



edited by Algis Budrys

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EDITORIAL



I was thinking about the differences between men and women, and I came across what I take to be a genuine difference (of which there are, to my mind, not many). The genuine difference I mean is expressed, in one of its more prominent manifestations, in how women relate to racism.

I am not referring to mob racism. In a mob, of course, all bets are off. A member of a mob is not much different from any other member. The victim of a mob will suffer terminal consequences without regard to any other factors, granted a woman will suffer more elaborately. But mob action is rare; what I really want to talk about is day-to-24-hour-a-day racism; polite racism, if you will. And there women differ from men.

By and large, women will talk on streetcorners, waiting in line, or wherever, to any other woman. Being a woman transcends any other box a particular woman may be in. The sisterhood tends to override everything else.

Please do not pick nits. Of course, there are exceptions. But on a 24-hour-a-day basis, a woman almost certainly will talk to another woman. Not on personal topics, usually, but it would surprise you, I think, what some women will talk about readily. And they will chuckle together immediately at the stupidities of bureaucracy, or the fact that the bus is late, or bitch about the way they've been treated by a clerk, without much regard to race, or religion, or whatever else you have. And within very broad limits, without regard to how upscale or down the two of them are dressed. A woman fairly easily, and spontaneously, passes the time of day with another woman. And will fairly often give a very broad definition to "the time of day." Women, taken as a class, do not really pay much attention to men's rules when men are not around.

Men are much more complicated. For one thing, they tend to aggress all women, until they are rebuffed; then the chances are the rebuff will be the kind that makes them draw back into a mumbling shell, though sometimes not. Men also do not care, really, about a woman's race, for most purposes outside marriage. But they almost never talk; rather, they maneuver verbally, until the rebuff, which signals the start of another reaction-tree.

Men above all do not talk to other men, except as part of a narrow, bonded group which excludes most other men; all other men of other races, certainly. There are seeming exceptions, for certain situations, but these are not meaningful. No white man talks of anything truly important with O.J. Simpson or Michael Jordan, although they would be delighted to spend hours in their company.

Women will do easily what men do with great difficulty, in this respect. A woman, in the end, does not feel that she is putting herself in peril if she exchanges words with another woman of a different race. And if they happen to be members of the same neighborhood group, for instance, engaged in some matter of importance to both of them, they will think nothing of exchanging words at length. With men the barriers go down much more reluctantly.

As to why this is, I think it's because women by and large understand that men are the common enemy, and this is the outstanding fact of their lives. Everything else is less important. A woman will allow a man to cozen her, or she will seduce a man, and live with him happily much of the time, but the great mass of men are the enemy; seen as untrustworthy, treacherous, and rapacious. So a woman has more in common with another woman than she has differences, except in extreme cases. Whereas men, trying to make sense of the world and organize it in some way they personally understand, are beleaguered and baffled by women, and are also in competition with most other men.

Men are, in the end, solitary. Women are gregarious. Perhaps this is not truly genetic; perhaps it is just the consequence of millennia of conditioning. But I think if the latter, it has been going on for so long that it has crept into the genome nevertheless. Men are solitary, and pick at superficial differences from other men because that is a way to fragment their enemies and make them less forbidding. Women are less ready to see differences. Maybe not much, but it *is* noticeable.

— Algis Budrys

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IN FOURTEEN-HUNDRED AND NINETY-THREE, COLUMBUS CROSSED THE FROZEN SEA

M. C. Sumner

Illustrated by Bob Hobbs

If the little ice age that drove the Vikings out of Greenland had lasted, think of the trouble Columbus would have had.

Diego de Arana drew his red cloak around his shoulders, and watched as the men butchered his personal mount. It was not yet the Feast of All Saints, and already half the horses were dead.

Young Raúl came around fallen animal. "It is a shame, Don Diego. That mare was a good animal."

Diego waved his arm, his gestures made stiff by his heavy clothing. "Most of the horses will be eaten eventually. We knew that from the start, but it is better to let them carry their own weight while they can." He tried to keep his voice even, but in truth, he had loved the horse. Even more, he had loved the prominence that riding the horse had given him.

As Marshall of the fleet, Diego had been permitted to ride long after the other men had been forced to shuffle along on foot. Now there were scarcely enough horses left to pull the ships on their heavy sledges, and Diego would have to wade through the snow with the rest.

Raúl sighed, his breath forming a dense streamer in the frigid air. "Still, it's a shame."

"Did you want something, Raúl?" asked Diego.

"It's the Captain. He wants to see you."

"Pinzón? What does he want now?"

"No, no," said the boy. "The Captain, Columbus."

"Columbus is the Grand Captain, Raúl," Diego said firmly. "Not just the Captain."

"Of course. Anyway, he says for you to come."

One of the sailors who was butchering the horse sliced through its belly. The animal's blood and viscera poured out onto the ice. Diego stepped around the steaming offal, very glad that he had a reason to leave.

As always, the *Santa María* was at the rear of the fleet. The lighter ships, *Hielo* and *Glaciar*, were far ahead, nothing more than gray forms in the mist that rose from the ice. A pair of sailors worked every day to chop away the rime of frost and

snow that gathered on the *Santa María's* sides, and encrusted its beechwood carriage, but it did little good. Twenty horses strained at the hawsers just to move the ship along the ice at the speed of a walking man. Diego caught the rope ladder as it went sliding past and pulled himself up to the deck.

Columbus stood near the bow of the ship. The reddish hair that spilled from beneath his hat was bright even under the pale wintery sun. He was shading his eyes with one hand, staring out at the mist beyond the other ships.

With him was Martin Alonso Pinzón, the captain of the fleet. Even before Diego came within range of their voices, he could tell from Pinzón's gestures that he was engaged in his usual pastime: trying to convince Columbus to give up.

"Ah, here is our Marshall," Pinzón said as Diego came closer. "I was just informing our leader that the firewood situation has become intolerable. Even if we turn around now, we will surely be out of wood before we return to Gomera."

"Is this true, Diego?" asked Columbus. "Have you ordered the men to refrain from fires at night?"

"No, Grand Captain," said Diego. "I did not tell them to stop, merely restricted their use of wood."

Pinzón snorted. "He has restricted it so much that they cannot even warm their frozen feet!"

"A great deal of the wood was need to repair the *Hielo* after it struck the iceberg," said Diego. "There is not much left."

Columbus looked away from the sea and fixed his eyes on Diego. "And do you think this means we should go back?"

"We must!" shouted Pinzón.

"I am asking my Marshall," said Columbus. His voice was soft, but Pinzón held his tongue.

Diego shook his head. "No, Grand Captain, there is no need to go back."

"And why not?"

"Because we can get more wood when we reach China."

"China!" shouted Pinzón. "And

if we never reach China?"

"We will reach it," said Columbus, "because the blessed Madonna and St. Francis are with us. But even if we fail, there will be no shortage of wood on the way back."

"No shortage? Even now we are almost out."

"We have many fewer horses than when we started, and fewer supplies. On the way back, we will destroy the *Glaciar* and use it for fuel. We may be able to do without the *Hielo*, as well."

"Destroy the ships?" asked Pinzón. If he had been angry before, he was livid now. "You cannot destroy the ships!"

Even Diego felt uneasy at the idea, but Columbus only nodded his head. "We must," he said. "And when we have crossed the last stretch of open water, we will destroy the *Santa María*."

Pinzón's eyes bulged from his face. "You are insane! That is one of the finest ships in Spain!"

"Watch how you speak to the Grand Captain," said Diego.

Columbus silenced Diego with a quick gesture. "Don Martín," he said to Pinzón, "The ocean at Gomera has been frozen for three years, Barcelona for ten. What good is a ship if there is no sea to sail it on?"

"You will not destroy these ships," Pinzón said.

The three men faced each other for a long moment. Just as Columbus opened his mouth to reply, another voice joined into the conversation.

"A storm!" cried the watchman at the top of the mast. "There is a storm coming."

"Captain, go to the other ships and tell them to stop," Columbus said to Pinzón. "We will bring the *Santa María* to you. Marshall, go with him and make sure that there is enough wood for the signal fires. I want all the men together before the storm strikes."

Pinzón cast a last dark look at his leader, then walked quickly away. Diego followed him across the icy deck and down the stiff rope ladder.

"You do not really believe we will reach China?" Pinzón asked as

they dropped from the bottom of the ladder into the snow.

"Yes," said Diego. "I have seen his maps and charts. I have faith in his calculations."

"You are as much a fool as he is," said the fleet's captain. Then he hurried off toward the smaller ships.

It was a good thing that they hurried. The *Santa María* had just reached the other vessels when the snow began to come down in great white waves, and the wind whistled around the masts of the ships. The meter-thick sea ice groaned, squealed, and fractured with a noise like cannonry.

As one of the leaders of the fleet, Diego was allowed to ride out the storm in the belly of the *Hielo*. He shivered to even think of the men that had to stay outside and tend the horses through the blow. Already, they had lost seventeen men to such storms.

Diego had been lulled into sleep by the creaking of the wood and slow movement of the ice when the pound of running feet on the deck and the noise of shouting voices jerked him awake. Raúl was running past, and Diego grabbed the boy by the arm. "What is happening?"

"A fire!" said Raúl. "One of the ships is on fire!"

Diego followed the boy to the deck and squinted through the driving snow. At first, he thought it was the *Santa María* itself which was ablaze. Then he saw that it was the *Glaciar* which cast tongues of flame into the wind.

Rank was forgotten as the men scrambled to help the burning ship. Leaving the *Hielo*, Diego stood with the others to throw buckets of snow and blocks of ice onto the deck of the blazing ship. The flames must have started from the signal fire at the stern of the ship. Under the howling wind, they had already spread through the rigging and along the port side.

Even in the midst of the blizzard, the heat grew so intense that sweat poured down Diego's face, and the hair of his beard began to thicken and curl. Fires broke out on the fur cloaks

of some of the men, and they rolled on the ice to extinguish themselves. Diego caught sight of Columbus and Pinzón working together to move the *Santa María* out of harm's way.

There was no saving the *Glaciar*. By sunset, most of the planking had burned away, and the heavy ribs of the vessel stood exposed to the dwindling storm. Diego stayed to the end, but eventually even he gave up. Trembling with exhaustion, he staggered back to the *Hielo* and started up the ladder.

He was very surprised when a Catalan sailor met him at the railing and kicked him in the face. The sound his head made when it struck the ice was very much like that of an axe biting into wood.

Diego awoke to find Raúl stroking his face with a warm, damp cloth. "Are you all right, Don Diego?"

"I don't know." There was a spot of nausea in Diego's stomach, and a tingling in his face that he knew meant frostbite. He managed to push himself onto his elbows and look around.

The storm was over, and streamers of clouds raced across a sky that was painted with the many colors of sunset. The remains of the *Glaciar* were little more than a heap of glowing ashes. A half-dozen men sat around the wreck, warming their hands and feet, while three others huddled under fur blankets. Diego craned his neck to see how the other ships were faring. He saw nothing.

"Where is the fleet?" he asked.

"Gone," said Raúl.

Diego frowned. "Has Columbus moved on without me?"

"No, Don Diego. It was Captain Pinzón. He took the ships and went back."

"We must stop him!" cried Diego. He tried to get to his feet, but vertigo swept over him, and he fell back. "Quickly, Raúl, we must stop him before he goes too far."

"He has already been gone a day and a night, Don Diego. There was a fight right after the storm. Pinzón and most of the crew turned back. They

took the ships and the bulk of the supplies."

Diego clasped his hands to his swimming skull. "Where is Columbus?" he asked.

"Over by the fire," said Raúl. "He was injured in the fight. Pinzón threw him from the *Santa María*, and his leg is broken."

"Help me get to him," said Diego. He leaned on the boy as they circled the ashes to where Columbus lay. Diego was relieved to find that his own limbs seemed to be intact, and despite a certain tenderness, his head was still in place.

Columbus had not been so lucky. The Grand Captain's face was puffy and swollen, and even through the heavy blankets, Diego could see the bulky form of the crude splint the sailors had lashed to his leg.

"Diego," Columbus said softly. "It is good to see you awake."

"What will we do?" asked Diego. "What can we do?"

"We will go on."

"How can we? We do not even have a ship. If we reach open water, we won't be able to cross it."

"If we reach open water, we will die," said Columbus. "But no more quickly than if we wait for death here." He gestured Diego closer, and waited for him to kneel before continuing. "God has not deserted us, my friend. Nor has the Madonna. The fate of nations rests with us. We must go on until we reach the Orient, then everything will be made clear."

Diego nodded and straightened. "Raúl?"

"Yes, Don Diego?"

"Gather the other men." He looked around at the meager pile of supplies that Pinzón had left them. "We must build sledges for the injured and move on. If we are caught in a storm without the shelter of the ships, there will be no hope."

"Move where?" asked Raúl

"To China," said Diego. "Just as the Grand Captain said."

It took several hours to build crude sledges from the bits of beech that Pinzón hadn't taken, and from parts of the *Glaciar* that had escaped the fire. They waited out the night

before heading off. All of the magnetic needles had gone with the ships, but Columbus instructed them to watch for the moment of sunrise, and make their heading in the opposite direction. As they traveled, he dropped fragments of charred wood onto the snow—markers that they could sight back on to keep their path straight.

The men were clearly worn and frightened, but each time they stopped to rest, Columbus encouraged them with bits of the same speeches he had given so many times before. "You all know how the parts of Africa which were deserts in the times of our grandfathers are now the greenest places on Earth" he told them. "Surely all the wastes which the great Polo crossed in Asia must be just as lush, just as ready for the building of new Barcelonas, New Madrids."

Diego had heard Columbus talk like this at court, at sea, on the ice, and now while lying injured on his back, but despite the circumstances, he found the ideas that Columbus expressed where no less enthralling. Diego had seen the green lands of Africa, where the emigré English and French had built their new cities alongside the Moors. And, like Columbus, he had read Marco Polo's Journeys so many times he had memorized each page. Surely, among all the many miles recounted by the great traveler, there would be some place free of the ever-growing ice.

Each time Columbus spoke, Diego felt a surge of urgency and drove the men harder. One of the injured men died and was left behind on the ice. It was a tragedy, but one the men had seen many times. Most importantly, the load of those dragging the sledge was lightened. They made several miles the next day, and the mood of the reduced expedition was brighter. But on the following morning, several of the men were ill, and even the lighter sledges became almost impossible to move.

Columbus himself grew sick, shivering from a high fever, a gleam of sweat around his sunken eyes. Diego did his best to make the same

kind of speeches that the Grand Captain had made. But the men were beyond speeches. They sat around the campfire at night without speaking and nibbled at the dwindling supply of food. In the mornings, they walked and pulled the sledges more out of habit than desire.

Diego's mind was wandering to Marco Polo's meetings with the Great Khan and the treasures of the East, when he felt a change in the ice under his feet. He stopped and looked down at the dirty white snow. It was gritty and granular, a kind he had seen before, but there was something about it....

He knelt and put a pinch into his mouth. It was salty, coarse, and it did not melt. Diego looked again at the ground, then at the gentle swell of the landscape before him. Then he fell to his knees.

Raúl rushed from his place at the sledge to stand beside Diego. "What is wrong? Are you ill?"

Diego could only shake his head. "Go and get Columbus. Bring him up here." He sat on the ground while Raúl hurried the men.

"What is it?" Columbus said weakly when at last the sledge reached Diego's side. "Why are you sitting in the snow?"

"Because it is not snow," said Diego. "It is sand. We have done it, Grand Captain. We have reached China."

Columbus reached over the side of the sledge and grasped a handful of the sand himself. He pressed the grains to his windburned face, and tears slid down his cheeks. "Of course we have," said Columbus. "With God's help, we have."

They camped there for the evening on the edge of the sand. At sunrise, Columbus claimed the land in the name of himself, Spain, and God. Then they moved on.

The sledges didn't work as well in the sand, but the footing was better. As they walked south and west, the sand rose in gentle white dunes. The sky cleared and the sun shone down, and by noon it was warm enough that the men removed their coats. There was more excitement

near sundown when Raúl suddenly gave a shout, and ran ahead of the group.

Diego soon saw what had gotten the boy so excited—just ahead of them was a knot of pine trees growing in the midst of a group of rugged, grotesque mounds of rock. It was the first touch of green that any of them had seen in many long weeks.

By the time Diego caught up to him, Raúl had wandered away from the pines and was rubbing his hands across the rugose surface of the stone mounds. There were fantastic whorls and ridges on the rock under Raúl's palm, and above his head were bone-white projections like the horns of some huge stag.

"What are these?" he asked.

"I have seen similar things in Africa," said Diego. "The old men say they were once under the sea. Some say they were alive."

"Could this be? Has the sea really fallen that far?"

"Even in my life, it has dropped the height of a man."

Raúl just shook his head and continued to marvel at the fingers of stone. The rest of the men arrived in the grove and pulled down one of the pine trees. They ate a double ration of their provisions that night under a clear star-filled sky, while the pine logs made a fragrant, crackling fire. For the first time in many weeks, they sang their grandfather's songs of the sea and Diego led them in cheers for Columbus. The Grand Captain himself was too ill to do much more than smile, but he did this frequently. They dropped off to sleep with their furs spread over a soft bed of pine needles.

When they woke in the morning, the strangers were all around them. The man who stood over Diego was short, and like the men of Columbus' expedition, he was dressed in furs. A cap made from the head of some large cat was pulled down so that the teeth hung beside his dark eyes. He said something in a sharp, hard tongue.

"The Khan," said Diego. "Can you take us to the Khan?"

The man only scowled and stepped away. More of the strangers appeared from around the dunes and rocks near the camp. Diego stopped counting when he reached twenty men.

"Are they Chinamen?" whispered Raúl.

"I don't know," said Diego. "They must be."

"What do we do now?"

Diego crawled over to the Grand Captain to ask him, but Columbus was locked in his illness, mumbling in his sleep. Two of the strangers approached, said something else in their unintelligible language and lifted the unconscious explorer. They walked off with Columbus suspended between them like so much wet laundry.

Another of the strangers, this one with a hat made from a great bear, gestured at the rest of the company with a spear edged in flakes of gleaming stone.

"I guess we go with them," said Diego.

The strangers set a brisk pace. The men who had crossed the frozen sea were desperately tired, but they got little time to rest as the animal-capped warriors rushed them out of the sand dunes and into a thickening pine forest. The men led them at little less than a run between the narrow trunks.

Diego was forced to shed and drop his outer coat, and even his cloak as he grew heated on the trip. And it was not just the exercise which warmed him. The air was surely above freezing.

Diego had not been in such a place since they had left the city of Gomera back in the Canary Islands.

Just as Diego was about to fall from exhaustion, the group crested a hill. The view below showed a wide green valley filled with pines and even a few clusters of broad-leaved trees. In the center of the valley was a city like none Diego had ever seen. A city of wood and stone that was equal in size to Madrid.

The strangers lead them down a curving path to a broad road. They went through stone gates incised with

frightening figures of men and animals, and down a street that led them between rows of stone houses. Dark-skinned people stopped to watch them pass. Diego was surprised to see people walking about without heavy coats or even hats.

Eventually, the strangers brought them to one of the houses and led them inside.

"Are they going to kill us?" asked Raúl.

"No," said Diego. "They could have done that already." He smiled and clapped his hands to the boy's shoulders. "We have done it! This is even better than Columbus said."

