, here here here yes I will go here* but really there is no language except:

Now.

NOW!

**S**andra is looking out the window, lifting Sam's blue dish to rinse it.

Tunisia wails, and the sound goes through her like a knife.

She turns, dish in hand, and it slips. Without her thinking about it, her knees flex—

"No!"

—and the plate falls to the floor.

It shatters into a million beautiful pieces as Sandra runs across the room.

She grabs Tunisia up, wipes her forehead with a tissue—

"Yes, it's okay, honey," she says. "It's not bad." The bleeding has

stopped already. Just a scratch.

This time. This one different thing will do it. This is the time you want. The time *we* want.

This time?

We?

And why does she hold Tunisia so tightly?

She feels a settling, a kind of inevitability which manifests in vision, in feeling. Why is everything—glowing, as if faintly, ever so faintly and yet luminously lit from within? Is it just the threshold of snow, the silvery waiting which precedes it, the barometric pressure somehow affecting her vision? "Nervous as a cat about this party," she mutters, while the familiar kitchen, the gray window, and the red geranium all *become more present*—

Or is it she who is becoming more present? No, we're the same, she thinks, confused for a second.

Then she *remembers*....

**S**he opened her eyes and stared straight into Sam's. Her shoulder ached. She wasn't sure which airport she was in, this time.

She tried to speak. She had to tell Sam that she'd been caught in the rough cross-current of Karlovy's plan the instant of crystallization, hit by the bullets of bizarre assassins, thrown into a subset of time physicists and mathematicians only glimpsed before.

She stirred and felt blood, once again, on a floor that seemed to be old linoleum. No, not linoleum. No, please, *not National. Not again. Hasn't anything changed?* She was too weak, too confused, too much in pain to try and do anything. *I've been hallucinating. That's all.*

But Sam touched her cheek with two fingers. His smile was brief but real.

He reached unerringly into her bag, pulled out the tape, and held it in front of her eyes. "Ours," he said, and then she knew *this* world was empty of the threat which sent her here.

"Of course it's not futile," he said. A non sequitur?

No. He said it to *remind* her.

Somewhere, she was arguing with him about that, about whether or not it was worthwhile, if his heaven did not exist. Where? Vaguely, she remembered....

Yes. Sharp. Clear. They *were* in National Airport. And then....

She stands, *knowing*, somewhere, out a winter window, looking past the red geranium, next to the shards of a broken plate, holding Tunisia.

In the future of *this* world.

But would it hold?

And how would the world be different, now? She wasn't sure. Perhaps the nature of *death* had changed. Or the nature of life, or human understanding of it.

She felt the crackling, disturbing possibilities fold up, like a flower which blooms once in a hundred years, and was utterly spent. She had done what Karlovy wanted; his precise information would inseminate this world. The European cataclysm, at least *here*, would be averted. But still, how was one to know what was best? Perhaps that question would never leave her entirely alone. She chose what would be best for *her*; perhaps when Karlovy's words were freed that would be a new human ability. She hadn't seen everything, not by a long shot, despite the Sorbonne Party's grand vision. Apparently there were still limits.

In a way, that comforted her.

The gigantic sign she glimpsed over Sam's right shoulder, advertising black cloth shoes embroidered with neon flowers, was in Chinese.

She lay on her back and stared at the sign, *daring* it to change.

The tears which welled from her eyes as three Chinese women shifted her onto a stretcher were from joy as well as the sudden stab of pain.

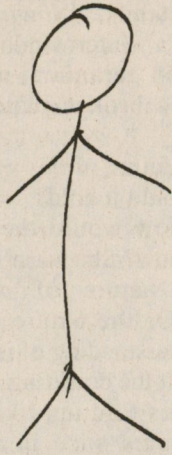
Because the neon beamed at her like a live, aware being, as if Karlovy, or her own self, informed the atoms of this new existence.

And because *this* time, it did not change. ■

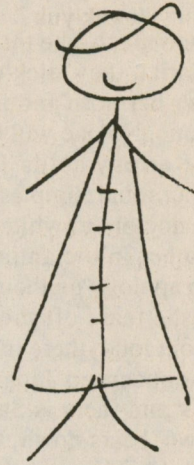


# WRITING, PART THREE

## Algis Budrys



*Who is Sarah Jane, and why should it matter?*



What is it that makes a collection of marks on paper come to life as a story? What is it, in other words, that successfully transmits a writer's construction of thought into an analogous structure of thought in the reader? Suppose a writer follows a plotline like the one we spoke of last time, with the heroine resolving her difficulties triumphantly. Will that do it? Will that make the story seem, for a little while, like reality?

I doubt it. Because we have not yet spoken of making the reader care. And reader care is vital.

It is all very well to speak of a high school girl, with her violin in the rain, trying to get downtown to the audition hall in time. But who *is* Sarah Jane, and how is she organized, and why should she succeed?

We first see her standing in front of the Wet Prairie, MN high school at 3:00 o'clock, waiting for the cab she ordered yesterday to take her to the audition hall, where she will play for Itzhak Perlman who is in town between planes. And the cab does not come, so she heads for the corner bus stop. And the bus does not come. And she sets out headlong for the other bus line an avenue block away. And she runs into old family friend Doctor Brown, who,

before she can explain her difficulty, tells her he has to get home and turn off the roast before it catches fire, because there has been a big fire downtown and his wife is stuck there. And he gets into his car and goes.

Sarah Jane is crushed. Nor is she helped when a boor goes by in his Chevy and jeers witlessly at her. But she gathers herself and goes to play her violin in the middle of the street, in the hope that this will attract attention from some passing motorist. And it brings a cop, who uses his knowledge of back alleys to get her to the audition hall, and she plays, and wins the scholarship that will get her out of Wet Prairie. But so what?

What you have to do is explain several things.

When the cab does not come, in the beginning, Sarah Jane is disappointed because now she will not go to the audition hall as she would have wanted, alone and psyching herself up as is her usual wont. However, she can tolerate the public bus ride instead. But as she moves from in front of the school to the bus stop, she recalls a conversation she had yesterday with Mrs. Green, her violin teacher.

"Mrs. Green," she recalls herself saying, "I will never forget you. Even though I'm going to win the scholarship to the Juilliard School of Music, and become a concert violinist, I will come back regularly and play to benefit your teaching. I have no doubt I will win. You have said

yourself that you have never heard anyone as good as me, and I can play any piece put in front of me on an instant's notice, playing it exactly as written. So I am very grateful to you."

"Well, that's very nice, Sarah Jane," Mrs. Green had responded, "I'll be down at the rehearsal hall to play your accompaniment and I hope it all works out for you. But remember there's many a slip twixt tongue and lip."

And now, moving to the bus stop, Sarah Jane realizes she has learned a profound lesson. There *is* something special to being an adult; without any evidence whatsoever, Mrs. Green was able to predict that the cab might not come.

And then, running to the other bus line, she bumps into good old Doctor Brown just coming out of his office. But he does not have any time for her, despite the occasions in the past he has helped her and her widowed mother in small ways. She realizes then that in life when push comes to shove she has to rely primarily on herself; that even normally friendly people have their own urgent concerns now and then, and if she wants something from them at those times, she has to attract their attention first.

And there will be no cabs, or busses, obviously, until Downtown gets unsnarled.

And then the yahoo goes by in his '57 Chevy and says "Hey, Girlie, what are you doing fiddling around in the rain, yuk yuk yuk," and throws his empty Budweiser can over the side and takes off, and she is at first devastated. What gives him the right to poke fun at her? He doesn't know her, he doesn't know how big a day this is in her life, he doesn't know *anything*, but he feels it's perfectly O.K. to jape at her! What gives him the right! And she gets mad, blazing mad, and she takes a furious inventory; she has her violin and her talent, and that's all she has with her, and Nero fiddled while Rome burned, and by God she's going to attract somebody's attention, and she steps out into the middle of the street and plays, with her umbrella handle down the back of her coat to shield her violin, and she looks like a mad mushroom with her yellow slicker, and a cop stops. And she doesn't mince words with him; she tells him he's got to take her to the audition hall, and he, bemused, takes her, and she slams the cruiser door shut, she flings open the audition hall door, she rips off her slicker and umbrella, she hastily re-tunes, and she strides out on stage at the last moment. Mrs. Green gives her the downbeat, and she plays. For the audience, and for Itzhak Perlman.

And as she plays, she thinks about everything she has been through in the last hour, and it is almost more than flesh can bear. She didn't even have time to compose herself, as is her wont; she just got out here and played. She thinks about all these things, and— She realizes the piece is over. She has played the whole thing, and she didn't hear a note of it. Oh, she would have heard it if something had gone wrong, she *was*, in fact, listening, but she wasn't...paying attention in that particular way. She was, instead, thinking of something important.

And another thing; nobody's applauding.

She lets the violin and bow sink down by her sides, helpless. She knows how audiences normally react. Somebody always starts clapping ahead of the last note, either in relief that it's over or to show that they know the piece. And then the rest of the audience joins in, for whatever reason, and that's it. But this time—oh, it can't really be more than a second, but it seems a lifetime—nothing's happening. And she notices that a man in the front row has tears in his eyes. And he's not the only one. And now they're *standing!* And *now* they're applauding, like nothing she has ever heard before, and they're going wild, and Itzhak Perlman comes bounding down the aisle—it's a miracle—and throws his arms around her, and hands her the check, and says "Never, never, never have I heard that piece played with such expression!" and the audience files out, and Itzhak Perlman goes, and the lights go down, all except for a single worklight, and Sarah Jane stands under it, violin still hanging at her side, bow and check in her other hand, and blinks in bewilderment.

And Mrs. Green comes out from behind the piano, and *she's* crying, and as Sarah Jane asks "What the hell happened?" Mrs. Green shakes her head in wonder, and says "Sarah Jane! Sarah Jane, what a time to have it happen! For years, now, you've been a superb technician, but today— Today, of all days, you were an *artist*."

It's still not a great story. In fact, it's quite bad in many ways. But it means something to the audience now; it has purpose.

And that's what it's got to have. It's got to have sustained purpose, from the first word on, and if it has that, the audience will go for it. Never mind that intrinsically it's trivial; trivial is for critics. Does it have purpose, does it tell a story? If it does that, it will succeed. And a critic doesn't even pay for his copy.

Think about that, for a moment. A critic is somebody paid to read,

and to bring to it deep thoughts, whether he has any or not. He is somebody with a deadline, and expectations from his editors. In other words, he is not like the normal reader at all.

Critics have a lot of value in the world of criticism, which supports innumerable publications and academic careers. But they have nothing intrinsic to do with the world of writing, which is based on transactions between you and your reader. And your reader just reads; he doesn't marshal his thoughts preparatory to getting them down on paper, and he doesn't have to get them in by a certain time, and he doesn't have to bear anybody else's opinion in mind. He just reads. And if you can enlist his cooperation in getting him involved in an alternate reality, you are a success, and if you can't, you're not. That's all there is to it.

Really.



Next time we will learn even more. For instance, why, from the standpoint of criticism, not all of the seven parts are in all stories. But, you now have absolutely all you will ever need; the basics. All you really have to do is practice them. Them, and only them. I'm not kidding. ■

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# GOING GENTLE

Cathy Ball

Illustrated by Christopher Beau

*Raise up a child, very carefully*

The pale woman on the bed moaned quietly as another wave of pain moved through her. The midwife bent over the woman for a moment and, straightening, then turned to the others in the crowded council cabin.

"It will be hours yet," the midwife said. She accepted a handrolled cigarette from one of the men and lit it, drawing the tobacco smoke deep into her lungs and exhaling it reluctantly. The other women in the room watched her, envy clearly marked on their thin faces.

"He'll be here," the woman on the bed spoke. Her voice was low and determined. She slowly pushed herself up enough to confront the others. The sweat-dampened brown hair fell back from her finely boned face, her pale eyes were full of conviction. The people watched her silently.

"He never was one of us," one of the men finally said.

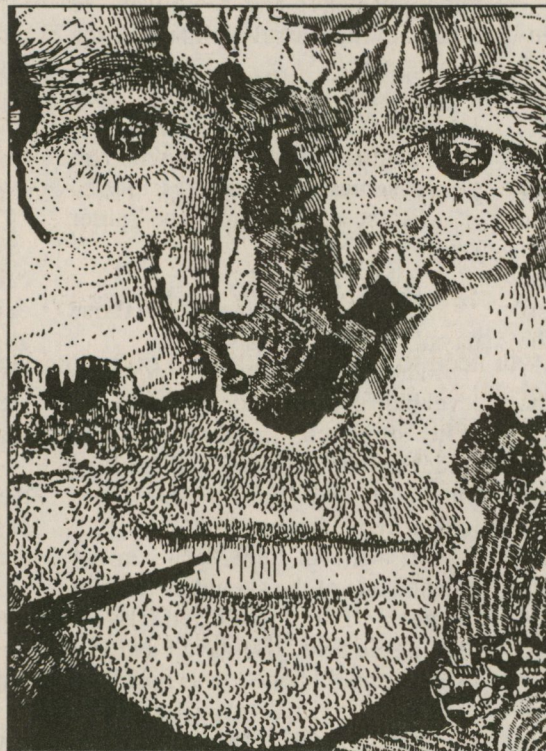
The woman looked at the speaker for a long moment and then sank back on the bed, her face a little paler than before.

"Lawton will be here," she said, her tone still sure, still determined, but much softer. She turned her head away from the watching people and met the eyes of the midwife.

A few miles south of the cabin, half hidden in the shadow cast by a snowy ridge, Lawton crouched over the trail of the raider. The supplies the raider had stolen were slowing him, the footprints closer together

now, a sign of growing fatigue. Lawton ran a bare hand around the outline of one of the tracks, brushing the loose snow on the edges. They were not set into a frozen pattern yet, the snow flaking against his fingertips. The raider couldn't be more than minutes ahead.

Lawton pulled his glove back on and squatted back on his heels. He



was tempted to wait, to let the raider get further away. He hadn't killed a man since the Aftermath of the Quick War. The last several years he had stayed close to his people's main camp. His knowledge was of more value than his skills as a hunter. He had seen men killed in camp. Execu-

tions, fights ending in sudden death, it was just part of the new hardness that came after the Night. The same hardness that meant he couldn't wait.

He sighed and straightened.

The trail of the raider led through the valley further along the foot of the ridge. The scavengers lived in that direction, between the back mountains inhabited by the loose network of free men and the occupied lands. They raided both areas for food and other supplies. They usually left the free men alone during the winter. It must have gotten very bad in the foothills for one of the scavengers to risk it.

Lawton pushed away his memories of how bad it could get. Everyone had it rough. He unslung the rifle from his shoulder and worked the action to make sure it was free.

His wife was back there, his people gathered for birth and ritual. Lawton didn't want to get back in time for that. He wondered if he could delay his return enough.

He cautiously began following the trail again. It was the snow that made it possible for him to track the raider. When one of the boys had come to the council cabin to tell of the theft,

it was a joke to the other free men.

"You go, Lawton," one of the elders said. He had looked at Lawton with thinly veiled contempt. "You don't want to be here anyway."

"Even you should be able to find him in this weather," another had said.

He had smiled with them, accepted the rifle, and, without a word to his wife, or a backward glance, thankfully left the cabin.

And now, he said to himself, I go to kill a man for stealing food. He hoped he could shoot the raider from a distance. Lawton still had unpleasant memories of people he had killed in the Aftermath, but only of the ones whose faces he had seen clearly.

He tugged the scarf further up around his cleanly shaven jaw, wishing for a moment that he could bring himself to grow a beard like the other free men. But he didn't like beards. He felt they looked uncivilized, a prejudice that still lingered.

The trail of the raider curled around the base of an outcropping of rocks and, keeping the rifle held ready, Lawton circled wide to follow, moving far enough away from the rocks to prevent an attack from above.

His attention focused on the outcropping, his back to the few trees on the slope behind him, Lawton heard a noise and started to turn.

The raider slashed at Lawton's shoulder with a knife, missing as Lawton backed away. At the same instant, Lawton had fired, the bullet spinning harmlessly away in the trees. The raider knocked Lawton off balance and he fell into the snow, the rifle half trapped beneath him.

The raider was on top of him, the knife flashing as the raider attacked. The blade caught in Lawton's heavy leather jacket, sliced through the scarf that was around his neck. Lawton could feel the edge of the blade cut him high on the shoulder. He kicked up at the raider and struck the man to the side. Lawton scrambled away, dragged the rifle up and threw the bolt back. The click of the action made the raider freeze in place, panting in the snow.

Lawton struggled upright, keeping the rifle leveled on the man and backed away a few feet. He sank into a squat and warily watched the raider. There was only the sound of their labored breaths. Lawton could feel the dampness of blood turning rapidly cold on his exposed throat.

He raised his left hand cautiously and felt the wound. Satisfied it wasn't serious, he wound the scarf awkwardly back into place.

The raider watched his movements, waiting to be shot.

Lawton knew he should kill the man immediately.

Easier. It was easier in the long run.

He steadied the rifle and took aim at the raider's head.

The raider stared back at him, the youthful features marked with the scar tissue of the children of the free men. Shocked, Lawton lowered the rifle a small amount, still holding it ready. The raider sat slowly upright, keeping his hands well in sight. Lawton saw the knife on the ground between them, too far for the raider to easily reach, and relaxed a little more.

"Surprised?" the raider asked.

Lawton shook his head, the rifle suddenly heavier in his grasp. He steadied the barrel pointed at the young man.

"I used to be a teacher," said Lawton. "Before. We lost people from regular lives. People who had proper homes, upbringing, safety."

"Raise a child up," the raider said.

Lawton flinched.

"They were too soft in those days," he said defensively.

The raider looked at him with level blue eyes. Lawton could see the skin stretched tightly over the raider's face, the pinched look of hunger on the young features. He looked about sixteen.

"It's all in here." The raider touched one of the shoulder straps of the pack. "I ate some dried fruit. A little of the beef." He gave Lawton a twisted grin. "I hope it was beef."

"Yes," said Lawton flatly. "It was stupid of you...."

"The stories about the Aftermath," the raider interrupted. "The beginnings of the Night. It's like that again in the foothills. There will be others."

Lawton shrugged. "I remember the Night."

"Seems to be the only time most free men remember," said the raider

bitterly. "It helps them to live with things now." He shivered and started to move his hands to hug himself, stopping as Lawton raised the rifle. He stared up at Lawton, looking very young, very cold.

"I remember other times," said Lawton reluctantly, the words forced from him.

There was the birth of their first child, so many years before. Just weeks before the Quick War. A quiet, gentle birth in a warm darkened room. There were long afternoons spent in the University Library, drowsing through the words of centuries. There were mornings on the beach, the sand cold and wet beneath his feet, a woolen sweater scratching against his neck as he would wait for the sun to rise over the dark horizon. For a moment, he could almost smell the sea, hear the waves.

And there were his students.

He looked at the raider. The boy must have seen something in Lawton's face. Hope appeared in the boy's eyes and he started to speak.

"I wouldn't be doing you any favors," said Lawton gently.

The infant was being washed when Lawton came back to the council cabin. His wife lay on the bed exhausted from her labor, her face alight with a tired relief as he pushed his way through the people gathered. He put the pack with the recovered supplies against the foot of the bed. There were dark streaks crusting on the top of the canvas pack, splatters of the same color marking the shoulder straps.

The people watched him without speaking. The firelight and the lamp-light played over their faces, the older ones tight and stern, those of the young adults and children marked with old scars, new scars.

Lawton studied the naked child held by the midwife under the proud gaze of the mother. He turned to the people.

"Raise a child up," he said, the ritual words hanging in the air.

And under the approving gaze of his people, he began striking the infant with even, restrained blows. ■



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# THE SHINING DREAM ROAD OUT

M. Shayne Bell

Illustrated by Kelly Faltermayer

*He was in VR when he found he had to locate the woman and rescue her*



So I buckled myself into the Driving-Simulation Unit and started connecting my head to Happy Pizza's central computer, which would connect up to Salt Lake County's virtual-reality road map of the valley, all the while looking around at the dump of a room I was in with its peeling paint on the walls and ceiling and the used pizza boxes thrown on the floor and the heat and the smell of garlic and onion in the air, but that box of a "car" I was getting into, that was beautiful to me, because I knew what it would soon turn into, and I was getting that hit-in-the-gut feeling of excitement I get just before I head out to drive and I wanted to laugh because I wasn't really going to leave the back room of Happy Pizza at all except through virtual reality in my mind, when the voice of Fat Joe, the owner of this particular franchise, came over the intercom:

"Ten minute run coming up, Clayton. If you beat your last time of 8:23 you got your raise."

Yeah, I thought, fifteen fucking cents more an hour. "So start the show," I said.

And a virtual-reality vision of southbound Interstate 15 settled over my mind: the section just past the 600 South on-ramp and the Salt Lake City skyscrapers east and the derelict houses west and a sunset shining red on rain clouds above and rain already spattering down on the windshield and I thought, great, I'm trying to get just fifteen cents more an hour out of a stupid pizza delivery job and they make it rain.

I turned on the wipers and thought how the box I was sitting in looked to me like a car now, a nice little Japanese fast car that motored along just fine, and I punched it up to 80, even with the wet road: my tires had good traction and the road was

rough enough in real-land to keep you from hydroplaning, though the city would never factor *that* into its VR road simulations no matter how many times I talked to them about it when they did their user surveys—it's like, did they really believe the state would ever get that road fixed? But they must have, because in every simulation I was ever in, I-15 was smooth, and we'd drive along on top of it like we were driving on a dream road, and you'd start to understand why Fat Joe wouldn't spring for new shocks in our real cars, not if all he ever drove was this simulation and he thought the roads out there in real-land were this nice.

I punched up the coordinates of my run, and they glowed red digital out of the dash in the dim car, dim thanks to the rain, and I turned on my lights and thought how easy can Fat Joe make this: I-15 south to the 53rd South exit, then west on 53 to the



Reston Hotel, room 115? Easy run was right—it was too easy. I saw what was coming: there'd be cops along the way and stingy Fat Joe had known it, must have punched into the city files to see how many cops were on duty, maybe drove along a little on the road himself just to check it out, just to see if he could save fifteen cents an hour but happy that I'd learn more about the real-land roads and where the cops had their speed traps so I'd know exactly where to speed up and where to slow down when I was delivering pizza, and that hit-in-the-gut feeling of mine got tighter because I couldn't make 53 South doing 80 with cops on the road, so I braked my car down to 70 just to be safe, and waited to pass the first speed trap coming up: 21st South, behind or in front of the railing along the merge lane—and sure enough, there he was, a cop just waiting for me to go by at 80 plus, but I was only doing 70 and nobody'd pull you over for that unless it was the end of the month and some cop hadn't met his quota yet.

Fat Joe must have been pissed: he'd thought a cop would get me right away, but now he'd have to sit in his VR getup, which he hated unless he were watching porn, and wait to see if one of the cops assigned to the net for a day could catch me on VR I-15, which I knew better than the back of my hand: once past the 21st South on-off ramps and speed trap I merged into the far right lane and shoved my car back up to 80—roadblock ahead, some old grandpa trying to pass the city sight requirements and motoring along just under 50 in a blue "Senior Driver" practice car—merge into the middle lane, still at 80, maybe plus—roadblock ahead, some trucker trying to get back a license after one too many speeding tickets—merge right again, back and forth, weaving in and out, always in the right two lanes, never in the far left, the fast lane, the lane cops looked in for speeders: if you weaved in and out in the slow lanes the cops would know somebody was going fast, but they wouldn't know who, the dots of the cars on their radar

would all blend together if I merged in close, and sure they'd think it was probably the pizza delivery boy who'd been going a little fast when we passed them, not the old geezer trying to keep his car on the road and do minimum speed at the same time, but they wouldn't know it for sure, which meant they wouldn't come out—they'd wait for some sure prey—and you can bet I'd be a good little pizza delivery boy around all their traps.

And make my ten-minute delivery in under 8:23.

So I drove along, making good time, when this pretty lady in a green stationwagon with peeling fake-wood side panels speeds by doing 90 who knows what—and there were these three little blonde-haired kids waving at me out of the back window.

Weird, I thought. And thank goodness it was just VR—it was one thing for me to drive like a maniac in VR or real-land, it was another for a mother with her kids. I hoped she'd use VR to work out whatever was eating at her and keep it down out there on real I-15. The kids kept waving, so I waved back and changed lanes into theirs and sped up to keep them company from behind—no speed trap till around the 33rd on-ramp anyway, our only danger would be roving cops—and we hit 93 miles an hour.

I started thinking, who is the lady driving the stationwagon in light rain at 93 mph and when would the wagon's engine blow, because it could, even in VR, just to teach you a lesson. Only somebody with nothing to lose or hot food to deliver would pull stunts like this, and when you looked at it that way her speed kind of made sense: I'd heard of people coming out to check the simulation to see how well it worked, and those types would certainly have nothing to lose. So I thought maybe the lady in the stationwagon is the mayor checking up on her VR cops and taking her kids for a joy-ride and seeing what her car should be able to do in theory, all at the same time—I imagined that's what somebody like her with a decent income and a crappy car so

you wouldn't look high and mighty to the voters would do on an afternoon: hold the appointments, I've got important work coming through on the net; then connect up, swing by the house in VR to pick up your VR kids who'd plug in when you told them to, and off you'd go—and fuck the city budget crisis.

We started coming up on 33, and she braked, and I braked, and I thought this is a smart lady, she knows where the traps are, which of course a mayor would, and I merged over into the right lane and pulled up alongside her and looked over, but she didn't look at me: she just watched the road and held the wheel so tight her knuckles were white. She wasn't the mayor. Whoever she was, I thought she must have some kind of bad trouble in her life.

I merged back behind a couple of Idaho Meat-Packers' trucks because I'd been part of a fast blip with that wagon for too long and I didn't want to be near her when we passed 33, and sure enough, another cop was waiting there looking confused about which of us had done what and I was happy to complicate his life. He pulled out three cars behind me, and I didn't touch my brakes, just eased up on the gas a little, then a little more, not wanting to look the least bit guilty and thinking did he somehow figure out about me, and wondering how he could have done that, and hardly daring to breathe because we passed 45 and 53 was the next exit and I'd used up nearly 5:30 of my run and if I got a ticket I wouldn't get my raise for sure.

So I played the good little pizza delivery boy, and I watched 53 come up ahead of us and the green stationwagon take the exit and drive down the hill and I followed her off and the cop stayed out on I-15.

But the wagon sped up down below me, and I thought, what's the lady doing? Before the intersection, she suddenly slammed brakes, which locked at that speed, and she slid to a stop blocking the exit, in front of a red light. Real good, lady, I thought, like, did she forget this wasn't the highway anymore, then suddenly

remember?

I braked to a stop behind her and waited for the light to change—she could just pull out and go when it changed—but she didn't pull out, and her head started banging around like she was being hit, though nothing I could see was hitting her in that car, and I honked to maybe bring her out of it, but she didn't even look at me.

What is she on? I wondered, and I watched her head jerk around for a minute. Then I saw that the kids were popping out of VR—they'd look at their mom, then just be gone, just not there, like they were maybe pulling out the connection and running in real-land to help her or something, and I thought: I have no choice. I have to screw this test and my raise. And I put the car in park, and unbuckled and got out and ran up to the lady's door and opened it.

That's when she looked at me for the first time, and her eyes were wide like she was scared, not of me but of something. And I said, *Lady, what can I do to help you? Can I call someone? What's going on?* And she said—

*My husband's beating me.*

Then she was gone, like the kids, as if somebody'd pulled the connection out of her head. The car disappeared next, and I was left standing in the middle of the off-ramp with four other cars honking behind me.

I stood there for a second or two, thinking how I'd blown the test and there was no point in going on and what Fat Joe would say, then I ran for my car and took it across 53 and up the VR 1-15 on-ramp and back out onto the VR interstate looking for the green stationwagon. I knew it was stupid to look for that wagon if the lady driving it was getting beaten up somewhere in real-land and I didn't know where and I couldn't even remember her license plate to stop and call the stupid police, I'd just been watching the kids in the back of a wagon doing 93 mph, I hadn't been memorizing license-plate numbers, and I didn't know what to do, and I wanted to do something, something, something. Before long, but before the ten minutes of my test were up, I

was past Draper and the prison and going up the Point of the Mountain doing 102 and when I hit the top, the VR blanked out and a screen came up that said "You are not a driver authorized to enter the Utah County Driver Simulation Net," which meant I didn't have the right kind of access to make the Salt Lake County net network me over to the Utah County net, and then the screen went all black in my mind: But before the words had come up I'd gotten one quick glimpse of I-15 heading south through Utah County, the road looking like it had been polished and looking like it ached for me to drive on it.

"So you blew that one, Clayton-boy. You blew that one—and you're supposed to be my best driver?"

I was unhooking my head and one of the wires had stuck in the back, so I kept working at it and looked at Fat Joe who seemed just a little too happy about my fifteen-cent-an-hour loss and said, "Yeah, so I want some practice time in VR."

And it wasn't just VR fun I was after, though Fat Joe wouldn't know that: I wanted to get back out on VR I-15 and look for that stationwagon and write down the license-plate number if I saw it again.

"You can practice when you don't have runs to make in real-land, Clayton-boy. We've got one waiting for you now."

The wire came loose, and I hurried out of the car and into the kitchen: it was two pepperoni and mushroom pizzas on a Midvale run waiting for me, and the kitchen staff had already boxed up the pizzas, so I took them and ran, sat them in the backseat of my little Japanese fast car and buckled them down and slammed doors and buckled myself in and rolled down the windows while I pulled out onto 600 South heading west to the I-15 onramp: I never used the air-conditioner because the drain on engine power would slow me down, and I was out there in real-land, which is weirder than VR: in VR you have people driving along trying to pass tests, most driving like

they always meant to be good little boys and girls of the road and only a few like me driving like maniacs because we had different kinds of tests to pass—and it was only those people out there.

But not in real-land.

In real-land everybody had already passed their tests so they could all go nuts and all two million of them in Salt Lake Valley are out driving around all the time, usually heading for I-15, and you never know what to expect except lots of craziness and unpredictability and I loved it, I loved playing the game that went on in that traffic: drive a fast car fast and you'll find one or two or three others doing the same thing, and an interstate highway can become your own little VR game in real-land: slow cars doing 60 or 70 to block the road ahead when you can't change lanes left or right and the other fast cars speed past and the drivers laugh at you, but you get your turn to laugh down the road when their lane is blocked and you can speed past, and you drive, weaving in and out, and *nothing* feels like it, nothing, with the wind whipping your hair and the hot summer air off the desert blowing over your skin and no music off the radio at all because you don't need it, not then, not during the game.

And I merged out onto I-15 and shoved my Japanese fast car up to 80 plus, close to 90, because I wanted to play then, real bad, and the Happy Pizza clown head stuck on the hood of my car flapped around like you wouldn't believe, but nobody was out playing the game, just me, I was the only driver weaving in and out, getting blocked and slowing down and speeding up again, and I couldn't help it: I kept looking around for the green stationwagon with the peeling fake-wood side panels because a car like that existed somewhere in the valley and was probably registered to the lady or her husband and the lady was probably a hacker because how else could she get out onto VR 1-15? A woman with a car like that didn't have the money to buy her way onto the net.

I wished I'd looked even once at the license plate on that car.

It was more of the predictable same-old family routine when I got home that night after work. My mother would ask "How was your day, Clayton?" and I'd say "Fine, just a lot of driving" and I'd never be able to tell her or Dad just how I drove and what I'd felt, and my father would look up from his paper and not say a word because he was pissed that I'd taken a pizza delivery job, not something at his bank to keep me busy through the summer till I hit the one year of college I'd get before my two-year mission preaching religion. I looked at them and wanted to try to tell them I had taken a VR driving test to maybe get a raise in the slow afternoon hours and that I'd seen this woman getting beaten by her husband and that I didn't know how to find her to help her. But I didn't know how to tell such a story to my parents, there'd be too much to explain, so I didn't say a word about it.

"Supper's at seven," Mother said, and I just stood by the fridge getting a drink, and I looked at us and thought we all seemed like little robots going about doing what we were programmed to do, no matter what happened in our lives: Mother programmed to make supper, Dad programmed to read the paper and disapprove of me, me programmed to go up to my room and do who-knows-what till supper, my two little sisters programmed to wear expensive clothes and be little brats, and I thought, God, I'm going to break this programming, I hate it, so I said to Mom, "Let me help. I'll set the table and get the water—did you want us to drink water tonight?"

And she looked at me surprised and said water would be fine, and Dad looked at me and I knew what he was thinking: that's a woman's work you're doing, Clayton, you're a fucking man doing women's work, isn't that a great kind of son to have? He would hardly move his arms and the paper when I tried to spread the tablecloth on the table or put his plate down in front of him, but he didn't

try to stop me either because I was after all just a son who might just as well do work to serve him and we all ate supper and didn't talk much, Dad had the TV on, and I stayed behind to help Mom clean up and she said, "Well, isn't this a surprise?" But I just wanted to be close to her, and I kept thinking about the lady I'd seen in the green stationwagon and what had probably happened to her.

We finished rinsing the dishes and putting them into the dishwasher and I went up to my room and stood in front of the mirror in my bathroom and played one of the other games I played with myself: Clayton, the little Robot Boy. I twisted an imaginary knob on the upper righthand corner of the mirror to turn me on and left more fingerprints there and wondered what Mom or one of the housecleaners thought about that little circle of fingerprints that was always on that spot of my mirror waiting to be wiped off, and I said "Hi. I'm Clayton. I'm programmed to comb my hair just like this, with every hair in place, and I'm programmed to eat at certain times and take showers at certain times and I always did all of my homework well when I was in high school so I could get good grades and get accepted into a Utah college that doesn't really care about grades, it just wants to know if you'll go to church every Sunday you're enrolled with them so you can sit and hear people talk about being a Christian, never asking 'What would a Christian's life actually be like?' while outside the air-conditioned church building decent women are getting beaten up by their own husbands and you even see it on VR I-15."

I sat down on the edge of the tub and looked at myself in the mirror. I hated Clayton the little robot church boy whose life was all programmed for him: college, mission, marriage, kids, college, career as a lawyer or banker, and numbers and money and deadlines all my life and maybe I could even die on schedule: write it in my dayplanner sixty years down the road—Wednesday, June 16, 3:00 p.m.: Die. Contact funeral home beforehand. Prepare final will that

morning.

I stood up and twisted the imaginary knob and changed the program: I became Clayton, the pizza delivery boy, and I remembered me the first day I'd played the game out on the highway on a pizza run, the day I'd caught on to what had always been going on around me but which I'd missed because I'd always driven so slow and predictably and couldn't see it through my slow-driving programming, but when I started driving fast I'd found a whole subculture of people who drove just that way, people who made driving to the grocery store an adventure, and driving south to Midvale an event, and if you got a ticket it was just the price of admission to the game which you wouldn't stop playing because it made you feel so alive.

That first day I'd hooked up with a blonde-haired girl in a red Ferrari and a thirtysomething guy in a Japanese fast car like mine and the three of us would weave in and out of the traffic and laugh at each other when one of us had to slow down and race to catch up to the others. Down by Draper, we all took the same exit and stopped at a Sinclair gas station and all of us laughed about the fun we'd had, and they pumped gas into their tanks, but I didn't need to, I'd just come in to talk to them, and I said, "I'm Clayton," after we'd talked for a while, and I held out my hand to the guy, and he and the girl looked at me like I was some kind of alien and wouldn't tell me their names—and they didn't care about mine. It didn't matter to them. All that mattered was that I'd had a fast car and that I was smart enough to learn how to drive it fast and that when I was out on the road I would play the game with them. So those were the rules and I learned them and I never again tried to follow anybody off the road to try to talk.

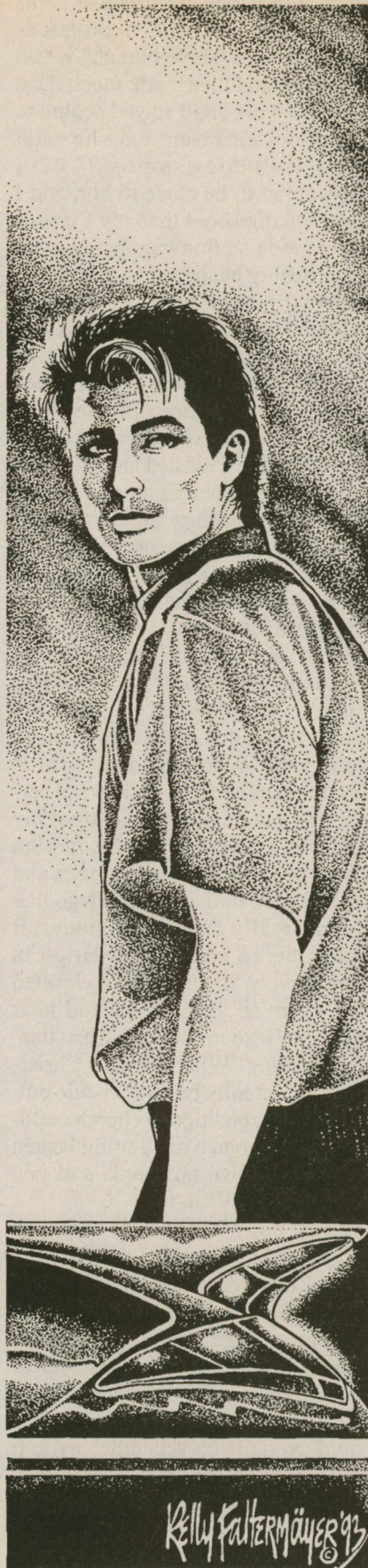
And I changed the program and I was Clayton, the Peace-Corps volunteer of the future, though the future was fast coming up to meet me: I'd sent in my papers and was waiting to hear back and I hadn't told my parents. They wanted me to do one set of

things with my life, and I wanted to join the Peace Corps then maybe do some of the things they wanted. So I just skipped that entire inevitable conversation and imagined I looked like Indiana Jones with a shovel, not a gun, black stubble on my face and me wearing a fedora, and I was saying, "Yes, sir. I'd be glad to go to Ethiopia and show them how to dig ditches and teach them to have fewer kids" and maybe I'd actually help the people there, and I imagined I was setting off with my Bible and Book of Mormon and the shovel—but I was mixing up my programs, the mission program and the Peace-Corps program, and I sat back down on the edge of the tub and thought how all my programs were mixed up because I didn't have a central program to guide them: I'd just been programmed so much I didn't know what Clayton really wanted or how to cut through the programs to ask the questions to even find out what Clayton would want to do with his life if he had ever been asked. I was so programmed to want what I was supposed to want I couldn't even ask myself questions I needed answers to because the old programs would all keep running in my head and block the questions and I wondered if any of us could ever break out of the programs that ran us?

And I looked at myself in the mirror and thought, I'm going to go tell Mom what happened today. It's not part of any of our programs. Seeing what I saw upset mine and it will upset hers and maybe we'll be able to talk to each other about more than the stuff we've been taught to think about and talk about.

So I went down and found Mom in the kitchen reading the paper, it was her turn to read it now. "Mom," I said. "We've got to talk."

And I told her what had happened, and she sat still for a minute, not looking at me, then she said, "Don't call the police if you see that lady out there again. Her husband would be a sweet angel while the police were there, but once they left he'd beat her for sure and maybe the kids. Just get her license plate num-



ber and talk to her and see if we can help. Maybe we can send her somewhere—to her parents? Now tell me what that car looked like again and what the woman looked like." And I did and she hugged me after a while, and I thought this was a good program we were downloading into our systems. A different kind of program, because I'd made some decisions and taken some chances. When I went to sleep that night I didn't feel so much like Clayton the Robot Boy in the mirror, and I liked not feeling like Clayton the Robot Boy.

At Joe let me do some VR practice the very next afternoon, and he merged me out onto VR I-15 and let me loose, and who should I see driving along in her cute little red Mustang convertible but my mother, with the top down but her windows still up so she wouldn't get blown too much and her black Gucci sunglasses on and a scarf tied down around her hair. She waved and cut in front of me and took the 21st South exit and I followed her into the parking lot of some abandoned warehouse by the off-ramp. She stopped and I swung around and parked next to her with my driver's-side window facing hers so we wouldn't have to get out of our cars, just roll down the windows. Mom reached over to turn down her music: she was listening to a CD of some old-fashioned group, Def Leopard or Scorpions, and I didn't even care then because I was so surprised to see Mom.

*I've been looking for your green stationwagon for two hours, she said. No sign of it.*

I thought, wow, Mom—we're calling out the cavalry for this one, you and me, and I said *How have you been looking?* and she said *Driving up and down the interstate—Bountiful to Draper, and back again.*

*I think she'll come, I said. I think this is a release for her—maybe a kind of escape. Maybe she's even planning to escape and she knows she'll have to do it in her old stationwagon, so she's practicing in VR, learning where the speed traps are, seeing what her theoretical car*

can do.

Mom agreed. We went back out onto VR I-15. I went ahead fast, looking, while Mom came along behind at a slower pace, just in case the lady merged onto the interstate behind me.

I drove down to the Point of the Mountain just past Draper, right up to the Utah County net, then turned around and drove north to Bountiful, then headed back south again—when there it was, the green stationwagon, merging onto VR 1-15 from 21st South and going fast. She passed me, and I sped up to keep up with her, and the kids waved at me again, waving hard and laughing like they recognized me, which they probably did thanks to the Happy Pizza clown face stuck on the hood of the car, and I merged into the right lane so I could get up alongside her, but a Brink's armed car roadblocked me doing 65, and I had to change lanes again, weaving in and out till I could get up alongside her. I honked and waved and motioned for the lady to pull over and she looked at me but then wouldn't look back, just sped up.

Great, lady, I thought, I'm only trying to help you, and I followed her along till 45, and she took that exit and went down the hill, and I followed, thinking maybe we'd stop at the red light and talk, but suddenly she gunned the car again and sped through the red light, across 45, up the on-ramp, and back out onto VR I-15. I just stopped at the red light.

Mom pulled up alongside me and lowered the electric window on her passenger side. *She won't talk to you because you're a man*, she said. *Let me go ahead and try. Don't follow us for a while.* Then Mom sped through the red light and out onto VR I-15, and I just pulled off to the side of the road.

A cop car stopped behind me five minutes later, and the cop got out and asked me what I was doing.

*I'm just thinking*, I said.

*Well, it's costing your company money for you to come think in here*, he said, and I told him to write my company a letter about it, which pissed him off, but since thinking

wasn't illegal yet, all he could do was tell me to get my car off the side of the road and into a parking lot somewhere, so I took it out onto VR I-15 instead. I motored along pretty slow—doing the speed limit, actually, because I didn't want to come up on Mom and the lady too soon, but I never did see them. I was down past Draper and heading up the Point of the Mountain when Fat Joe broke into the VR and told me I had a run to make.

When I got back from that run, Fat Joe had another waiting for me in downtown SLC, some banquet of ten pizzas, but my mother was sitting in the front diner by a window, eating a pizza of her own. "What happened out there?" I asked her, and Fat Joe told me to get out on my run, I could bother the customers on my own time, and Mom said, "Send one of the other boys. This one's making a run for me in about ten minutes," and Fat Joe looked at her as if to say "When did you buy this place so you could order my help around?" But he sent somebody else out on the run and didn't say anything. Mom was, after all, a paying customer, and you don't argue with those types when you're in the pizza business.

I pulled up a chair at Mom's table, and she said "This lady is in bad trouble: her husband beats her two or three times a week and has put her in the hospital twice. She left him once before but went back to him, so I don't know what to think. You know how people in her situation are: they can't let go of the person killing them, and they leave them and then go back to them, and who knows what she'll actually do in the end, but I told her, 'Honey, you'd better get ahold of yourself and break this marriage apart before your husband kills you, so you can raise these three babies. If you don't want to think of yourself, think of them.' And she thought about it in those terms and told me she'd leave her husband again. She has a sister who just moved to Baker, Nevada, who will take her in, and the husband doesn't know the sister's gone to Baker, so

the lady should be safe with her. I told her we'd drive her out there. The Nevada courts can get her a divorce by the weekend. So this is the plan: she's going to call in a pizza order anytime now. You'll take it to her in my car, which is faster than yours. When you get there, she and the kids will come out to pay for it, get in the car instead, and you'll drive her on to Provo. Your Dad and I will meet you at the courthouse, where she'll arrange for a restraining order on her husband. Then we'll all go on to Baker."

"Dad?" was all I could say.

"I told him this morning what we were doing," she said, "and he's been checking into the legalities of helping this woman, and taking your sisters to your Aunt Cheryl's and getting a reservation at a campground in Great Basin National Park for us. He's home packing his van now. He and I both agree this will be a great chance for the three of us to talk. Here are the keys to my car," and she handed me her car keys.

I gave Mom my car keys and realized I maybe had some rethinking to do about my dad. Maybe I'd been running the wrong programs about him and let a few I/O errors affect my brain and keep me from seeing things right. I guess I'd find out. Fat Joe walked over, and I looked up at him. "So what's going on?" he asked.

"This boy's your best driver," Mom said. "I need his services." And she pulled out a hundred dollar bill from her purse and handed it to Fat Joe. "That should cover any inconvenience you'll incur from his absence this weekend."

Well, Fat Joe was all smiles then, and I knew my job was secure if I took off the next week, not just the weekend. The funny thing was, Fat Joe probably didn't even know that this was my own mother doing all this, and I sure didn't tell him. He came out to help me put a Happy Pizza clown face on the hood of Mom's Mustang, and it looked so stupid there, but then, it looked stupid on any car.

When we walked back in, Mom was pacing up and down, looking at

her watch, and then the phone rang. We all just looked at it till it rang again, then we all dived for it, but Mom got it and it was the lady. "Yes, I've got your address right here in my purse," and she read it back to her. "Ten minutes," Mom said, and she hung up and handed me a paper with the address on it. "Go, Clayton," she said, and I started for the door, but Fat Joe said "Don't you need a pizza?" and Mom said, "For heaven's sake, yes, but who cares what it is or if it's even cooked," so the kitchen help rushed a frozen Italian sausage and pineapple out in a box, and I ran for the car.

The address read Layton Avenue, which meant out to I-15, down to 21st South, east to West Temple, then north five blocks to Layton. I got there in seven minutes. The three kids were out sitting on the lawn, and the oldest, a girl maybe five years old, took the hands of the others and started walking them toward the car. I left the door open for them and left the car running, hoping the kids had sense enough not to touch anything, and I walked the frozen pizza up the steps to the door and rang the doorbell. The lady answered it, and I couldn't even talk for a minute when I saw her in real-land. Her eyes were both black, and her wrists were bandaged and there were bruises along her neck above her shirt collar, and her hair was a wreck. She looked at me with tears in her eyes, and I thought, Lady, don't back out now, your kids just climbed into my car. She handed me a ten, and I gave her the pizza and said I'd have to go get change from the car, could she come out for it? She nodded and set the pizza on the TV. Some man I could barely see on the couch growled "this doesn't even smell like a pizza. Where did you order it from?" But the lady just walked out of the house and followed me down the steps. She stopped and pulled a suitcase out of the bushes by the front door and hurried to put it on the floor in the backseat. The kids were in the back. We climbed in, and I started backing out and I looked at the lady again and thought how I'd

known that people look better in VR because you can touch yourself up after you're in so I should have known a woman would take away black eyes and bruises. I should have looked ahead and been prepared for seeing her in real-land, but I hadn't and it was hard to look at her now. That's when the husband ran out of the house. He must have looked in the pizza box and seen that the pizza was frozen, then looked out the window to see that his family was making an escape. I could easily outdistance him in a Mustang, and he turned and ran back to the house.

"He'll follow," the lady said. "Can you drive this thing?"

I didn't even answer her. I just took us out onto I-15 and started the game. It was all the answer she needed. She turned around and buckled the kids in, then buckled herself in.

We weren't going to have an easy time of blending into the traffic in Mom's red Mustang with a Happy Pizza clown face flapping on the hood, and I just hoped her husband was way behind us somewhere, which was too much to hope for. The lady was watching behind. "Here he comes," she said. "White Bronco, center lane. He'll want to kill you, because he'll think I've been stepping out with you."

I thought about that for a minute. "What about you and the kids?" I asked the lady, finally. "What will he do to all of you?"

"He'll just want to hurt me. The kids don't matter to him yet."

So play the game, I thought. Play it better than you ever have. He was right behind us and gaining, doing 90 plus. I sped up to over 90 and thought that this is what I would do: come up fast on the speed trap at 33rd South, get in the inside lane, then slow down fast, send the Bronco speeding past, the sure prey of any cop waiting there. We came up fast onto 33rd South, I took the inside lane and braked. The Bronco sped past in the middle lane.

But there was no cop.

"Now he's in front of us," was all the lady said.

He slowed right down in the middle lane, so I got in the fast lane and punched it. When we were alongside each other, doing 80 plus, he tried to shout something out his window. The lady wouldn't look at him. The five-year-old girl climbed out of her buckle and over the seat into her mother's arms. She looked at her Dad, but didn't wave. The other two kids started crying because they wanted to come up into the front seat, too, but the lady just ignored them. I punched it again to get past her husband, and he swerved in behind us—I didn't know if he'd meant to hit the back of the car or what, but he was right on our tail, and speeding up behind us to maybe ram us. I shoved the Mustang up to 90 plus, and he was still gaining.

I merged right, and he followed us. We passed a Smith's grocery store semi in the middle lane and just ahead a white Lincoln was going to roadblock us doing 70. I got an idea and slowed down while the semi closed up the space between us. The lady's husband slowed down, too, though he stayed right on our tail. I waited till there was room for just us to merge into the middle lane between the semi and the Lincoln and did it. The semi let out a blat of horn and I sped ahead. The Bronco was sandwiched back behind the Lincoln and the semi.

We'd passed the 45th South exit and were coming up on 52nd South and one mile later the I-215 turnoff. The white Bronco reappeared behind us. He'd slowed down, gotten around the semi, and was speeding up toward us again. "I know where I can get some cops," I said.

At least I hoped I did. They were always there when you didn't want them: just off the I-15 merge lanes onto I-215 heading west toward Redwood Road. I'd gotten my first ticket there after starting work for Fat Joe and Happy Pizza. Be there today, Cops, I thought. Just be there. I didn't care if they pulled us all over and helped us sort out the mess. The husband couldn't make his wife stay with him, and he couldn't kill me if there were cops around.

So I got in the inside lane and headed for the I-215 exit. The Bronco followed. I dropped down onto I-215, doing 80 plus, and braked. The Bronco changed lanes and sped past to get ahead of us, and a cop pulled out after him, lights flashing and then the siren started up.

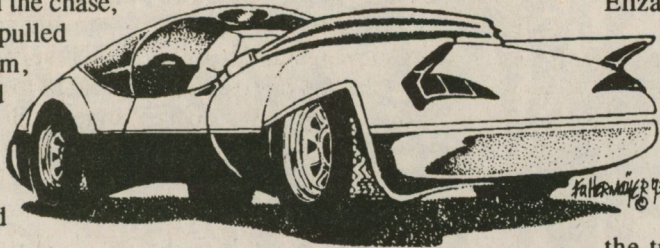
We stayed well behind the chase, and eventually the Bronco pulled over. We drove past them, turned around at Redwood Road, and headed back east for I-15. The police still had the Bronco and the lady's husband pulled over when we went past.

"He's probably telling them that you kidnapped us," the lady said.

"You can straighten things out at the courthouse in Provo," I said.

We got onto I-15 and headed south. I realized I was breathing hard and tried to slow it down. I also slowed down the car. After all, I had a mother and her three kids in the car with me and no reason to race any-

more. I dropped us down to 70 and kept it there. The lady turned around and unstrapped her crying kids and took them all into the front seat with her and held them, quieted them down. "Thank you," the lady said to me, almost in a whisper, looking straight ahead.