The boy looked worriedly at the man standing at the door with spear in hand. "Can we really bring people here?" he asked. "Won't these people fight?"

"Did you see their weapons? Stone. How do you think they will hold up to Spanish steel, or to cannons?" Diego shook his head. "Look around. These people don't even have horses or wagons. We can easily drive them out, and take this warm green land for our own. The Grand Captain said that the fate of Spain would turn on what we found, and we have found Spain's salvation."

Another man came into the house. He was old, with a thin yellowing beard that streamed down past his waist. He looked at Diego and the other men with astonishment.

"Do you speak Italian?" he asked.

Diego was both surprised and pleased. "Yes," he said. "Are you from the court of the Khan?"

"As it happens," said the bearded man, "I am. My name is Lao Tseng, interpreter to the court." One of the animal-capped men said something, and Lao Tseng answered in the same tongue before turning back to Diego. "I'm afraid they are in a hurry. Which of you is the leader?"

"He is," Diego said, pointing at the sleeping Columbus. "But he is ill."

"You are leader after him?"

"Yes."

"Then come with me."

Diego quickly assured Raúl and

the other men that everything was all right, then hurried after the Chinaman. A pair of the animal-capped men followed them. They passed more of the strange warrior and women carrying elaborate vases and baskets. All of them stopped to watch as Diego walked briskly past.

"Are we near the Khan's palace?" asked Diego.

"What?"

"What part of China are we in?"

Lao Tseng stopped and stared at him. "We are not in China at all."

"Where are we then?" asked Diego. "India?"

One of the warriors said something, and made an unmistakable gesture with his spear. "That is difficult to explain," said Lao Tseng. "And it appears we will not have time to discuss it now."

Confused, Diego followed Lao Tseng past an area where men were laboring to lay the foundations of some enormous structure, to a stone house only slightly larger than the rest. There was a raised platform in the middle of the house, and on it sat a man wearing elaborate headgear.

Lao Tseng spoke to the man and gestured at Diego. Then he turned away and spoke again in Italian. "This is their leader, the Great Sun. He wishes to ask you questions. I will translate between you."

Diego eyed the man on the platform. He appeared to be a savage. Still, the man was a ruler of some sort, and Diego knew how complicated court etiquette could be. "He is the king?"

"He is the Great Sun. It is not quite the same, but he serves many of the functions of a king."

"How do I address him?" he asked.

"Do not worry," said Lao Tseng. "I will take care of that. Just tell me what you wish to say, and I will phrase it as he desires. Understand?"

Diego nodded. He did not much care for having his words chosen by this man he had just met, but he saw little he could do about it.

The Great Sun spoke in a language that sounded similar to that of the warriors, but not quite the same.

Diego waited as the man spoke for several minutes.

When he was finished, Lao Tseng made a short bow and began to speak. "He welcomes you in the name of his people and his land. The rest of what he says is much the same."

"Give him my greetings, in the name of Columbus and of the monarches of Spain." Diego waited as the Chinaman translated his words and the chief made a reply.

"He asks if you came here across the eastern sea. I have already told him that you did. He now asks if you plan to return."

"Tell him yes," said Diego. "We would like to go home again, but our ships were lost, and we are without supplies."

"He says he will help," said Lao Tseng. "You may take anything that you need. In return, he wishes you to carry a message back to your people."

Diego smiled. "I'll carry any message he wants."

The Great Sun began to speak again. This time, Lao Tseng translated as the man spoke. "For many years, our people have watched the cold and ice approach. There was a time when our land was hot. It was full of animals, and of towering trees. Now our holy cities in the mountains are covered in ice. Even Tenochtlán, where we ruled this land since the beginning of time, has slipped beneath the ice. We have seen the ice stretch across the lands of the grass people, and the dog people, and the cat people. Soon it will cover our lands. Will you go to the people in your land and ask them if we may come there, so that we can escape this ice?"

Diego could not answer. Surely this land was so green and rich that the ice could not touch it. But then, Madrid had been green when he was a boy. "I will carry your message," he said. "Can I go back to my people? I want to talk with them."

The Great Sun spoke briefly to Lao Tseng, and they left the stone house to walk back to where Columbus and the other men were waiting.

"This is not China?" he asked as they walked.

"No," said Lao Tseng. "A land east of China."

"But you are from China?"

"Yes. I came here by ship several years ago. There were many others with me, but this place is filled with diseases and they have all perished."

"Why did you come here?" asked Diego, but he already suspected the answer.

"We were seeking a shorter route to Europe," said the Chinaman. "Polo had told the Khan so many things of Europe. We remembered these things, and passed them on. We hoped that with the ice pressing down on us, we might find a way to travel to the land from which Polo had come."

"So, the ice is in China, too?"

Lao Tseng sighed. "The ice is everywhere in China," he said. "And where it is not, that is where it is going." The interpreter bowed, and left Diego at the door to the house where the other men waited.

When he went inside, Diego saw that Columbus was sitting up and sipping at a flask of water. "Are you better, Grand Captain?"

"I will be," said Columbus. "Tell me, did you meet with the Khan?"

"Not with the Khan," said Diego, "but with a local ruler."

"Is this land truly as the boy has said? These people have no metal, no cannons?"

"Yes, Grand Captain. He is right about that."

"Then it is just as I said it would be," said Columbus. "There can be no doubts now."

"Yes," said Diego. "You were right. Now that we are here, the future of Spain is perfectly clear." ■



WRITERS IN THIS ISSUE

Keith Brooke has largely been published in England. He has had stories in *Interzone*, *Aboriginal*, and others, and three novels, with others in preparation. Born in 1966, he has a degree in Environmental Sciences, is married, has a son, and another baby due in July. **Kandis Elliot**, in addition to being Production Manager of this journal, is a biological illustrator for the University of Wisconsin, among other things. She has published a trade book on fish, a spoof on runners, and a naughty tongue-in-cheek spoof on eating ice cream in *The Journal of Irreproducible Results*. **MMMHAYES** teaches English at a community college, has an MFA from Vermont college, a husband, a son, and that does not begin to describe her. **Norma L. Hutman** originally appeared as a finalist in the first *L. Ron Hubbard Presents Writers of The Future*. She is a professor of Comparative Literature and a commercial pilot as well as a writer, which leaves her just enough time to play at gardening. **Robert Marner** has not published in 35 years, and was never very active. His best-know story was "There Ain't No Other Roads," which, though strange, was nothing like as bizarre as "Time and Space." **G. David Nordley** is a retired Air Force officer and physicist, who now makes his home in Silicon Valley. He has published in a growing number of places, most notably *Analog*. **Norman Spinrad** was born in 1948, and turned to writing full time in the late 1960s. He is a writer of the first rank, with his novels including *Bug Jack Barron*, *The Iron Dream*, and *The Void Captain's Tale*. His story publication credits are too numerous to mention. They are major. He lives in Paris, where he has been for some time now. Every piece he publishes is the occasion for debate and discussion. **M. C. Sumner** has just signed a contract for his fifth young adult novel. His thriller, *Deadly Stranger*, came out from Harper in April. He wrote this story in the Writers of The Future workshop, overnight. **Laurie Tashiro** lives near Vail, in the Colorado Rockies. She is a former teacher, and a former advertising executive. She also has an MS from the University of Wisconsin. "Tell Me" is her first sale. **Mary Turzillo** teaches at Kent State, and is a former Writers of The Future winner. Since then, she has had numerous stories published in *F&SF*, *Universe*, and many other places. Her current novel project is about addiction, nukes, underwater volcanoes, and octopi. ■

ILLUSTRATORS IN THIS ISSUE

Paul Lehr has done hundreds of paperback and magazine covers, including the one for our second issue. His work has been exhibited at numerous prestigious museums and galleries. Born in 1930, he has now turned to the creation of pictures which depict mysterious scenes of human congestion, destruction, and conflict.

Kandis Elliot is any number of things, as you will note in her biography as an author. Nevertheless, she draws her principal salary as a biological illustrator for the University of Wisconsin, though not usually with the style she displays in her illustrations for her story. **Kelly Faltermayer** 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 Promotion Assistant for a chain of weekly newspapers in Houston. **Peter H. Francis** is a Canadian, living with his wife and cat in Halifax, Nova Scotia. He is a winner in the *L. Ron Hubbard illustrators contest*. He works as a layout artist and ad designer for the telephone company, and is also doing work for several small press and professional magazines. **Frank Kelly Freas** needs no introduction. **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*. **Rachid Idriss** is a medical illustrator formerly based in Evanston, IL. He has recently been accepted in the University of Michigan illustration program. **Peggy Ranson** is a graphic artist and designer in New Orleans. She is a past finalist in *L. Ron Hubbard's Illustrators of The Future Contest*, and was nominated for the Hugo Awards in *FanArt* in 1991 and 1992. **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. ■



WORM TURNED

Mary A. Turzillo

Illustrated by Rachid Idriss

The world was wrecked, all hope gone.

Hi. I'm Dave Mohave, your—what shall we call it? Physician? Healer? That's what my people (when I still had people) called me. Anyway. I'm your Healer, your Best Buddy, Mr. Fix It Up, Doctor Feel-good, the Handy-Man. But I'm getting carried away.

Actually, can you hear any of this? I laid you out pretty good with an old-fashioned chemical sedative they use on my patients. Crude, but it works. I'll come back and talk to you now and then. After what happened to you, Beautiful, I'm not sure you even remember what little English you knew. Or how to relieve yourself without peeing your panties, however that applies.

I've never done anything quite like what I did to you, so I'm beat, too. Think I'll go up in the sun-room and soak up a few rays. They did a

job on me, too, Sweetheart, back when I was a wee bit of a fetus, and now I don't need to eat much. Just kind of lay back and photosynthesize. Till then, Sweetcakes. And remember, I'm your man.

Maybe someday I'll even be able to bear to touch you.

Ahh. MUCH better. See these green and silvery patches on the back of my neck and shoulders? That's where my energy comes from. Well, yes, I do have a tofu sundae now and then, or a handful of goddamn alfalfa sprouts. Yum. I understand most people (we're talking back when there used to be people) actually get off on eating. Supposed to be one of life's great pleasures. Most people like to fuck, too, and that's something I can really identify with. Except one of the little side-effects of becoming a

Healer is I can't bear to touch anybody except during the few minutes it takes to read their illness and transmit the microorganisms to fix it. My synapses are wired funny. Touching feels all wrong. Sex is an impossible fantasy. And, goddamn it, I get off on healing people.

Aw. You thought I was insulting you when I said I couldn't bear to touch you. Well, I couldn't even if you were my mother, my kid, the most beautiful red-haired wench in Colorado, or for that matter a dog or cat. Even a worm. Which you are and will always be. However, you are a special worm.

You listening? You look totally out of it, Doll, and I don't know enough about your ugly type to know what you remember. I do emphatically want you to understand that this is all your fault and it is the worst mess

I ever—oh God what am I talking about? Mess? This is worse than a mess, this is godawful the whole world, my parents, Lisa if she was still alive, all my patients, all the dogs and cats and squirrels, all the—no, you said the insects were okay EVERYTHING no I'm gone. Upstairs. I'll be back. Maybe.

Okay. Nothing like a few zees in the old sun-room to restore one's energy. And let's not talk about what you did or what it's like out there. Evil bitch demon hellhag.

Sorry. Guess I don't understand. Cultural relativism. But you'll pay, Angel. You'll pay.

What do you remember? I can hear your pitiful mewlings if I lean over, just so, not touching, of course. I guess I can bear that.

What? Put you out of your misery? Oh, Hon, you don't know what misery is. Does it hurt? Despite the sedative? Golly, I hope so. You bitch.

So it appears you haven't lost your rotten synthesizer-accent English. You know, I could have forgiven a lot if I hadn't known you and your kind were smart enough to sort of learn English. Goddamn rotten English, though improved by our tete-a-tetes in the sun. Anyway, that means you can understand. Maybe you remember a little. Most of my patients with brain diseases, once I cured them they had memory loss. Big-time. Back to adult-size diapers, you know. So. Let's talk. Let's stroll down memory lane. My memory.

For purposes of the narrative, which shall commence once I master my impulse to vomit every time I think about you, you will be called—the Thing. Is that okay, bitch? By the way, are those straps tight enough for you? Oh, I'll let you go eventually. Once I'm sure you're tame.

Cultural relativism indeed. I should cut you up for bait.

What? More pain medicine? Well, Sweetcakes, you may have to grin and bear it, because you can't sleep your life away, and it's gonna take you a while to get all healed. I only did the high-tech part. Pity your kind didn't find out about my tricks. Pity for you. I personally

hope they all die with dry heaves. Believe it or not, you're gonna help me fight them off.

Now let's talk about you and me.

About a month ago, I—the Healer, Dave Mohave, Wonder Kid—got very sick. Strange, because I never get sick. My subconscious keeps track of everything in my body and sends microorganisms out to zap the baddies. I figured I'd been overpowered by something bad, bad enough to cause a plague in the rest of humanity. But I'd worry about plagues after I worried about myself.

As always, I worried too about Lisa. I haven't heard from Lisa in ten years, and I suppose it's stupid to keep obsessing about her.

See, Lisa was this girl I used to do phone-sex with. No, that sounds crude. And it doesn't express what happened, because I used to do phone and computer sex with lots of girls. Still do. Did. But Lisa was special. Somehow I got it in my head that I would actually meet her in person and—I loved her. There. It's out.

At first she didn't know who I was. I usually do that. Some girls like doing phone sex with celebrities and special people, and *boy* am I special. But those girls are a little weird in the head, they have this megalomania thing, and I steer clear of them. Lisa was normal, very smart, I guess, but normal, a Ph.D. candidate in endocrinology at—well, let's not say more, on the odd chance that she's alive, since you have a propensity for holding hostages.

Anyway! Back to your advent on the scene. Once I felt better, I groped around for my robots to find out what was happening. I guess by that time you—the Thing—had figured out something strange was happening up here. You must have learned spoken English from recordings. After you killed everybody.

See, those robots you took apart—they were for entertainment, Babe, not just protection. Not that I need much protection. Or needed, past tense. Humanity in general was not about to kill off yours truly, a highly developed technical product

designed to cure difficult, intractable illnesses. Well, sure, the robots knocked off a few. Religious fanatics. Nuts that claimed I was preventing population control. Or that only the very rich or very lucky got to use me. But I had human guards who watched the daily list and screened out most of the crazies.

Those robots, they were my favorites: Parsifal, Gertrude, H.H., and Goldmund—they play Glasperlenspiel and Go and Diplomacy and D&D and occasionally Old Maid with me. And Aphra B. She's sort of a robotic blow-up doll. Gives great backrubs, too, and plays harpsichord duets with me when I'm in the mood. Then there's Heartthrob, a little kinkier than Aphra. And, uh, the secretarial help, T.S. and the bunch. People, regular humans, would be cheaper but I can't stand being in the same room with humans, so they got robots to be my buddies. The human staff lives—lived—down the mountain. They escort the patients, do repairs. I get antsy even knowing HUMANS are around. Afraid they might touch me.

Anyway, I put two robots back together again—ones you didn't smash up too bad. Discovered their memories all screwed up. God, it's irritating to spend years teaching a goddamn robot to play a decent game of Glasperlenspiel, and then discover its memory fucked. Even if you hadn't done anything else, you bitch—

Anyhow. Then I noticed the chalet had gone on auxiliary power. I checked the printout for new patient priorities.

I'm not much one for news. Got tired of hearing how people swindle old ladies and blow each other up or eat habit-forming carcinogens or put their babies in the microwave. I prefer my music and my books. I seldom check out the evening news. I did that day, and found—very little. Amazing how fast your little drone ships managed to knock out everything on the planet. Sonic disruptors, huh? Tuned to animal life of a certain size?

So it wasn't just us. It was the dogs and cats and bears and horses

and cows and yaks and, and, and.

I'll miss them.

Oh, I couldn't touch them. If they brought a dog up here, I couldn't pet it. I'd run away screaming. Unless it had something wrong with it, of course. Then I'd sample its blood or drool or something and my fancy nervous system would tell my clever GI tract how to make macroviruses to cure it. And some stupid vet from the University of Lah-dee-dah would study the macrovirus I had made, and register a patent, nominally in my name, then start a squabble over the subsidiary rights. Not that they ever used me on animals, I'm just saying they could have.

All the animals? All the koala bears and teenage girls and four-year-old boys with turtles in their pockets, and puppies, too?

You bitch. Satan's little sweet-fuck, you.

You must have been curious. Did other humans survive somewhere? I understand your drones can track them. But you noticed me. Noticed unusual activity. All this electronic junk, probably.

And when I came back from the communications room, there you were, waiting. In the consulting room. As if you'd been a patient.

Do you remember, by the way, that I'm blind? Or I was. When I was about—sixteen? I discovered there were things I didn't want to see. Human males (remember this, it might come in handy) are sensitive to visual cues; that is, visual cues send them into rut. I'm using language you can understand, since you have the sensitivity of a—worm. Anyway, sexual cues happen to be inconvenient in my case. Annoying. It's bad enough without them.

I get sick of even looking at patients, except the occasional patient who turned me on, which was a real nuisance. So, when I was about sixteen, I just *thought* about vision the right way. As if the specific retinal structures were a cancer. Reversible, incidentally. It's painless. Takes about three hours.

Would you like me to demonstrate? On you, I mean. No?

I will tell how we met. I will be calm. I can, you know, but only if I tell the story as if it happened long ago.

In nightmares, I used to race, heart pounding, through tunnels, up and down stairs, to a seductive horror. That was the feeling I had then, walking, blind and awake, into the zing of my sunroom.

A surprise. A worm-thing. You. I felt your exhalations. I hate to admit that you smelled—not bad. A chemical odor, yes, but also like flowers. An overtone of cooked pork, maybe, but mostly flowers. Jasmine? Daffodils?

You breathed softly, to my left. I edged around the wall to the right, my back tight to the wall. Felt the sun arrowing down from my transparent roof, giving me strength against this new thing. I wondered, were you intelligent? Could you tell me what you were?

You spoke. Machine-English, synthetic voice. "You are not injured. We need to know why."

Heat rose in my throat. My fists tightened. "Fuck you."

You took a while before answering. "Insults are ineffective.

"I don't know what you're talking about."

"The—sonic devices did not injure you. They were effective with the rest of your race."

I tried to hide my fear. The sonic devices, whatever they were, had injured me badly. I had healed myself, but they had been very damaging. "You can't hurt me."

"Difficult to believe."

I tried not to quiver with hatred and fear.

"You are unusual. Some sort of alpha, or evolved being. We ask: how do you fit into your species' biology?"

"Who's we?"

"My people. I get used to speaking for them."

Blind, I did not anticipate the sonic disruptor beam. It stung near my navel, flared into agony, then subsided into burning. Deliberately, I bit back a wowl of pain.

"Yet you are injured. Your flesh stinks of the burn."

I felt my mouth tremble, my nostrils jerk open, my body try to close fetally around the pain. I touched the front of my shirt. It was unsinged, but wet.

While this happened, I felt a distant part of my mind analyze the injury. My intestinal tract churned, acid bubbled up in my throat. A familiar feeling—my intestinal flora manufacturing microorganisms to mend my hurt.

I couldn't stop it. My body began mending itself, just as it would mend a sick child's body. I didn't want you to see the cure take place—too secret, too important for you to know. But it was happening: prickling, itching lightning-tracks, a sign of healing.