"My name is Clayton," I said, suddenly thinking it was important for her to know that.

She looked at me, then, but didn't smile. "I'm Elizabeth. The oldest one here is Jane. This is Amy; and my youngest is Clayton, like you."

There wasn't much else for us to say. Not then. We drove past Draper

and the prison, then started up the Point of the Mountain. We'd be in Provo in thirty minutes.

I thought about meeting my parents there and decided to tell them about the Peace Corps later that night around the campfire when it was just the three of us, after we'd dropped Elizabeth off at her sister's, the three of us without TV so we could talk, away from the things that reminded us of all the programs in our lives, out under stars in the cold mountain air and the only sounds the sounds of our crackling fire and the wind in the trees and our voices. Our lives would all seem short and valuable out there, and our dreams worth dreaming. I got that hit-in-the-gut feeling of excitement again, and it was strong because it came from being excited about talking to my parents *and* from being able to drive my mother's red Mustang down the road I'd wanted to take in the net, where the road out looked so achingly beautiful. ■

## **PITFCS**

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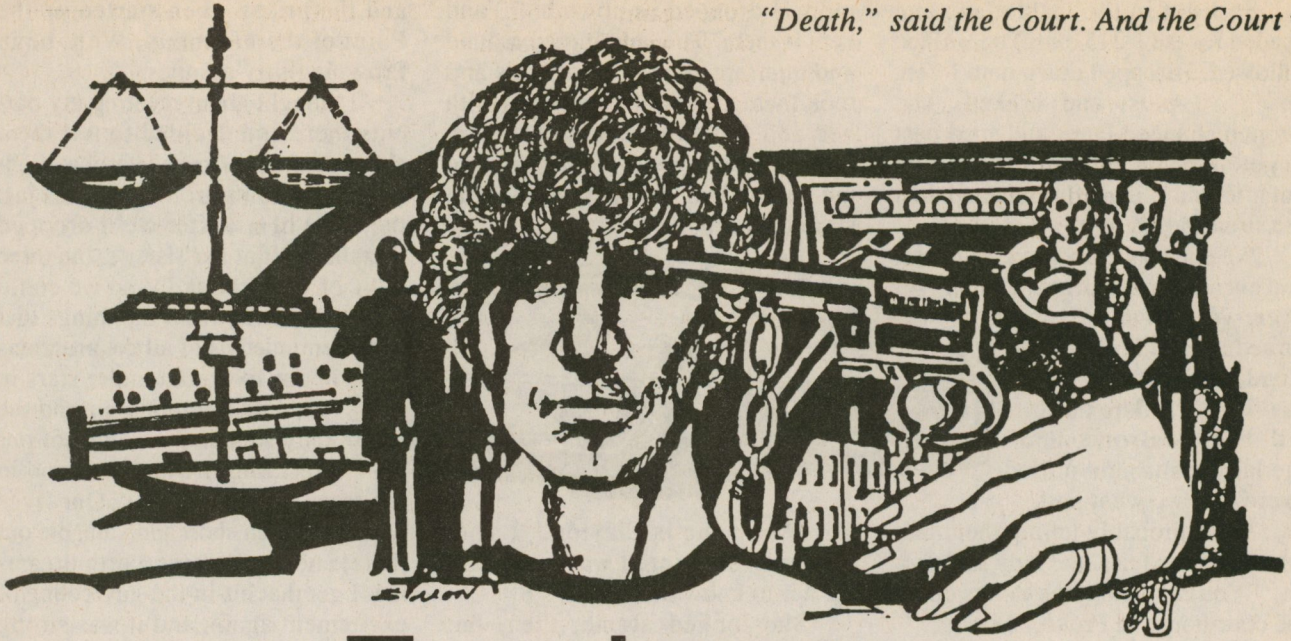
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In 1958, Theodore R. Cogswell sent out a postcard to certain members of the SF establishment. The result, with really astonishing speed, was one of the craziest, most wonderful, occasionally dead-serious journals ever published. It was a fanzine for professionals, and over the twenty years that followed—well, there was a seventeen-year break in there—just about every professional, from all over the world, joined in. Now the original spotty, hectographed and photo-offset pages have been translated into a dignified and permanent volume. But it is not to be mistaken for a scholarly text. You will be astonished, amazed, delighted, and might occasionally foam at the mouth.

*"I wrote the introduction to this volume, and I have seldom spent my time to better effect."*

—Algis Budrys

*"Death," said the Court. And the Court was I*



# THE JUDGES OF THE SECRET COURT

Richard Bowes

Illustrated by Margaret Ballif Simon

The wisest man I ever met told me about the Secret Court. That's the one in each of our heads where we are defendant, prosecutor judge and jury. Despite his warning, I was unprepared when my own court began handing down death sentences.

The trial began on a soft spring night in a year when Carter and Reagan were just out-of-work governors and I was newly sober. Alone and unsure of myself without the props of drugs and booze, I sought the intimate anonymity of the decaying West Side piers. There, hands reached out, clothes got peeled away and only a carefully timed match flicker revealed your partner as goblin or god.

As I was about to cross West Street, a Checker cab pulled up beside me and a voice said, "Kevin Grierson." Startled, I turned to see Carl Valleck smiling as he got out of the back seat. "Kevin," he said, "I

need to talk to you."

The blond hair was shorter than I had ever seen it. He had muscles that hadn't been there when I first knew him. The brown, slightly Slavic eyes were the same. Around me, indignant cruisers wondered why they hadn't been chosen.

Maybe fresh sobriety distorted my memories of Carl and myself. Otherwise I might have recognized him as chief witness for the prosecution and passed up the invitation. Instead, I replied, "Long time, no see."

A man and a woman in dark glasses followed him out of the cab. The man paid. Carl made the introductions. "Kevin, this is Judith and Michael." Neither of them reacted at all. Carl just shrugged.

We were in front of Cape Fear on West Street. "Join us," said Carl. The other two said nothing. Curiosity

drew me. Carl and I had once been close; then we fought. Neither condition had been pretty. But obviously Carl still had a hold on me, because I followed him.

Entering Cape Fear was like going from a darkened wing onto a bright stage. What once had been a warehouse was now a restaurant, all exposed brick, polished wood and photos of great ladies and talented young men. On the stereo, the Velvets sang the concert version of NEW AGE.

Judith was the only woman in the place. She looked around avidly like she wanted to implant it on her retinas. Along with the glasses she wore a black sheath dress and long black hair. As we got seated, she fixed on two guys walking past. One wore a wide, scarred belt with several feet of chain attached. The chain ran into the half-opened zipper of his partner's



jeans. They moved in tandem and you had the feeling the friend was very safely secured.

"This place is theater of the eye. Brilliant!" said Michael. He looked kind of delicate, his hair was mostly gone. He wore a beard, a watered silk vest and the only suit in the house.

Carl sat opposite me and ordered a double Wild Turkey when the waiter came. "The same," said Judith. It was the first time I heard her speak. The voice sounded remote.

When I ordered a club soda and lime, Carl indicated Michael, "Daddy Big Bucks is paying, man." But I just shook my head. My instinctive take on the situation was that Judith had Michael, that Michael had money, that Carl was for hire and that they had rented him. But unless he was a tour guide I couldn't guess the terms of the lease.

"What are you doing these days?" Carl asked me.

"Oh, a little acting." This was an acceptable reply in that time and place. Were we not all actors in the dramas of our own lives?

Judith and Michael paid no attention. Carl winked at me and lighted a cigarette. As he did, the arm of his leather jacket fell back revealing a series of cigarette burns on his wrist and arm. Some were old, some fairly new.

My stomach turned but I couldn't help looking. He told the other two, "Kevin was the one I talked about on camera last time." The attention of the pair of voyeurs was on me, their expressions calculating but respectful. Suddenly, I was somebody, but I didn't know who.

A big, grey bearded guy with a beautiful half-Asian kid in tow stopped to kiss the top of Carl's head and say in an awed stage whisper, "The boy in the white room." He continued his grand exit. But that line and the sight of the scars, left me with a twinge, a memory I didn't much want to probe.

When our drinks came, Michael looked around the room and said to Judith. "Half the people here would be delighted to be in our little project."

She spoke again, "Asshole. We have the one we want." She stared at me raptly.

I looked to Carl for an explanation. "Kevin and I have to talk," he said. Shortly, he swallowed his drink and got up. We left the two of them gorging their eyes.

Outside, I cast a glance at the shadow dance across the way as men singly, men in pairs, passed under the ruined highway and headed for the Hudson. I could have joined them but by then curiosity, or maybe boredom, with my life had the better of me. "Carl, who are those two geeks you were with?"

"Judith is a video maker. Michael is, like, her producer, puts up the money. I guess they're an item. I'm the star of the thing they're doing now. Let's take a walk," he gestured uptown. "I live at the Landing."

That was a couple of blocks from the place I'd just moved into. As we walked, I had a million questions. "What did you tell them about me? What was it the old hawk said about a white room?"

"That's why I got to talk to you." The Landing was an old river front hotel way west in Chelsea. Carl lived on the top floor. We went up wide, worn stairs that stank of piss and mold. "You disappeared, Kevin. I guessed you were dead. Then I got involved in a project that was basically your idea and started seeing you around. Like fate, man."

His room was bigger than I expected. White paper covered the windows. Walls, floor, the bureau, table and two chairs, were all painted white. The only intrusive items were a stand of lights in one corner and five bullets on the table. The paint job was recent and hastily done, intended for immediate effect and the camera's eye. "The White Room all set up for shooting." Carl emphasized the last word.

I sat on a chair. Carl sat on the bed and stared at me with his fixed half smile. Painful memories that I had managed to put aside wanted my attention. To continue avoiding them, I asked, "What are you doing with

your time? No tv or radio, I mean..."

"You have amnesia, Kevin? When I was just a kid, you told me how to set this scene. The room had to be white, a complete blank. Nothing to identify yourself. Hide anything personal away, you said. Maybe leave one item out, an open switchblade, a pair of handcuffs, a needle. Something to grab a straight's attention. You talked like nothing I ever heard. Now you're going to tell me you don't remember any of it?"

What I recalled was the place of utter clarity at the apex of my bends. It was where mortality got left behind and the shakes hadn't started. The past was a wreck, a terrifying crash lay in the future but in that eye of the storm, I was cold, unhuman, immortal. "All that's behind me," I told Carl, "I've had a lot of apologizing to do."

He just shook his head. Slowly, he reached under the mattress and drew out a revolver. It looked like a .38. Still smiling, he broke it open, showed me there was one bullet in it. "The straight won't be able to not look, you said. Just sit and watch the straight's reactions, you said. Well man, I'm watching."

"It was booze and drugs talking, not me. I was just about the age you are now and scared people would see what a fraud I was. I can't connect with that anymore...."

Carl locked the pistol. The sharp snap of metal made my heart lurch. He spun the cylinder. "Do something like this, you said, and the straight can't look away."

A pulse I hadn't seen before stood out on Carl's forehead. It started throbbing as he brought the gun up behind his right ear.

Trying to keep my voice steady, I said, "You play this game often, your number is going to come up."

"I've done this a lot, man. And it's not a game, it's a test. If you gotta think of it as gambling then you get five to one odds. This is a test." He spoke softly, looking right at me. And I was unable to move.

In the instant before he pulled the trigger, his eyes glazed and lost contact with mine. Had they bulged and

rolled back into bloody sockets, my own brain and heart would have stopped along with his.

Instead, the hammer clicked on an empty chamber and the breath rushed out of my lungs. Carl's hands hardly shook as he offered me the revolver. "Wanna try it?"

The hotel, the streets, the whole city, was silent, transfixed. I shook my head. Sirens cried in the east and music burst then died as a door opened and closed. Out on the street, a man yelled for a taxi

Carl's smile came on again. "I know what it is. You want to wait, save it for Judith. I talked about you on video last night, before I rolled. Said how you taught me. Then I saw you tonight and thought what a great film it would be. Think about it, man, two good-looking guys in a white room. They discuss old times. Then first one rolls and the other. People will watch that video."

"We're supposed to die just so those ghouls can film it? How did you get into this?"

Carl rolled up a sleeve so that I could see his whole scarred inner arm and said, "Love bites. What you don't see is even better. Remember a couple of times you held matches next to your hand to see what it was like. I remembered how that got to me and thought it would do the same for other people.

"Of course, things kind of escalated. I was so drugged out I didn't even feel it. But after a while not enough people dug the way I looked to pay for my medicine.

"Without this," he indicated the gun and the room, "I would have ended up peddling my ass out of some bang and walk up on the Square. That's what happens to kids with no daddy to send them money. People play with our bodies, play with our minds. Then they discover Jesus or something. Forget about us.

"Kevin, nobody is going to forget about me. Weirdos and perverts, that is to say everyone, will whisper to each other, 'I saw this shocking film you are just not going to believe.' If you weren't so numb you could be in on it too."

He sounded disappointed in me. All I possessed of any value was my sobriety. So I offered that, "There's this guy I'm seeing who helped me with drinking and drugs. He's real good. You can talk to him."

Carl shrugged. "You're clean, you're broke and you're nothing." He took a worn piece of paper out of his pocket and handed it to me. "When you change your mind, call the number where it says Judith." He said nothing more, just stared at me until I left.

The next evening from the window of Leo Dunn's apartment on Madison Avenue, I watched the sun turn the Chrysler building bronze and pink. I had come there directly from my ridiculous research job. The night before, I'd had trouble sleeping. That day summer heat had arrived in the city. Mr. Dunn was the one I had wanted Carl to see. "I'm just no god damn good," I said.

"My friend, no one tells me that about a client of mine, not even the client. You are the best person in the world, the bravest, the smartest." Dunn's technique was that I went three or four times a week to his apartment and he talked. He paused and I turned to watch him, white haired and a bit majestic in his big chair as he lighted a cigarette and smoked. After a while he asked, "What brought this on?"

"A guy named Carl that I haven't seen in five or six years. "We lived together. No, that's not right. This isn't easy to explain." Dunn nodded and drew on his cigarette. "He was a kid I picked up. I let him stay in my place. But I didn't give him keys. When I left for work, I'd give him a dollar and put him out on the street." Then I described my previous night.

When I finished, Dunn leaned forward across the glass coffee table and said, "Even the cleverest of us can get caught in twisted logic." Leo Dunn was a great performer in a variety of roles, priest, fellow sinner, salesman. That evening he was a wily old lawyer with a tough case.

"You say someone you knew in bad times made you an offer that

leaves you with a fairly good chance of blowing your brains out. You refused, showing, I would say, very good sense. Do I understand that you are blaming yourself for his having tried to get you killed?"

"Eventually he's going to shoot himself and I planted the idea."

"He drinks?"

"And does drugs, probably junk."

"You want me to talk to him?"

I shook my head. "I asked."

"In other words, despite the great influence you had on him, he knows you stopped and that doesn't make him want to stop too. Do you see the flaw in that?"

"He never had a chance. Society thinks..."

"My friend, I know what it's like to get the back of society's hand. I drank myself onto the Bowery, wrecked career, family and marriage when people believed only a born degenerate could do that. I'm not asking for a verdict on this unfortunate boy, I want your unbiased judgment of yourself.

"Kevin, we've talked about the Secret Court where each of us is defendant, prosecutor, judge and jury. Like any court of law, it can be corrupt. I've seen the worst offenses get winked away. Other times it's harsh and unjust. Sometimes the death penalty gets dealt when the defendant was at most a bystander.

"By the look on your face, I would not care to come up before you at this moment looking for the mercy that human weakness always deserves. Fortunately, I don't have to worry about that because each one's Secret Court tries only him or her. Its decisions can be biased, its methods suspect, its authority tainted. But its verdicts quite often get enforced."

Dunn said "I plead for compassion for that poor drunk inside each of us, Kevin. There's a way in which our basic instinct plays us false. Other people don't have that trouble. But a drunk's instinct is like a bad knee. He can't put his full weight on it. What seems to him a certain thing is just bad judgement. The young man you described can only be helped if he

learns that. The same is true for you, my friend."

A long pause followed. I was lost in thoughts about the white room. I found myself missing the cold clarity at the bender's apex. A big reason for my sobriety was Leo Dunn's convincing me that saving my life was a worthwhile project. Carl's recent testimony had thoroughly undermined that case.

Mr. Dunn sighed and said, "This is Wednesday, I have a special client in from England all day tomorrow. I want to see you Friday at six. But call me sooner if there are any problems. This is important. Against great odds, you have stayed sober for months. I am proud of you, Kevin."

When I got home, sunlight still bounced off concrete and chrome, blazed on the Hudson at the end of the street. My block, all small trucking companies and decaying tenements, was a long established whore run. That evening the girls' halters were extra skimpy, their skirts slivers.

My apartment was at street level, the windows of its front room were barred like a cell. The place included a tiny bedroom and bath. It was damp and impossible to keep clean. But it was cheap and not quite the gutter.

It was dark by the time I re-emerged. Certain girls I thought of as regulars. One, a black called Rosie, had a sweet round face. "You wanna date?" she asked.

When I smiled and shook my head, her friend Carla laughed and said, "Don't bother with him. Where he's going they're giving it away."

Down on West Street, guys flocked like pilgrims to holy water. Someone dropped a heavy set of keys with a sound like a hammer hitting an empty chamber. Suddenly, the warmth drained out of my night and the scene lost all appeal.

A drink seemed very tempting at that moment. Drugs were easily available. Carl was the one I had to see. His life and mine had tangled together again. It seemed to me I could save myself by saving him. But he wasn't at the Landing. I spent hours circling the hotel waiting for

the lights to be on in his room.

The girls were busy when I gave up and came home. Across the street, Rosie, bent over to talk to a taxi driver, exposed her ass to the world. Compared to me, she was so innocent.

My apartment was an oven, the bedroom a crypt. Finally, I dragged the mattress out near the front window and fell asleep to the car radios of cruising johns. Then, deep in the night a familiar voice, called "Kevin? Kevin, we got to talk."

I awoke and recognized Carl crouched outside. Only when I rose and went to the window did I see that his eyes stared empty and unfocused. The white of his right eye was dark red. The entrance wound on his right temple still throbbed with blood.

I closed my eyes so as not to look at his ruined face. But I could still hear him. "Kevin I talked about you again tonight. I held the gun and faced the camera and told how when I felt scared you talked to me then the way no one else did.

"You said how you weren't going to clear thirty because you didn't want to. You were going up in smoke you said. The hustlers and queens and junkies were going to be amazed by what they saw. The important thing was to call the shots, to make it your own game.

"I told them how later when we didn't have much to do with each other, I'd still see you around and it looked like you were on schedule. When you disappeared, I thought the way you went wasn't that great. But at least your words meant something.

"All of a sudden I saw you again. And I thought that maybe you had problems with forgetting. Like forgetting it was time to die. But when I reminded you, man, you were afraid.

"That made me afraid. For the first time tonight, when I put the gun to my head, my hand shook. My magic was gone. When the gun went off, the sound of the explosion hurt worse than the bullet.

"It was weird, I could still see the room but from high above. Like I can see us now with you too scared to look. Michael threw up but Judith

was so god damn cool. She got her stuff and him out of there so fast that she stepped over me on the way. I could have been alive. They didn't even check for a pulse."

Carl paused. The thought of their leaving him for dead brought bile to my throat. "For years, my mother hangs up the phone when I called," he said. "You're the only one I can tell."

But I stopped listening. Rage pounded in my heart. I was a hanging judge. I reached for him through the bars and felt nothing. I opened my eyes and saw only the first grey of dawn and a couple of hookers watching me from across the street.

In a kind of trance, I got dressed and went around to the Landing Hotel. Sometime after that, I called Dunn from a pay phone. "Carl who I told you about? He talked to me last night, it must have been when he died. The side of his head was all blown off. Just now I saw the police take his body out of his hotel."

"Kevin, where are you?" Dunn was very calm.

"Everyone will think it's suicide. But those two bastards killed him! With a lot of help from me."

"Kevin, the older I get the more sure I am that there is no great trick to becoming dead. Life, that's the hard part. For some poor souls, it proves impossible. I have confidence that you aren't one of those. I want you to come up here and talk."

"He came to me asking for justice, revenge!"

"They aren't the same," he said and I hung up. For the judges of my Secret Court blame for what had happened to Carl was so obvious, that only one course was open.

For what had to be done, I needed fuel. In the first bar I saw, a nondescript place down the avenue from the Landing, I got a double bourbon, my first drink in months. Despite the heat, it was the only warmth in my body.

When I told Carl that the part of me he remembered was gone, I was lying. With booze it was very much present again. I had another double and felt myself standing in the place

beyond tears and pain where I was judge, jury and executioner.

I took out the piece of paper Carl had given me. On one side was a faded number with a New Jersey area code. On the other several numbers had been crossed out. One remained with "Judith" written beside it. The phone booth was at the back of the joint.

The line was busy. I returned to the bar and had a drink, then I called again. I did that a few times until the phone was picked up. "This is Kevin, Carl's friend," I said and the person at the other end hung up. When I dialed again the line was busy.

A delivery man wheeled a loaded handtruck into the bar. A couple of guys in coveralls came in for a mid-morning snort. I finished my drink and dialed. The phone rang six or seven times before it was picked up. I said, "This is Kevin. I'm ready to play my scene." The other party hesitated then hung up.

The delivery man needed to use the phone. I had one more double and left. The vacation from booze had done me good. The stuff hit the way it had when I was sixteen.

But now I had better connections. In a narrow candy store on Eighteenth Street, I walked the length of the counter back to where the magazines were. "You got that racing magazine?" I asked the tiny woman with red blond hair. She looked at me empty faced and I held up five fingers.

"Twenty-five," she said. Without arguing, I gave her the money and took the five pills she dealt.

The amphetamine kicked in fast. My senses were acute. When I called from a street phone, I heard two receivers get picked up. I said, "What Carl did, he did because of me. I accept my guilt. I'm going to put myself on trial right in front of you. The penalty is execution."

Around me, people were out of their offices for lunch. Michael said in a whisper, "We can talk about it tomorrow."

"The scene gets played today with you filming or not."

"We can't," he said.

"Where?" Judith asked.

"I have a room that looks like a cell."

"When?"

"As soon as you get to my place with a camera and loaded revolver."

"If you don't have a gun how were you going to play roulette?" he whined.

But Judith grabbed at what I offered. "Call back in an hour," she said.

Ten minutes later on Thirty-first near Penn Station, my nerves jumped as I ran up two flights of stairs. I hadn't been there since I started seeing Dunn. Banging on the door I called, "Angel? Man, what you got?"

A peep hole opened. "Mother-fucker, who are you? I don't know you." But Angel let me in. The door clicked behind me. And I heard a hammer hit an empty chamber.

Once I had bought junk and taken some, everything went like a dream. I asked, "When?" from a phone booth.

"A few hours. Hang on. I'm waiting for the guy to bring the piece."

I gave Judith my address and telephone number. "Ring three times. Hang up and ring again." Then I sat in a playground near the river and plotted the scene, saw in detail how Judith and Michael would arrive at my apartment and set up their equipment.

It would be dark by then as I moved smoothly to draw the curtain against prying eyes from the street. Michael, looking sick and scared, handed me the unloaded revolver. It was a Smith and Wesson .38. Sober I wouldn't have wanted to touch it. But as an agent of the Court I feared nothing. "Let me have six bullets so I can be sure."

"Five," said Judith. "There's no dramatic tension if it's six." Both of them were sweating but I felt cold. I didn't argue, just made sure that I was seated between them and the exit.

She filmed me loading the piece. The junk let me sit quietly until all was ready and I could face the camera and say, "The Secret Court condemns everyone who killed Carl. The family



who threw him out, the johns who used him. But they are beyond our control. Before us right now are the prime murderers, the one who gave him the idea, the ones who stand to profit from his death.”

Michael broke and ran as soon as I leveled the revolver. The first shot hit him in the side and he fell through the bathroom doorway. My second shot hit the camera. Judith cried in a high-pitched wail as she backed into the bedroom. A shot in her face threw her against the wall. I finished off Michael as he writhed under my sink.

That left one bullet for me. I was careful not to waste it. The last sounds I heard were shouts and footsteps on the street and then a final explosion. There was an unbearable bulge behind my eyes. Then something snapped and all was black. Such was the movie that ran in my head.

When I came off the nod, I was still sitting on the bench. Before me, silent grey forms moved majestically from left to right up the Hudson. Rising, I saw that it was a tug boat pulling a string of barges.

On the street outside my place, Rosie and the night shift had just come on duty. “Honey, you look bad. Want a date? We can do it in your place.” I shook my head. “Your friend the other night seemed like he was hurt bad.” I looked at her. “The one talking to you at the window,” she explained.

In my apartment, the phone rang three times, stopped and rang again. I picked it up. “Yeah?”

“The gun took longer than we expected,” said Judith. “We’ll be over within an hour. Just hold on” As she spoke, I glimpsed a face outside the window. Pale and fleeting as the moon in daylight, it was gone when I went over to look.

I thought maybe Carl was reminding me. He didn’t have to worry, all that remained was to enact what I had already seen.

While waiting, I nodded out. The phone rang and I came to in the light of the setting sun. The phone rang and rang again. Knowing it was Leo Dunn, I ignored it. Having him plead

my case would make it hard to maintain my remote calm.

It was dark when Judith and Michael appeared at my apartment. Things ran much as I had foreseen. They set up their equipment. I moved to draw the curtain against prying eyes from the street.

Against the city night I saw a pale face. Reaching back, I turned off my light. The two behind me protested. Then they also saw and shut up.

“Kevin,” The voice was a whisper. “They got me in the morgue. I am more cold and lonely than I could ever have believed.”

“He’s still alive!” Michael was terrified. “It’s a trap!” I heard them scramble in the dark for their equipment.

This time, I looked at Carl. Shadows masked the wound and he appeared lost, childlike. Once when he lived with me, I had stayed out all night drinking and forgot about him. Coming home I found him sitting on the stairs in a rainy dawn, rocking back and forth with his head on his knees. When I called his name and he raised his head, it was with the same lost expression.