Nearly healed, I slid into a squatting position, trying to think. "Why are you hurting me?"

"To achieve cooperation."

My extra brain tissue subconsciously analyzes disease processes; consciously, my mind is no faster than any other human's. I hung onto the control I needed to think, get information. "What are you?"

And you were silent. How much did you understand?

"Look, you thing. You can't be human. That voice, that smell, even blind I know you're not human. Where are you from?"

"You have no need to know."

"You're asking questions. You want answers, you have to give answers."

The sonic beam stung again, this time my cheek. I recoiled. Wetness oozed down my neck. I tasted blood, felt air sucking through my cheek. But my brain had tasted wounds like this before. It was old news, and the healing started at once.

"Interesting," you said. "Since you don't answer, I can continue this and observe your rapid healing."

I couldn't answer, mouth full of blood.

You stung me three more times, hell-kisses, on the arms and leg. I tried to stop the healing process, to hide it. But my instincts were too strong. I'm programmed to heal.

I put my hands over my ears and

ANNE McCAFFREY

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curled around the still painful patch on my chest. And you were silent, except for the slithering, rustling noises, like clothing dragging on the floor, and sometimes a wet noise, sucker on parquet. Moving nearer.

"The pain reflex is not dead?" you asked.

Could you feel my hate?

I struck out, blind. My knuckles contacted only air.

You settled near me. Rigid with repulsion, I sharpened my senses to locate you. I hoped you were soft and slow; you had a weapon, but I wanted to hit back with my fists.

"We think we could kill you." Your voice came as near to a soft chuckle as an alien voice could.

"Maybe I want to be dead."

You made crinkling sounds, as if seating yourself. "Highly developed brains generally have highly developed pain sensitivity. Your dying could be unpleasant, as well as meaningless."

"I mean," and I wondered whether I did mean this, "if I'm alone, I don't want to go on alive."

You paused. Something in your silence suggested surprise. "We assumed you were voluntarily solitary."

"Shit, no!" That told me something about you, you Thing. That you're alone, on a solitary mission.

"What are you, then? You must be unique, with unique abilities to restore your body."

"My only bargaining chip is information. I'll die before I'll give it to you free."

"I could kill you. Or we could guarantee your safety in exchange for information. Yes, I can guarantee that. Tell."

Flexing my fists, I pressed against the wall. An idea. "I'm not stupid. I need some sort of hostage. You understand hostages?"

"The word means something to us."

"Well, do you value your offspring, say? Is there somebody you could give me as a hostage, until I feel safe?"

"We place paramount value on

our offspring. This concept we understand."

"Then bring one here. I'll have to take your word that you won't bring a condemned criminal. It'll have to be small, and of your genetic pattern." I'd know if you brought an animal of a different species. I planned to sample its body fluids and compare the genetic pattern with yours.

You rustled your clothes or whatever made the soft ugly noises when you moved. I clenched every muscle and willed you away from me.

When you were gone, I went over the floor with my palms. You left a slime path—a mucus lubricant to ease movement of boneless limbs on flooring. What kind of planet evolved you?

A ball of demon intestines bleeding with ground glass and —

Calm. I promised to tell the story calmly.

I forced myself to touch a bit of slime to my tongue. Because the parquet was rough, cell samples appeared in the slime and my brain went to work on them.

None of my brain work was conscious. But I soon knew you were unlike anything whose bodily fluids I had tasted before.

I locked myself in the sunroom, eating light, trying to plan. I felt the sun glow like courage on my shoulders and neck.

I had to know what was left of the world, you understand? The silent news media, the unmoving braille printers that organize my patient-load, both stood against the hope that much civilization was left. Still, were you bluffing? Maybe you had blocked media transmission locally.

I had to grow eyes.

First, I called the robots together. You had dismantled them before, but that was when they were separated and not programmed for attack. I canceled functions other than defense and arranged them on the stairs. You might break through the defense eventually, but I'd gain the hours I needed for eye-growing.

I prodded my brain, told it the

retinal structures were no longer malignant. Told it to mend things. Felt the heartburn that meant my bacteria were at work. My head ached. I dozed, under the sweet nourishing sun.

And came awake into nightmare. Light crashed my brain, unwelcome, acidic, malign. I thrashed around, trying to block your blows. But these were only dreams. Robots started up and purred: Aphra B. approached, soothing, mewling.

My eyes hurt; as expected. I covered them, then gradually hardened them to floods of light. It would have made sense to awaken at twilight, but here was full noon.

I looked down from my mountain.

The switchbacks were empty of traffic. Here and there, a car hung over the edge of a fenced pull-out, or lay burned in brush. No traffic moved on the roads in the further distance, either.

I looked everywhere for evidence of your ship, wishing I had binoculars. I asked the robots to look for signs of life.

Nothing was stirring, they said, much larger than a bird.

No, don't go blind again, I told my brain. I need eyes. Maybe somewhere people survive. Maybe not my family. Maybe not Lisa. Maybe not the patients I had reluctantly learned to like in the brief time I had to cure them. But people. Humans. And maybe cats and dogs and cows and horses and bears and gorillas. If there were, I had to get them together and save them. It had to be me. But how?

I would need all my senses, including sight and the taste sense that told me how to cure people. And I had to live.

Too bad I would never have time to play *Glasperlenspiel* again.

You came at dusk. This time, I had to look at your nauseating body. I couldn't decide if you had any skeleton at all; there were suckers and extrudae poised wetly against the floor. Your anatomy wasn't all visible; you wore (someday you'll

know how comic this was) a pink flowered beautician's smock, a ski cap, and a man's torn raincoat in black and green plaid.

"Sharp outfit. You're trying to blind me all over again."

But you never could take a joke. "We conceal our body for good reasons. We have hostages. We desire more information about your unique functions."

So. How much information had you extracted from textbooks, educational materials? "If you came here for information, why did you kill so many?"

You moved inside the grotesque clothing, and I glimpsed your muscular, three-sided mouth. "This is our method of propagation. At one time in our history, we propagated by moving into a new area on our own planet. Our reproductive potential extends to injecting thousands of middle-sized animals."

I had guessed something nearly as horrid. But this boded ill for my hostage plan. Curiosity struck me. "Thousands? But you must have killed billions."

"We attain reproductive capacity before mental maturity. A ten day old child can begin mating and implanting. Meat can be quite rotten but still useful as a host, and the drones establish a kill line just in advance of the population wave."

Sweetheart, I gotta hand it to you. You taught me the meaning of atrocity. But I asked, "What happens when the planet is full?"

"We self-limit. Cannibalism and psychological sterility. A new leader is selected, put in deepsleep, and space travel begins again."

Nausea trickled deeper into my nervous system. "This process—"

"Is already under way. We have a second generation."

"Your hostages are useless! You can't value a single individual if you reproduce like—" Then I realized. Sneaky bitch. You wouldn't have told me that if you were planning to let me survive.

"I assure you, our children are quite precious to us. They are intelligent. Every living child is unique."

"You're crazy. You expect me to cooperate?"

"But you must. I have brought hostages."

Then I saw them, tottering forward, peering with frightened eyes from the dark stairwell. Two children, both human. Brothers, maybe. One just a baby, the other about six, dark-haired children with fair freckled skin and gray eyes, faces streaked with dirt and tears. Both sick with—starvation? The baby was unspeakably filthy, caked with feces. The older was missing all his front teeth—knocked out, not shed as baby teeth, I suppose.

Hostages. But not hostages to ensure my survival. Hostages to make me talk.

You heaved your boneless weight around and aimed a weapon at the older boy, who yelped and clutched his arm. But the kid didn't cry. Cried himself to exhaustion, maybe. Or just brave.

Stupid me. I leapt at you, kicking at the limb holding the weapon. My leg jerked in pain as I contacted. Flashes of agony danced up my leg from where I touched you. A shield?

The older boy shrank back and looked pleadingly me. I went to the children and squatted by them.

"It's no use, Mister," the boy said. "He took all your robots apart, too."

You waved the weapon at them. "We have about fifty more children like these. I gather from your inefficient reproductive method that these are valuable to you."

I looked the boys over, repelled by their filth and sores, furious that an intelligent being could treat other intelligent beings this way. "Let them go. Bring me all the children you have, and I'll tell you about myself."

"Not all. Just these. We might need the others."

Nor had I planned to spill everything, either. For example, the fact that I was bioengineered. Are you surprised? The technical process itself would just be too valuable to you and yours.

I stood up, feigned defeat. "It's

like this. I sample body fluids. I have extra cortical tissue in my brain, which analyzes the abnormality, then sends signals to organs in my digestive system." Your English wasn't up to that, was it, Sweetcakes? But it sounded good, didn't it?

"We are recording this and will interpret it at leisure."

"I manufacture a variety of therapeutic buggies. I use samples from the diseased area, or for systemic diseases, any body fluid, blood usually, because feces, semen, etcetera, would work, but, you know. Sweat and tears usually don't work."

"What are tears?"

But I was thinking, if you realized I had been manufactured, you'd try to find reports on my manufacture. But if you thought I was a natural variant of human form, a rare polymorph—

"We of course require some sort of imaging. Electromagnetic would be too crude, I think."

And now you planned to dissect me.

The six-year-old shuffled forward. In a frightened whisper, the boy said, "Can't we get away from him?"

"Shut up, kid, I'm thinking."

You rustled your charming clothing and heaved toward us. "Fascinating process. Maybe useful. Can you provide a demonstration?"

"On—these?"

"No. I have some which are sicker."

My mind was spinning, but at least I could buy time. "Leave these kids with me. Get one that has some sort of cancer or leukemia. That's the most interesting demonstration."

"The young come with me."

I lost my temper. "Why, in God's name? What can I do to them?"

You said nothing, but pinged the baby with your sonic weapon. The child began to retch violently.

"We have to go with him," said the older boy in a level voice.

It was, alas, nightfall. I needed light, so turned on a bank of sunlamps. My brain felt limp, from curing my

own wounds and thinking more than I had needed to think before in my life. Sure, Glasperlenspiel takes analytic and synthetic thought, but the robots did not put me under the pressure you did.

I missed Aphra B. and her perfect, programmed backrubs.

I dozed off, and dreamt a Glasperlenspiel game with you. At first it was a normal game, musical phrases, metaphors, puns, chess moves, constellations in motion, etc.: *felix culpa / felix catta, coda / kata, Morse code / Napoleonic code, law of gravity/law of the open sea*. But then you began dragging organs and limbs, wrenched from living beings, into the game, and I had to counter each with an abstruse and delicate metaphor. A pulsating heart (human?) I countered with a throbbing Beethoven theme. Then you shoved tongs into my ear and began extracting my brain. How would I counter that?

I awoke to blind panic, calling for Parsifal, who lay at the top landing, in pieces.

I stepped over the parts and headed for the bathroom, where I urinated, successfully avoided vomiting, and brushed my teeth till my gums bled. Back in the sunroom, I screamed, "Come back, I'm ready for you!"

The children shambled in ahead of you. Same two boys.

"The sicker one we planned to use died. You can work on these."

I looked the kids over. I wasn't sure about restoring missing teeth. I saw sores, probably from your weapon, and maybe kwashiorkor. "They'll need food," I told the alien.

"They were fed. We gave sufficient protein to restore tissue."

It occurred to me that these were in fact the only kids, that the fifty other hostages were a fiction.

I said, "The sores will heal fast enough to demonstrate. The older boy's teeth will take weeks."

"That will be enough."

I knelt beside the baby and dabbed at the ichor from a sore on his cheek, repressing my antipathy to touch. I felt my brain process it, felt bile rise in my throat. Touched my own lips with a forefinger, then the

child's sores.

You, sinister voyeur, produced a camera and aimed it at us.

I shuddered, wishing the sun was brighter. I peeled off my shirt, felt the energy get to me.

Like a hungry toad, you watched and recorded.

"The older child has been infected with something I believe is called *Pseudomonas*."

You couldn't mean that.

"Injected in the brain. He had an initial seizure just before I brought him in here."

"I'm not equipped to treat meningitis! Are you insane?"

Your toad-like stare did not falter.

Sane. Insane. Concepts that paled in the face of the situation.

How was I supposed to get cell samples? How was I supposed to deliver healing microorganisms? "I need tools," I told you, feeling like a belligerent beggar. I edged past your loathsomeness and fetched syringes, pipettes, and so on from the stock room.

The whole procedure was a nightmare, and I felt cold through and through when it was over.

The boy was sedated, but the baby had cried a good deal while I was working, trying to get me to pick him up. I just gritted my teeth and kept working. Now, the baby was curled up with his older brother, sniffling. Physical contact with the older boy made my nervous system feel sort of as if icewater and steam were being piped through it in rhythmic waves.

I had strength to say, "Leave me with the children."

"I need to record—"

"Get out or I'll smash your goddamn camera."

"You couldn't—"

"I can try."

So you slimed yourself out of the room. I listened to you rustling and thumping down the stairs.

Here's the part you don't know.

"Kid," I said when you were gone. "Will you for Christ's sake wake up?"

The kid's translucent lids flut-

tered. Oh, yes, I had some vestigial notion of how children are supposed to be handled. I steeled myself to lift the child into my arms.

"Can you hear me? This is very important."

"Mom," said the kid.

"Oh, great. You're delirious. You won't remember anything."

"No, it's okay. I know my Mom's not here. What do I have to remember?"

"Here's a little gift for our slime friend. Do you think you can hide it from him for a few hours?"

"In my pocket. Sure."

"And can you prick him with the end of it? Here, see, just break the end off, and scratch him with it. I think he has very thin skin. It's strong, you just need a drop."

"He locks us up."

"Aw, shit."

"No, it's okay. I'll pretend I'm dying and get him to come to us. He wants to keep us alive."

To experiment on, sure.

"What'll happen to him?"

"He'll get very, very sick," I said.

The child smiled weakly.

"Only," I added, "he isn't a he. He's a she, a queen. We have to kill him, or he'll have babies all over the whole Earth."

The child's dirty, chubby hand engulfed the ampule, then vanished into a grimy, torn pocket. "Kill him," the boy said, and fell into smiling sleep.

After you took the kids away, I went down to the human quarters and found a can of tuna fish. Figured out how to open it. Repressed my disgust enough to eat it. Then I went upstairs and lay face down under the sun. When twilight came again, I switched on the sunlamps.

I awoke to real pain, not just a dream, this time. Your alien weapon, pinged my thumb. Surprise.

Poor wittle Worm, you had turned an ugly yellow-gray color, naked now except for an apron. Green streaks radiated from your mouth, which foamed and stank. That mawkish clothing gone, speck-



led torso rippled sickly.

"A little under the weather? Awww." Before I could offer more sympathy, you shot me, tiny painful pings, in hand and cheek.

"What did you do to me?" Your synthesizer moan was almost comic.

I shook my head, all sympathy. "Are we ready for a treaty?"

"I never betrayed my end of the bargain. I promised you survival. You are responsible for this. What have you done?"

"What did you do with the children?"

And you were silent.

"I was afraid of that. So, at the end, I am all alone, whether I cure you or let you die."

"You'll die with me." You aimed the weapon.

I spread my hands. "Your choice, master."

Your boneless/slick limb wavered and went limp. You dropped the weapon and flattened your ugly body. "Cure me, then. Quickly."

And I did, beautiful. You were so sick. I had gambled so much, gambled the kid could scratch you, gambling that your kind didn't have a handy cure for that disease. Gambled that you'd come back to me for help.

Can you imagine my repulsion toward that procedure? I TOUCHED you. Placed my hands, my normal mortal hands on that ripply, mucousy, naked gray freckled hide of yours. And you healed. I cured you.

I had to do so much. The sun came up and went down three times.

I touched every part of your loathsome body. I was afraid I'd have to touch your mind. But that starts now.

Now, you'll think it was revenge. You're probably as revolted as I was. At no point, I say, at no point! in the whole procedure did my revulsion lag. I'm saying this so you know what I did for you, friend. You gotta appreciate me.

To calm my nerves, I played music disks. Berlioz. Gounod. Berg. Oh, I like baroque better, but I figured that was too clean. The contrast would have killed me.

Sometimes I'm afraid you'll resent all I did for you. But listen: you ruined my best robots; you spoiled Glasperlenspiel for me forever; you killed Lisa and all the little kittens and puppies and babies and dotty old grandmas. You owe me, pal.

It's good I ate that tuna. It was pretty horrible, but I could never have brought myself to eat anything once I started on you. Just me and old man sun.

I do it with microorganisms—T-cells, superviruses, all kinds of stuff. I used every trick I ever learned, and more.

And now you're—you! I love it. I wonder, will you appreciate a mirror in a few days? Probably go screaming mad. But hey. You'll improve—swelling, bruises, they'll heal up. I can't say if you're conventionally attractive, because I have this prejudice, you see, but—

What's this, Beautiful?
Tears?

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Upon looking at any map or globe of the Earth, the astute observer soon notices all those lines going from pole to pole. Criss-crossing them are even more lines, radiating in parallel from the equator. The observer might wonder, what are these lines? Have I ever traveled across one? Are they natural features like the Arizona Meteor Crater, or the Boot of Italy? If they are manufactured objects, more akin to the Great Wall of China (visible from orbit), why are they there? Who has gone to all the trouble of netting the world with them? And what a task that must be...

THE LAYING OF THE MERIDIANS

Politics of the Prime

Actually, the worst problems come long before the very first Longitudinal has even started to uncoil—the politics, the landowners, the petty bickering of town mayors, the disruptions with pounding surveyor's stakes in a populated area as Greenwich, and Britain in general—great are the wailings of lament for beloved knot gardens of carefully woven and tended basil and rosemary, for the milking parlors, the favorite partridge meadows and trout streams, the best alfalfa commons—

it's always the best, of course, never the worst, never a mud wallow that mires shaggy highland cattle, never the stinking slew. When they learn that the Line is to be placed *here*, well, even the cess pool suddenly spouts champagne. Eventually all gnashing of teeth and rending of garments ceases, usually in direct response to the filling of pockets. Those obstinate few who refuse to grant Right of Line, or the greedy wretches holding out for too much compensation, those soon find the Meridian unrolling upon their very heads.

A true debacle materializes on rare occasions, to the great distress of us all (contrary to popular sentiment, we are *not* heartless bastards conscripted to work on the Meridians as retribution for some heinous sin of misspent youth). I recall one tragic case, that of little Beatrice Wellington and the Cat-Grave Cherry—you may have read about it; the *London Courier* serialized the episode. (Is it the hand of Divinity or Evil that confronts us with such a string of coincidences, beads on the neck of time?) To wit: a well-mannered ginger kitten is purchased to light a little



Kandis Elliot

Illustrated by
Kandis Elliot

orphan's spirits. Kitten, alas, runs afoul of the Coventry Square-Luddington trolley. To prevent the tiny grave from vanishing utterly into obscurity, upon it Miss Wellington plants a cherry sapling—watered, if one were to believe the *Courier*, by her tears—and at its height of bloom the following spring, along comes the decree. What is to be done? For the occasional great tree deserving of preservation due to its majesty and longevity, under whose spreading boughs, perhaps, historic documents were once signed, for such as these the Meridians can be accommodated: a window opened in the breadth of the Line to fit the tree trunk (this done to placate petitioners more than nature, of course; for every tree is mortal, and the Meridians, once laid, endure forever, even if punctured like Swiss cheese). But a sapling! Not enough wood to survive the heavy collar upon its trunk, nor root for rainfall parsimoniously meted out through tight-woven threads of polymylarized spider silk, carbonized Windex, opal, recycled rubberite, beeswaxed Shinola application balls, Pet Milk, Jelly Bellies, counter-clockwise tau-helices. Nothing to be done but the inevitable, and try to convince the orphan that the Great Prime Meridian itself would serve as the final memorial to her little friend. "If she likes animals that much," grumbled the Degrees and Hours strawboss, "we should take her with us to the North Pole, to distract the damn narwhals."

At Ninety Degrees North

They all start out at the same point: the icy zenith of the globe, the frozen apex of the Arctic Sea ice on the top of the world, slush upon a beach ball. Bad enough trying to keep one's footing at the base of the mountainous, still-rolled Coil, but even there, with nothing but the howling ice-fog cutting across one's shins like abrasive ground glass, and the dizzying Aurora flashing in the unending Times Square of the winter night, even there, beneath the ice pack like compressed Styrofoam

popcorns, in the hyper-haline sea, miraculous creatures by the score come to watch the laying of the Line. Who would have thought there'd be so much life in that desolate, sunless expanse? No sooner would we start the great Coil moving on its long journey south (or "down," as we say), than up through the ostensibly unbreakable yards of frozen froth would stab the curious unicorn-lances of narwhals, flaying at our feet, toying with the straining backs of those of us trying to keep the ribbon unrolling at a temperate pace. Oh, how'd they'd play with the edges of the Line, poking and testing, as though it were lacy tatting and their great tusks (almost always the upper *left* canine) sewing needles. One big male took it into its head to torment the Degrees and Hours strawboss, chasing that harried soul over the flocculent sea ice in great leaps, the man stumbling over the floes and at times disappearing entirely in the drift of ice-fog, and the sea creature slicing through the ice mass with the ease of a marlin cutting in and out of a tropical sea.

We all laughed, much to the strawboss's humiliation, illiciting endless threats of calling for the union barrister. Empty oaths, of course, for everyone knew that Numbersmen had the cushiest jobs of all, simply fastening the big digits and degree-marks at the fore and aft of each Meridian after it'd been laid down. It was the laying that was horse's work, and the Numbersmen knew it. Even the strawboss contented himself with grumbling, venting his anger with an occasional kick at narwhals poking at the big number "0" and its tiny "°", which he was trying to align evenly on the rough glaciers. I glanced at him whenever I could take a breather (I was manning one of the letting-poles used to keep the unrolling Coil on the right heading); just as we marched below the horizon, I saw the little degrees-mark rise into the air, riding a narwhal's nose like a peppermint Life-Saver skewered on a toothpick, and the strawboss trying in vain to lasso the playful creature with a guy wire.

The Battle of the Congo

Compared to that horrendous Twenty-fourth East, any of the Pacific low hundreds would be considered cakewalks. What a pleasure cruise, to lay the Line along the surface of the ocean. The great Coil unravels itself perfectly, lubed by sea water; mid-latitude northerlies keep her going with hardly any effort from the letting poles. Some days we would just walk leisurely along the back of the ribbon, enjoying the pleasant sun and salt breeze, applying only the occasional tap to maintain our heading. Even on rough seas, with the sky green and lightning-streaked, when we'd huddle close to the rising Coil with our letting-pole hooks dug tight into the strong fabric of the Line and our umbrellas tugging like impatient steeds, still we had no inordinate difficulty in fulfilling each day's quota. Waves five, ten, sometimes twenty meters high might break against the edge with thundering booms, but since Meridians are woven tightly and well, capable of withstanding the pounding of the sea for all time, our only worry was that one or another of us might get washed into the sea, unnoticed between the swells. "Don't drop your poles!" shouted the Degrees and Hours strawboss (he'd become a chronic worrier—we suspected a psychological scar left by the narwhals), "Our supply isn't limitless! Lord knows the Abyss has its share of lost poles!" He had a point; by the time we flopped the end of a Coil onto the apogee of the South Pole, we were quite short on equipment, sometimes even doubled up.

Nevertheless, on the oceans we had plenty of time for watching the phases of the Moon and her powerful effect on sea-life, the Palolo Worms spawning in wiggling shoals, the flashing of luminescent animals like underwater lightning storms, the flights of schools of little flying-fish and squidlets, which we'd have to sweep back into the water when they marooned themselves on the flat surface of the Line. ("Tsk, tsk," we'd hear the strawboss cluck as he

manned a broom—since Numbersmen had little to do during the voyage, they were subject to janitorial duties—“Always cuttlefish and sea urchins; if only you were shrimps, what a lovely scampi we would have tonight!” Whereupon the offended urchins would promptly pierce his feet with purple spines.) Porpoises and dolphins would pace the bow of the Coil as it cut ever southward through the sea. Great whales would roll up to the edge like elderly gentlemen, aim one weepy, intelligent eye at our goings-on, then dip back into the deeps with a hail of that wall-like fluke. Occasionally the Meridian would quiver a little underfoot when some old granddame Baleen scratched her belly barnacles on the keel.

How ironic that even the greatest beasts of the sea were not a millionth as obnoxious as the least of the creatures of the continents. Down through the dark heart of the Congo—might as well traverse the chambers of hell!—mosquitoes swarmed in such numbers that we had to knit little hankies to hold over the mouth and nose, lest we breathe and eat nothing but *Aedes*. Each evening we'd endure a horrendous thirty seconds—thirty seconds! might as well be thirty millennia!—standing still to let mosquitoes fall upon us like iron filings to magnets. Driven by blind voracity, they'd push and shove themselves into a tight frosting over our bodies, lacing antennae, legs, wings, those accursed stabbing siphons, into a tight weave, a suffocating blanket. And that is exactly what they became. The instant the Captain bellowed *Now!* we'd all fall flat and commence rolling on the Line until our coats of mosquitoes were pressed into sheets. We'd crawl gratefully between these insect piecrusts for the night—a more or less peaceful respite, except when the occasional miscreant mosquito discovered each man's secret breathing-tube in the coverlet. We'd listen to an intermittent chorus of “Ow!” and “Blast!” and “Argh!” throughout the night; in the morning we'd compare welts on our bulbous, itching noses.

And the elephants. Actually, most of us did not consider the elephants anywhere near as invidious as mosquitoes, scorpions, spitting cobras, eye-worms, crotch ticks, toenail fungus, and so on. The pachyderms would come up on the Line out of both curiosity and to comfort their sore feet. All animals would test the new Line cutting through their world. Congo elephants, however, being more intelligent than other jungle beasts, would, upon mounting the flat expanse of the Line, immediately notice the horizon at the distant end of it. It was a sight we all liked and never jaded at seeing, especially when rising cliffs or tall trees quite walled us in. Behind us always stretched that great long ribbon to the horizon, an engineer's dream of a perfect river, ever pointing straight north, tribute to the celestial harmony of nature and math, bringing us overhead each night at least a strip of stars. Anybody living in confines, but especially Congo elephants (perhaps remembering holiday cards received from their relatives on the veldt), would be naturally quite taken with the discovery of Distance. They left only when driven by hunger; and when we were laying the Line through banana country, they hadn't needed to do more than stretch out a trunk to pluck a meal. In all fairness, they shared liberally with the Line workers—including the Degrees and Hours strawboss, despite his constant complaining.

It was his own fault, actually. Dung-beetles by the score were attracted to the bounty elephants left for them. Each pair claimed a dung-heap for their own, patting it into a perfect sphere, rolling it back into the jungle with their three-pronged rhinoceros-horns. How pleased they were for a surface so easily traversed, not to have to roll over fallen logs and sedge-heaps, up kopje stones and around disgusting seepage puddles. We were fascinated by their work, and in fact identified with it—had not the Egyptians embodied these scarabs with the spirit of the world? Rolling their sphere of dung like the gods twirl Earth through the heav-

ens—as the dung-beetle marked, divided, slaved over her own little Sphere, here we were, delineating the Earth, enwrapping it with the Lines that defined it as a globe, dividing it up into understandable and useful portions that would be used by cartographers, sailors, botanists marking the sites of rare orchids.

But the Degrees and Hours strawboss would have none of it: beetles were beetles were bugs; his broom batted at their little balls as though on a golf course. “We can't have it,” he'd insist. “It must be properly disposed of. Scavengers trailing at our very heels, indeed. Are we not a civilized people?” The brooms would flail madly, though in most cases the beetles won their prize anyhow. Elephants, after all, noticed brooms no more than tidal patterns in the clouds of Jupiter; on the Line they (and thus the beetles) remained, even as we moved onward.

In fact, the Greenwich Meridian Corporation owes the elephants of the Congo a debt of gratitude. In those days the deep-swamp allosaurs were quite put out by our passing and did everything they could to make trouble. Somewhat bright for dinosaurs (they suspected it was not a good idea to sit with the others to watch the comet land, as though it were just another fireworks show—although they may have stayed away simply due to an antisocial bent), the allosaurs soon found out that biting the Line itself did nothing but break off gobs that stuck to the roofs of their mouths. They then came after the workers.

We fought them as best we could with letting poles, brooms, Pooper-Scoopers, even flinging mosquito-sheets over their eyes and tossing old black banana peels under their scaly feet. Having had to put up with much-quicker narwhals, the Degrees and Hours strawboss was courageously ingenious. “Follow me, boys!” he rallied us, and we danced and skipped around those great beasts, poking and prodding under green scales like little mosquitoes ourselves, until the brutes were gashing each other in frustration. In the

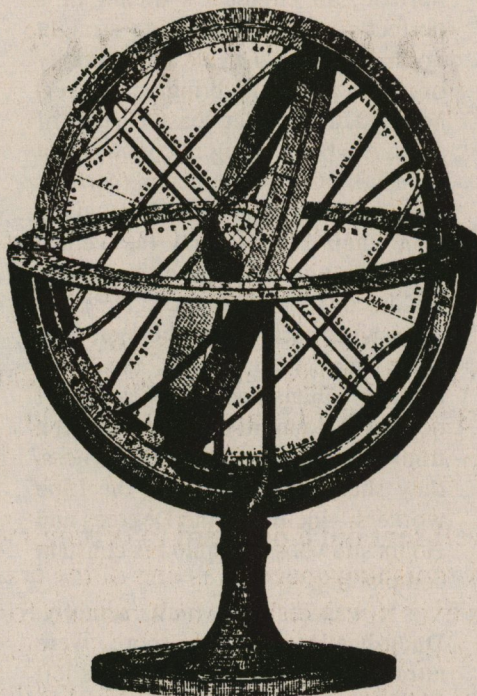
pandemonium, one or the other of us would stumble and fall on a banana peel—disaster! Instantly, scarlet knife-lined jaws would grin and lower. As much as it galled him to blemish the symmetry of the Line, the strawboss quickly carved little cannon-balls from the edge. He rushed to the fallen men, so close that the allosaurs' hot breath scorched his workshirt, and pitched his Line-balls between gaping fangs. The monsters, blind as to whether they had snatched something other than a squirming body, would drool and gum for five minutes, during which we would stab thrashing tails with letting-hooks. At last we drove the rogues back to seek sanctuary in the swamp.

After learning that neither the Line nor its workers could be physically beaten, the allosaurs at last gathered at the head of the Coil itself. There they leaned their strong backs against it—and stopped the progress of the Line! Oh, we pushed, we put the letting-hook poles to the nether edge until they snapped under our effort; we rushed to cut saplings from the jungle for added leverage, but, horror! nothing succeeded. To our appalled dismay, the Coil itself began to rewind, inch by inch creeping back toward the north, a great blasphemy that anguished even the strongest hearts among us. The Numbersmen ran to their strong-boxes and hastily extracted the degrees and hours, flinging them over to us to jam under the heel of the Coil and prevent any further re-rolling. We could hear grunts and panting on the Coil's other side, and hoped the allosaurs were tiring—but spies sent on reconnaissance came back with the defeating news that the giant lizards were cutting trees of their own, to jam the Coil motionless while they rested.

Sooner or later, they would gain momentum, and we would have the Line rolling backward upon our very heads! (We grew quite sympathetic with the squabbling politicians and landowners of Line sites.) "Is there nothing that can help us?" lamented the Degrees and Hours strawboss,

watching his Ones and Sevens warp and buckle under the strain.

At that bleak moment, out of the jungle charged fifty Congo elephants. Great bulls and wise matrons put ivory tusks and broad gray foreheads to the bulge of the Coil. Legs like jungle trees dug in. On the opposite side, the allosaurs must have felt the surge and fought back, calling those reclining in the shade to come and renew the effort. But they were tired; many still had tongues stuck to the roofs of their mouths and couldn't concentrate. With a final groan, the Coil began its southward movement once again. We cheered and added our own resurging strength to the push. The Coil bounced forward; it seemed to



surmount an obstacle, then clear it—then rolled freely, unencumbered! Wild with victory, we continued to push for many kilometers, until the allosaurs were no more seen or heard.

Man and elephant alike celebrated throughout that night, mosquitoes be damned, on banana wine and mangoes. The morning found us rather hung over and quite sore from exertion, but still flush with victory. Leaving the sleeping elephants to their rest, we quietly moved on. It

was nearly noon that someone called, "Where's the strawboss?" A search party found him back at the battle scene, trying in vain to tamp down a large bulge in the center of the Line. "Messy, messy," he clucked, but with a grin of bemused satisfaction.

At the South Pole

The Coil shrinks. From mountain to hillet, from ox-cart to yarn-ball; toward the end it was almost the same as pushing a roll of carpeting across the Antarctic icecap. No, it didn't get any easier. In fact, some thought it much more difficult. At the North Pole, with the huge Coil towering above us, lost in the snowfall and the gloom of Arctic night, the visitor not used to the laying of the Line would sigh, "How impossible!" But the Coil had energy; like a clock spring it jumped forward and wound down by itself, helped along only by our guidance and the occasional push over an Alp. By the time we'd reached the South Pole, that energy had been dissipated over the entire globe, and we found ourselves putting our backs into it more and more. And because it was low to the ground now, we worked bent over the entire day, our faces exposed to the cutting ice-needle swirls of the frozen southern continent.

Here at the end of the journey, our mood was quite different than it had been at any other point. One might well expect a feeling of satisfaction, if not jubilation for a task well-finished, and a looking forward to deserved rest ahead. But ah! at the laying of the last Meridian, to a man we suffered a bleak melancholy, a wrung-out emptiness, a sort of looming post-partum depression, now that our great endeavors were suddenly to be over. The undrefrosted-freezer gloom of Antarctica mirrored our spirits. Once we'd ascended from the sea onto the Cap, leaving behind us the blue whales and legions of clownish penguins, once we trekked inward into desolation that not even sea-ice creatures could

broach, it was as though our journey advanced from labor into illusion, a walk from sun into lightless shadow, from a living world into the void.

We had only each other at the end. Whenever people are forced by circumstances to keep close company for a long period of time, and in more-often-as-not trying conditions, relationships are molded, emotions run daily hot and cold, leaders and followers discover themselves. We had formed the bonds of those whipped at the same post. The Num-

bersmen rubbed the sore backs of the Coilmen, the letting-hook wielders went out in front and chipped away on the glacier ridges to smooth the going.

The inevitable moment arrives: the final flip, the end of the Line is uncoiled. The ribbon lies flat from Pole to Pole. It completes the final spoke in the starburst created by all the other Meridians. The occasion demands an acknowledging cheer; we oblige, our hearts aching. The southern Aurora blazes up into the

universe like a burning curtain on an immense stage; we are but laboring ants beneath. Strong men weep as we gather to watch the Numbersmen pound the final spikes around the huge 0, and last but not least, the proud little °.

There is a moment of silence.

And then the mood changes. Chatter starts, growing warm and lively; we lift our tools onto our shoulders, thump our neighbor's back, and turn as one. We head North. The Latitudes await. ■

PITFCS

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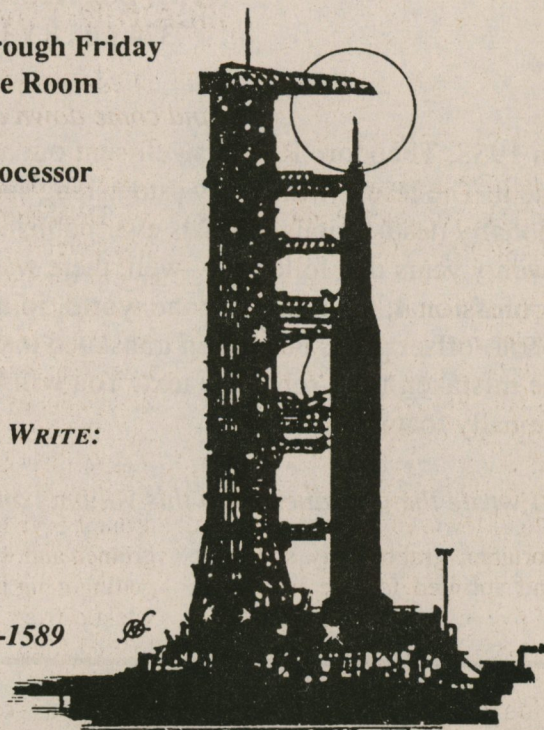
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HUNTING THE SPACE WHALE

G. David Nordley

Illustrated by Kelly Faltermayer

*She had to go up, spear the shuttle tank, move it into a higher orbit,
and come down again. All in three hours.*

Code 10S3 Biography Material.
Edited Version: Don't release
unless I approve, or die.

My final hunt started when Cap's voice roared "Thar she blows!" down to the beach from the speakers across the runway. It was my watch. If NASA had gotten *Endeavor* off on time, it would have been Terry's mission. I hit the Emergency Quit, Save and Shut Down key; shut the lid on my portable; grabbed my swimsuit top and sprinted for the runway. I waved bye to fellow whalers Kit and Terry; they could take care of the chair, books, and iced tea. I could catch up on the ET harpoon line dynamics study later, maybe with

some real data.

Dead Kitten's shocking pink cat-whiskered C-5 had its APU's whining by the time I hit the tarmac. The cryo lines were already disconnected and the rear door was up. The band was rehearsing "Gonzo" from the tour pallet by the side of the runway as a farewell gift, and I pumped my legs to their beat. One of the dancers waved her top at me, swinging it around over her head like a lariat. I grinned and waved mine back at her, getting a big good-natured leer and a whistle from a bushy-bearded beer-bellied Jodo, the lead bass and chief stockholder of Dead Kitten, Inc. Definitely unbecoming behavior for Captain Linda T. Stevenson, USAFR, I

thought. Made me feel good.

The right engines were revving by the time I hit that little ladder you need to get up into *Dumbo's* belly. We were rolling before the door shut. Kathy, Dead Kitten's lead singer, had my insulated, female-plumbed flight suit ready to go, and I was more than ready to climb in it; it was *cold* in there with all that lox and methane loaded in the *Ahab*.

Brad whistled and I threw the swimsuit top at him. He snatched it out of the air. "This," he japed while I got my legs in the flight suit, "is an affectation for you." Kathy was breaking up. While she needed such objects for her comfort, my chest had problems keeping them in place.

Brad and I got along pretty well for three years of marriage, but this kind of banter usually left me feeling I needed to show him up to prove that I had more going for me than my ability to stick with a diet. "It's a matter of form," I retorted, "speaking of which, Brad Stevenson, you goggle-eyed idiot, where's my checklist?" True to *his* form, he'd forgotten—it wasn't in my flightsuit.