The memory tore my heart. Behind me the door banged as Michael and Judith fled. “Kevin,” Carl pleaded, “Don’t get angry like last night. I have no i.d. Nothing to tell them who I am. My mom’s number was on the back of the paper I gave you. They don’t know who to call. You’re the only one I can ask for help. See if she won’t come. All I want is someplace to rest. That’s all, please?”

I managed to choke out, “Forgive me, Carl.” Then the booze and drugs caught up with me. My head spun and everything went black.

Light hit my eyes like nails and all I could see was a tall figure looking down at me. “Jesus Christ,” I said.

“No,” replied Leo Dunn. “You’re not even close.”

I lay on the floor of my front room feeling very sick and criminally stupid. “How did you get in here?”

“I couldn’t sleep last night thinking about you. I came down this morning and saw you lying in here. Two young ladies from the street picked the lock. Did it easily. In their way they were quite concerned.”

Still stunned, confused, I saw the paper with Judith’s number on the floor. I looked around expecting to see carnage. “What have I done? What the fuck have I done?” I crumpled the paper.

“Nothing that a million others before you haven’t. Wash your face and put on a clean shirt and we’ll begin again.” His voice held a sadness that I had never before detected. And I was the cause.

My Secret Court was still in session. Judges, a whole panel of them, held that I didn’t deserve to be in the same room with anyone who could still stand the sight of me. Instead of wasting Mr. Dunn’s time, should continue what I had started and kill myself. Unless I could think of some redeeming aspect, one thing that would cause me to be allowed to continue in this life.

Then I looked down at my hand and remembered one slim possible reason. Smoothing the paper, I looked at the Jersey number. It took a couple of tries before I managed to pick up the phone and dial the number. It rang several times and I felt my life hang in the balance. “Hello?” A woman answered.

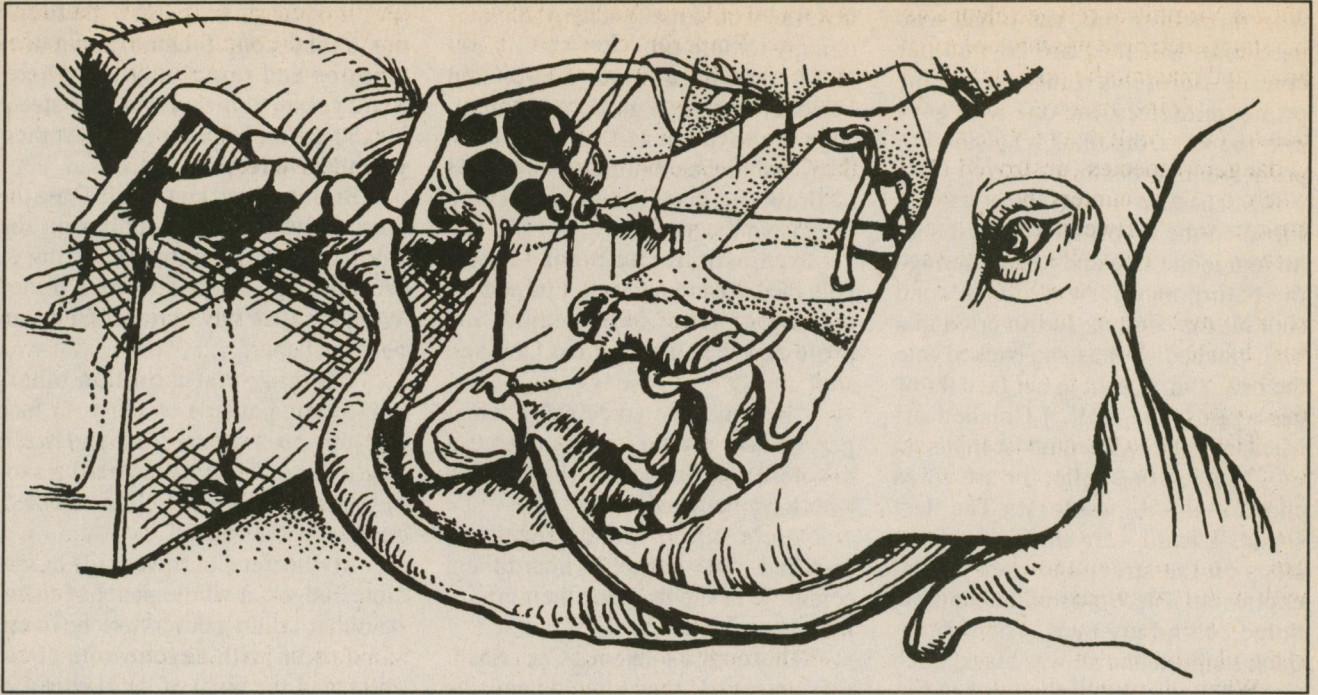
“Mrs. Valleck?”

“Not for years.” She sounded tough but tired.

I took a deep breath. “It’s about Carl.” On the other end was silence. What would I say? I hesitated.

Mr. Dunn reached out and put his hand on my shoulder. It was the only time he ever touched me except to shake hands and I felt like I had dirtied him. Then I looked up and he smiled at me. “I’m sorry to have to do this,” I said. “but he wanted you to be told.” ■





# LOST VIRGINIA

Joe Mayhew

Illustrated by Rachid Idriss

*Even the Emperor of Virginia came to the celebration*

Back home in Lost Virginia, I think it must have been about twenty-seven years after the Expulsion, Orville Wellrogue and Clovis Ringling completed their famous resort hotel atop Agincourt Mountain. Even pilgrims, winding along far below in their dusty Chevrolets, could see that it was built for elephants and by elephants. It was a massy pile. Great colonnades stretched out in ranks of Gargantoguinol awesomeness. Its lobbies were decorated in BaBar-oque and from its computerized howdah checkstand to its vast tennis wallows, the place was equipped with the latest pachydermophobic technology: six lane moving sidewalks, cosmic ele-

vators, and golf carts with 24 hour kitchens.

Naturally, when it came time for their Grand Opening, the elephants invited the Emperor of Lost Virginia to cut the ribbon.

So, on the appointed day, the Emperor's fabulous flying trailer, *Croatoan*, descended from the sky onto their parking lot. All the elephants trumpeted in major triads as the Emperor of Lost Virginia trotted down the ramp on his stallion "Space Traveller" and galloped up from the lot waving his Civil War hero hat. His horse reared up and did some really fine equestrian shenanigans before the Emperor cut the official ribbon with his great-great grand-

dad's saber.

After a rather lavish buffet which featured 200 varieties of peanuts, an exotic hay carousel, and a forest of sugar cane for dessert, fireworks sparkled and boomed in the night sky above the neighborly mountains while the University of Lost Virginia marching band did military things under the kleig lights.

When it came time, Orville Wellrogue tapped on the microphone, which whonked and howled with the obligatory feedback.

He put his trunk affectionately around the Emperor of Lost Virginia's shoulders before addressing the crowd. "Twenty years ago when Uncle Pierpoint opened the Empire

of Lost Virginia to refugee elephants, we stamped here in search of toleration and mammoth opportunity.

"Lost Virginia has become the home of nearly all that remains of our endangered species (destroyed elsewhere by ivory hunters, boring zoos, atomic wars between tiny African nations, and mice). We look forward to the day when we are able to do something to repay our debt to you and to Lost Virginia. Being elephants, we will never forget your benevolence."

There was a thundering applause which rang out until every abandoned oil rig and every cheery still, bubbling away in the rhododendron groves on the mountain, shuddered with it. A few enthusiastic elephants in a crowd can do a lot toward making applause thunder.

When the tumult died down, the Emperor of Lost Virginia paused to wipe his glasses and then went up to the microphone.

He said, "Butch Ringling and Ory Wellroque will probably charge you elephants a tusk and a leg to hang out at their fancy new spa. They'll have to: they've larded the local economy for the past three years building their dream hotel, and if we don't watch out, thanks to them, this country will get so rich that the Federal Government will come begging it to come back into the Union. Of course, they'd have to repeal their cruel and stupid Dumbo Laws to get your vote.

"Still, most of you can afford a room at the Agincourt Mountain Spa now. The days of those Mom and Pop traveling circuses and of doing bullwork in the logging industry are mostly memories. On the whole, life in Lost Virginia is getting nicer for everyone."

With that, the Emperor remounted his hot-dogging horse and trotted across the spot-lit parking lot, pausing several times to turn back and tip his hat to the crowd. His roadies were already stowing the kleigs and revving up the Dwayne Drive by the time he had reached the *Croatoan*. Before retiring to his interplanetary trailer, the Emperor joined his roadies

in a round of Cheat Valley Mist.

The Emperor checked in on Space Traveler, who was just a little colicky from too much exotic hay, and then settled down for a nap while the *Croatoan* scuttled across the rumpled Backbone Mountains. The trailer cruised slowly toward the Western Edge so that they'd arrive around 9:00 a.m. at the Good Morning River, where the Emperor was scheduled to meet with the Director of the Federal Park Development Service.

The *Croatoan* landed across Route 2 from an official FPDS nature-processor which took up most of the American Pyramid parking lot. As the Emperor stepped out of his flying trailer to inspect the meeting site, he could see that his roadies had been thorough. American Pyramid's anti-personnel fence had been reinforced with sandbags and specially wired up for the conference.

Some locals were watching from Wackety Grove Cemetery which bordered on the parking lot. Most had taken cover behind their pick-ups or their ancestors' tombstones. The Emperor waved to them and sent a roadie over with his horse to give their kids pony rides.

The roadie returned straightaway with a picnic basket full of home-fried chicken, a loaded colt pistol and a note which said, "Don't take any Washington from them, Uncle Pierpoint."

The Emperor lifted their basket up high and patted it appreciatively. The folks in the cemetery responded with a whoop and a cheer.

It was time to meet the FPDS.

Even though the Federal Government had evicted Lost Virginia from the Union, the Bureaus and Departments still stomped in over the mountains whenever they felt like it. As he crossed toward the American Pyramid parking lot, the Emperor of Lost Virginia tipped his hat to the Bureaucrats who were now waiting for him behind the reinforced twelve foot high chain-link fence. The Federal Park Development Service Director was present in the form of an immense ecologically correct spider.

She looked so real. How had they modified the natural biological material to allow for a spider that large? All the textbooks said it was impossible. "Cyber-Genetics are bringing you a Brave New World."

A man-sized copperhead slithered up beside her. That would be Agent Copperfield's idea of a joke. The bio-puppet monstrosities on the other side of the fence seemed so bureaucratically correct that it was hard for the Emperor of Lost Virginia to remember that the Director and Copperfield were actually pulling their strings back in Washington.

The FPDS Director shut three of her eyes but focused the remaining five on the Emperor. After the customaries were done and over, the Director said, spitting tiny amounts of liquid silk with each word, "Personally, Your Imperial Highness, I'd rather have this fine cyanide factory than all the ivory growing out there in your woods."

The Agent on her left hissed, "So would he. He doesn't really control that much of this cast-off 'Empire.' Besides, we could nuke those pathetic elephants any time we feel like it."

The Emperor nodded. "Could be. I've heard folks say that the Federal Park Development Service could fly over Lost Virginia with a few of its nature processors and blow the elephants clear off the endangered species list. Then, with the last tusker dead, the price of ivory would skyrocket."

The eyes of the Director and her agent lit up like a string of Christmas lights.

But the Emperor continued, raising his hand like a little skyrocket, "—At first the existing supplies would be worth so much that your competitors would make every effort to destroy your stock to improve the value of their own. In time so little ivory would remain that it would no longer be safe for anyone to have any of it. Eventually, no one would feel it was worth the risk to own ivory and the price would fall and never recover." Down came the hand like Newton's apple.

"As long as the Elephants remain in Lost Virginia, the world's supply will safely grow in value."

"Nonsense!" hissed the agent.

The Director snapped her feeding claws several times and then said, "No, Copperfield, his Imperial Highness is more than likely right. Perhaps, Imperial Highness, we could discuss some means of insuring that the Federal Park Development Service will be able to regulate future ivory harvesting."

The Director's words seemed to license Copperfield's imagination and he tasted the air with increasing excitement. His nictitating membranes rose to the occasion and then he smiled as much as he was able to. "Those Dumbos should be concentrated into a sanctuary and culled, for their own sake: for the health of the herd. Without natural predators, a species quickly deteriorates. So, any—" Copperfield paused for the right word.

The Emperor suggested, "killing—slaughter—decimation?"

Copperfield paused thoughtfully and said, "So, any *deselection* would be for their own good."

"One hears a lot about that on Ouzi's TV nature specials," said the Emperor.

"Has your Imperial Highness considered that, with a well-regulated ivory trade, Lost Virginia might develop a sufficient tax base to rejoin the Federal Union?" The Director arranged her legs for a pounce.

"Voluntarily?" asked the Emperor.

Agent Copperfield hissed, "You'd get a piece of the action that way. But don't get greedy, Chief."

"Director, you'll probably have a hard time convincing the elephants to participate in Agent Copperfield's program. As to Lost Virginia returning to the Union, those folks over there in the churchyard are descended from people who not only seceded from the Union, but then seceded from the Confederacy as well."

The Director's legs began to quiver. She said, "We have the might of the United States of America

behind us; you will be utterly destroyed if you resist us."

"If we don't resist your plan to murder some of our neighbors, we will surely be destroyed in a far worse way."

In response to that, the Director vaulted effortlessly to the top of the twelve foot fence, but then there was a shower of sparks and the ozone smell of an immense electrical presence. The Director's spider form was instantly fried.

Agent Copperfield recoiled like a bullwhip toward the nature-processor, which exploded as he reached it. The roadies had been very thorough.

The blast knocked off the Emperor's hat, but he was otherwise unperturbed. When the dust settled, the crater where the nature-processor had stood was filled with bits of sputtering technology and orts of quivering snake.

The Emperor suspected that the Director and Agent Copperfield had been knocked for a loop before they could disengage their sensor connectors.

With a carnival air, the Emperor picked up his hat and saluted his roadies. They came out and took a bow before dismantling their equipment to pack it for the next show.

After the Emperor of Lost Virginia saw his roadies off, he joined the Fire Department's victory parade down Route 2 from the Grove to Wackety proper. The Fire Trucks rang their bells and souled out on their horns and sirens. The bell of Wackety's OK Church and several family dinner bells made as much noise as they could.

Wackety's Mayor and Fire Chief competed for the honor of putting the Emperor up for the night. The toss up was won by potato salad.

Mayor Anderson's wife, Rosie, was a past master at potato salad and everyone in Weed County just had to testify to that. However, the Emperor agreed to be bingo caller the next day at the fire house's annual fund raiser.

Just as the bingo was reaching its climax, the Mayor's son, Tom, came panting and shouting up the stairs, "Uncle Pierpoint, there's thousands

of NASA 'Alpha swine' heading down the Good Morning valley."

"Beltsville cyberpigs." The Emperor of Lost Virginia sighed as he turned off the bingo ball-popper. The hall grew silent.

Tom crossed the painted cement floor, gesturing like a foreigner. He said, "They've eaten everything in their path from Cresap's Landing to Saint Maude's. The valley behind them is a desert. Not a green leaf or an edible root is left. Just tomatoes. They don't touch them. Everything else is gone."

Fire Chief Howard raised his hand to reassure anyone who might be possibly reassured by a hand being raised, and solemnly said, "They'll eat buckeyes and die. Or they'll choke on papaw seeds."

But Tom just continued his exotic gestures, which reassured no one whatsoever, "So far they seem to be able to eat just about anything without even pausing to sigh with discomfort. They've even chewed the bark off the trees—higher than natural pigs can reach. Like I've said, there's nothing left but tomatoes."

The Emperor felt a chilly tingle running up his hands. He hadn't thought the Federals would be able to respond before November. Usually the fiscal year closeout and fund shuffling paralyzed the Federal Government from mid-September through the end of October. That should have halted further adventures against Lost Virginia until after the appropriations for the new fiscal year had been wrangled through the committees. But he had underestimated the lure of ivory.

The Imperial roadies had gone off right after the parade and they would be hard to reach. While his interstellar trailer was pulled up close behind the firehouse, its Galactic Peterbilt Space Tractor was up on blocks over at the Weed County Spaceport having its Dwayne Drive overhauled.

Chief Howard shook his head and muttered, "It was a dark day when NASA took over the Beltsville Agricultural Research Center. First it was those durned helium beans.



Cows flying every which way! Next they tried out their hydrogen beans.”

The Emperor smiled as he thought of the way the Federal hydrogen bean project had backfired. “Tom, have any of these wonder pigs exploded? There’s a lot of hydrogen beanfields along the River.”

“If they have, I haven’t heard of it. Uncle Pierpoint, shouldn’t we fetch our guns and such?”

Fire Chief Howard was already on the radio. Soon, a massing of fire trucks and pickups were converging on Route 2 from everywhere within CB range of Wackety. Home-made cannons, WWII weapons, flintlocks, big slaughterguns, you-name-its, and geewhatsits were packed with ammo and ready in the high-spirited arms of everyone old enough, and some who weren’t.

The Emperor prayed no one would fall to friendly fire before they saw an enemy. About halfway up to Saint Maude’s they saw the pigs.

The front vehicles were mostly those who had pushed in ahead of the Wackety Fire Trucks as they reached the town of Bellhop. The Bellhop Fire and Rescue Truck tried to ram into the pig vanguard, but when it hit solid pork, the truck bounced up and fell over onto its side.

The pig it hit seemed a little confused but unharmed. A critical mass of alpha swine surrounded the Bellhop Fire and Rescue Truck and began eating its tires. Other pigs came trotting and snorting around the overturned rescue truck, gobbling onward toward Bellhop in a wave which spread from the riverbank to where the hills were too steep for pigs.

The Bellhop folks fired into the onrush of pigs for all they were worth, but to no avail. Panic struck.

The Emperor heard a series of metal and glass shattering impacts behind him and turned to see the dismal rubble which was growing by lurch and collision down Route 2. The fire trucks and smaller prey were becoming gridlocked, power-jammed and road walloped into something megapolitan. The Emperor of Lost Virginia hopped off of

the Wackety Hook and Ladder Truck and dusted back to get his horse, Space Traveller, out of his trailer.

Space Traveller took a look at the oncoming hedge of pigs and babbled incoherently.

“Calm down, S-T!” said the Emperor as he tried to mount his less-than-enthusiastic steed. “They’re vegetarians.” He hoped that the report that the cyberpigs weren’t eating people was true.

When Space Traveller finally let the Emperor up onto his back, he grumbled, “Uncle Pierpoint, you basically don’t know much about hogs. Let’s go somewhere quiet.”

The pigs came onward like pork-termites from hell. They ignored the Lost Virginians’ gunfire. Exploding bullets and even a few stray hand-grenades were not good enough.

Soon the gobbling pork swarm were buffeting their way through the tangle of vehicles along Route 2. Several folks were knocked about and trotter-scarred while the megaswine grumped up their tires and picnic lunches.

Rosie Anderson, in a fit of pique, smashed a bottle of ketchup over the head of a cyberpig who was hogging up her famous potato salad. As the ketchup spilled onto it, the swine began to steam and then to buzz and crackle. It collapsed and started to hum. The other cyberpigs dodged away from anything ketchup had touched, but kept eating their way south.

The ketchup seemed to be burning its way into the cyberpig. Mrs. Anderson smelled bacon. The pig was indeed sizzling like chops in an iron skillet.

Seeing what had happened, the Emperor convinced Space Traveller to carry him up to the Hook and Ladder’s cabin. “Tomatoes!” shouted the Emperor to the terrified men inside. “I think those pigs can’t stand tomatoes.”

Mayor Anderson smiled nervously at the Emperor of Lost Virginia while making a spiral in the air next to his ear for the benefit of the other men with him in the cabin. But

then Rosie had reached the other side of the cabin and was telling them about ketchup.

The Emperor said, “Ketchup triggers a self-barbecue mechanism in cyberpigs. I suspect tomatoes might work just as well.” Armed with some of Rosie Anderson’s best slicing tomatoes, the Emperor rode after cyberpigs and scored several hits with satisfying results.

The word spread exponentially and soon most of Bellhop and Wackety were chasing cyberpigs with tomatoes, bottles of ketchup and carving knives.

Fire Chief Howard reported, “Uncle Pierpoint, The Weemstown police called to say they’re rounding up every bottle of ketchup, barbecue sauce—you name it. Some is already on its way upriver—and there’s a convoy of trucks loaded with tomatoes coming down the railroad from St. Maude’s.”

Mayor Anderson, who was busy with a generous hunk of self-roasted cyberpork, dabbed at his chin and said, “Durn pigs ate the tires off of their trucks, but they can still drive on the rails. With nothing left in the fields but tomatoes, they ought to be able to get together a Federal-budget-load of them in no time at all.”

Space Traveller shook his withers in disgust. “What the Wetzel is that noise!”

The air was vibrating as if something too heavy to be heard was rolling down into the valley, with a woodwind family reunion traveling on its back.

At first the Emperor saw a shadow rippling down the hillside and then another. Above it were vast things shaped like steam irons moving ponderously across the afternoon. One touched down onto its shadow in a devastated cornfield not far from the Emperor.

The handle opened up (at least it looked like a handle) to reveal Clovis Ringling wearing a Golden-Age-of-Science-Fiction space opera helmet. Fourteen other Space Irons landed nearby.

Clovis saluted (elephant style, with his trunk) when the Emperor

rode up to him. "The Federal Park Development Service invaded Agincourt Spa this morning but we were ready for them, thanks to our mole in the Republican Party."

"Mole?"

"Well, actually she's an elephant shrew. Any way, we've put Washington out of commission for the while" said Ringling.

"Did you bomb them?"

"No." Said Ringling, "We de-Gaussed them. That's what these fliers were built for. They project super-magnetic fields and after everything is erased, our re-programming ray inserts a variety of hardware viruses."

As they were speaking, Ory Wellroge moved his ponderous steam iron close beside Ringling's. "Has Butch told you about the Federal attack force they managed to send up against us on our way back? Even without their computer stuff, they still tried to go after us. Gotta give 'em credit for being game. The Central Security Company sent up air commandos riding on flying helium-

bean-fed cows—real hell-for-leather stuff."

"Hey doggies!" trumpeted Ringling. "Those cowboys tossed everything they had at us with little success, thanks to our protected magnetic fields. But their bio-engineered radio-bugs turned out to be a serious secret weapon. Those little beetles kamakazied into our windshields in such droves that we had to fly on instruments until we could land somewhere for repairs

"We had to hose our fliers down to get the bugs out of our Dwayne Drive intakes and such. Actually, it turned into an old-timey elephant beach party." There was a wistful note in his voice. "On our way home, we heard your broadcasts about tomatoes and thought we could help out here—low bombing runs and such."

"That you could!" said the Emperor. Within an hour the elephants were armed with ketchup and tomatoes and went off to barbecue Federal cyberpigs. As the elephants' awesome steam irons plowed up

into the air, the Weed County folks set to work on the alpha swine close at hand.

Tom Anderson made some very down-home gestures toward his plate of barbecued cyberpork and said. "I suppose a body could grow tired of this stuff one day."

Then his father belched discretely and said "We're going to be up to our ears in roast pork. It'd be a pity to waste it."

"You know." said his mother, "This barbecued pork should can up nicely."

Tom Anderson stood up and waved his hands about like a tenor. "We could set up roadside stands and sell it to the Buckeyes."

Firechief Howard's eyes rang up dollar signs. He said, "We could sell it all over the USA. We'll all be rich!"

"In an way, their cyberpig invasion turned out to be an odd sort of Federal aid," said Tom.

The Emperor of Lost Virginia licked his fingers and sighed. "There never was any other kind." ■



**Brother Endle has a problem...**

**A seven foot butterfly has taken up residence in his library. She's gorgeous. Endle is in love...**

**But that is not Endle's problem. Oh, no. You see his lover has died and left him pregnant and it's eating him up inside...**

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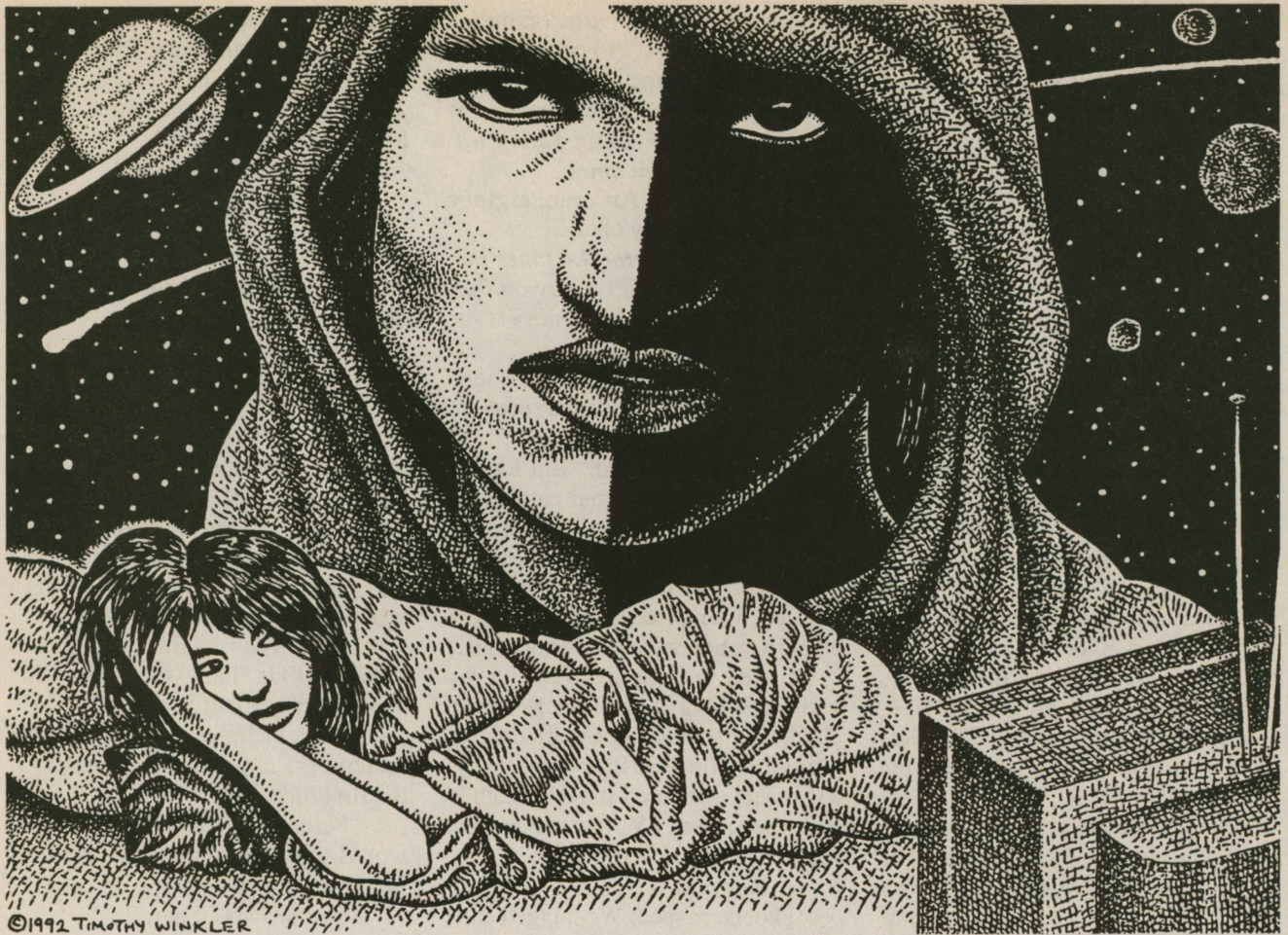
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# MOONS OF SATURN

James S. Dorr

Illustrated by Timothy Winkler

*Phoebe has shown improvement, of late*

*Phoebe, with her retrograde motion....*

We laughed about that when the Voyager photographs were on TV. Her real name was Phoebe, named for the mother of the Sun. Or that's what she said.