Banter aside, I had the flight suit on by the time the C-5 got airborne. Kathy found my checklist where Brad had dropped it, and stuffed it in my breast pocket with a wink. Then I kissed my slim, steel-haired husband, popped Kathy good-naturedly right in her bovine splendor, grabbed my portable computer and scrambled up the steps on the nose wheel into the *Ahab's* tiny cockpit, holding on carefully as Cap upped the angle of attack. Cap Wilson had flown C-5s in the US Air Force until he failed to make a promotion. His sister, Shana Wilson, was a singer with Dead Kitten and got him a job—writing songs. He wrote "Gonzo," a platinum hit, for instance, and their new "Starstone," which might be the next one.

If all this airplane and platinum talk gives you the impression that Dead Kitten was just rolling in money, my apologies for the understatement. But there's money and then there's the stuff governments throw around. By *those* standards we were damn economical. Cap found *Dumbo* a couple of years ago on the used airplane mart; Uncle Sam had sold it to the Saudis, whose new king had traded it to Argentina for uranium, who listed it when the maintenance cost got too much. Well, the plane *did* spend time at the plant in Georgia.

Anyway, Cap saw the listing and figured Dead Kitten could afford to move up in the tour bus area. It was a great gimmick: the band can fly into your local airport, off-load the tour pellet onto a flatbed, do the show right from the flatbed in your local fifty-thousand-seat stadium, reload, and fly away in three hours. One reason Dead Kitten is so successful is they don't have a counterculture atti-

tude toward money. They love the stuff. They've done as many as three thirty-dollars-a-head shows in a day. And people pay to tour the big pink plane with the whiskers, too. A relic of the cold war, a C-5 looks too big to fly.

But it was flying now and we were getting close to a go for launch. Brad helped me close the *Ahab's* hatch, pulling while I pushed and hollered instructions. There was just enough room for me to bend over and rotate the latch. That seal was one place we didn't cut corners—no spacesuits on this hunt. Except for the relief valve, the hatch door was the only break in my little clear Duron tank of a cabin. No pipes or wires went through; we used commercial optical links. There was CO₂ absorbent and bottled oxygen for just over six hours—twice as much as we planned on using.

I flipped down the tray, set my portable on it, connected the leads, and powered up the cockpit—my world for the next three hours. We gained two thousand meters while I was doing that, and my cabin pressure didn't change. Good seal. I'd done a precautionary preflight two hours before hitting the beach, so I didn't have any worries. *Ahab* was ready to go, all forty-one tons of her, including my own spare, flat, forty-three kilograms.

"Everything looks okay here," Brad yelled. I gave him a thumbs up through the windshield and started *Ahab's* final prelaunch. My astronomical engineer husband and Cap had got the idea for *Ahab* and the whale hunt over a couple of afterburners about a year after Dead Kitten got the C-5. You see, a shuttle cost about two hundred million dollars to launch, depending on who's counting. Brad figured that, with a C-5 as the first stage, using composites and not carrying anything more than you had to carry, we ought to be able to reach orbit with forty-ton rocket plane for less than a million a shot. Dead Kitten was blowing that every month on publicity they didn't need anymore.

What was really brilliant was

that NASA could provide the payload: that whale-sized external tank that they took ninety-nine percent of the way to orbit, and then threw away in what was almost a parody of government waste. If you just got the things up into a little higher orbit, there ought to be something you can do with them, Cap bet. With it costing well over a thousand dollars a kilogram to put *anything* in orbit, a few tones of construction material like that ought to be worth something to someone. All someone had to do was harpoon the things. We could sell them to Japan, if nothing else—an out-of-this-world retirement fund. Rockers start thinking about that when they hit forty.

The composite airplane people in Mohave worked up a design for us on the back of a couple of concert flyers at Domingo's after the big desert bash in 'ninety-seven. The weight margin was paper thin, but it seems Brad knew this pretty, competent, space-crazy, fighter pilot who couldn't weigh more than.... So there I was, in the cargo deck of a C-5 sitting at the front of a spaceship that wasn't much more than a big lox and methane tank, good to go hunt whales in space.

The astrogation program kicked in: the map and horizon appeared on the LCD just as they should. The satellite position data looked good. Fuel state and other functions scrolled by below, all nominal. I adjusted my piss cup, secured flipbooks, smart pens, rations, spare memory chips and such, then strapped into that strangely comfortable, half-sitting, half-standing posture the acceleration couch gave you in horizontal flight. All I had to do now was wait. We had reached ten kilometers and I was ready.

"*Dumbo, Ahab*, everything's go here," I sent, and waved through the window at Kathy.

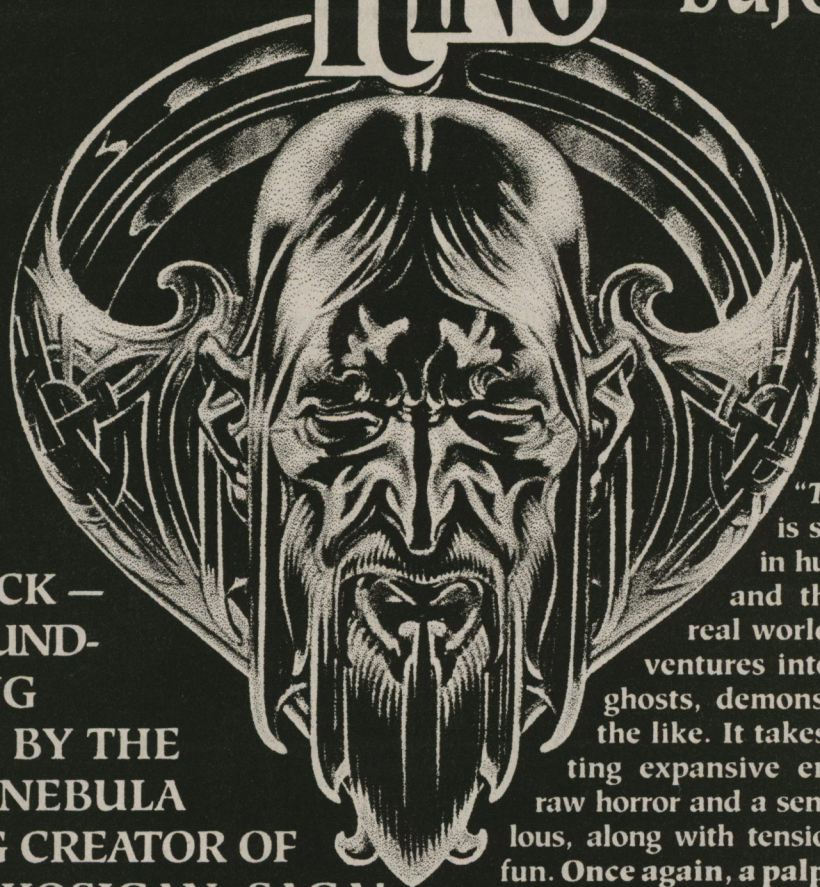
"Roger," Kathy replied with a nod, her waist-length, wavy red hair rippling down the curves of her no-apologies bodysuit with every move. She was wild, loved everyone, and was super nice to me. And Brad. Brad was a fonder and she had

Just in time for Halloween...



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—Faren Miller, *Locus*

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something to fondle. Fine with me.

I double-checked the restraints on the portable—if it slipped it would fall on me with up to three times normal acceleration. Then Cap started the “vomit comet” maneuver: a shallow dive followed by a pull up into a parabolic trajectory. The noise level went way up as the back door opened and our minutes of weightlessness came.

Kathy fed the “Go down, come up” track to the intercom. She’d written the single—no guy would have had the nerve. I started nodding my head and tapping my feet. Getting psyched. Eyes wide. Mission lust—gonna go *do* something—gonna open up space for the whole human race. “Get ready for separation—one red-orange space whale breaches in two minutes. Go get it, Linda!” Kathy cheered.

If I did, it would be our first success in three attempts.

Brad and Kathy, tethered to the front bulkhead, waved goodbye while the now-weightless *Ahab* eased it off its support carriage and rolled out the rear on the wheel guide rails as Cap gunned *Dumbo’s* jets. Don’t try this in your Cessna, folks—Cap is a shit hot pilot.

Dumbo pulled away rapidly and I felt some buffeting as the *Ahab’s* tail and side flaps struggled to keep my attitude right in the slipstream. Then the pumps whined and the engines cut in. I got nineteen out of twenty good chamber ignitions—no sweat; I just stifled the bad guy, pulled the gear in, and kept my hand off the chicken switch. Full thrust hit me and I went off to space thinking about how good Brad and Kathy looked together. Knew I was in the way. Deal with that later.

I lost one more engine on the way up—at least the vibe sensor went redline so I stifled it, too. No problem, we had plenty. Brad told me it costs a major company about twenty million dollars to design and develop a twenty-ton thrust rocket engine, and they charge more. He got a one-ton baby with the same thrust-to-mass ratio built at our local university for about the price of a home

these days. Once we had the prototype designed and tested, we got someone in Taiwan to make a hundred of them cheap. Forty-two met our specs; twenty of those went on *Ahab* and we were saving the rest for the *Ned Land* or for spares. The pumps cost as much as the whole engine buy, but one set of pumps feeds all the engines.

The launch program cut the engines at just over seven and a half k.p.s. inertial and my weight went from almost one point three kilonewtons to nothing. Right on schedule, in the grove, *Ahab* was floating along just under the circular orbit velocity than our whale, waiting for it to come to us.

I pitched the *Ahab* with the track ball, RCS thrusters banging, and started scanning the sky for a moving, twinkling, red orange star. This had been our problem so far; twice before our pilots hadn’t been able to find this spaceborne monster until too late. The rub was that our whale wouldn’t show up anywhere near the cursor ring; there were just too many sensitive measurements required to get its relative position and we couldn’t afford pricey SDI-type special electronics.

So, this time, I just used my eyes. I knew the general direction and what to look for now.

There! A pulsing orange and white speck drifting past the other stars. Now I selected the cursor and our el-cheapo heads-up display, one glowing orange ring, appeared in front of me, twenty degrees left of my target. I rolled the ball, got the ring over the tumbling whale and hit the enter key.

“*Dumbo, Ahab.* • Contact and acquisition.” This was the earliest we’d managed to date; might actually get a chance to shoot. Keeping the ring on the target, I enabled four of our main engines and waited. That was hard, the waiting. My mind went back to the years of being the runt of Mom’s six-kid litter, the years of discouraging comments from my teachers when I was pushing for an aeronautical engineering degree, and all the condescension, and harassment

I’d gone through to get to fly an ancient, third-line fighter. I had something to prove—probably always would. I started humming the melody to Jodo’s tonal rap signature tune.

The computer must have taken less than a minute because I was just about to where you sing “exit the kitten and enter the cat” when the *Ahab* thrust sideways and pitched down. It was heartrending to see the target swing out of view, but we had to almost-match velocities with the whale by the time it reached us, and that meant pointing the rockets toward the whale and the cockpit away. *Come on Linda*, I thought, *trust the instruments!* The main engines came on and we executed a short powered dive toward the atmosphere. Then I looked overhead, expectantly.

No disappointment. When the whale showed up overhead again, it slid over me like something out of “Star Wars.” Those things are *huge!* Its tumble was slow and seemed mostly in yaw; maybe the slight air drag up here at a hundred-eighty kays was already affecting it. Harpoon ready, left hand on its trigger, right hand on the trackball. Only one shot at this.

First, a pitch up maneuver to point at the whale’s center and then a pitch rate down maneuver to track it as it moved over and in front of me. I got the cursor on its approximate center of rotation and fired. By the time all this was done, its apparent size had shrunk from that of an oil storage tank to that of a VW across the street. But it looked like a good shot. Our modified black market TOW missile went off right like it was supposed to.

“Hang on!” I shouted to no one. This could put us over the hump. Dead Kitten owned *Dumbo* free and clear, and with real estate and video royalties, they had enough cash flow to keep going at this level indefinitely. But with a success, we could get some real financing. We had plans. Jodo swore that, before he played his last thirty-hertz tensor thromb, there would be Dead Kittens on the Moon.

They'd bought in for the long haul.

We'd kept our secret pretty well because we were sure someone would try to stop us, even if we couldn't figure out why. There had been a couple of unflattering articles asking why one of the few woman fighter pilots, and one who almost never listened to anything but Tchaikovsky at that, would all of a sudden quit the Air Force and walk away from everything to hang around half-naked with a rock band on a sandy island in the middle of the Indian Ocean. But that sort of thing soon died away. "Hey, guys," I'd said, "I'm *free* and the island is *nice*." Life moved on. But they'd hear from me, oh yes.

Yeah! The harpoon-set light flashed the news to me that the harpoon head had penetrated the whale's skin and the barbs had deployed. Hooked! The line whined as it unreeled from the rear of the ship over the top through its guides. Now everything would be done by feel. For the first time.

The reel brake control was a hand grip with a feedback force proportional to the harpoon line tension. It only took a few seconds to calibrate my grip, braking the reel gently with an occasional glance at the tension bar gauge on my portable's monitor screen to keep things in limits. I didn't want to break the line or tear up our whale. Acceleration pushed me back into the seat as I increased the tension. The whale tried to drag me down into the atmosphere with it. Thrusters clanged to keep the *Ahab* oriented correctly, and there were all sorts of jerks and torques as my tumbling prey set the harpoon line wobbling. I rode them out and pretty soon things started to damp down.

Finally, the unreeling stopped and cable tension went down to almost nothing. I started pulling in my catch with the reel motor to keep tension on the line and reduce its distance.

But time was going by too fast. The objective was to keep my space whale from burning-in and it would do that shortly if I didn't pull this

baby from the shallows in the next ten minutes or so. We were already over Australia and perigee was just south of Hawaii.

Being attached, I didn't want to say 'Hi, Mom' as a fireball.

I locked the reel, opened the front guide, and pitched down so that the line pulled away from the nose and released back to a guide near *Ahab's* center of gravity. Then I pulled the line tight with the reel motor, vectored *Ahab* at the local horizon, and ignited four main rockets. The cable tension went up to near the redline and fluctuated around it. Pitch down thrusters fought the torque. The whale, floundering at the end of the line, started swinging behind the *Ahab*, or, rather, the *Ahab* started swinging in front of it because the whale was much more massive.

So far, so good. I had steady thrust and there was no change in the tension for several seconds.

No change? I tried to click in another display. Nothing.

The computer had crashed. Hung up. Hung me out to dry.

No time to panic; first, cut an engine to keep tension under limits, then throw the attitude control system into backup mode: a dumb hard-wired loop that Brad had rigged up to keep the spacecraft pointed in the same direction in an emergency. It even had a separate power supply.

"*Dumbo, Ahab*. Computer crashed but staying with it. Say perigee altitude, best fit from beacon."

"*Ahab, Dumbo*. Roger. We show you five kilometers, seven now; apogee, two-twenty."

"Thanks, Kathy. Repeat every ten seconds. I say again, repeat every ten seconds."

She rogered. Kathy had a music BA—and took to this stuff like she was born to it. Things were stable for the moment. I took a breath, hit the restart button on the portable and it didn't respond. So I powered down and powered up again. Bingo! I selected reload and waited for the program to get up to speed.

"*Ahab, Dumbo*, fifty-five, two-eighty." Bless you, Kathy.

"Roger." We needed four hundred each. The reason apogee was better than perigee was that *Ahab* was already near perigee. Too near. I weighed pushing that tension red line further.

Reaching a decision to do it, I turned control back to the computer, pitched down a little more and added another rocket, feeling the slight increase in acceleration. My harpoon line tension bar moved up to the red-line limit again, then started dithering around it.

Line...I thought of the orange monstrosity wobbling far below me. If I were to just...

I felt my attitude starting to change, and without even looking at the portable, threw the ACS back into the backup mode.

Another computer lock-up.

As quickly and deliberately as possible, I took manual control of the pitch axis and pushed the nose back to where I felt it had been before. But we'd wasted a lot of fuel.

"*Dumbo, Ahab*. Lost the computer again. Must be the software. I'm staying with it."

There was no answer. Below me: Cape York. *Ahab* was below their horizon, on its own.

NASA didn't even know we were up here, thanks to a friend of mine in a Cheyenne mountain who I'd sweet-talked into identifying us as part of the whale. Just as well; they'd only confuse things now. They'd be mad enough about everything later on.

Despite all the problems, *Ahab's* engines kept firing, and we were gaining velocity, altitude, and orbital lifetime. Trouble was, without the computer, I didn't know how much, didn't know my fuel state, perigee was awfully close and the whale was dragging. I had been in orbit less than twenty minutes, but it felt like either hours or seconds.

I looked back at my catch again and smiled. *You aren't getting away that easily!* I reactivated the reel and felt the harpoon line tension rise and fall through the feedback grip. When it fell, I reeled in some line. It could get a lot closer to our mutual center

of gravity before my rocket burned it.

The problem with my portable computer wasn't necessarily in its software, but that was the only thing there was a chance of fixing in real time. So the backup disk went in the slot, and the machine rebooted. A look showed that the harpoon line tension bar was still up around the red line.

Perigee was coming up, and there wasn't any visual sign of heating on the big orange whale; we weren't going to reenter this pass. That was worth a sigh of relief. Our whale had been saved for at least a revolution. We had proved that what we were trying to do could be done at least in principle. I could cut the rockets as soon as apogee was high enough, and do another burn fifty minutes later to raise perigee. It was just starting to look like we'd won the whole ball game when the portable crashed *again*.

Return to back-up mode. My fingers went to the bank of valve switches and stifled an engine. I should have stifled all of them, right then. I knew I was almost out of fuel and that if I succeeded in what I was trying to do, i.e. putting our space whale in a safe orbit, then there might not be any reentry, at least not in what would remain of my lifetime. But I don't think I was consciously trying to sacrifice my life, yet. Rather I was trying to do whatever it took for a mission I had long ago decided was worth the sacrifice. I concentrated on the computer problem.

It must be a program error; some combination of things I was doing had not been anticipated. Maybe the problem was running that close to the tension red line without allowing the computer to reduce thrust. I could change the red line limit. Complicated and time consuming.

I spent more time working this problem than I realized. The lox ran out as I was rebooting.

We made sure the liquid oxygen ran out before the methane because if the methane fuel ran out first, the lox would use the red hot engine itself for fuel. Boom. Also, *Ahab* needed

the vapor pressure of the residual methane for structural integrity—from now on it was, for all intents and purposes, an overweight, hard skinned, methane blimp. In fact, the lox tank is just a flexible bladder inside the methane tank, and we have to lace the methane with hydrogen to keep it from freezing.

The folks in Mohave had really done a job for us. The old *Voyager* aircraft had carried almost five times its weight in fuel. On tubby *Ahab*, the surface-to-volume ratio was a lot lower, and it never had to support its full fueled mass on its wheels, so they'd pushed that ratio up to twelve.

If only that ratio could have been twelve point one.

The *Ahab* did have a liquid oxygen reserve: my fuel cell supply could be routed to the ACS thrusters for reentry control, but the main engines were out for the rest of the mission, so I'd have to be very sparing of *any* thrusting at all prior to reentry.

The computer came back up as if nothing had gone wrong. I was at perigee. Thirty minutes after launch, fifty minutes to apogee and a little over an hour before I could call *Dumbo* again. About a hundred minutes to the next perigee. Plenty of time to think about reentry.