"You must be Enceladus," she said on a different night, when the news showed the space probe closer to Saturn. Never mind my real name or background. "Enceladus was the most powerful of the storm giants. Savage, yet noble. And, according to

the Greek legends, he was born not in the usual way, but from the spilling of his father's blood."

"Shouldn't I be Iapetus instead?" I asked. "The creator of man? Or, more to the point, the moon whose orbit is closest to Phoebe's?"

"No," she said. "Between us, we encompass all the moons"—that was before Mimas's pictures were broadcast—"you next to the brooding bulk of Saturn, the god-devourer of his children, and me the outermost moon of them all."

"And you with your retrograde motion," I said. "Withershins to the others' orbits."

*Discovered in 1898*, the TV continued, flashing back to the Voyager pictures. *Phoebe circles more than eight million miles from Saturn, one of only two of the moons with its orbital plane tilted at an angle to that of the rings....*

"Another difference. Another out-of-stepness," I said.

We laughed again, Phoebe and I. Phoebe, with her passion for ancient

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legends and myths; her fascination not so much with science, as with the fantasies that could be spun from it.

As for me, as I say, never mind my name or my background. You may have known me. Suffice it to say I had money enough, willed to me by an aunt, that I needn't work unless it held my interest. That I had had a good education.

That Phoebe and I loved each other deeply.

**D**iscovered in 1789...the TV news said. This was for Mimas.

"The Year of the Guillotine," Phoebe broke in, as if the announcer were talking to her. "Of revolution and blood in France."

"Shhhh," I said as the voice went on...*discovered the same year as Enceladus*—there was a shift as a picture of my moon formed on the TV so they could be compared—*Mimas orbits less than 120,000 miles from its parent while Enceladus, the next moon out....*

"No," Phoebe said. "Saturn was never our father. You, Mimas, the storm giants, I, were all born of Gaea and Uranus. Saturn, too, was a son of Uranus."

"I know, Phoebe," I whispered. I kissed her.

"Wait," she said. "Before, I'd forgotten Mimas, the innermost moon. The one of our siblings who freed Earth's volcanoes. And now they say there are other, tiny moons even closer to Saturn than he is. But last night I had a dream about Mimas. And you and me. The two of you are bound together—discovered the same year—and thus, somehow, Mimas is bound to me also."

"I heard you scream last night," I said. "While you were sleeping. It was only once, so I didn't wake you."

"I haven't been feeling well," she said. "It's probably nothing."

I kissed her again, harder this time, and she kissed me back. That night we made love in front of the TV while Voyager's arc swung it closer to Saturn. We watched, in each other's arms, as the pictures formed on the screen.

*Saturn. In some cultures, called the "Death Planet." Phoebe started, then kissed me quickly. To astrologers, said to be the ruler of Capricorn, lord of winter. Saturn was known from ancient times....*

We watched. An orange globe appeared, strikingly oblate.

*...with a diameter 9.4 times that of the Earth, and yet a day on Saturn's surface lasts less than eleven hours here on Earth....*

"That explains the flattened poles," I said. "That fast a rotation. Centrifugal forces would...."

"Maybe," she said. "But look at those swollen stripes and patterns. It moves *too* fast. And see—Enceladus, think of what it would look like from your orbit. From my moon, it seems like just a jewel in the sky, but from where you are, it must be enormous."

I tried to imagine it filling my vision. Rising over a rock-strewn plain, over so huge an arc it looked as though it must crush, of necessity, any object that dared stand beneath it. But then, the TV picture pulled back....

*...the rings....*

Phoebe gasped. We hugged each other.

*...believed by some scientists to have once been an asteroid, sucked, vampire-like, from its proper orbit when it came too close. In time, gravitational forces destroyed it....*

I stood again on Enceladus' surface, seeing the rings now shoot from the huge disk like two immense arrows. In my mind, I saw them on edge, because only Phoebe and Iapetus have orbits that deviate from the rings' plane to any appreciable degree. Here, though, the space probe approached from an angle, slightly below, as it wove its complex path around Saturn....

*...what scientists call Cassini's Division forming a wide gap between what we now call the A Ring and B Ring. But look. Now we can see there are more. A C Ring, possibly D and E Rings. And outside the A Ring, a narrower pattern is coming in focus. It isn't smooth-looking like the rings we've seen, but looks almost as though it were made from two long,*

*separate strands and braided....*

I laughed out loud. Phoebe had braided her hair that evening. I nuzzled the back of her neck and kissed her. She didn't respond.

"Phoebe?" I whispered.

I saw she was sleeping.

I carried her up to bed that night, and the following night too. Then, at her request, I made her a new bed—a sort of a nest—on the living room floor in front of the TV. I went out during the day and left her watching the pictures, then joined her afterward to watch the news and the evening specials.

Sometimes the pictures we'd see would be new ones, broadcast by Voyager as we sat, arms around each other. More often they'd be ones received already—that she'd seen already—but half the time she couldn't remember.

And sometimes she'd say she *did* remember...a picture being sent for the first time.

"Perhaps it was in a dream," she would say. "Or something I read—I just thought I saw it."

I worried about her.

On the third day I called a doctor to come and see her. She protested—"I just feel faint sometimes"—but I insisted. He gave her a thorough examination, but found nothing wrong. He gave her a tonic.

He thought that she might use a bit more fresh air.

She laughed when he'd left us. "You know I prefer the indoors," she said. "I just—I don't know. Since I was a girl, I've always enjoyed the feeling of waking while still in a dream. I just feel more tired now."

She took her tonic. I tried it too at her insistence, at night when we watched the Voyager probe start its long ascent back through the moons of Saturn. Mimas, a ball of ice from what the scientists said on TV. Enceladus, my moon, mostly ice too, scarcely more than 30,000 miles farther out than the orbit of Mimas.

"I dreamed of you and Mimas again last night," she said. "How you—and I, too—are bound together. I dreamed of Rhea, its mineral sur-

face sparkling with jewels."

Rhea was still just a dot in the distance on the TV. Yet Phoebe went on.

"I dreamed of the mining colony there. Oh, maybe not right now, but in the future they'll go there for gemstones. You'll see, Enceladus."

I almost *could* see it when I closed my eyes. The pressure domes. The space-suited men digging into the rock. But then, when I opened my eyes again and gazed at Phoebe, I saw she was paler.

I called a new doctor. We lived on a back road, outside the city, and soon there was a succession of doctors plying their way across the countryside to our home. They gave her tests of various sorts, but none could find anything wrong with Phoebe, at least not physically. Some prescribed pills.

On my way back from work—oh yes, I still worked then. Never mind what I did. But one afternoon, on my way home, I drove through a different part of the city than I usually went through. On an impulse, I stopped and got out of my car.

I'd already stopped once before at a drugstore for Phoebe's pills, although I was convinced they were doing her no good. But now, as I looked at the stores around me, I had an odd feeling of having once stood in this very same part of the city before. It couldn't be true, unless years ago—it was near the city university, in what once had been a student residential section but since had degraded to one of those over-the-hill hippy neighborhoods, rife with herbalists and Tarot readers, "New Age" gear and shops advertising magic stones and "Pyramid Power." And yet, I *knew* when I turned the corner, I'd find still another doctor for Phoebe.

His sign was a three-by-five index card pasted onto a door frame. I knew where to find it. I knew I *would* find it.

It said Dr. Mimas.

I raced up the stairs to a dingy hallway and, without looking, I knew to open the door to my left. Inside was an elderly, tired-looking man, his

beard—somehow I knew it once had been fire red—the color of old, much-trampled snow.

I explained my problem. About Phoebe's sickness. He asked to know more and I told him about how we watched together as Voyager's pictures formed on the TV. He held up his hand then.

"You are Enceladus?" he asked.

I nodded, startled. "I haven't told you my name yet," I blurted.

"Perhaps I guessed it," he said. "Or perhaps I had reason to expect you. We are like brothers, you and I, although maybe not in the usual blood way." He handed me a dust-covered bottle, about the size of a whisky bottle, and then he smiled up at me. "I once knew Phoebe."

"What is this?" I asked.

"Another tonic for Phoebe," he said, his face again serious. "It's artemisia—oil of wormwood. As a tincture, sometimes called absinthe. In its true form it's not exactly legal these days, but it won't do her harm and, if you try it with her, it may help you to relax as well."

I looked at it dubiously. "How much?" I asked. He named a price that seemed surprisingly low to me and told me to come back if Phoebe got worse. I paid him and left and, when I got home, Phoebe and I tried a spoonful together.

It seemed to perk her up a little, at least for a while. I turned on the TV and we watched together as pictures of Tethys, then Dione appeared.

*...both discovered by Cassini in 1684, nine years after his observation that Saturn's rings were divided in two. And now we have proof there's a second moon in Dione's orbit, a "Dione B," that circles the planet sixty degrees ahead of its namesake. Cassini had already discovered the moons Iapetus and Rhea....*

"I had a dream while you were away," Phoebe said when the announcer had finished. "It was about the stone of Rhea. Once, when the universe was young, some fell to Earth. It fell on the hillside, in the forest behind where we live now...."

"Yes?" I prompted when she became silent.

"A moment," she said. She closed her eyes.

"I dreamed of a cabin, built in the woods." Her voice was chantlike. "A steeped roof, with openings to let light in...."

She fell silent again and I saw she was sleeping. Quietly, I put on my shoes and crept out of the house and into the forest. I climbed the hillside. The sun had set, but in the moonlight I saw, near the top, a jumble of stone that cropped out through the underbrush. Some of it sparkled—gneiss, most likely—yet, in the pale light, it flashed, multi-colored, as if it were studded with precious jewels.

That night, I dreamed of Phoebe's cabin too.

In spite of the absinthe, Phoebe's condition worsened nightly. I called more doctors, many whose theories lay in less than traditional medicines, yet, like the others, all were baffled. I sought out Dr. Mimas again and told him, were she to die, I wished to die too. But all he would tell me was "share *everything* with your love, Enceladus. Share in her dreams that you may both be free."

I thought, then, of the cabin we dreamed of. I quit my work and had plans drawn up. I hired men to build it.

During the days I supervised the cabin's construction to make sure all details were done right. I had the men work fast—within a day, the first of the massive rock walls was standing and, by the week's end, the jeweled peak of its pyramid-shaped roof was set in its place. Although I was unused to physical labor, I did this last with my very own hands. I had not exaggerated when I told Dr. Mimas that, if it must be that Phoebe would die, I wished to die with her.

And throughout all this frantic activity, Voyager continued its measured path out through the moons.

Tethys, the Diones, all fell behind in the wake of the space probe. Phoebe—*my* Phoebe—slept most of the day now, waking only for the nightly reports on its progress. A sparkling jewel appeared on the

TV—another ice moon, the announcer said.

But this was Rhea.

Phoebe started, visibly shaken.

“Hush,” I told her. “I’ve built your cabin, just as we dreamed it.” I gave her her tonic, and took some with her, a half cup for each of us. “I’ve had it built in the woods, like we saw it within our minds. The tall, pointed arches, the peak of the roof, the cut stone of the floor. I’ve put in a couch for you so, if you wish to, you can lie out there....”

She half rose to kiss me, to show her thanks, and I sat by her side as the pictures continued.

*Next on Voyager’s journey, the TV said, we’ll come to Titan, discovered in 1655 by the Dutch astronomer Huygens....*

“Titan,” she whispered, “the namesake of all of us. The first discovered.”

“Yes,” I whispered back. “But *this* is Rhea. See. On the screen now. The cratered surface....”

So the nights went on. Titan now filled Voyager’s sky while Phoebe dozed fitfully in my arms. I half-dreamed with her, seeing not just the globe on the screen, but its surface as well—its methane fountains vaporizing in orange haze, filling the air, its sparkling liquid nitrogen pools, its view of Saturn, peeking through clouds, like the moon of our own Earth seen after a storm.

And still she worsened. She didn’t even wake when Hyperion filled the screen. Two-faced Iapetus, black rock on one side and ice on the other, passed silently too, with Phoebe only stirring slightly. Then Phoebe, the moon—my Phoebe’s namesake—appeared, a glowing red point on the screen.

My Phoebe half-opened one of her eyes. I gazed at her lips as she tried to part them.

“See,” I whispered—I shouldn’t have said it, but seeing her paleness next to the image drove the words from my lips.

“See,” I told her. “Even your moon has more color than you do.”

“No!” she screamed. “All I see is blood color.”

She sat bolt upright.

I tried to calm her. Held her close to me. Shared her medicine—a half cup for each of us—just as before when she’d started at the passing of Rhea.

“It’s all right,” I told her. I kissed her cheek, startled myself at its coldness.

“No,” she said again. “Look at the blood.”

I closed my eyes, trying to imagine, but saw only darkness.

“Again, Enceladus. Let your mind reach out. Turn where you’re standing and look behind you.”

I did so. I felt her standing beside me. I turned as she did and suddenly saw the sky fill with redness.

“What is it?” I whispered.

“Disaster,” she said. “The miners of Rhea. A meteorite has struck their colony, breaking its dome. The air is rushing in....”

“Out,” I corrected. “Rhea is airless. They said on the TV....”

“They lied, Enceladus. Don’t you see? The miners are there *now*, not just in the future. But the air of Rhea is poison.”

“What can we do then?” I felt her push from me. Felt more than saw her fade into the distance.

“I am bound with Rhea. We both are. Not just with Rhea, but all of the moons, and all who live on them. But I cannot help them—I’m too weak already. You must go to Titan....”

I strained to listen as her voice faded, then came back again, like a radio signal in the far distance.

“...must journey to the surface of Titan without me, Enceladus. There is a Wizard who has a serum. A brilliant alchemist. Only with that can you save the miners. Only with that can you save my life with theirs....”

I no longer heard her. Instead I heard a ringing of chimes and a rushing of winds. I opened my eyes and saw I was hurtling through orange clouds, my ship’s rockets blazing.

Below me was rock. Rock, and nitrogen pools, and fountains.

I knew, somehow, where the ship’s controls were, and I steered to a landing.

I disembarked. I felt the wind whistling around my spacesuit, wondering how I could hear through its plastic-coated metal. I strode through jagged, red-colored mountains, across yellow plains. I swam frozen, brilliant blue rivers—I don’t know how, in my heavy clothing. Suffice that I did it.

I saw the animals. Dinosaur-like, green-scaled creatures that munched on crystal.

I came to a cave.

I threaded my way between two huge boulders and descended a twisting passage, my way lit by a red-orange glow. I came to a vast, level-floored hollow, domed over with purple and brown and gray rock. And I saw, his back to me, a giant clothed in robes as black as the empty space Saturn and its moons whirled through.

I wondered what to say. Then words came to me and, even though my faceplate was closed, I heard my voice echo as if in challenge.

“I am Enceladus, he who was born of his father’s lost blood. I seek the Wizard”—I knew his name now!—“the Wizard Iapetus, maker of humankind.”

“Then you seek your own brother,” the figure said, turning slowly. I realized as he said the words that I was a giant too. “You come to save Phoebe, our mutual sister, but you are too late. The serum is used up.”

“No!” I shouted. I stopped as Iapetus pushed back his hood. I gazed at a face as double-sided as the moon that bore his name, one half the white of the purest snow and the other dead black—the black of his clothing.

“No,” I said again, now in a whisper. “I come for the miners. The serum is for them. Through *them* I’ll save Phoebe.”

Iapetus laughed. “Don’t you see, my brother, that in my power is both death *and* life. I am the father of Prometheus, bringer of fire. The father of Atlas, who holds up the sky. The father of man, yes. But, just as I preside at birth, the death of all mankind is also mine to withhold or bestow.”

"I understand only that I need the serum." I lunged at Iapetus, striking with both fists. I forced him backward.

Iapetus raised his own hands to defend himself. "Wait my brother. You don't understand yet. Don't you know that death is needed—for in death is new life?"

I found myself armed now with sword and shield, while my adversary counterattacked with net and trident. The net of his words. I found myself tangled, then, with a shout, I shook them from me.

"If I must destroy you, so be it, Iapetus. I will have the serum. Or, if I cannot and Phoebe is doomed, then you must kill me too."

I rushed at Iapetus, striking blindly, pushing him backward once again. Without his net he was helpless before me. I lunged. I twisted. I opened his chest, his shoulder, his belly. I laughed in my triumph.

But still he struck back at me—one final blow.

"You don't understand yet. She's dead already."

I felt the trident's points tear the inner part of my thigh.

I felt myself falling.

I heard my brother's voice, far away. "It is not for you to attack me, Enceladus. For that I curse you: That you will recover. That you, the strongest of all my brothers, are doomed to live on...."

I woke to the memory of clashing chimes. To a rushing of air. I woke at Phoebe's side, clutching her coldness within my arms. I, the youngest of the sons of Uranus and Gaea, formed when my father's life splashed onto the ground of my mother.

I knew what I must do.

Slowly, painfully, feeling my wound stiffen with each step, I carried her body out into the woods, to the cabin I'd had built. I laid her gently on the couch I had furnished it with when I'd still hoped she might use it in her recovery.

I loosened her clothing, then kissed her softly.

The following morning I went to the city.

I sought Dr. Mimas, but, when I arrived at the building where his office should be, I found it boarded up. It didn't matter. I knew, if I looked, I could find a new source of absinthe elsewhere.

More important, I searched out a slaughterhouse that would sell me cows' blood and ask no questions. That became my new tonic. I found a medical supplier who sold me catheters and needles, tube arms, pressure bulbs and bottles. I bought a second recovery couch to set next to Phoebe's.

I knew our blood types matched. We had been tested some years in the past. And I had had a good education, including a smattering of medical knowledge.

Enough to do what I knew I had to.

That evening I began the first of Phoebe's transfusions. Her pulse, when I felt it, was still nonexistent, but now, at least, when I looked at her cheeks I saw traces of color. When the transfusion was done, we made love, my stroking as gentle as it had been the first time we'd done so.

Of course she didn't respond that night, or the next, or the next. But still, every evening, I gave her my blood, mixed with a tablespoon of absinthe bled into the catheter, then, every morning, renewed my own strength with the blood from the slaughterhouse. Blood and absinthe—Dr. Mimas's tonic. Semen. Life fluid. Just as my father had granted to me. At least her disease was now in remission.

And every evening, winter or summer, I opened the louvers in the roof of our pyramid cabin to show her the stars. I took to reading ephemerides so I could point out the position of Saturn.

In the fourth year, I built a telescope with a mirror so we could watch the moons together during our lovemaking. Happy enough her condition was stable.

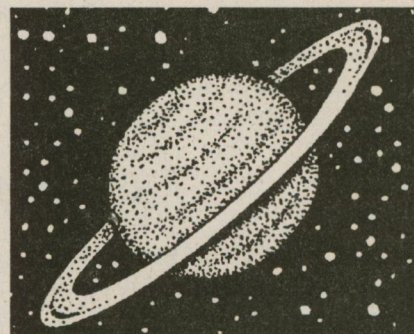
Oh, you wouldn't know me if you were to see me on the street now, even though we might once have been the best of friends. The nights, the transfusions, the love take their toll.

I've paled and I've lost weight. My skin peels in sunlight. The blood from the slaughterhouse—I need more and more now—I scarcely eat otherwise—brings me less strength now than when I first started.

My wound, after all this time, has not yet healed.

But Phoebe, ah, Phoebe....

Phoebe, of late, has shown signs of improvement. ■



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# THE SPOOK-BOX OF THEOBALD DELAFONT DE BROOKS

Avram Davidson

Illustrated by Kandis Elliot

*If he could, indeed, find the lost box!*

It was more than his theory, it was the very foundation of his belief, that if you were legally entitled to use a name containing the names of two very well-known people, then...sooner or later...it would result in some very good pieces of business getting thrown your way. It hadn't happened yet...well...not very good pieces of business. He collected rents on a number of properties, collected them for the owners, that is, and he sold the insurance policies to the same properties. He alas did not hold a power of attorney for any of the properties. Not as yet. And he had

managed to keep an apartment in one of the properties vacant for so long that old Miss Whittier had forgotten it was even rentable. And then—

"Eighty-five West Elm really needs a night watchman, Miss Whittier," he said.

"It *does*?" her voice had already begun to flutter.

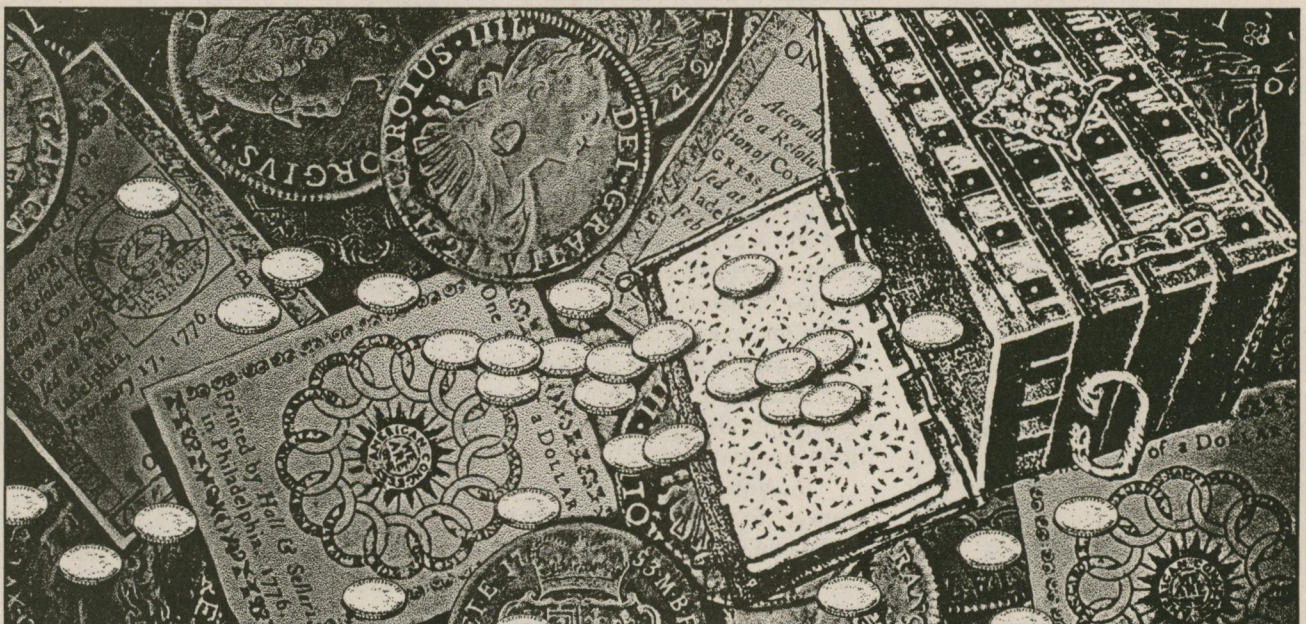
"Yes, it does. But it isn't going to get it. Tell you what I am going to do, Miss Whittier—"

"Ye-es?"

"I. Am going to give up the place I now have. And I. Will move in there. Will," and here he named

a sum about the third of his present rent, a rent which he was increasingly finding it inconvenient to pay. "—will that be all right, Miss Whittier?"

Miss Whittier would have undergone a slow course of the water torture rather than admit she really no longer had a good notion of what would be all right for the place (or any other place). "Oh... why I suppose..." Some last vestige of business sense entered Miss Whittier's aged mind. "Wasn't that about what those nice Van Dynes used to pay?" Was it necessary for him to remind her that the Van



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Dynes (they had been dead for decades) had actually occupied another apartment in another building? Theobald Delafont De Brooks didn't think it was.

He squinted a moment, deep in thought, then: "Oh, I have to hand it to you, Miss Whittier. For a minute there *I* had a hard time remembering just what the Van Dynes used to pay. Little bit less, Miss Whittier. Little bit less, they paid."

Another flutter. "Well, then, is that quite fair to *you*...Mr. De Brooks? To pay more than—"

But Mr. De Brooks begged her not to think about him. "The main thing, you see, is to have somebody living in that apartment. Apartment stays vacant, no curtains, no screens, no shades in the windows: gives the place a bad name."

Miss Whittier was never moved to ask how long the apartment in question had stayed vacant, or anything else pertaining to its possible bad name. "Why...then...I'm sure it will be just fine. *Thank you*—"

Very politely he brushed away her thanks. "Anybody wants anything, for example, at night: there I am. Never go out at night anymore. Except," he did want to be honest with her, his face said, "Thanksgiving. *Got to*." He breathed the magic words, *Family Dinner*.

Ever squeeze a drop of lemon on a live oyster? Remember what happened? That, more or less, is what happened to Miss Whittier. "Well, of *course*—why, oh, *certainly*, Mr. De Brooks! The very idea! that you for one moment or any reason shouldn't *think* of going—!"

"Don't like to leave the place alone, you see." Do *you* see? He hadn't even moved into the place yet, Thanksgiving was months away, already the owner was begging him not to give it a second thought.

*The prophets, where are they? And your fathers, do they live forever?*

And, bringing it up to date, do your owners live forever, either? It

would have been almost as easy for him to have gotten the apartment rent-free. But a man had to look at the future. Were he to have done so, and the cold eye of an executor or a cost-accountant looked at that No Rent arrangement—and not by any means could De Brooks have pretended he had acted as janitor—superintendent—engineer, so as to have justified the rentlessness: No. Whereas this way, if it were even mentioned, "Well, the late Miss Whittier very much wanted someone whom she knew very well to live in that apartment and, as she put it, 'Keep an eye on things...'" What could the heir...the banker...the whoever...say? At most, a slight grunt, and at worst, some small amount of time later, a civil letter on crisp paper to the effect that his services were no longer... but that was likely enough in any event. No camp lasts forever.

So *there* was one piece of good, if not very, very good, piece of business.

And although he did not know it, yet he—having a sixth or/and a seventh sense for such things—would have been not at all surprised to learn that a Certain Connection of Miss Whittier had, oh, some several years ago, at her own expense, obtained an independent genealogical report; from which we will cite just a bit, as follows:

The family line or lines of Mr. Theobald Delafont De Brooks himself are certainly traceable to 1820, and probably to 1800. Possibly as far back as 1787. There were quite a number of De Brookses in New York, and only one known progenitor, the Jacobus Aurelius De Broogh who had arrived from Bergen-op-Zoom in the Netherlands in 1643 and on whose great success in the Indian trade the De Brooks family fortunes were founded...so that a distant relationship to both Presidents is certainly probable, though now impossible either to prove or disprove. A further search, though perhaps more productive, would be much more expensive.

And at the words *more expensive*, the Certain Connection (certain...and suspicious) drew in her horns, bore the costs in silence, and never, ever said another word. Just as well.

Visitors and possible clients, gazing at the two large framed photographs, invariably asked on their first visit, "Are you related to *both* presidents?" and Theobald Delafont De Brooks would say, with a smile, "Shirt-tail cousins, you might say—" Adding, "We were the poor relations." And... *invariably*?...well...just in case the visitors and possible clients didn't ask, TDD would somehow always manage to get in an early reference to *Cousin Theo* and to *Cousin Grosvenor*, would laugh and add, "They stopped sending us the Christmas turkey after My Folks supported the other candidates." Who could fail to enjoy that not-quite-a-story? and who could fail to get the not-quite-point? —*High Family Connections...and...Fearlessly Independent People...*

But...really...were they?...weren't they? Mr. Quincy De Brooks was once semi-publicly asked this outright; rather smoothly said, "If they didn't have a lot of enemies, then we are probably not related;" rather smoothly passed on before further question time. Still—how could one but wonder? What names to be announced by trumpets! *Theobald De Brooks, President of the United States!* and *Grosvenor Delafont De Brooks, President of the United States!* Dead now, long dead, both of them, of course—but what about the descendants?

Q. Do you ever see anything of any of them, Del?

A. Nope. *Nope*. They don't push it. And *we* don't push it.

This was perhaps wise of Mr. Theobald Delafont De Brooks who had, anyway, a few other stories to tell. Not many.

Story Number One. When TDD's grandfather was a student in the seventh grade at the old Governor Daniel Tompkins School (long

obliterated), who should make a visit to said school but old T.D. himself: see an officious principal shove Del's grandfather forward, *Mr. President, here is a namesake of yours!* Well, you don't get to be President by asking *too* many dumb questions and so all that old T.D. said was, "I believe we may be related, then." "I believe we may, sir." Old T.D. grinned, made feint of offering the boy a cigar, and, amidst the genial laughter, briskly shook hands with him, and passed on along.

Story Number Two. Del's father did have the courage to send a letter beginning *Dear Cousin Grosvenor* congratulating GDD on his first election: back came another letter, from the same mold and form as all replies to all such letters, but beginning—mind you, mind you—*Dear Cousin Delafont*. Explain *that*, would you. They knew—almost spooky, as you might say.

In neither case: *No* invitation to come boating or swimming at Muskrat Sump. *No* invitation to go golfing or riding at Parkkill Ridge.

Oh well. Take what you can get. Hope for the Big Chance. Keep your powder dry. And—say?—don't knock it. On the strength of the Story Number One, Theobald De Brooks the distant, floated into a job offered by an uncle of the boy standing next to him during the handshake. And on the strength of the letter (framed) D. James De Brooks floated into a job given *him* by the local Committeeman: not much of a job, but it kept them in groceries and off Relief. *See?*

Maybe at one time they *had* been the poor relations. But for a long, *long* time, they hadn't even been that. Had Del's dad been merely boasting, swaggering, in giving his son the names, the given names, of both the presidential De Brookses? Or had he merely given what he had to give—

Were there any other family anecdotes? There were *no* other family anecdotes. Were there, then,

any family traditions...? any, even, family words or phrases, such as almost every family has? Well... this expression: *More money than six patroons*.... Theo. Del. De Brooks's grandfather sometimes used to say that. And, actually, for quite a while, the grandson had taken it for granted that a patroon must be a rich Irishman! Later he learned, long later, that a patroon had been a Hudson Valley landowner, a sort of squire, with a land-grant from the old Dutch or English governments. And *this* expression: did someone say, Say, guess what I found? a family answer was, *the spook box!* No explanation came with that. And *this* expression (and a little bit more): If the family was having a hot-dog roast or toasting marshmallows in the back-yard (the barbecue had yet to cross the Mississippi) and the fire didn't at first or at second burn too well, see Grandpa De B. grub for a cigar- or cigarette-butt or even a pinch of pipe-tobacco, stamp his foot, and say, with an air of mock solemnity something that sounded like *Skah-ootch!* and cast the bit of tobacco on the fire. And the fire did always seem to burn better. Once: Theo. Del De B.: "Grandpa, what does *Skah-ootch* mean?" Grandpa (once) "That's what the pow-wow man used to say." "Grandpa, who was the—" *Mrs. De Brooks*: "Pa, you are going to *burn* that frankfurter!" A low-scale squabble, but after that it (the trick) was seldom done. A few times, if an electric light flickered or the old vacuum-tube radio misbehaved, the boy did actually stamp his foot and cry "the magic word" and sometimes it did work. But his Mother didn't like feet being stamped in the house. So he quit doing it.

And the funny old yellow brick "from the old house in the Bowery"? Vanished. Dusty old thing. Forget it.

And don't think, either, that it was all peaches and cream and little anecdotes (even what little there were of them), having a famous

Name. Names. For one thing: If you're so much, *whutta ya doin' here?* If your name is De Brooks, why ain't chew rich? *How* often, merely to answer, What's your name? was to collect a sneer, a scowl, a jeer, jibe, explicit insult, sometimes—more than once—a poke in the ribs? Often. There was an army sergeant who had made his life a living hell, and—Ya don't *like* it? Write t' GDD! Well... doubtless there had been people who had hated George Washington... Millard Fillmore, for that matter.

Once, Theo (actually, he had more often been called Baldy) did put the question to his old man. "How come all we've got are the names?"

At once he saw that his father well knew the meaning of the question and only pretended his, "Huh? Whuddaya mean?"

"*They're* famous. We're not famous. They got *money*. We haven't got no—any—*money*. they're up on *top*. We're down at the *bottom*. *How... come...?*"

A weary expression. A sigh. "I dunno, Theo. I just don't know. How'd I know? Maybe one of us married the servant girl. Maybe one of us was a horse thief. Maybe we're illegitimate, or something And I'll tell ya somethin' else, sonny. My great-great-grandmother? She was a cousin to Commodore Aurelius Vandervelt. And it never even got none of us a job shovelin' coal on the old East Coast Steam Boat Line. They say that once she went to the Old Man's wife's funeral. And at the, ah, reception? *They* wouldn't even give her a glass of *sherry*. Said, 'No, this is just for the family.' And so she just turned around and went home. Big people don't like little people, and if they got the same name? seems like they like 'em even less. The, uh, *names?* Well... hold onto 'em. Who knows...."

And, before turning back to his newspaper, he added, "You're entitled to *them*, anyway."

So.

There had in those days been someone, at least *someone*, to whom the matter *had* meant something; his high school teacher, the virginal Miss Vark: "Are you planning to go to college, Theobald?"

"No money."

And Miss Vark had explained to him that there was a certain scholarship, he had long ago forgotten its name, "for the benefit of native-born American boys being of Holland Dutch descent." "I *think*," said Miss Vark, "that the part about the being of Dutch descent...which I am, too, Theobald...may actually be of more importance than the actual grades." Poor Miss Vark. Ancestry was no dowry. And, rather to his own surprise, there really was such a scholarship: that year there were three openings, and they all went to native-born American boys being of Holland Dutch descent, all of them having names like Vanderdam, Vanderzam, Vanderbam, and all of them of a more recent and perhaps more vigorous immigration, by way of Grand Rapids, Michigan. But good Miss Vark didn't stop there. *He* was fazed, but *she* wasn't. Her face an unaccustomed pink, she said to him, "I am going to write to Sophronia Vandervelt De Brooks," no need to explain who *she* was, you'd have to be illiterate never to have read about her; half way between the two lines of Presidential De Brookses—very famous...*very* charitable. And so, he hadn't meant to, he'd known better than to mention it to any of the kids, he told her of the great -great -grandmother who'd been Commodore Vandervelt's cousin. He left out about the snub and the sherry.

Miss Vark felt sure that this would clinch it...and *what* was the lady's maiden name? Dad De Brooks put his poor old head in his hands at the question, and said, "Jesus." It took a personal visit from Miss Vark to persuade him to look into the matter; in his Sunday suit he traveled via two changes on the subway to find his only living

great-uncle, who gave to the question the same pious reply. Great-uncle Greeley, however, was game. And took Dad De Brooks, via trolley-car, to the uttermost end of the wilderness, where miraculously there still survived, God knows how, an aged lady cousin, in an ancient cottage smelling of kerosene. She didn't even remember her cousin's great-nephew but she remembered the incident. "They wouldn't even give her a *glass of sherry!*" she exclaimed, as vivid to her as though it were yesterday. She went on to say a few vivid things about Old Aureley Chaw-Tobacco (as she called him), none of them to his credit: but—*what was the lady's maiden name?*

Long, long the ancient creature sat, from time to time murmuring *Now, don't mix me up*—and then—like a tongue of fire at Pentecost—"Phoebe Fisher! That's what it is! Phoebe Fisher! From Fishkill, New York!" The fire died down, leaving only age and suspicion: "Why do you want to know, Greeley?"

"Delly here, wants t'send his boy to the academy, and he hopes Soprony De Brooks'll give'm some money, they bein' distant double-cousins, as y'might—"

"She'll never do it! She'll give him nothing! Not a thrip, not a fip, not a shinplaster! All them old family connections?—*not-worth-a-continental!*" Very, very suddenly she stopped. Looked Del in the eye. Very slowly got up, fumbled through the Family Bible, extracted an envelope crumbling with age, and drew forth a splendidly engraved and antique five-dollar bill, so archaic that it was blue and not green. "I send this to your boy," said she. "Tell him that Millie Toten sends it."

"**S**ay, guess what I got, Theo?"  
"The *spook* box?"

**T**he five-dollar bill looked so odd that they bore it to the bank with trepidation. "Is this worth anything?" "It's worth five *dollars*," said the cashier, cheerfully. "Real

old-timer. Want it changed?"

It was a nine-days wonder; and, after much talk, bought Theo a pair of shoes. He needed them. Badly.

Primed with the name of Phoebe Fisher De Brooks of Fishkill, New York, and with whatever other information Miss Vark was able to find on her own researches—there was after all a rather large gap between Jacobus Aurelius De Broogh and John Quincy A. De Brooks, whose services with *the* Army of *the* Potomac had anyway earned him an honorable mustering-out—off the letter went. To be followed, in no haste, by one from Sophronia Vandervelt De Brook's secretary. To the effect that there were so many demands upon her employer's means and so many commitments had already been made that Miss De Brooks was absolutely unable to be of assistance even in regard to distant family ties, and that she hoped that Theobald would meet with all the success to which his merits might entitle him.

"Well, such a disappointment," Miss Vark observed. "Though rather a nice letter in its way, all the same."

Delafont James De Brooks said, "The old lady was right. Not worth a continental."

**W**hen you're on your own, and having nothing else to do in particular, you might as well sell insurance. In doing so, Theo left the Old neighborhood and moved into a rather better one where, anyway, there were no more—well, very few—insults. In fact, people...some people...seemed rather impressed by the double-barreled, the ancient and honorable name(s). One thing led to another. By and by he opened his own office, added the words *Real Estate* to his sign and calling card. In order to do that he'd had to pass an exam, yet nothing but the assistance of the sign painter and the printer was required to add the words *Business and*

*Financial Management.* Sometimes (often) he much felt that he was god-awful tired of the names and all, and that maybe he'd just change it to, say, Higgins...or, for that matter, to his mother's maiden name of Puckleman; the Pucklemans were cheerful outgoing urban yeomen, brewery deliverymen who had never looked a glass of sherry in the eye; asked, where had they come from? cried, *Off the pickle-boat!* and farther than that, did not and could not have cared less. But...somehow...Theobald Delafont Puckleman? And if it came to changing first and middle names as well, well really, there were just too many choices. So he held to his, such as it was, heritage.

Someone in his family, perhaps a grandmother still reluctant to accept that marriage into a glorious name had brought her no further to glory than a rather shabby house on a rather shabby street, had begun, long and long ago, an attempt to keep a scrap-book about people with The Name; but the effort did not persist—how could it?—no library in the world could have kept up with it. But some loose pages persisted here and there throughout the house: in the kind of old cardboard cartons which continue on in the cellar of almost every house, a nuisance, but no one wants to throw them away...in the backmost part of a closet... in the bottoms of drawers, along with an old shirtwaist, an old pair of long-johns, a fountain pen which had been awaiting a bladder transplant since 1920...and some of these must have followed (*must* have followed, for surely he would not have wanted to bother taking them) TDD from place to place in his various moves; most of them did not interest him any longer.

Now and then one would surface, a page from the extinct scrap-book, that is, would surface, like an old piece of shrapnel or a fragment of bone from a tooth which was no longer there. These had become familiar to him in his long and lonely hours waiting for The

Chance which never came, and when, unaccountably, one would rise and appear again, he would read it again, although he may have read it a dozen times before... Theobald De Brooks, Jr. had perhaps shot a rare antelope somewhere in Manchuria, say...James Q. De Brooks's yacht had been overdue but all's well that ends well...Grosvenor D. K. De Brooks III had been appointed to an office and the newspaper wondered if this newly-begun career would culminate in the presidency...just as certain cardinals were considered papable, so certain De Brookses were considered presidentiable (but no one had ever proposed appointing Theobald Delafont D. to any office, however minor). Interest in these appointees persisted, then flickered, then went out: twenty years later another one would come into focus...for a while. But no reporter or feature writer or political leader ever focused, however briefly, on Theobald Delafont De Brooks, because *nobody even knew he was there.* Nobody watched him during the long grey years while he grew more and more solitary and his wraith of a business just about sufficed to bring his two good suits to the dry-cleaners a few times a year and his six good white shirts to the French Laundry down the block.

At perhaps somewhat shorter intervals the classical old De Brooks homes at Muskrat Sump or Parkill Ridge were always good for a story; same, dim and thin as old tissue-paper by now, the faded dream that a Someone would appear, "Say, I'm Jim K. De Brooks! Mother and Dad think it's about time you paid us a visit... I've got the car outside." Through the years (decades) *the car* changed: it was a Stutz...a Star... a Caddy...a Kaiser...Edsel...Jag... but...somehow...it never really Got Outside. *Here.*

There was one old newspaper story in particular; unlike others, which tended to be cyclical, it seemed to have appeared in print

only once: and the scissors had missed the date: it was worn, torn, and faded: its headline was, MISSING TREASURE OF THE PATRIOT PATROON. A patroon, remember, was a sort of squire who held an old land grant from the Dutch or English governments; this particular patroon was Wouter Cornelius De Brooks, and he was a *patriot* because, unlike anyway *some* other patroons he remained steadfast to the Continental Cause, whose ultimate victory he did not live to see. The list of the treasure itself was so detailed that it must have been read even by King George while he helped himself to his breakfast beer and beef. And, except for 75 silver Pieces of Eight Royals, it was all in gold: escudos, guineas, louis d'or, doubloons. The Patriot Patroon, one season during the War of the Revolution, had in the presence of witnesses packed the treasure into a traveling-chest made of cedarwood and black bull's-hide and set off in his very own sloop from De Brooks Castle high above the lordly Hudson with the expressed intention of making his way to Philadelphia via the kills, creeks, rivers, and bays which lay outside of British Occupation, and, once arrived, to put said treasure at the disposal of the Patriot Government. One month later he turned up in York, Pennsylvania, "tired, hungry, muddy, bloody, and exceedingly confused." He had nothing with him save the clothes on his poor old back, and died a few weeks later, without ever having disclosed where he had been, what he had done, or what had happened to the carefully-listed Treasure. A contemporary source (said the old newspaper clipping) had darkly suggested that "the poor old man" (the Patriot was then fifty-five in age) "had somehow been waylaid by the British or the Tories and feloniously robbed." Three generations later some sad, sour Whig (this was *not* in the article, but TDD had found it in a letter at the Historical Society) commented, with who knows what mad motive,

that "Neeley De Brooks had really intended to send it by ship to be banked in France, but was made drunk and lost it at the craps;" fie upon the fellow who said so.

And, "is this all there is?" Theo asked the faded, quiet lady at the Historical Society. She thought for a moment. "Well, there is this," she said, removing a manila envelope from a file. Within lay something between translucent sheets; removed, *this* appeared to be a page from an old, *old* letter, so stained with time and water and *God-knows* what, that only a few words were, theoretically, legible. And Theo could not have read even them, had not the letter-page been accompanied by a conjectured reading of those words, typed on even-now-yellowing paper by an old-time typewriter. As follows:

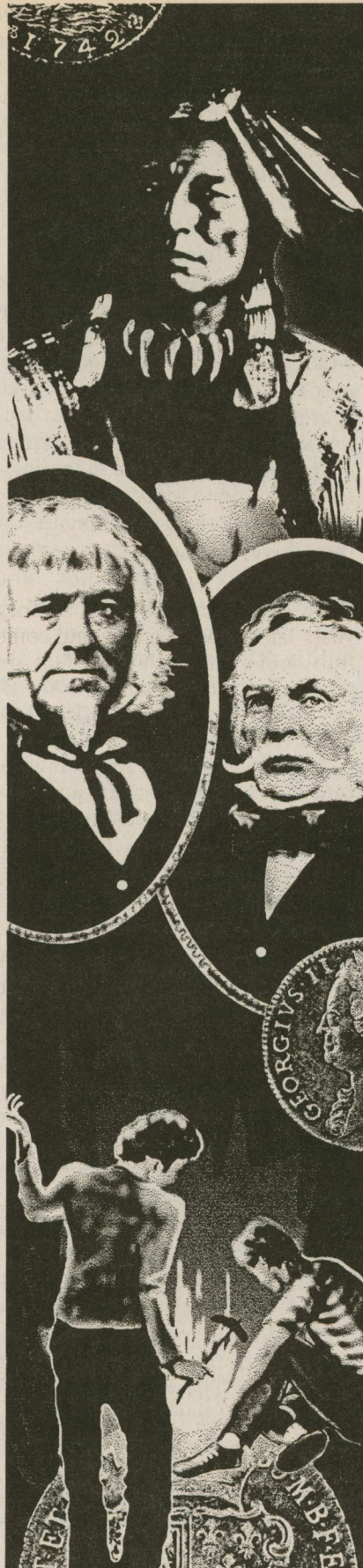
.....cadet of [the] fam[ly?].  
.....addlepa[te?] or  
drunkar[d?] .....strong[ly]  
defen[ded?] himself, but  
cou[ld?] or [wou?]ld produ[ce?]  
no evi?]dence.....but never  
shewed any Signs of  
[ac?]crued Wealth,  
so.....althoug[?] tis true that  
a Fool and his money are  
soon.....

Also in the old-fashioned type-writing:

This paper was certainly manufactured between 1820 and 1829 or 30, but the Penmanship is of the late 18th century, Mr. Stuyvesant believes it relates somehow to the Patriot Patroon. —G.D.

"Mr. Stuyvesant, of course, has been dead for some years," said the faded, quiet lady; "and so has Mr. Gilbert Dawes, our former Director. Our budget," she concluded, "does not allow us to submit the paper to any of the later scientific tests."

That was *that*.



And, last and last of all, was *this*, from a letter of Phillip Hone, Mayor of a then-much-smaller New York City, both in population and in area, say a million years ago, give or take a quarter of a million; addressed to a Mr. Gansevoort, Officer aboard the Ship *Nepera*, care of the Office of the Seamen's Chapel, Honolulu, Sandwich Islands: skip most of it; stop at this: "*Yesterday was the funeral of Aurelius De Brooke, son of the Patroon, last of the old Indian Traders, of whom I recall my Gt. Aunt Maria used to say, That he knew more of the ways of the Powhew Men than was lawful for a Christian to know, I cd not go, having a bad cold.*"

Did the old Patroon learn how to cast the always at least semi-sacred tobacco into a not very flourishing fire and cry *Skah-ootch?*

Useless to ask. Useless even to wonder.

And, just as no young and handsome and famously-De Brooks-grinning distant cousin had ever appeared to invite poor Theo to tennis and tea, just so no unknown figure had ever appeared out of the dusk to hand him the map and the key to the traveling-chest made of cedar and black bull's-hide.

And the years rolled on and he had rolled on with them, explaining endlessly to anyone who would listen why their family *needed* that extra protection which only the Special Indemnity Policy offered; and to collect the rents for Miss Whittier and a few other ancients who still thought that he went annually to Parkill Ridge or Muskrat Sump for Thanksgiving Dinner to be made privy to the secrets of America's almost-royal family. Whereas actually he went over to his mother's folks, where he was loudly and cheerfully greeted as *Pres-i-dent-De-Brooks!* (once: then the annual joke was over), and cheerfully squeezed into a place at the crowded table where the only political philosophy

expressed was that fingers were made before forks; and lavishly poured many glasses of whatever beer the Pucklemans were currently contracted to deliver

Once, out of the mists, an elderly man in a high-crowned fedora such as Warren G. Harding might have worn at the Convention of 1912 (the sweat-band was *very* sweaty, though; even its sweat-stains had sweat-stains) and a once-elegant suit with matching vest—that is, the spots on it matched those on the jacket and pants—had visited TDD in his office. The visitor glanced carefully at him, glanced carefully at the two framed photographs, made him a ponderous nod. “Yep!” said he. “You’re a De Brooks for sure!” His faded blue eyes had a sort of film over them and there were little traces of yellow gum at the corners and his complexion was as grey as his suit.

“I...am...a Hammerson! Augustus Hammerson, Minister of Marine under John Adams? [Was *this* the face to launch a thousand ships and—] Great-uncle, four times removed, in the di-rect line!” And he leaned back, awaiting the effect. “Can call me Gus,” he said.

“Gus,” said Theo, obediently. And, after a moment, added, “Well. well. well.”

“Wrong side of the *tracks!*” exclaimed his visitor, suddenly and bitterly. “Won’t even give me the time of day! —Suppose it’s sort of the same with you, I guess,” he concluded, in a not-quite questioning tone. “All of those fancy-dancy De Brookses, hand in glove with the Big Bankers, hey.”

Theo said, slowly, “Well...”

And Gus Hammerson, after expressing his own grievances, which were many, went on to invite TDD to attend an informal get-together of a group of Real Americans interested in purifying the political system and restoring things the way they used to be and the way they ought to be: “No Irish need apply,” said he. And gave another ponderous nod.

“Apply our united *strength*,” said he. “Get some of those good political plums for ourselves!” said he. And, after some more such talk, asked TDD if he had a cigar, then borrowed a dollar to get one, then took his leave, still nodding deeply.

TDD, after a lifetime of ungratified hopes and increasingly entrenched disappointments, was no longer really sure of what he really wanted. But he was sure that it was not to become a part of a would-be cabal of unpensioned former railroad telegraphers, retired secretaries of down at the heel institutions, bankrupted salesmen of the bonds of obscure municipalities: seeking to revive the ghost of the Know Nothings and secure for themselves a share of the openings for U.S. vice-consulates and inspectorates of intestate properties, to which their descents from militia officers of the War of 1812 obviously entitled them. He opened his office door to let a little air in, and wrote the dollar off as charity.

—Was *that* how he seemed to others? he wondered—and the wondering of it gave him a very sharp pain whenever he thought about it: and, after that, he thought about it often.