And think about what I was trying to prove. It wasn't so much putting our space whales in a tank bank as it was giving this planet a way into space that it can afford, *if* people can accept taking a little more risk. Kip, Terry and I had told Jodo, Cap, and Brad right off that they were cutting enough corners off the way things were usually done that one or two of us might get ourselves killed before all the bugs were out. We made them all promise *not* to stop trying to get it right until either we were either all dead or someone physically stopped us by impounding *Dumbo* or something.

I guess that's when Brad started letting go a little and developing other relationships. What *Female Combat Pilot* implied must never have really sunk in to him, but it was about the same thing. "You a strange

bird," as Jodo says with wonder, but he accepts me like that. Death, as such, doesn't scare me—in fact it sort of fascinates me, like I was one of those old time poets or philosophers. When death happens, it happens. I look over high ledges and fantasize jumping; what *would* it feel like? You don't know what it's like close to the edge unless you go there.

Don't get me wrong, I like living. I think I get more out of life than most people. But to give up doing the things I want to do just to avoid risk? Well, foes and friends, that *would* bother me. And let's face it. You don't put yourself in a capsule at the end of a rocket with less technology aboard than John Glenn had forty years ago, less ground support, and no spacesuit if you're that scared of dying.

So I don't make it back. I had that option, in fact, having that option gave me an almost Faustian sense of power and freedom. If nothing else came of this, I'd *already* been part of something worth dying for. Our recurring costs for putting *Ahab* in orbit, *per kilogram*, were one one-hundredth of what a shuttle launch cost. Those kind of economics would start moving industry off Earth and allow humanity to grow without fouling its cradle any further. Something to die for. But come to think of it, we all die for something—that something being whatever it is that we do with our lives.

Brad could have Kathy full time when I'm gone. It made me feel good to think of it. Everything Brad and I had was in this venture—Dead Kitten donated our room, and we slept on floor mats. The only thing in the world I could leave him was a good single friend like Kathy. I didn't have any insurance—I mean, who would insure *me*? So, Brad and Kathy, have a ball.

There was the Space Shuttle, of course. Same orbital plane. But calling on them for a rescue would spoil everything. See, they would say, you had to have a multibillion dollar government program up here to save you from your own foolishness. *No*, I would shout. *I knew the risks.*

I'll take death to that kind of humiliation any day. Besides, I didn't have anything to wear in vacuum.

A chime reminded me that I was out of main tank liquid oxygen. I said 'thank you' and started recording this stuff for Kit and Terry, intending to dump it on the sideband next pass with *Dumbo*.

I felt like listening to my favorite composer's sixth symphony, or Berlioz's march to the scaffold, but we hadn't had enough weight margin to bring entertainment. My untrustworthy portable computer could listen to the global positioning receiver, though, and it told me that my apogee had risen to an acceptable three hundred sixty-eight kilometers but my perigee had only reached two hundred forty. Marginal.

Might as well inspect my catch. The tension bar graph showed no tension in the harpoon line. I reeled some cable in to give it some. The space whale, of course, still had a lot of liquid oxygen in it, inaccessible for now. It came toward me. There we were, two big empty gas bags playing celestial chicken. It was tempting, but I slipped aside with yaw thrusters paired for translation.

Its red-orange color wasn't gold, but it might have been; at ten thousand dollars a kilogram *any* mass in orbit was worth owning, and this whale was ours by right of salvage now. It might take us a bit of time to realize that wealth, but the wealth was there. If we collected a bunch of them, well, that would be too much mass and volume to ignore. Someone would have to do something.

My whale bled a bit of gas from its harpoon wound as it floated by. Our next development... "Orbit Salvage's" next development, sans me... should be a harpoon that doesn't make leaks. That stuff is valuable out here.

Dumbo would be over their horizon again in another ten minutes; maybe they would have an idea for me. I had enough power and breathing oxygen for another four orbits, if the time would help, though I wondered if I would use all of it if

things were hopeless as they looked. No, I decided, I wouldn't. My life might be over, but I would get as much for it as I could. "Auguring in?—at least take the SAM site with you," type logic. Right.

"*Ahab, Dumbo.*"

"*Dumbo, Ahab.* Five by. Good to hear you, Kathy! We got one, folks. Don't know how long we get to keep it, though."

"Linda! We thought you were done for! Then when the tank didn't burn in over Hawaii like everyone thought it would, well, the you-know-what hit the international fan. Your ex-lover in the mountain spilled the beans and everyone in the world wants to talk to you. Thank God Dead Kitten's flacks knows how to handle this kind of thing."

"Roger that. Ah, I don't know how to break this to you, Kathy, so I'll just say it. I don't think I'm going to make it back. I'm almost out of lox; computer guidance problems. I kind of made a trade while I was fixing it."

Dead air. Come on, troops, I thought, I'll be below the horizon in ten minutes.

Finally Kathy said "Jesus, Linda. There's got to be something. We'll get the guys on it...."

"Roger, good luck, but I think I know the score. Anyway, I think I can get this job done. What I'll do is use what delta-vee I have left to pull perigee up a couple more notches. That ought to give us a couple months to do something more permanent, though I'll feel better about that when you run an integration. I'm just going on the King-Hele estimator we loaded in the portable."

"Linda!" That was Brad, getting sentimental on me. "We'll get you back, somehow...."

"Hey, I'm open to better ideas, believe me, but don't take too long. I'd rather not wait until the CO₂ gets me and I can't do the apogee maneuver right. I don't want to waste that shot. Look, is NASA screaming bloody murder like we thought they would?"

"Sort of," Kathy said. "They've figured out that you're in trouble and

they're taking the high road, space-is-no-place-for-amateurs line. The real problem is in the Senate. Holmes wants NASA to rescue you and then bill Dead Kitten enough to put us out of business."

"No way! I'd burn in on purpose before I give him that kind of satisfaction."

That got some silence. Damn it, they had been considering it. Finally Brad spoke up.

"Okay, Linda. We said we'd do it your way, so I guess we have to. It hurts, love. Uh, we'll be in Perth next rev. Kathy's doing a solo. Help pay for the trip. Unless you...."

"No, don't cancel. If I don't make it back, use me. Do it *for* me. Wish I could stick around to see it. And one more thing. Kathy, take care of Brad. Will you do that for me? I know you guys like each other. It's okay." I tried to spot *Dumbo's* contrail below, but the Indian Ocean was full of cirrus.

"Linda, I will," she promised. But her voice cracked.

"Linda," Brad said. "I...I...."

"Roger, Brad. Look, I love you guys, too. Both of you. Just don't let me down, understand?"

I was getting *me* to understand it too. Tell yourself something often enough and it has the echo, if not the ring of truth. Now that this was all out in the open, things wouldn't be the same even if I did get back. But the *last* thing I wanted was for anyone feeling guilty because of my supposed jealousy. That's *not* what I wanted to be remembered for.

"Roger," Brad said, the hurt in his voice making it through the radio. Whatever I lacked as a sex object, he still cared for me as a person, and that felt good.

"Okay. Now let's get back to business. I'm going out of range again. Have you got my data dump? Kit and Terry will need it."

"Roger, Linda, we've got it. What about NASA. Do you want to talk to them?"

"I'd rather fight the problem in peace, thank you. Talk to you next rev, if I'm still around. If not, it's been a blast. Just don't give up the

hunt, understand? Love, Brad. Good-bye."

"We'll be listening. Love, Linda. *Dumbo* out."

"*Ahab* out."

Off went the transceiver, just in case NASA or someone else had my frequency. Then I realized that was the first part of letting go, shivered and looked at the stars. No problem, I can do this. And, just like anything else, do it well. The first good thing about deliberately letting go of life's certainty. You start planning, accommodating yourself to it. Pretty soon, you start thinking, all right, let's do it. I'd never understood that about condemned prisoners until I faced it myself.

But there was work to do first. The *Ahab* jerked a bit, backward, which seemed odd since I hadn't fired any thrusters. Mental gears switched for a moment.

Of course—our whale had reached the end of its harpoon line. It would probably rebound and come back.

I settled back to think, going over options again. This was important—I wanted people to know that if I bought the farm, it was a professional trade off, like the pilots that don't bail out to make sure the airplane doesn't hit a school. I didn't want people to think I bought it because I screwed up. So, I went over everything I could think of. I could split the remaining oxygen between a reentry burn and reentry control, hope perigee was low enough for reentry and hope for enough oxygen for the thrusters to keep things stable. But there wouldn't be any lox left for the fuel cells, so what would I do for power to control the lifting body surfaces? Then I could lose the whale and burn up anyway. Much rather get my catch safe in a higher orbit, then let the air out. Do it my way.

There was another tug on the harpoon line; almost like the whale was still trying to get away. I looked out the window. I hadn't used any gas and the *Ahab* was still pointing down at the Earth.

Down, of course. Tides. Gravity

gradient. I knew about this, but we hadn't planned on using it, so it didn't connect at first. The whale and I were a tethered system....

Hope and uncertainty returned, along with a knot in my stomach. I almost resented the complication: but you can use a tethered system to change orbits. In principle, I could use my harpoon line to generate some deorbit delta-V and help boost the whale into a higher orbit at the same time. It's like this....

My harpooned space whale was *higher* than the center of mass of the *Ahab*-whale system; at a larger radius but moving with the same angular velocity. So that end felt *more* centrifugal force, pulling it out, than our center of mass—and less gravitational force holding it in. So the whale tried to move into a higher orbit. But the *Ahab* was *lower* than the orbit of the center of mass, and thus experienced *more* gravity and *less* centrifugal force. It was trying to fall into a *lower* orbit. That stretched the harpoon line between us. *That* was what was jerking the *Ahab*.

Ahab still had ten plus kilometers of half-ton test harpoon line on the reel. Just maybe....

My first perigee had been about at the international date line. In the next hour and a half, the Earth had moved twenty-two and a half degrees east under my orbit so that my second perigee was over near where Amelia Earhart disappeared. Talk about birds of a feather! They might even end up looking for what's left of me in the same area where they found what was left of her. That was a kind of neat thought.

My third perigee, it so happened, would occur when Western Australia was under my orbit, just after concert time. I started laughing. Couldn't stop for a while.

I let out all the cable as I coasted toward apogee, riding the cable brakes just enough to keep tension on it and used some cold methane, very sparingly, to take the swings out of the system and ease me into a mostly stable gravity gradient configuration. There were still some long period vertical oscillations; stretch in the

cable. But, once things semi-settled down I had time to do the math: my space whale's orbit would still come closer to Earth than I wanted and my own not close enough. The whole thing was a low-probability maybe.

It was getting near decision time. I could use all my fuel to get the tank into a much better orbit, at the expense of any chance for a controlled reentry, or I could *hope* that the tether trick would keep it aloft long enough for our next mission to rescue and *hope* there was enough left in *Ahab's* tanks to get us down safely. I wasn't big on wishful thinking; it doesn't usually work with jets nor in space.

So, despite all the tether stuff, something inside me was proceeding with the letting go process. Once I'd gotten used to the idea, dying up here wasn't so scary. Taking the Kathy and Brad thing head-on would be a lot more painful than just opening a valve and becoming a legend. There are all sorts of sacrifices, I reflected, and all sorts of cowardice. There were some real pluses. I'd achieve the kind of immortality that makes a point people never forget, and solve that personal situation back on Earth nice and clean. A sort of farewell present.

But, to be fair, getting back alive would make a pretty important point, too. All our bravado aside, the world might not let Kit or Terry take this risk if I bought it. Or even if I did, on the other hand. One whale was not the whole mission and the mission comes first. But if this was our only chance to show that the mission could be done....

I like to think of myself as a winner. Back in officer training school, our Military History prof had told us the best way not to lose was not to get into fights you can't win. Select the battles you can win, and do what you have to do to win those. Easy enough to say.

Salvaging the tank was the battle I knew I could win. This letting go really worked. I felt the exhilaration of the kamikaze, the joy of the martyr, the passion of an *Ahab*. I was grinning, released, ready. I'd come



up here to catch a space whale; that first, then come what may. Below, it was dawn, blue, and clear. The plume of Kilauea stretched high and white to the southwest, almost to the shadow of night. I thought, in awe, that I was already in heaven, and had only to stay.

At apogee, my hand passed over the reel jettison switch and moved to the thrusters.

What happened then I never really understood. There was a sudden, unexpected, tug on the harpoon cable and my hand sort of fell down on the release switch. I saw the line snake up toward the big orange tank, which wobbled a bit, as if it were nodding at me. We all had fun calling huge empty things a "whale," but it was just a bunch of aluminum and stuff. No volition at all.

I think I sat paralyzed for a minute or so. The flag with our logo and "Orbit Salvage, subsidiary of Dead Kitten, Inc." on it unfolded from the reel on its way up and waved farewell to me. I shook my head, laughing and crying at once. Can't be happening, I told myself. I'd made my choice, and then, somehow, the universe had said 'no.' Maybe I had something more important to do. Anyway, I'd damn well better find something more important, I thought.

"Okay, Moby," I said, in the privacy of my cockpit. "I sure hope you're right about this."

The decision had been made for me and now I had to implement it. When no single thing looks like it will work for sure, my motto is try all the compatible options at once. Since I wasn't going to try to make the fuel cells last another three orbits, I could steal a couple of meters per second push from the fuel cell allocation to make sure that I'd reenter *this* rev. I did it. I had the margin to sacrifice another couple of pascals of methane tank pressure for a cold gas delta-vee. I did that. Perigee at ten kilometers, the laptop told me.

Right in the middle of the Columbo-to-Perth jet route.

That left about forty minutes until reentry, a little time to get some more of my thoughts into the computer, just in case I didn't make it anyway. Dear Brad...(sealed file).

Thirty minutes later, I turned the ACS back on and released the spacecraft to the computer. Without the harpoon line tension messing things up, the software should be trustworthy; after all, it had worked perfectly on the two previous missions. *Ahab* wasn't in the nominal groove, but we can be a lot more relaxed about this than the space shuttle—*Ahab* is a lot lighter for its area, so its spray-on heat shield doesn't see as much friction, nor does it drop like a flying stone. The *Ahab's* nose rose above a brilliant white horizon as the laptop adjusted the spacecraft's attitude for reentry.

I adjusted mine as well. After getting used to the idea of dying, some things didn't matter so much. This preparing yourself to die business wasn't like facing a danger that you probably would survive: I'd been in combat over the Balkans, and it wasn't like that at all. The certainty of what I had decided to do had been calming, releasing. I wasn't trying to hang on to anything except my own dreams and self-image. It felt good. Now the whole mess was back again.

No, not the whole mess. It came to me that I didn't have to pick up everything I'd let go of up there, that I'd gotten a kind of disposition to leave some of it behind, and remake my life. *More opportunities*, I told myself, *Get with it, Linda*.

You can get busy flying a lifting body, second-guessing your computer about attitude, trim, and energy management. It gets your mind off your psychological navel. I was out of the ionization blackout, before I found myself wondering how long it had been since I talked to anyone, and then realized my radio was still off. Meaning no transponder either. I stared at it and started giggling—be a hell of a thing to go through all

this and get cited for a near miss! I flipped the switch.

To avoid a mob scene, I used my maiden name with Perth RAP-COM and told them I was an experimental aircraft in trouble and had to make a dead stick landing. They bought it. So did I, buying the maiden name part, inside. I left Linda Stevenson up there, somewhere. Linda Takamuri would have the press conference.

The dead stick landing was no sweat, really. The *Ahab*, even though it doesn't have wings, has a lot of lift when empty, sort of like a stretched out and flattened beachball. It's heavier and wider at the tail than the nose because of the engines, so the canards and the nose rudder have a lot of leverage. I flared right on the program and we just glided in like a paper airplane, no sweat.

My radio patch call caught Brad and Kathy in a Perth Hotel, consoling themselves about my demise. Somehow, that didn't bother me a bit, like it was part of another life, in fact, I felt it was kind of neat that they enjoy each other. Let 'em be happy. Let everyone be happy. I wasn't dependent, and wouldn't be ever again.

Brad put a lot of innovations in the nose wheel. Besides using the wheel well as the hatch opening, he rigged a couple of lightweight rods and gears so that the motor which raises and lowers the wheel can also make the wheel spin, giving me some slow taxi capability with what was left of the fuel cells. Despite its size, *Ahab* only weighs about three metric tons empty, and if its pilot isn't really careful, it sort of bounces along down the runway. The Perth tower controller was later quoted as saying I looked and sounded like I was high on something.

Well, in a way I was. After seriously contemplating the alternative, life is a blast.

Personal File, Linda Takamuri
CEO, Orbit Transportation Inc.
Code 10S3 ■



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WRITING, PART FOUR

Algis Budrys

The example of the missing climax, which in fact is not missing

These last three times, I have told you about the seven parts of the story, and said that in order to *be* a story, instead of something else, all seven parts have got to be in there. This is true. It is also true that in reading stories, it does not always seem to be true. Why is this?

Well, some very successful pieces of fiction have not been stories. This is more likely to be so when the piece is short; the shorter, the more likely it is to be a jape. A jape does not have to be funny; it has to have the characteristic of being one-punch in a contrived setting. Now, all settings are of course contrived, but in a jape they are obviously contrived, in order that the punch be outrageous. Most japes are funny, and they draw their name from a rich tradition of humor. Humor depends in large part on the outrageous, and thus one tends to think funny when confronted with an obvious setup for a punchline. But many japes, particularly when written and sold in the fiction market, are not so much funny as they are *verging* on humor. Damon Knight's "Not With a Bang" for example.

In it, a lone male survives a worldwide holocaust. He is, however, subject to peculiar fits; every so often, he becomes temporarily paralyzed. However, he now has the (temporary) antidote. Finally he meets the last surviving woman, and she is crazy about him. She has a peculiarity; she is pathologically shy. But she agrees to give him the antidote when he needs it, and he gives her the whole supply. Then he excuses himself to go the men's room; he steps inside, the door whispers shut,

and the paralysis hits. The woman will never enter the men's room. He is doomed. Thus a jape.

Now, for a beginning writer, this is a very difficult form. Even for an advanced writer, this is a difficult form if one does not have much of a bent for it. The result is that few japes get published, because few get written. The story, on the other hand, is amenable to just about everyone.

Understand me. The chances are very, very good that if you practice long enough, and practice the correct things, and only the correct things, you will sell a story—perhaps more than one—whether you have any talent or not. A story.

Talent—which, by the way, is one of those words for which there is in fact no exact definition—is a vastly over-rated commodity. What wins in the end is hard, persistent work. It is lovely if you have talent *and* you work hard. But if you don't have much or any talent, hard work will eventually get you there.

The catch, of course, is cost-effectiveness. Do you want to do as much work as may be required for you? In most cases, the answer turns out to be No. In most such cases, that is a prudent decision. Something else will reward an equal amount of hard work better. But if you badly want to write, and nothing can stop you, then the odds are that *if you practice the right things*, you will succeed in the end.

But we were talking about the seven parts, their apparent absence from some stories. The seven parts are: (1) A character, (2) in context, (3) with a problem, (4) tries to solve it, but (5) fails because he doesn't

understand it all, and fails again though he understands it better, and again though he has increased the stakes, and (6) finally succeeds with everything at stake, at the last possible moment, and (7) a trustworthy character steps forward and says "The story's really over."