Not very many months after that Old Miss Whittier died, leaving him—surprisingly—a \$1,000 Liberty Bond. Her nephew and niece, it was very plain, deeply begrudged him this trifle; but, inasmuch as Miss Whittier’s will had specified that if any of the heirs contested the will, such contestants were to receive the sum of \$25 each and nothing more, decided to let him carry it away as spoil. As then, one hoped they neither of them broke a leg in their haste, sold all the Whittier properties to a syndicate with offices in Zurich and Hong Kong The syndics sent TDD a nicely-worded letter expressing appreciation for his long services, for which their plans however....

Having lost his apartment in Miss Whittier’s West Elm building, and not feeling quite ripe for yet

another major move, Theobald Delafont De Brooks sold some of the furniture, gave some away to an eleemosynary organization whose bands had, now and then, briefly brightened his boyhood; and moved a very few items (such as, for example, a folding screen and an army cot and some blankets and sheets) into his office. He considered that what he would henceforth save on house rent would, if he were lucky, outweigh the increasing costs of dry-cleaning and finished shirts, and so on. It also came to pass that a morning meal consisting of a little orange juice and a little vodka not only cost less than a heavy greasy breakfast however traditional (and what had tradition ever done for Theobald Delafont De Brooks?) but that he felt rather better afterwards. Slowly going over these matters in his mind one night as preparation for unfolding the cot, he gazed—as one engaged in a religious ritual which no longer greatly attached him but which was very much a part of his routine—at the large framed oval photographs: President Theobald De Brooks, the Hero of the Pampas War; President Grosvenor Delafont De Brooks, who presided over the nation during more perilous times (happy era! whose major enemy was *Spain!*)—

—came a knocking at the door—

“Come in!”

No one could have looked less like a raven than the decent-looking, tired-looking woman who entered, a woman of about the same age as Theo. Woman who at once saw the photographs, at once recognized them. Was at once impressed. Then, “Am I talking to Mr. De Brooks?”

“You certainly are.” Well...he certainly *was*. *Wasn’t* she? The woman (really, he thought of her as “the lady”) looked at him carefully. Her face, somewhat faded, but fairly pleasant, asked a very over-familiar question. “Shirt-tail cousins,” said Theo. *Didn’t* feel like rest of the routine at all, at all. “What can I do for you, Mrs.—?” (Had to be *Mrs.*,

she wore a wedding ring and was not of the generation to be a *Ms.*)

"Thatcher. Ella Thatcher. Widow of Bob—Robert Thatcher—I married my cousin, didn't even get to change my last name." How brief, the dry, wry smile, anticipating the oh *God* how foreseeable remark which she must have heard a hundred thousand times: and weary of it as he of the one which he—). They shook hands. "Mr. De Brooks, have you ever heard of... Thatcher's Storage?" Her manner was a bit embarrassed, a bit defiant, a bit irresolute, and...though rather less...a bit hopeful.

TDD was not very used to women (and certainly not respectable women) calling on him late at night; he was just a bit embarrassed, certainly more than a bit puzzled; politeness won, however. "That-cher's...Storage..? Yes! Browning Street! Isn't that—"

Ella Thatcher laughed briefly. "You've seen that old sign, the one painted on the side of the old Odeon Building by the railroad tracks. Why, that advertisement, it's been there since the Year of One! My goodness! We moved, the firm moved, as a matter of fact, in 1930. To 635 Oldham." She seemed rather pleased: however obsolete the sign, it had at least—

"Well, Mrs. Thatcher. I'll be glad to sell you some insurance, or—" He *would* be glad. He would be surprised, too.

Ella Thatcher again gave her short laugh. "We're going out of business. Did you ever hear of Mullet River, Florida? Just a wide place in the road, the town, can't even call it a town. I own a couple of little bungalows there, and that's where I'm going, just as soon as I wind things up here. Got my social security, going to catch and sell bait. Bob taught me how to load a hook and hold a net when we were just kids. I have a book about a hundred ways to cook fish...."

"Sounds great." It *did*.

"Yes? Do you think so? Well, I think so, too. The place is just too far from the nearest fire hydrant, I

couldn't *get* insurance...come on down, then, I'll rent you the bungalow out behind for almost nothing, just for the company. It's on, oh, a sort of canal. Quiet."

Quietly, "Why are you going out of business, Mrs. Thatcher?"

Mrs. Thatcher sighed. "Well, people just don't *store* things the way they used to. And...seems like the government, and the Unions, they are just making it harder and harder for a body to stay in business. Taxes, my God, the taxes! And...then...the place's got about seventeen mortgages on it, and my brother-in-law, he owns sixteen of them. You know how long we've been in business, Mr. De Brooks? No...I suppose not...I sort of thought, you being a real old family, you might have heard something. Well, the fact is, we don't *know* how long we've been in business! A lot of those old records, they were burned up, about the time of the Civil War. That's when the last Mr. Simkins, he married... his daughter married...my great-grandfather, he was named Robert Thatcher, too. Before that," her voice had taken on a slight sing-song rhythm, and TDD formed the notion that perhaps Mrs. Thatcher had recited this history many times. "...before thaaat, it was called The Great Repository. How's that for a name, The Great Repository? Anyway, to come to the point. Cleaning out the place, way down in the sub-basement, I come across this great big box—"

"A box?" TDD's heart gave a sudden thump.

"Great big box. My hunch, you know if you've been in the same business all your life, you sort of get hunches sometimes about things, and my hunch, is that inside the box there's maybe another box. Or something. And, on the *box*, it's painted with the word, the name, I mean...."

"De Brooks."

The two of them had spoken the word simultaneously. They chuckled. Then stopped. Was there, very suddenly, a slight but definite drop in the temperature?

"See, maybe you *do* know something about it. And besides the name there's a number, but the number doesn't *mean* anything—Well: maybe it meant something to Simkins, and maybe it meant something to The Great Repository. But it doesn't mean a thing to Thatcher's. I mean, it-is-*old*...the box."

TDD nodded. "And you want to clear it out...and close up, I see."

Mrs. Thatcher, speaking with rather more confidence, said that she had written to every De Brooks in the book. Maybe because it was because she had no more letterheads and didn't see any reason to *get* any more and had just written in ink on plain paper and used just plain envelopes.... "Or maybe they just thought I was trying to *rook* them, I don't know. But, do you know what? *Not one of them answered*. Not a single *one*."

"I believe you," Theo said, with great sincerity.

"I never wrote *you*, Mr. De Brooks, because you, you're in a different phone book, here. Just, tonight, thinking it over, I did remember that I did once see your name when I was driving past. So...well...so...Here I *am*."

Very quietly, Theobald Delafont De Brooks asked, "What's the bill?"

Ella Thatcher took a piece of paper from her purse, started to look at it, started to speak, then looked at it again, and then read aloud, "Three thousand, five hundred and thirty-five dollars and thirty-five cents." And she looked at TDD, slightly diffident, slightly embarrassed, slightly defiant, and withal: somewhat hopeful.

It flashed across TDD's mind that, on something which had been in storage so long that no one knew how long it had been in storage, and the very records of which had been burned over a hundred years ago that the bill as announced could represent nothing but a pious hope; he said, "Will you take a \$1,000 Liberty Bond in full settlement?" Surprise and delight moved across Ella Thatcher's face, and so, in a second,

did a slight shadow.

"—that will cover moving it over here...and we won't need to mention a thing to your brother-in-law—"

In an instant they were shaking hands.

In twenty minutes they were in a bar for which *dim, drab, sleazy* were inadequate qualifiers. "Red." (Mrs. Thatcher speaking.) "Red. Want to help us move a *box*?"

"Gimme twenny dollars," said Red, "and I'll move the Moon."

The warehouse truck was old, it was, for a truck still in service, very old. But it, with the dolly, Red, Ella Thatcher, and TDD, made no hard task of transportation. By midnight they had moved it into TDD's office. Red received his \$20, was *gone*, leaving only the thought of a thirst for beer.

"Does that do it?" asked Mrs. Thatcher.

"That does it," said TDD. He opened his (mostly-empty) old safe, removed the manila envelope, slid the bond out for swift inspection, handed it over.

"Lots of luck," said Ella.

"Lots of luck," said TDD.

And yet she did not move to go. He made no move to hasten her, eager though he was to be at work on the crate.

"Well..." she said. Gave her purse a nervous pat, as though perhaps a bit afraid she might lose it. "Well..." she said, again. "Honestly, I should have told you honestly before...although I *did* come across the thing just a month or so ago, well, I had *heard* of it before. Bob mentioned it. My father and my uncle and *their* father mentioned it. And I'll tell you what they called it." She stopped suddenly. He had felt his face change. She had seen it change.

"The spook box," he said.

Everybody has read of someone's jaw dropping. Hers now dropped.

After a moment it was back in place.

"Well, I've heard the expression, too. But I...we...never knew

what it meant," he said. "What *does* it—?"

She had somewhat recovered. He saw her swallow. But she did not ask for a glass of water, or even if she might sit down. She was *game*. "Well, it was an old family story. I mean, *old*. It was a... 'now you see it and now you don't' sort of thing. Every now and then it would turn up. By the time it would take for someone to go and tell about it, by the time someone would come back, it was...well... *gone*. As though it had some kind of a hex on it."

Theo said, "Maybe he had cheated the pow-whaw man on a bale of furs, or something. Or maybe *his* father had. They didn't get rich buying cheap and selling dear, that's for sure. *Well*. Guess we'll never know."

She agreed that, probably, they never would. "But when I saw it and touched it myself, I knew that if there really had been a hex! on it, the hex was really off it now. Woman's intuition; I *really* have to go." And she really went.

*Sometimes dreams come true.* Among the (few) things which TDD had brought with him in his latest move was the old toolbox, its last remembered use being the dismantling of a hen-house: "It *smells*, is 'why,'" said Mrs. Delafont James De Brooks, nee Puckelman. The box was far more well-built than the hen-house had been, and it must have taken him an hour to get it open, his heart beating, beating, beating. *How* many years? Over three hundred years. *What* did he have to show for it? A lifetime of unrealized hopes. And many sly tricks, most of which never worked. *How* was he going to handle the matter? Some of the gold coins he would sell in Boston. Some he would sell in New York. Some in Philadelphia. Some in Baltimore. No dumping. And then he would catch a plane. Where to, a plane? Jamaica... Barbados... Curacao...and...Ella...?

He never doubted for a minute what, exactly, was inside the box.

He was right.

Mrs. Thatcher was right, too.

The story of how the traveling-chest made of cedar-wood and black bull's-hide got packed into a snug box and how it found its way into The Great Repository and what had happened to the poor Old Patriot Patroon and why it had lain abandoned for almost two centuries would never, certainly, now be known. And as for the rich De Brookses, screw the rich De Brookses. They had had their chance. Chances.

And maybe the pow-whaw man *taught* the Patriot Patroon the hex.

The chest was easier to break into than the heavy outer box had been. The black bull's-hide crumbled easily. The cedar was sturdy, but the builders had not built it precisely snug, and the crowbar fitted between the gaps. Theo felt a slight difficulty in breathing; there was fortunately a bottle kept in case of emergencies; as he sipped, these words came into and ran through his mind: Seventy-five silver Pieces of Eight Royals, and the rest all in gold: gold escudos, golden guineas, golden louis, gold doubloons: every one of the rightful heritage of Theodore Delafont De Brooks.

*And sometimes they don't.*

The treasure chest of the Patriot Patroon contained not a brass farthing nor a pewter shilling nor two copper pence, and certainly neither silver nor gold. Witnesses had seen that it had once been packed with metal money. But Wouter Cornelius De Brooks had not been called the *Patriot* patroon for nothing; it was not in word alone that he had supported the Continental Congress: he had trusted in its currency as well; and sometime during that mysteriously missing month he had exchanged every single piece of hard money for paper money, and the fruits of this exchange filled the chest. How unpatriotic, then, how cruel, on the part of whoever it was who had first used the phrase, *Not worth a continental*.



The Continental Congress had been gallant.

But it had not stuck around to pay.

The ancient, the august, the almost-noble house of De Brooks, for reasons which Theobald Delafont had never known and would never know, had smitten him, innocent as he was, more than one blow: and this one more and greatest blow, it had waited more than two hundred years to smite.

The greatest.

But the last. Had he, though, been entirely innocent? Had he not wasted his life on a dead claim to a dead name? Was there not, waiting in the chest, one message of great worth? *Lay thy burden down*, it seemed to say. It had to say *something*, didn't it? He spent another while neatly dividing the old paper money into two equal portions, and in neatly wrapping and addressing them. One to Muskrat Sump. And one to Parkill Ridge. And in the upper left-hand corner of each he wrote, *Wouter Cornelius De Brooks*. It was morning by now, the post office would soon be open. And...then...? Mullet River was so small that he could not even find it on the map in the Atlas.

But he could look for it, on or off the main-traveled roads. There was lots of time. ■



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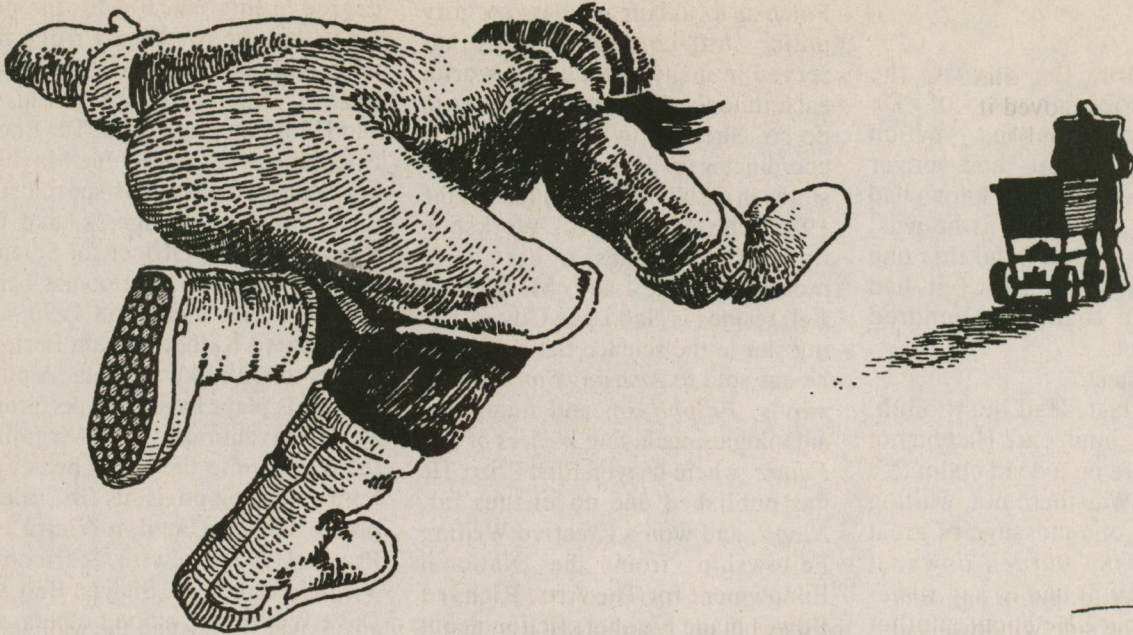
## The Writers in This Issue

**Cathy Ball** retired from the Air Force as a captain and base security police shift commander. She has served in many parts of the world, each time the first woman officer to do so. She is now the operational coordinator for a chain of used bookstores in Oklahoma, and attended the 1983 Clarion Writers' Workshop through the kindness of her grandmother, Lucille Land. **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, *Nicoji*, and 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*. His first published story was chosen for Year's Best Fantasy and Horror #6. Like "The Judges of The Secret Court," it is part of a longer work in progress. **Avram Davidson** is, of course, the Avram Davidson who has been delighting readers for nearly half a century. He is the award-winning author of 24 books, including *The Phoenix And The Mirror* and *Vergil in Averno*, and many collections of both fiction and nonfiction. He was the editor of *The Magazine of Fantasy and Science Fiction* in the 1960s, and has won an Ellery Queen's Award, a Hugo, an Edgar, and the World Fantasy Award for lifetime achievement. That does not begin to describe his accomplishments, but it serves to describe, roughly, the literary career of a major talent. **James S. Dorr** has appeared in *L. Ron Hubbard Presents Writers of The Future*, *Alfred Hitchcock's Mystery Magazine*, *Aboriginal SF* and *Pulphouse*, to name only a few of his many fiction sales. He has also published a number of articles, and *Towers of Darkness*, a poetry chapbook. **Kathleen Ann**

**Goonan** was for seven years a Montessori teacher, and in all spent 13 years as a teacher. She has a degree in English. But for the past six years, she has been writing full time, with appearances in *Asimov's*, *Amazing*, *Interzone*, *Strange Plasma* and *F&SF*, among others. Tor Books is looking at her novel. **Joe Mayhew** is a Senior Acquisitions specialist in the Library of Congress, and the Recommending Officer for Science Fiction. He is also a cartoonist, being nominated for a Hugo in 1990, and has painted Katherine Ann Porter's casket to look like a piñata. A number of his plays have been performed at SF conventions. "Lost Virginia," the overture to the novel he is currently working on, is his first sale of prose fiction. **Carolyn Nicita** is a Provo, UT, housewife. A friend of Virginia Baker, M. Shayne Bell and Dave Wolverton, among others, she has been studying writing for some years. She wishes to thank the Confederation writer's workshop, the Xenobia writer's group, and Orson Scott Card for their advice on "Recycling," which is her first professionally published story and her second sale. **Barry Reynolds** grew up in Patrick County, Virginia, and still resides in Rocky Mount. He is currently a collection development librarian for the Blue Ridge Regional Library in Martinsville, a fact which should give pause to readers of "Auto Da Fe," his second sale. His first was to *L. Ron Hubbard Presents Writers of The Future* in 1991. "Auto Da Fe" was written, overnight, at the WOTF workshop that year, a fact which definitely ought to give us all pause. **William R. Warren, Jr.**, lives in a grand old Victorian haunted house in the Pacific Northwest, with his college sweetheart, Joy, an artistically inclined son, Robert, an orange tomcat named Huckle, and a cocker spaniel named Lady. "Out of The Deep" is his first fiction sale. ■



*For Cray, Rat would abandon everything*



# RECYCLING

Carolyn Nicita

Illustrated by Bob Hobbs

At the habitable end of the dome, near the colony's only mine, Rat ducked behind a pile of coal slag and watched the commissary. If she could steal food and get it to Cray to keep him from dying, she would try to think of what to do next.

Second shift was over; eleven workers emerged from the dark roar of the mine and coal processors. Some approached the furnaces and became visible as they stood, shuffling their feet, raising their hands toward the orange light. Others passed under the incandescent bulb and got in line, waiting for the commissary to open.

She saw them read the notice on the chalkboard mounted on its wall:

ATTENTION: ALL AUTOMATED  
TRANSIT IS NOW SHUT DOWN.  
THOSE LIVING FARTHER THAN A  
HALF KILOMETER FROM THE  
MINE WILL RELOCATE TO NEW  
LIVING QUARTERS.

The people read it and said nothing.

Cray wouldn't like it, she thought. That meant the workers would now have to carry coal and supplies. Cray would go over and erase the sign, pick an argument with the transportation controller, even take it to Brunner if he had to. Except he'd been put in custody.

She had found him, just two hours ago, after looking for three days. The controllers were holding

him in a closet off to the side of the assembly hall. The guards had ripped seats from the assembly hall's floor and piled them in front of a closet, barricading Cray inside it. Out of the light, barely illuminated, had been three people. They had moved and sounded like two guards and Brunner, the head controller. She hadn't seen any way to get Cray out at that moment, so she'd come back through the tunnel to here, the living area at the edge of the shell—or the Enclosing Dome of Zoroaster Colony One, as Cray called it—to get food. Once she got it she'd go back, when there were fewer guards, less chance of being stopped after they'd escaped. She worried about how they would get food once they were out. But

she'd be with Cray. He'd tell her what he needed, and she would find it; the same as before. They'd be all right then.

The controllers had shrunk the commissary since last time she'd been here, and had moved it next to the lab. It looked more like a booth. Rat watched the lab door. After eight minutes it banged open and the guard entered the lighted space. He carried the stores for the shift: food—lipids, amino acids, saccharides—as well as clothing, mostly nylon, all made by synthesizing hydrocarbons from coal tar. The guard opened the commissary's only door and entered. He closed the bottom half of the door, and began distributing supplies through the top half.

Rat approached the building, keeping away from the glow of the light bulb, trying to ignore the stink from the lab. The side windows had been covered with corrugated metal, but maybe she could fit through that gap between the sheetrock of the commissary and the wall of the lab, which served as the back wall of the commissary.

The Lantz twins were in line. They were complaining, as usual. This time the controllers had discontinued working on particle insulation. They still believed the controllers could find a way for people to survive outside the dome.

She knew they wouldn't find a permanent solution to the survival problem in her lifetime, if ever. Why did they tell everybody to work on the survival problem? The information center had been closed to everyone but controllers and friends ever since she could remember. Even those allowed into the center couldn't find a solution. There was no solution, not since the petroleum had run out, two hundred years ago. Her information center experience had taught her that, at least.

The last in line was the old man who stuffed his cap with fine grey ash to keep his bald head warm. The ash kept sifting down onto his collar. As he stepped up to the window, Rat squeezed between the walls, and slid through.

She was too big for the gap; the walls vibrated. She froze, hoping the guard wouldn't notice. He looked up at the shivering door frame, and as he did, Rat slipped behind him and reached for the food on the back shelf.

The guard turned. He saw her and picked her up by an arm and leg and tossed her out the door.

Rat hit the grimy pavement on her ribs. "Work next time," she heard from inside. The people looked away, but tightened up the line to keep their places.

Idiots, she thought.

Rat was supposed to have reported to the mine today, now that Cray had been arrested and she, Retsi his student, had been barred from the information center. Rat the scrounger, once again.

She got up and tried to push into the line, but the guard raised a copper pipe in warning. The controllers knew she hadn't worked. Rat ran into the dark.

Now what do I do? she wondered. I'm not working for those parasites.

She passed the living area, away from the mine. The technicians must have added ash to the barricade around the area since she'd been gone; the sounds were damped. To the right, people were talking at the controllers' post. She avoided the dim light, treading silently as she headed down the ramp into the tunnel to check on Cray.

Rat softened her footsteps—they echoed too loudly in the tunnel. They wouldn't kill him, would they? Capital punishment, even for sedition, was illegal. It would be just like some of those controllers, though, to take Cray, the one who opposed their new policy of sending useless people to the recyclers, and send him to the recyclers.

How long had it been since he'd eaten? Probably three days, since the day she'd been kicked out of the information center and told to work in the mines. In that time she'd eaten all the food she had hidden. She wondered if air was boiling in his stomach, too.

I've got to get to him before he dies, she thought.

She pulled off a mitten and checked the time by touching the hands of her watch—a windup with a soft tick and an alarm. She'd used wire to hang it around her neck after the chain broke. The clock had a lid with a sun engraved on it. The trip through the tunnel had taken her fourteen minutes, so far. Cray had given her the watch. He said that if she took care of herself and slept at regular intervals, her body rhythms would work better and maybe she wouldn't get the sleeping sickness.

She half walked, half ran, guiding herself by the echoes of her footsteps.

The echoes ahead became erratic—the transit station was coming up, its platforms on the right. She felt for the rail with her left foot, hopped over it, touched the wall and went on.

Ahead of her, something squeaked. Was someone coming? She stopped. Silence. She heard it again. The squeak of the recycler's cart, going through the tunnel to serve the meal to the information center workers. Her mouth started to get slimy with saliva. But she didn't work at the center any more.

Rat remembered Cray asking if she ever found the food he'd left her. She never had. She'd found the fuel, though. He'd hidden it by her figures—piles of scraps she'd built outside the complex dome, away from dangerous people. She'd built them to keep her company when she was small and on her own. It was near those figures that she'd finally let Cray get close enough to ask her if she would be his student.

She decided to try to steal from the cart. She had done it before, tiptoeing, waiting until the cart passed right in front of her, and feeling for a pot on the cart's shelf.

The cart neared the end of the tunnel.

She heard an inhaled snort. The technician had a cold. Good, she thought, maybe his ears are congested. As silently as she could, she pushed her running speed, started

getting closer to the cart. She veered around the cart, near the right wall. Too near. A stud poking out of the tunnel wall caught her coat and ripped it.

"What was that?" A click. Light blinded her. She ducked past the cart and ran.

The tunnel's echoes muffled in front of her. She climbed up the exit ramp and headed for the assembly hall. The information center was on the way. She would get hit if she tried to enter, but she wanted to know. As she neared the information center foyer, she heard a conversation within. She ducked behind a corner, next to a knee-high pile of discarded thermoelectric generators, somebody's failed experiment.

"Black lung, definitely." She recognized the voice of Andrys. His bloodshot eyes would half-close as he spoke. "Freezing is easy."

"How about cancer of the scalp?" Luda, Rat guessed. "That has to be the nastiest way to go."

"They have some cream for that in the lab."

"Yes, if you're Chief Controller or a lab worker."

Rat peeked in. She could see part of the board in the information center.

*Population By Age:*

0 - 12	=	32
13 - 18	=	17
19 - 35	=	134
36 - 68	=	221
<hr/>		
Total	=	404

Last time the chart had totaled 405. Hadn't it? Was it Cray who'd died?

The cart squeaked faintly behind her.

She almost expected, when the cart came, that Cray would stop it right here at the entrance. He'd open the door, see her and invite her in. "Give Retsi some food," he'd say. All the controllers would glare at Brunner while Cray picked off two plates and balanced one over to Rat.

The squeak was approaching. The cart's light was still on.

She backed off behind a corner and listened. The cart went to the door and was admitted.

Rat retreated down the corridor. She climbed the stairs back to the assembly hall. The light was gone. She maneuvered around the chairs and entered the closet. Cray's scent was ambient, but Rat could hear no breathing. She felt the space inside. No one was in the closet. Rat almost cried.

Then she thought, maybe everything's normal again. Maybe if she went to sleep and woke up, worked at the mines and got something to eat, maybe she'd find out Cray had returned to work in the information center, but the workers didn't want her around any more, so they were doing this. That explanation made sense.