When a writer has had a certain amount of experience, and if he or she then so chooses, a fair amount—in some case, an amazing amount—of game-playing can take place in the manuscript. Remember that the manuscript is not the story. The manuscript may, then, not contain all of the story in so many words.

Extreme cases exist. Roald Dahl's "The Man From the South," for instance. In it, a man stops in a saloon in a town to which he is a stranger, intent simply on getting a little lunch and then on his way. While waiting to be served, he starts to light a cigarette, only to be peremptorily stopped by a horrid little man who has swarmed off a barstool. "I'll bet you think that's going to light!" the horrid man declares.

Our viewpoint character looks at the lighter in his hand. "Why, yes," he says, "this lighter usually works the first time."

"I'll bet it doesn't. I'll bet—" And the horrid man goes on to name the house on the hill, the Rolls Royce parked outside, the yacht in the harbor, and what have you. Our viewpoint character is shaken; he sees the barflies watching intently, he suddenly becomes aware that he is totally at the mercy of the circumstances, and, Thank God, he has an out.

"I don't have anything to bet,"

he says. "I'm just an average bloke. So, I'm sorry, but—"

The horrid man whips a hatchet out from under his coat. "You've got a finger, haven't you?"

And the situation develops, so that our man is finally at the table with one hand pinned down and his little finger extended, the horrid man has his hatchet poised, and the cigarette is in the man's trembling lips as he raises the lighter to it and prepares to flick—

When the door bursts open. "Stop" says the horrid woman who has come in. "Don't do it! He doesn't own any of that stuff he bet you! He doesn't own the house on the hill, the Rolls Royce parked outside, or the yacht in the harbor! No! They're mine! All mine," she says, brandishing a hand which is missing almost all its fingers.

And that's the end of the manuscript. And it is only at the end that you realize the viewpoint character that Dahl has given you is unimportant to the

story, except in the sense that somebody had to furnish the hand and the naivete. The *story* is about the man and the woman, living out their lives in this town, terminally bored, chopping away at each other, and now at passing strangers, going to go on and on until one kills the other or a passing stranger, or both. There is a sense that the property over which they contend may have been part of an estate, and they the heirs to it. There is a sense—just as much of a sense—that *neither* of them owns the property. But clearly there is a story developing in there somewhere, validated by the woman's words and gesture, with the climax yet to come.

Dahl was a devilishly clever short story writer; go ahead and surpass him if you can.

At least one writer did. John Collier wrote many great short stories, among which is numbered "The

Chaser." In it, a young man searches along a back street until he comes to a dark and obscure store labeled "Shop," with stuffed baby alligators and crystal balls and what is either the horn of a narwhal or a unicorn in the dimly-lit window. The young man goes inside, with a bell on a spring jangling to announce his presence. Way in the back, beyond

"Stop it! Sell me the love potion. How much is it?"

The man shrugs and plucks a small bottle off a shelf. "Fifty cents. Here it is. Now, our undetectable poison is a lot dearer; it calls for you to sign over everything you've got. But—"

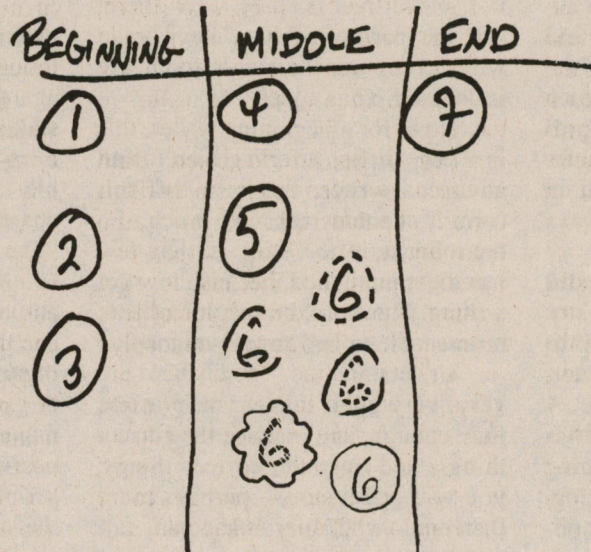
"Stop it! This is what I want," says the young man, snatching up the bottle, throwing down a fifty-cent piece, and walking back to the front door. At the door, he stops, and turning toward the storekeeper, says "Well, goodbye," and exits to the jangling of the bell. "Au revoir," says the storekeeper.

Well, first of all, if you don't know "au revoir" means "til I see you again," the story is in trouble with you. But when Collier wrote it, he had every reason to believe most of his audience did know it. He took a much larger chance in depending on his audience to be mature enough to realize that what the young man thought he

wanted would soon enough become intolerable to him. But, too, by then a good deal of the world knew what to expect from John Collier, and to consume it eagerly.

Now, the thing about "The Chaser," like the thing about "The Man From the South," is that you can search the manuscript from one end to the other, and not find all of the seven parts.

The seven parts have not yet occurred fully; we have not had our climax yet. But it is precisely because we expect all seven parts, and to have them occur in the future, that the stories work. (They work, by the way, no matter what the actual Part Six may suppositionally be, as long as all the possible Part Sixes are satisfactory.) They are not japes, although "The Man From the South" *almost* reads like one. The difference between them and "Not With a



(6) is the climax. It may not be in the manuscript

shelves laden with all sorts of arcane stuff or else junk, is a counter, and getting up from behind the counter is a gentleman of a certain age, saying politely "May I help you, sir?"

The young man looks around to reassure himself he is in the right place. "I want," he says, "some of your infallible love potion."

"Ah, yes, the love potion. Well, I can sell you some of that, certainly, but it's really trivial. Couldn't I interest you in our absolutely undetectable poison, instead?"

"Are you crazy? I want some of the love potion. I've met the most wonderful girl in the world, but she doesn't like me. I want her to love me, to marry me, to see to my every need, to hang on my every word, to be unable to be separated from me under any circumstances!"

"Ah, yes. Well, that's all very fine, but our undetectable poison—"

Bang" is that we can see the climax looming in the future, but it is not here yet.

That's OK. You will remember that although a manuscript runs from left to right, from top to bottom, with events necessarily occurring in serial order, a *story* lives in the mind, which is not only capable of handling multiplex inputs but in fact much prefers them. Although the raw input from the manuscript necessarily enters the mind serially, it is immediately translated into something the mind can handle much better. Remember that readers compare each new bit of information to all the previous bits, and that they assign values to those bits according to a great many criteria, not just the simple one of "this is the latest bit." As the story takes provisional shape, that includes bits *that haven't come yet, but are likely to*. If the manuscript does nothing to contradict them, those bits will continue to maintain their validity.

Those bits are based on everything the reader has found in your manuscript up to that point. If it turns out you didn't mean them, in the end, you will be accused, probably rightly, of introducing nonsequiturs, and your story will be downgraded sharply. But if you do mean them, you have something like "The Man From the South" or "The Chaser."

(Incidentally, that species of nonsequitur is called a "red herring," and is named for the practice, of English conservationists, of drawing a red herring across the track of the fox, thus diverting the hounds.)

You will notice also, from "The Man From the South," that items 1, 2, 3, 4, 5 and 7 may not be, in the end, what they seem for the bulk of the manuscript. You *thought* you knew what they were, but they were not. Nevertheless, they were there; they just weren't written down, or in some cases were written down but you assigned a different value to them.

(A) do not be chagrined; Dahl would have failed in his story if you could get them right while reading the manuscript; (B) the general lesson to be learned is that just because a thing is simple doesn't mean it is necessarily applied simple-mindedly.

So. I would suggest you think, hard, before you start getting fancy at the beginning of your career. It's hard to write as well as Roald Dahl or John Collier at the peaks of their careers; they didn't start that way either. And it's not only hard, it restricts your audience to a group of relative sophisticates. There is something to be learned from the fact that Dahl, Collier, and most superb short

story writers, were relatively unsuccessful as novelists. Too much sophistication at a time is bad for sales.

Put it another way; if you read many best-sellers, as I did for years for the *Chicago Sun-Times*, you will swiftly see that their authors put the seven parts out there in plain sight, and keep their stories relatively simple. Their reward is riches beyond the dreams of most writers. Many of them know how to write "better" than they do; they also know it would be suicide to their bank balances.

But even in speculative fiction, which presumably is what we're really talking about, many writers, old and new, have made a career of putting all seven parts into the manuscript. They may not get talked about when "really good writers" are discussed by other writers—though they equally well may—but (A) that doesn't stop any editor worth his or her paycheck, and (B) most of the talk about writers you hear from writers is worthless. No writer can possibly reach a truly objective opinion about another writer. What counts is what goes on between you and your readers; very little else matters.

Next time, we will talk more about writing being a lonely profession, and what that really means. ■



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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TELL ME

Laurie Tashiro

Illustrated by Peggy Ranson

Tell me true.

"Tell me," the old woman said, her voice an intimate whisper inviting confidences, indiscretions.

"It was the same." The experience was Lizabeth's. She needed to hoard her feelings. Examine them again, one by one. If she had to tell, it would all be ruined and so she stood mute.

"No. It couldn't have been the same. It's never exactly the same. I know that. Don't you lie to me." The old woman's voice rose and broke, lacking the strength to shout.

As a few of the telltales on the old woman's life support chair turned yellow, Lizabeth's resolve failed. She knew she'd have to give in. If she wanted the old woman to live, if she wanted to live.

As the old woman rolled her chair nearer, Lizabeth could smell the acrid, medicinal stink of death too long delayed. Retreating, she breathed her own sweet perfume rising in waves from her flushed skin, doubting if the wasted, scarred husk in the chair had ever been a woman with soft skin and tender feelings. But she had been and Lizabeth had once been little more than a few cells

carefully scraped from the old woman's body.

"Start at the beginning. Tell me what was he wearing when you first saw him. What did he say."

Lizabeth pressed her lips tight, waiting until the last possible moment to surrender. Hoping just once she would be allowed to keep her memories private.

"Tell me." Punishment was never far from the old woman's mind.

Lizabeth concentrated on the third ceiling tile from the left corner, second row.

"He was wearing a blue shirt."

"Periwinkle blue," the old woman said, insisting on absolute accuracy of detail.

"Yes. He was wearing a periwinkle blue polo shirt with a cream colored silk jacket and matching slacks...." And so she recited the whole, unvarying story, keeping her voice even, sharing as little as possible.

She met the young man in an old-fashioned, Victorian garden. They spread a picnic, fed each other bits of baked chicken, cold salmon,

fruit and drank champagne. They read each other Shakespearean sonnets. They made love on the blanket. Those parts of the chronicle never changed.

Lizabeth didn't think they could change. She knew she was reenacting a moment from the old woman's past. Reliving that moment over and over again in an attempt to charge or refine it. If she just knew more of the story, some background, what outcome was hoped for. But the old woman refused to tell her anything useful, saying she didn't want some clone's attempts at intellect polluting the moment.

The old woman watched every reenactment. Lizabeth resented the watching less than these retellings. The recounting forced her to acknowledge the invasion of those intimate moments. The endless retellings changed the very color of her memories, turning them from blushing rose to soiled gray.

"Tell me. When he said he was leaving to take the job in Georgia, what did you say?"

"I told him I was happy for him. That I knew it was a wonderful

opportunity.”

The old woman nodded thoughtfully. “Very supportive and worth a try. But it didn’t change his mind.” This judgment was delivered with a sting that brought to tears to Lizabeth eyes. As if the most recent failure was her fault.

“No, he still left.” Bowing her head, she let long dark hair fall forward to shield her face.

Standing quietly, she tried not to draw the old woman’s attention. Soon she could go to her room. Slow minutes passed and vertigo caused by being too long motionless began building in the back of her head. A small sound caused Lizabeth to raise her eyes.

“You can go. I’ll work out another variation and we’ll try again. I want to remember now. I don’t need you for that.”

Lizabeth’s eyes narrowed for a moment, a tendril of rebellion escaping her sealed heart. Then her expression smoothed and blanked. The old woman had never bothered to conceal the records of prior experiments. Lizabeth knew she was only the most recent in a line of more than a dozen bio-constructs, the most sophisticated yet. A melding of a biological clone with artificial intelligence. If her intellect was artificial, she’d wished the old woman had given her a bit more so that she could understand what was going on. What her purpose was. Maybe find a way out of the endless replaying of this one, limited incident from her tormentor’s past.

The life she had with the old woman and her repeated picnics wasn’t much. Lizabeth knew she had no legal status, no right to exist. Her creator had been very careful to point that out from the first. She’d been told most people would regard her as an abomination. Something less than a real person. Yet Lizabeth wanted to hold on to the little part of life she had. More than anything, she wanted to hold on.

By careful prying, she’d found that eighteen previous constructs had participated in the reenactment of the picnic. Sometimes she wondered what had become of them. It was a

subject the old woman refused to discuss and the logbooks only said, “Results inconclusive.”

Lizabeth left the lab, walking a short way down a beige, windowless corridor, returning to the other half of her personal universe, her room. As soon as the door lock snicked behind her she felt her energy draining away. Laying down, she prepared to dream, dream of the boy in the garden. Dream of a life. Dream until the old woman called her again.

The first thing Lizabeth did upon awakening was look at the clock. Three days and two hours had passed. Not long, usually six or seven days went by between summons. She showered and went to the lab.

The picnic holograph was already running. The young man stood to one side of the clearing, picnic basket in hand, a blanket slung over his shoulder. His vacuous expression signaled his resting state. Lizabeth knew his intelligence was different from hers, limited in some way. He never argued, always said his lines perfectly, played his part with unvarying correctness. If only he would be flexible or inventive, maybe they could end this sequence. Move on, or better yet move out. So far, nothing Lizabeth had tried or the old woman could come up with had been able to break him out of the pattern.

“Finally. What took you so long? I woke you ten minutes ago. He’s waiting.”

“What will I say?” Lizabeth hesitated, looking over the scene. The trees, the grass, the very color of the sky, echoed previous failures. Yet each time some subtle variable was altered, a different nuance introduced with the hope of changing the inevitable.

“You’ll know when the time comes.” Bitterness and jealousy seeped through the shroud of scientific purposefulness.

Lizabeth entered the scene. Try as she might, the picnic repeated with depressing sameness. They ate, read poetry, made love. As she reached for something in her purse, the picnic glade vanished, leaving Lizabeth sprawled on the bare floor. Without a

word, the young man got up and left the laboratory. She felt disoriented. Cheated. Wiping away tears, she picked herself up and straightened her clothes. Anger bubbled up from deep within her gut, burning the back of her throat and obscuring her vision.

“Tell me.”

“‘Tell me. Tell me.’ Always your damned ‘Tell me.’ What could I possibly tell you, you don’t already know?” She heard herself shrieking and didn’t care, her stomach rolled, a sour, fishy taste filling her mouth. “You watch. You see everything that happens. You program the whole damn thing. What is there to tell. You’ve heard it all before.” Lizabeth’s hands clenched at her sides. If she relaxed even the tiniest bit they would batten around the old woman’s neck and choke her into silence, support chair or no.

“Tell me what his hands feel like as they touch your bare back.” The old woman’s voice was slow and husky.

“You’re sick. You’re nothing but a degenerate voyeur. You can’t have a man any more so you watch. Why don’t you die and give us some peace?” Lizabeth was shaking. She loved the young man and the old woman was making it all into something dirty.

“He’s not ‘a man,’ he’s mine. My colleague, my partner, my mate. Mine. There is no ‘us’ where you two are concerned. You are a tool I happen to need at the moment. When your usefulness is over, you’ll be discarded. But he will always be mine. Do not forget it. Never yours, mine.”

Minutes passed, the room filled only with the sound of angry breathing. It did no good to argue. Nothing ever changed.

“Tell me.” The voice was a whisper.

And because she had no choice, Lizabeth told. How his hands felt on her skin, caressing a bare hip. How his lips felt kissing the hollow of her throat, behind her ear. And when she had finished she fled to the meager refuge of her room, leaving the old woman to remember.

“Tell me how you felt when he walked away. Tell me how you felt when you knew he won’t be coming back, not ever.”

Sobbing, Lizabeth looked up from the floor where she had collapsed. Trying to speak, she choked and shook her head violently. She clutched at the bare tiles as if to rip them from their bed.

The old woman waited, barely suppressing her distaste at the self-indulgent emotionalism she was being forced to witness. She had time. More time than this stupid mannequin. The doctor said she had several years left. With her money, she’d be able to buy time. As much time as it took to prove them all wrong. Her colleges who’d insisted that time travel to the past wasn’t possible, her experiments not only criminal but a waste of time and money. Prove wrong her husband who had said they were no longer right for each other, proceeding with his oh so legal and meaningless divorce. But she had kept this facsimile of him and if her research proved out, she’d soon have the real man with her. Just a tiny change here and a twitch there and the last 25 years would disappear as if they’d never been. Finally, the girl wore herself out with crying and lay silent, hands covering her head.

“Tell me.”

“Tell you what? That I feel like shit? That I feel like I’ve been run over by a bullet train?” Lizabeth crawled across the floor towards the old woman. Not close enough to threaten, but closer. “I feel like everything inside me, my heart, my lungs, every last organ has been ripped out. I hurt that much. But you know that.

“How could you do this to me?” Bolts of real pain accompanied the hurt in her heart. “I’m you. You know how this feels. You know I have to love him. Like you did.”

“You do love him, don’t you?” The old woman adjusted an instrument.

“You give me no choice. You made me to love him.” Despair rolled over her in an inescapable freezing wave.

“But you don’t have to love him

so much.” The old woman’s voice was a malevolent hiss. Telltales on the support-chair burned yellow. A warning tone sounded, annoying, persistent.

“I want him back.” The girl shivered. “Let me try again. I know I can make him change his mind and stay. I can make him love us so much he’ll never want to leave, for any reason.” She rose, ready for a challenge, or an attack.

Neither woman spoke. Each searched the other, hunting for an overlooked weakness. Each knew the other too intimately to waste time begging or bargaining.

Turning her back, the old woman said, “Perhaps we can play the scene one last time. But you need to rest. Look at yourself. Eyes all swollen, face red and blotchy. No man would give you a second glance. Go to your room. I’ll let you know when I’m ready for you again.”

Lizabeth gave the old woman a long look, trying to guess what plan lay behind those clouded eyes. Failing, she nodded and left the old woman to her memories and plans.

Rather than return to her room, only sleep awaited her there, she spent the next week avoiding the old woman and secretly ransacking the entire house looking for clues. Clues to the old woman’s identity and that of the young man. Lizabeth needed to know what their relationship had been and why the old woman persisted in the futile attempt to change the past. If she could discover the answers to these questions, she’d be able to win free of the old woman and if she were clever, take the young man with her.

A diary discarded amongst a pile of books in an unused bedroom provided some answers. A scrapbook of newspaper clippings added to a tale of young love coupled with a brilliant research partnership and eventual betrayal.

Lizabeth trembled as she returned the books to their places. There was only one way out. It would take courage. She’d need a few tools herself. She pressed her hand to her mouth, silencing hysteri-

cal laughter. Only one way out. It would be enough.

Several days later, the old woman finally sent for Lizabeth. The lab was set up the same as each previous time, the picnic scene in place, the young man not yet activated. Lizabeth didn’t like to see him like this. Lifeless, neuter. If he was hers, she’d never turn him off.

“Take your place.”