She left through the arched doorway and followed a lower portion of the wall until it stopped. One heating duct had its steel grate removed for recycling. She climbed down into it. Stay here? she wondered. Too warm, somebody might come. A door had been placed at the end of the duct. It opened when she pulled. This was bad—what if someone slept here?

She listened for a long time, but heard no movement, nothing but the coal crusher faintly pounding half a kilometer away. She went in. The room smelled of body odor. She took off her mitten for a minute. With her fingers she followed the designs carved into the stone walls, and, where the blocks met, the horizontal and vertical cracks. Most of the fixtures had been removed, used as fuel or recycled. Because of its ornate designs, she guessed the building had been constructed during the time the Wasters had control (on thinking this she was supposed to spit on the floor, but she didn't bother).

She began to be satisfied with the room. She examined the floor. She slid her gloves and boots along the smooth surface. In the far corner, she found a woven mat made of natural hair. No one would have left that. They were still here.

Maybe an exit led out the back. Some buildings she'd explored had back exit. She found a corridor on the far side of the room and entered. A room adjacent to the corridor smelled;

it had been used as a toilet. She tiptoed past and examined the corners....

Someone grabbed Rat by the neck and threw her to the floor. Sharp metal pressed her throat. "Don't move," she heard. A hand touched her face and explored it. Rat tried to judge the location of the assailant's eyes so she could jab them if the knife were ever removed.

"Oh, it's Retsi." The gravelly female voice of Lane, not a guard. She was an information center worker. She'd worked in the center before Rat had studied there. "You have to be on your guard here. Perfectly nice people get crazy in the dark, when no one's around."

Rat thought they were normal in the dark; they just pretended in the light.

Lane let go.

Rat stood but said nothing. So this was where the female controllers have moved, she thought. Well, they can live where they want.

She backed away, and ran down the corridor.

Lane yelled behind her. "Sorry about Cray."

What does she mean by that? Rat wondered.

Rat ran down the corridor. After she'd searched for four hours and hadn't found him, she decided to find a resting place. She'd be no good to him if she got sleeping sickness.

Rat went back to the area near the information center. She slowed her pace and followed a wall with her hand. Two minutes later she reached a hole in the lower part, waist-high. She felt for the wall's struts, being careful her mittens didn't tear. When she found one, she climbed into the hole and set her back against the strut. The sound of anyone who came down the corridor would wake her before he got near. One time she'd awakened to find that someone had clipped a vein in her wrist and was sucking her blood.

She tucked her collar under her cap and set the alarm on her watch. She wanted Cray to be here. "Before you go, Rat, take this blanket with you," he'd say, hand it to her, and knock on her head for good luck.

Before, when she was on her own, she used to put herself to sleep by imagining herself wandering through the dead cities in the outer shell. She'd find a skyship all ready for her. She'd strap herself in and blast off, poke a hole through the dome and fly back to the star where they'd come from, leaving this dying planet behind.

But her year in the information center taught her things; the colony had no skyship and no fuel, except sub-bituminous coal from the mine. Two hundred years ago the Wasters had used up the rest.

She would have to go along with them, she thought, getting sleepy. If Cray sees me starving again, he'll get mad.

Next day, on her shift in the coal mine, Rat worked a vertical shaft off to the side of the main operation. She shoveled loose coal from an earlier blasting operation into a basket. Maybe working here, she would find out what was going on. Maybe the controllers were right; she should still help out, after all. She stuck handfuls of coal gravel in her pocket for burning later.

She remembered Cray telling her that if the planet had a molten core, its heat would warm the mine. She was glad the core wasn't. Molten rock might burst out of the ground and burn the dome.

Cray hadn't shown up yet. Perhaps he was dead, or they were hiding him somewhere else.

"Rat!" a man yelled from above.

Rat crouched next to the wall.

"Report to the production controller, now!" Boot scraped on rock; he left.

It wasn't a reprimand, she thought. Wrong controller. She tested the rope up the shaft and climbed, feeling for hand and footholds.

The controller's post was across the street, at a bearable distance from the lab. She approached, trying to act unnoteworthy.

"We need more errand-runners," came the muffled explanation from behind the controller's scarf. "Find us some solder. If you don't come

back, you don't eat."

Rat ran. She guessed they needed solder to fix the phone between the controller's post and the information center in the administration complex.

Was the production controller relying on her reputation for finding things? Maybe Cray had gotten her this position. But she knew at least three men who would get angry when they learned they hadn't gotten the job.

She passed the commissary. She wished it were open. She'd try again, then look for Cray.

Entering the comfortable darkness, she went through the alley by the communications booth. She'd hidden some solder in a cache down this way. She walked alongside the slag barrier, insulation against the cold in the outer dome.

Here the cold numbed her fingers, and the smell resembled bitter rock. She went up a flight of steps behind some unused buildings, found the destroyed wall and near it the cinder block and the sheet metal cover of her cache. She moved them aside, and reached down. She felt through the stuff—a pile of hair, a spoon, a broken electric motor to which she planned to attach a crank and a light bulb, if she ever found one—and touched the solder. She dug deeper and pulled out a file and a thin, sharp tool she could use as a screwdriver or chisel. She might need it when she found Cray.

As she put them into a lower pocket of her coat, Rat caught an odor out of place. She crouched and listened. Hearing nothing, she crept toward the smell, leading with her hands. It came from a wad of spiked wire, as did quiet breathing. The wire's teeth hooked in the clothing and skin of a woman. Rat took off her mitten and with her hand explored the woman's cool face. One of the technicians.

She had sleeping sickness. She must have sat down to try to free herself, and had fallen asleep. It didn't look as if she would wake up, either. Cray wasn't the statistic on the information center board, then. Good.

Rat started prying away the wire with the screwdriver. She wrenched the spikes out of the holes the wire had made in the woman's jawl. The pain should have awakened the woman, but didn't. Rat thought about informing those at the technician's dorms, but they would send the recycler's cart to get the woman. Standard procedure.

She slapped the woman's face. The woman still slept. Some would have eaten her without another thought. Cray was right—now that everyone knew people were recycled, anyone was fair game. At least I can get her to a safe place, Rat thought. I'm not helping the Recyclers.

The woman wore thick gloves. Rat removed her mittens and put the warmer gloves on her own hands. Finding nothing else of interest on the body, she dragged the woman to the slag barrier. She placed her feet in the slag. Leaning uphill against the woman's weight, she climbed. She ascended faster than she slid, stopping to rest partway up. At the crest, she tipped up the corrugated metal roof and pushed the body through, glad for the gloves in this cold. Spraying gravel hissed as the body rolled down and hit bottom. The woman would probably lie there forever. Rat descended on her side of the mound, and dug rocks out of her boots.

She returned to the post to deliver the solder and resume her shift at the mine.

With fifteen minutes left on Rat's shift, someone's scuffed footsteps neared the hole where she worked. They stopped at the lip of the pit where she was shoveling. A man whispered down to her that she needed to go on an errand. It sounded like Gerrit, a technician who insisted on getting everything he deserved. He had just been demoted. But if it was Gerrit, why was he ordering her to go on an errand? He had no authority to do that. Maybe it was someone else. At least she would get out of the mine. She wasn't complaining.

"Here," he said. She caught a package thrown to her in the dark. "Take this to the information center."

What does this mean? Am I allowed in now? Rat tried to stay calm. Maybe they were bluffing—Cray was there and he wanted to see her. “Good, Retsi, you came.” he’d say. “The meal is on its way. Why don’t you sort these tags until then?”

When the boss saw the package he let Rat out of the mine. Rat thought she’d make another attempt to get food before heading for the tunnel. She approached the commissary; it was open and no line had formed yet. Rat stood in front of the door, in the light. The guard examined her sooty face and clothing, and handed her a plate of gray sludge and a large cup of water.

Food. She’d made it. She had food. Should she look for Cray now? What if he were still being held? She’d save some, just in case.

After making sure it didn’t smell organic, Rat gulped half of the sludge down. She tipped the rest of it into a dirty pocket, gave back the plate and cup, and left.

On her way to the tunnel, she passed the old lady, not yet off her shift. The lady had lost her mind. She sat and pedaled all day, powering a generator. Sometimes she pedaled faster, sometimes slower. At the end of the shift, a technician took her off the seat and stuck her in a corner, where she kept pedaling until she fell asleep. Rat wondered if she was even a person anymore.

Rat entered the tunnel and started towards the administration complex. Did they really need the package? Was this a way to reinstate her without making other workers jealous? Maybe the suggestion she and Cray had given them about convection reflectors had worked, and they were calling them back to develop it, and maybe they’d appoint her controller in a few years, and she could fix things, and that smell... new sweat.

Rat crouched. A blow knocked her to the ground. Pain above her ear. She knew what this was. She should have been thinking, listening. She should have been more careful.

As he came near, she lay still. She remembered Cray yelling that



Rat didn’t have to take this, just because “oh yes, now we need off-spring.” As he bent over, she stomped her foot upwards. It connected with his kneecap. She felt him stagger, but he grabbed her leg. She tried for his groin with her other foot, but her heel smashed something soft on his face. He fell back. Bad timing, but it worked anyway. She rolled away, grabbed the package and ran. He had picked the wrong time, just as she’d gotten the energy rush from the saccharides she’d eaten. She ran swiftly down the rest of the tunnel. The side of her head throbbed. Too bad, that’s what you get, she thought.

Now what was he going to do to her? Would he make up a complaint against her? Would he follow her into the mine with eating utensils and relieve her of an arm?

Her new bed was safe, though controllers slept nearby. She would have to watch out.

She ran through the portal into the complex dome, down the street, and entered the anteroom of the information center. She hid, allowing herself to rest for a moment. What would they say? She knocked on the door sealant. Maybe Cray was in, working. She stood near the light, in anticipation. The door opened. She held out the package. “We didn’t send for anything. Sorry.” The door slammed.

She stood, holding the package for an uncounted time.

Backing away from the light, she broke the package open and dumped its contents. Scrap metal shavings. This had been Gerrit’s ruse.

She tossed the package into the dark.

As she passed the female controllers’ sleeping area, Rat could hear women talking. She crept in. Three controllers tenanted the room now. They were working on the survival problem.

“What about the convection project?”

Cray’s project, Rat remembered. “Andrys has that now.” Lane’s voice.

“Good. Are we going to work on that methane recovery system? I still

think it has some possibilities.”

“We’d better. When Brunner dies, we won’t have the resources.”

Rat crouched a little apart from the conversation, as if it were a glowing coal. She listened until one of the women made a snide comment about having a pet rat. They wanted her to leave. She got up, made fists out of her hands and put them up to her face for courage. “He’s dead, then.”

A voice with a nasal tone, Jan’s, said “Probably having a nice sleep in the old prison,” and laughed.

Rat backed away.

She knew where the prison was. She had seen maps of that area, most recently when she was looking for stress analysis reports for Cray. On the map the prison stood about two thumbs’ distance outside the administration complex dome, out the right portal. About one thumb farther on, the tall city buildings started.

Rat had never gotten enough courage to go near the prison. The portal ahead, the one by her figures, was little-used. But now, she turned right and started for the prison. Rat passed empty buildings, a church and the utilities office, she remembered.

Somehow, she would get Cray away from the controllers. They had to escape tonight; she wasn’t sure he could live much longer.

She arrived at the portal in the shell of the complex dome. She found the door’s lever. Before tugging on it, she crouched to think.

She didn’t have an escape plan. What if she got Cray out, what would they do afterward? They couldn’t get by. The controllers knew it. They manufactured the only food. She and Cray would freeze anywhere in the Egg. They couldn’t live outside either, they wouldn’t get ten meters in the cold. Nobody was out there anyway, either on the planet or in the sky. The controllers had been sending distress signals for hundreds of years. Nothing ever came back.

Rat decided she would just sneak him out. And if she couldn’t, and they decided to punish her too—well, good. She hoped they’d kill her.

Rat pulled the lever, lifting the door high enough to crawl through.

The air became colder, burning the inside of her nose when she inhaled. She crawled under the door. Crossing the street she could hear, far away, a repeated banging on metal. She followed the rail track. When it sloped downward into a tunnel, she followed the overpass to the right—that path went to the prison.

The banging got louder.

What are they doing out here, she wondered, making cotter pins? Or maybe manacles.

A pile of glass stopped her foot. Glass shards sprayed outward. She almost lost her balance, almost fell into the glass. She ducked, both for balance and secrecy. She was silent, careful afterwards. The remains of glass perimeter barriers, Rat guessed.

She passed more glass piles and found a portion of glass wall still standing. Ten steps to the right, she found a hole. Beyond stood a razor-wire barrier, also with gaps. She ducked through the second gap.

This must have been done in that war, Rat thought, the one that wiped out the Wasters. Sometimes, after the meal, Cray went spelunking in the old buildings. Brunner had a fit, of course, but Cray went anyway. Rat came as his guide. They would wander outside the complex dome, down the old market streets near the colleges. Fog from his breath would wander through the beam of his light. Broken walkways with latticed railings, all frosted; depressions their feet made in ankle-deep fans of white; and curled columns on building remains, would each sparkle for a moment, captured in the light, and then disappear.

Once, Cray shined the light on a cable that dangled from the darkness above. It ended, frayed, about ten meters above the ground. He said it had been a “ladder to the stars,” and told her how people used to ride in cable cars, up 15 kilometers to restaurants mounted on the inner edge of the dome’s top. They could view stars above them and city lights below.

Rat was starting to wonder if she’d missed the prison when she touched a wall. She followed it clockwise with her right hand. She found

the closed outer door of the jail. Something cut through her glove; pain. Her palm started throbbing. Rat curled her cut hand. If the prison is as damaged as this, getting Cray out might be easy, she thought, searching the door for its lock. The door had been bombed. She felt where the jagged steel had splayed.

The door opened. A light shone into her eyes. She turned to run but two men caught her, pinned her wrists to the small of back, and forced her into the jail.

Inside, the banging was louder, but still far away. It sounded like banging on bars. Rat guessed Cray was hitting the ones in his cell.

The guards pushed her down a hall, down in the wrong direction, away from the noise. She’d be too far away. She wanted to go near Cray, so he could talk to her. She tried to get away, stomped one of them on the foot and ducked, but they held on tighter and rushed her into a cell.

She hit the floor, rolled, and ran toward the back wall. She frantically pounded it, searching for holes. Behind her she heard the split click of the door’s lock.

She searched the wall, the left corner which smelled of urine, ran to the right corner, and back to the door. She found no holes.

From here the pinging against the bars was fainter. She went back to the door. Through the dirty cell wall she could see the guards’ light recede. She wiped the wall with her sleeve, hoping she could see it better. The light, now a streak, receded around a bend in the hall, and disappeared.

The reverberation blended, making a wall of sound. Her watch’s tick passed up the rhythm. Was he trying to keep awake? Why didn’t he give up?

She yelled. “Cray!”

The banging stopped. After a moment, it resumed. She yelled again, yelled, continued yelling, but the banging kept its pace. She tried to fit her head through the bars—it wouldn’t quite go through. The banging continued. Still panicked, Rat grabbed the bars, shook them, hit,

kicked them, ran back searching for holes in the walls, back to the door, felt the lock, yelled again, but the banging did not stop. When her throat grew hoarse, she shoved the door once more, and crouched in a corner, listening. Cray would die. Unless she could escape. What haven't I tried? The walls.

She got up and swept her hand over the walls, up, down, up, looking for a crack. She looked in the corners, the floor, stuck her arm through bathroom pipe in the floor, banged the door frame, nothing.

She felt for the lock mechanism but it lay out of reach somewhere, so she started exploring the hinge. It ran from the floor up to the top of the door frame. Rat knelt and fitted her screwdriver in the outer crack at the bottom of the door. The hinge didn't move. She climbed the bars and tried the top of the hinge. It still didn't move so she leaned on it. The tip of the screwdriver broke. She heard a ping when the tip landed. Frustrated, she stabbed at the hinge with the screwdriver's stump. It escaped from her hand. The stump hit the floor, clattered, and rolled away.

Her hand increased its throbbing rate, four times to each beat of Cray's pounding.

I'm hungry, she thought, knowing Cray must feel much worse than this. If I took off the most bulky part of my clothing and relaxed, maybe I could fit through here.

She took off her mitten, her hood and coat. Her muscles started tightening from the cold. She took off her thick overshirt and belt. When she put on her gloves again she fit her shoulder through the bars, her chest, hips, a leg, and the rest of her body through. It all passed through except for her head. She braced her hand against a bar, tried to relax her neck, and pulled. Her head went slightly farther and stopped. The bars touched the backs of her ears.

Rat knelt. Every part of her body burned with cold. Her arms and back shivered, her neck and jaw were becoming numb. She couldn't feel her ears.

If I can get my head through, I'll worry about ripped ears later.

She pulled until her neck bones crackled. Her head would not fit through. Starving wouldn't help. Her bones were too big.

In a panic to get back to her clothes Rat started pushing the other way.

But now her head wouldn't move inward.

She pushed again. Anything could get her here. In a panic she shoved and pulled but her head didn't move. She stopped, and relaxed her neck muscles. Her head slipped through, back into the cell. She worked the rest of her body back in.

I've got to do something, she thought as she got dressed, this can't be the end.

She became dizzy when she tried to get up, so she sat rocking to warm herself. She thought about the food in her pocket, but didn't dare reach in. She might not be able to keep herself from eating it.

Now the pounding felt as if it banged within her skull. She wished it were the steps of Cray coming.

"Don't mind working in the Center," he'd say. "Those Controllers have to let you in. I'll be right there. You'll have food, every day."

Listening to the sound, Rat became sleepy. In dream its rhythm became erratic—faster, slower, and faster again, always out of phase—then it grew regular and the sound blurred. The banging turned into a squeak. She awoke, and listened. It was the squeak of the recycler's cart, receding down the hall towards Cray's cell.

Sometime later a single pair of footsteps approached her cell. Cray is coming, she thought wildly. She looked out, down the hall. A light was nearing. When it reached the door it shined, painfully, in her eyes.

The lock clicked. The door opened; light entered. She didn't move. Andrys was holding a metal plate. "You're an intelligent kid, Retsi. I'm truly sorry this had to happen to you."

He knows I can only go back, Rat thought.

"Perhaps someday we can trust you again." The plate smelled like flesh. "When you finish this you can go," he said. The light dipped as he bent to set the plate on the floor. "Organic is good for you. It should make you feel better."

Rat kicked the plate, ducked and ran through the door, down the hall away from Cray's cell. No sound behind her; Andrys was not following. She made her way by touch, trying to blink away the fading afterimage of Andrys's lantern superimposed over the darkness. She ran until she smelled the air coming from outside the prison. She followed the smell to a hole in the prison wall, and ran out. After clearing the glass and wire debris she pushed through the freezing blank space.

Rat took the rest of the sludge from her pocket. It was frozen. She ate it.

She allowed herself to think of Cray grinning at Andrys and Brunner when he got away with feeding the miners extra, and after her eyes stopped leaking tears, she tried to decide what to do next. I can't go back, she thought. I'll be caving in to the controllers again. But how would she live, without food? She felt weak, as if the dark were a dense barrier, and though she were pushing hard she went through slowly.

She found a curb of a street. She started following it, hitting her boot against the curb. As she went on, she could sense that she was changing direction by the echoes. This was the road around the perimeter of the administration complex dome.

She tried to look for food, but in an unfamiliar place, she found only abstract surfaces covered with frost, which she ate for the moisture. She took out the coal she'd stored in her pocket and tried to eat it. She wished she were a technician and knew how to process coal into food.

She decided to go back into the dome, at least to get warm. If this were the perimeter road, eventually she would come to a wide intersecting road. Turning left would take her to a portal into the administration complex dome.



She walked on. She reached an intersection and turned inward toward the dome's portal. She found a junk pile just off the road. She recognized it; her figures stood by this portal, on the other side of this junk pile. A surface blocked the road. She explored it; the portal. Inside, mine workers would be warming themselves at the furnace, watching the commissary for their food to come out.

She left the door and groped toward her figures. She touched them, first one, then another. The thin one's head had fallen off. She found it on the ground, a dented spherical jug, the conical spout opening out the front. She put it back on its frame, tried to straighten its wire arm.

On the other side of the street, in some barrels, was the cache. That was where she'd put the packages of brick fuel Cray had left for her, back when she was a kid. She crossed the road and found the packages in a lower barrel. Two were left. Nothing else. She wasn't supposed to have kept them, of course, the Controllers had told the workers to take brick fuel—or any fuel they found—to the Recyclers.

She took it out, and realized she didn't have anything to light it with. Her sparker was hidden inside the administration complex. She forgot where, she hadn't needed it for a while. She poked a hole in the plastic and worked the brick out. This had to taste better than the coal; she almost hoped it was poisonous. She sucked on the brick. Sweetness. As it thawed in her mouth, it became chewy. She tugged off a biteful with her teeth and rolled it on her palate. A sugar, not the sweetness of poison. She grabbed the brick with her teeth again, pulling as much as possible into her mouth. A piece stretched and came off, almost too much to eat. She chewed. It coated her mouth, made her breath smell; strong, exotic. She took another chunk, grinding it in her teeth to soften it while swallowing the first. When she exhaled, the air kept the smell for a moment.

She knew where she could find more of these. In metal boxes and

drawers near fuel repositories. There was no pattern to the places, but they were far from here, in places the Recyclers didn't bother to go.

She stopped chewing. No wonder the Controllers had told the workers these bricks were fuel. They weren't recycling the bricks, they were eating them.

I could have helped, after all. Cray could have eaten these. He should have told me this was food. I can't do anything right.

She started walking away from the portal, in the direction of some tall buildings. She thought more bricks could be hidden there. She'd look. But what for? So the Controllers could use her when she went back? And they would, too. Well, they're not using me any more. This is where it stops, one way or another. I'll just keep walking until I find a tall building. Then I'll climb it, until I fall off.

Retracing her steps to the main road, she turned left. The ones down this street were tall, she remembered from diagrams of the colony. Actually this is exciting, she thought, killing myself. Except it was so cold.

The first wall she came to felt smooth; she couldn't find a handhold on it. On the next, she ran her good hand over the impressions. She remembered a large picture—a carved face staring upwards at three-dimensional faceted shapes. Let them try eating that person, she thought. She attempted to scale the building, but couldn't climb past the ear. Down the street she encountered a monolithic building made of a hard material. Too steep.

After several hundred more steps Rat found an accessible building. The surface dipped and rose into platforms, holes and stairs. This must be that pyramidal building; water had flowed down from the top. Now the holes contained only frost. No secrets. She knew what the building looked like from the map. She found a place to grasp and, balancing herself with her right fist, started climbing to a point that might be high enough to kill her when she jumped.

They think they know everything, those Controllers. There's no way out, they say. This will get them.

Pulling herself onto a horizontal ridge, her arms started to shake. At a plateau she paused, hesitated. But it wasn't high enough, so she continued.

When she reached the top of the dry fountain's course, she sat against the wall where the building continued upwards.

She felt a breeze. It crept from behind, past her neck, reached downward into her coat and ears, where it sounded like a long breath.

Wind is not supposed to be here, she thought. This is not Outside. Rat sat up and turned her head toward the chill wind; it felt like life on her face.

Oh. Of course, she remembered: differences in temperature cause an air current. She leaned back again. But the current brushed her ears once more. It felt as if it were freezing her bones, growing crystals of silicon carbide in the marrow, making them so strong they would never break.

How do the controllers know everything? she wondered. How do they know we can't get out? If they did know a way, they'd cover it up so they could go on using people and taking food bricks from them. No doubt they were listening for the plop she'd make as she hit bottom, so they could find her body and eat it. Whatever I do, the Controllers will take advantage of it. Let them use someone else. Cray's dead and the Controllers aren't going to use me any more.

She tied her hood more tightly, to protect her ears from frostbite, and carefully started climbing back down.

At the bottom Rat stood. It was quiet here, no wind. She kicked the curb until her toes hurt, and felt how tired she was. Maybe after she got to sleep, something would come up. She started for her sleeping place. She went to the portal, opened it, and entered the complex dome to sneak near the warmth.

She'd started to eat the second brick when she came to the crazy lady, charging a battery. She stopped,

but remembered that the lady wasn't aware of much.

She placed herself in front of the woman, made a face at her, and splatted her tongue out. The lady kept pedaling. She didn't even see me, Rat thought.

Rat noticed the lady was pedaling too slowly. Her cheeks looked like caves. The Recyclers will be coming for her soon.

They're not feeding her, Rat realized. They are coming for her. They want her to die by herself.

Rat took another bite. The lady doesn't have teeth anyway. She pulled up the woman's hairy upper lip to make sure. No teeth.

She broke off another piece, and chewed it until it softened. On impulse, she opened the old woman's lip and stuck the soft food in.

The lady stopped pedaling, chewed hesitantly, and swallowed, sticking out her tongue and sucking her upper lip.

Rat put another piece in, then another, until the food was gone.

After the woman had swallowed all the food in her mouth, she started pedaling again.

Rat watched her for a minute or two, and walked into the dark. ■



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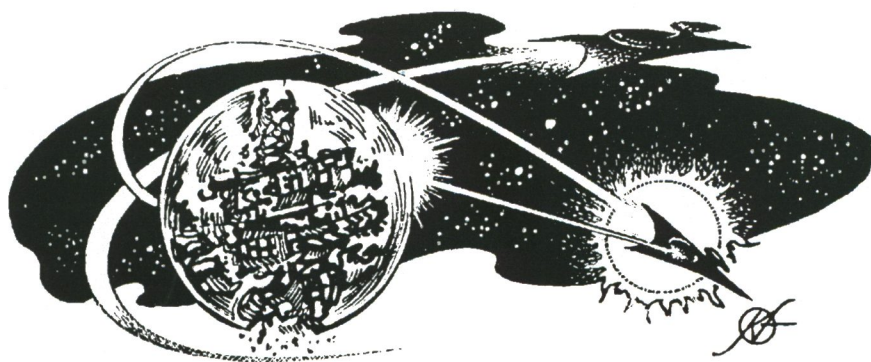
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