The old woman’s hands shook as they manipulated dials and switches. Lizabeth saw signs of deterioration more advanced and debilitating than a mere ten days should have been able to accomplish. The air had a sour reek that put her teeth on edge.

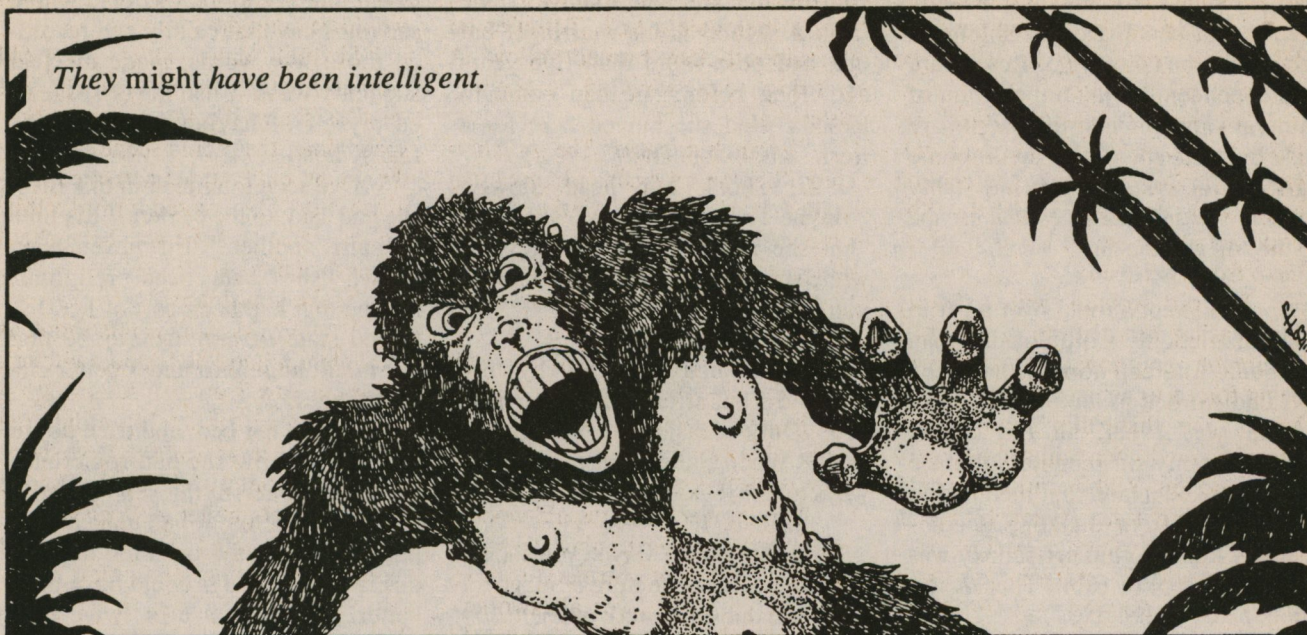
She hesitated when the old woman refused to look at her, reluctantly taking her place on the grass. The picnic proceeded as it always did, with gentle laughter and warm caresses. Lizabeth desperately attempted change after change, but events proceed with an unbreakable momentum.

As he had told her about the new job and his plans for moving she felt her soul leave her body. With her will struck cold and still, her hand crept into the purse lying on the edge of the blanket. From the other side of the universe she saw light glitter off the barrel of a gun, saw it pointed at her lover, knowing what would come next. What had always come next.

Except this time her hand swung around and when the shot rang out and the bullet traveled its course, it was the front of her own dress that exploded into brilliant red. Hot pain burned away her strength, leaving only a few moments of consciousness. More than enough time to turn the gun and, with mechanical accuracy, fire two shots directly into the old woman’s shocked face.

Blackness narrowed Lizabeth’s field of vision until all that remained was the old woman’s bloodied head. Gagging on the warm, metallic wetness filling her mouth, she steadied her hand and with an unfamiliar sense of accomplishment, pulled against the weight of the trigger once, twice and again until all the telltales went red. ■

They might have been intelligent.



ANTHROCINE

Keith Brooke

Illustrated by Peter H. Francis

I never expected to be leaving Reseda accompanied by my sister. Except, perhaps, if she was in a little funerary urn, as extra baggage.

I don't even know why I went there in the first place. I am Kieran Connor, an objective witness, a reporter and political analyst by profession. I never get involved. Yet within an hour of being informed of the death of Sara Duffin I had booked myself onto the first available Interstitial Ship to Tau Ceti's fourth planet. After a moment of hesitation I had realised that the message must refer to my older sister, despite the change of surname; but still, I should not have felt so compelled—I had not spoken to her more than once in the past ten years. Perhaps it was that moment of confusion that made the impact of her death so penetrative: if I had been told simply that my sister, Sara Connor, was dead, then I might

have accepted it more readily. I don't know.

Maybe I just wanted an excuse to see a new planet.

So a few hours after the ship had blasted its way back into reality, I rode down to a low orbit on a space lift with the few other passengers who had business on Reseda. A shuttle brought us the rest of the way and I was met at Immigration by my taxi which, after a pause, I punched with Sara's address.

Reseda looked like a poor watercolour to me then, my eyes adjusting slowly after twelve days of starship interior. Everything was so pale: the sun, the insipid sky, the thick vegetation. Even the features of human origin—the red plastic road surface, the buildings rising up around me as I entered the city of Saint-André—were pale, as if out of deference. It looked a gentle place to live.

But I knew that the forgiving aspect of this planet was a facade: the easy climate, the lushness, the absence of dangerous beasts and plants. As my taxi passed through the streets of the city I saw plenty of evidence that Resedan life was as harsh as I had been led to expect. It was an easy task to tell the rich from the poor, for the former were merely thin whereas the latter suffered goitre, peeling skin, loss of hair, crooked bones. I had seen this kind of thing before, in my work, but it was usually the result of political indifference. Here, the fault lay in the planet itself, for Reseda suffers a shortage of certain trace elements essential to the health of Terran life. Saint-André is situated where it is, not because of the climate or the views, but because there is a local mineral deposit; it is an oasis town. Here there are traces of iodine and zinc, even a little

molybdenum. Not enough, by any means, but some. Despite intensive recycling, the colonies of Reseda are still dependent on the importation of mineral supplements; the people are fed by self-contained hydroponic agricultural systems, but inevitably there are losses, wastages that escape to the soil and the air.

Sara had kept a room over a bar in a district only a little seedier than the Saint-Andréan norm. It had been left undisturbed at the instruction of my lawyer. I had all the details loaded into my suboccipital interface and I checked again, and then had to stop myself from dictating a commentary into the chip my suboxy was carrying. Force of habit. This wasn't a job: I was on holiday.

My objectivity must have been on leave, as well, for I couldn't bring myself to climb those stairs and confront all that my sister had left to the world. Instead, I entered the bar and asked the human barkeep for some local wine and a sniff of something soothing.

The wine wasn't bad, so with my refill I ordered a sandwich, checking with my suboxy to see that I'd popped all the right pills today. I watched the barkeep staring at me and scratching her thinning scalp for a while, then introduced myself.

"You're staying in her room?" she said. "I'm sorry, but if you're staying in her room then there's some rental due, all right?" She seemed to turn every sentence into a question, even introductions: "My name is Zil? I'm really sorry about...your sister, you say?"

I handed over some money, although I wasn't sure if I would be staying there or in a hotel. "I don't know much about it," I said. "They told me it was suicide."

"Oh, that's right," said Zil, shaking her head so that I could sit and watch the dandruff drifting on the air. "She was completely out of her...do you mind me talking like this?" I shrugged and she continued, "She wasn't always mad—maybe just for the last few weeks?"

"Man trouble?" I'd been able to

confirm that the name Duffin came from a second failed marriage, but that had been more than five years ago, long before she had come to Reseda. Had she moved here for a fresh start, I wondered?

Zil shook her head slowly. "Maybe I shouldn't say," she said, "but she never had anyone regular while she lived upstairs. Only clients, you understand?"

"She was a whore?"

Zil seemed shocked by my directness but after a pause she nodded. "Only occasionally, you understand? When she couldn't find other ways to live."

"Such as?"

Zil shrugged. "Maybe you should ask at the Farm, before you go? I know she did some work up there."

This wasn't meant to be an investigation. I had planned to come to Reseda, tidy up after Sara, and try to take a break from my work.

So, of course, when I left Zil's bar I went straight to an office of the city authorities and tried to find out what I could. Records were sparse, where they weren't nonexistent. I confirmed that Sara Duffin had existed, that she had once worked in an office just like the one I was in. The only useful information I discovered was that she had been in debt to the city, but four months before her death she had been able to pay her back taxes, and presumably whatever other tabs she had accumulated.

I returned after dark, as glow flies filled the city air. By that hour I was virtually committed to staying at least one night in that room. I retrieved my bag from where I had left it in Zil's safekeeping and then went up the stairs.

It was a room, just a room. A layer of dust indicated its lack of occupancy, but otherwise the tenant might simply have gone out for the day. But she had gone out one day five weeks ago and never come back.

I saw the little screen in one corner.

Zil had found the message playing, after word had reached her of Sara's death. A copy had been sent

to me, but seeing that screen, where she must have sat calmly and recorded those few words, made me feel suddenly weak. I had never suspected myself of having such a strong family bond.

"I've seen too much in this life," she had said, to the camera. "It's time to start another." I'd never even known she had been religious. Maybe that had been part of her disturbed state of mind: the hope that she might be reborn under better circumstances.

I lay on her bed, and tried not to think about how she had sometimes had to earn her living. She'd had a good mind, before it had unbalanced, but she had always been too impetuous. I wished things could have been better, that just once or twice they had worked out in her favour.

I asked about the Farm the next day, and discovered that it was some kind of research centre a few kilometres out of the city. I had read about a number of projects where scientists were trying to improve the ability of Terran crop plants to scavenge scarce minerals from the soil. Some were even trying to symbiotically combine Terran and Resedan biologies in a kind of botanical chimera to achieve their goal: a means of feeding the colonists without having to depend on expensive imported supplements. I wondered if this Farm Zil had mentioned was one of these establishments. I decided to go there that morning to find out.

I called ahead and spoke to the director's assistant, Anders Pilic. He was an angular man with long dark hair who seemed to lean right out of the screen. "Would it be all right if I was to come and see what you do there?" I said, after the introductions and the commiserations.

"If you like," said Pilic. "But we are busy, and understaffed. We cannot spare much time..."

When he met me at the gates he was more welcoming. I decided I must have called him at a bad time. "Mister Connor," he said, hands raised in greeting. "So pleased. Do come in." He swung the wide gate

back and my little hire car drove through and parked nearby. "You know what we do here, of course," he said, and when I looked blank he smiled and continued. "We study the anthrocines in captivity. We are Reseda's leading experts in the genus."

Anthrocines were one of the more advanced lifeforms on Reseda, my suboxy told me. Four-limbed, two pairs of opposing fingers on each hand, startlingly monkey-like except for the round mouth with hard, vertical mandibles for grinding seeds. They were social animals, but intellectually inferior to their Terran analogues.

Still, I did not see why Sara should be involved. "My sister," I said. "She worked here?"

"She contributed," said Pilic. "Come and see the colony, and then I will explain."

He ushered me through a swing door and said no more until we came to walk along a path between two low fences. Overhead was Reseda's feeble blue sky, and surrounding this enclosure I could see high plastic walls. The compound must have been close to two hundred metres by one-fifty. It held trees and scrub and huge fungal whorls and its open spaces were littered with the earthen homes of mudfish; in the far corner, there was a series of woven screens, or nests—I couldn't be sure at that distance. My suboccipital interface told me that they were probably the shelters of the Farm's anthrocines.

"Here they are," said Pilic. At his gesture I was suddenly able to distinguish a trio of anthrocines in the undergrowth nearby. Two squatted, but the third stood straight, to about the height of my chest. Its body was a naked grey at the front, bristly and green on the back and scalp, and, all the time I watched, its black mandibles chomped from side to side behind translucent pink lips.

"Good day, Amy," said Pilic, and one of the squatting anthrocines chattered at him before the three turned and merged with the vegetation.

"You talk to them?" I said, in amazement. "You understood what

it said?"

Pilic smiled and shook his head. "Amy comprehended my words," he said. "But they have no language, as such. They communicate by tone of voice, and gesture. It is very limiting. We can't even tell some of them apart, without an intimate examination. At present staffing levels we can check each of our research subjects at approximate fifty day intervals. It is a complex process."

"But it seemed so..."

Just then, there was a crashing in the bushes and Pilic looked up and said, "Ah, meet our director. Doctor Kiwolski." And then another anthrocine appeared, larger than any of the first three. Its arms swung wildly as it charged us, and then drew up short. With a strange air of concentration, the beast straightened itself to my shoulder-height and offered a hand for me to shake. Its skin was peculiarly smooth, the bristles on the back of its hand rough and sharp.

"Explain, please," I said, in a controlled tone. I have always hated that sort of situation: one where everybody but me knows what is going on. At a sound from behind, I turned.

"Our director, also," said Anders Pilic.

A tall woman, apparently in her fifties—although I had already noticed how rapidly this planet aged its settlers—had just entered the enclosure. Her body was hard and thin, her clothes loose, her grey hair thick and tied back with an Alice band. "Please explain," I said again.

"Our programme," said Pilic, "is a study of adaptation and integration." He muttered a command at the big anthrocine and it meekly lowered its head and allowed him to part the bristles at the base of its skull. I saw the suboxy before he pointed it out. "We copy a human personality via the suboccipital interface," he continued. "We transpose it onto a chip, thus." He thumbed the suboxy's release and a slender slip of plastic slid out. "And here we have, perhaps, the basis for the *real* colonisation of our planet. The mind of humankind,

in a body supremely adapted to prevalent conditions."

Copying personae was something I had come across before, but never with cross-species transfer the goal. "And Sara?" I said, making the obvious connection.

"Your sister? We have a colony of nearly 450 anthrocines in this enclosure, Mr. Connor. All have undergone suboccipital surgery. Ninety-eight of these are currently carrying human personae. Obviously there must be a pool of volunteers to donate personality-copies for us to use. Your sister first came here as one of our volunteers."

She was just selling herself, in another form. At least it had paid her bills, I thought.

Pilic slipped the chip back into the human-anthrocine chimera's interface and we both watched as the beast ambled off towards the colony.

"Who's this?" demanded a woman's voice.

I turned and nodded at Doctor Kiwolski, standing a short distance back along the path and pointing in my direction.

"What's he doing here?" she said. "You know I don't want any disturbances until things settle again."

"Doctor Kiwolski, Kieran Connor," Pilic made the introductions, and then continued to his superior, "I told you. He wanted to come and see the Farm for himself. He has just met your *alter ego*."

"I'm trying to find out about my sister," I said, interrupting. I wasn't put off by her brusqueness. I regularly encounter more hostile people in my work. "Sara Duffin. She was one of your volunteers. She killed herself just over a month ago."

Kiwolski softened her tone. "I'm sorry," she said. "The name means little. They're all data to me, I'm afraid. Anders will tell you all that we know, I'm sure. Good day."

As the director walked off towards the colony Pilic muttered under his breath in a tone I should have recognized as over-theatrical, "She remembers. Believe me: she remembers everything."

But I must still have been thrown out by the revelation of what they were doing here with the anthrocines. We completed the tour but I learnt little. Then, dumbly, I let Pilic lead me from the enclosure and out to where my car had been parked. "You're having problems?" I asked, from my seat. "Doctor Kiwolski said...."

"Just some disturbances among the anthrocines," said Pilic. "It may be seasonal, we don't know. Nothing much." He seemed a little disappointed, as though he had expected more from me. I thought that perhaps he felt isolated out here, with his project and its surly director. "You'll come again?" he asked, and I said something noncommittal.

The car had taken me nearly a kilometre before I suddenly told it to return to the Farm. I'd found out so little about Sara, yet it was clear that they knew more.

Anders Pilic was standing at the open gate, as if he had been expecting me. My car would have been visible for some distance as it approached the Farm. "Yes?" he said curiously, as I climbed out and stood facing him.

"When you told me what Sara had done for you, you said it was the *first* time she came here. What did she do on subsequent visits?"

Pilic was looking down at the ground. After a moment he glanced up at me and said, "All our volunteers return once or twice for further tests and comparisons to be made. Sara would have come again for that reason."

"And?"

"And when she came after that, Mr Connor, she came to cause trouble."

We sat in a small office with a window that overlooked the anthrocine enclosure. Pilic fidgeted in his seat, smoothing his hair back over his scalp, first with one hand, then the other. I sat and watched. If he felt awkward then that was his own problem. It might lead him to reveal more than he intended.

For now I felt certain that there

was something to reveal, something not covered by the official record of my sister's death.

"You said she came to cause trouble," I said, after a long pause. "Will you explain?"

He pressed first one cup and then another at a spout in the wall and used the distraction for delay. Handing me a coffee he said, "This is difficult for me. I thought Sara was special, for a time. I was infatuated for maybe twenty-four hours, but she persisted. She was using me...."

I looked at him, across my steaming cup, and wondered how many of his guinea pigs had been recruited from the warehouses of Saint-André. They were cheap, I supposed. Also, I wondered just why he had chosen to tell me this. To disburden himself? To relieve some sense of guilt at her death? To trap me?

He looked at me and then put his cup down. "I'll get back to the point," he said. "To what you want to know. We have a rolling programme of recruitment: selecting volunteers, transposing them onto chips, transferring them into a host and helping them as they reorientate themselves in their new bodies. At intervals of fifty days we remove the chip and analyse the data: compare it with its original form, interrogate it over its performance in the host body, and so on."

"You want to see how successfully the copied personae remain human?"

"That sort of thing, yes," said Pilic. "Your sister was recalled, as all volunteers are recalled, so that we could measure divergence from the biological form of that personality-data, as well as the encoded. I don't remember it, she was just data back then, to quote Kiwolski. Later, she told me that she had met the host of her chip—her *alter ego*, although I still cannot remember that. Perhaps it was one of her delusions.

"But then she returned unannounced. She said she wanted to help out, and she did, in more ways than one. Then, she said, in return could we lend her the chip with her data on it, so she could slot it and see what it

was like to be an anthrocine? But that was impossible, and I said so. A chip cannot simply be put into your suboxy like that, it needs processing, formatting. And anyway, the chip was in its host all this time, it couldn't just be removed like that—it would upset our programme. I realised what she had been doing, why she had seduced me, and I tried to turn her away.

"It was not easy, and she kept returning. She was removed by the police on three occasions. She was obsessed: she had to find out what it was like. She kept saying she was no longer complete, that she needed to be reunified.

"I'm responsible for your sister's death," he said, and suddenly I realised that he had dropped his smooth facade. I didn't know what he meant, so I waited for him to continue.

"I made a mistake, which proved fatal for Sara. One time she came back and I took pity and spoke to her. She seemed more rational, as if she had recovered from her mental upheaval. And, for some reason, I mentioned that her chip was being analysed, that it was no longer in its host. Later that night, she broke in and stole it.

"She loaded the chip into her suboxy, as I had warned her she should not. And it drove her mad."

"Why?"

"The confusion, the disorientation. Identity is a fragile thing at the best of times, but this data chip carried a persona which had last been functioning in an anthrocine body—it was Sara, but *not*-Sara. Loading that chip would have thrown her into a schizophrenic crisis for which she was totally unprepared. Considering how unbalanced she was already...."

"And so she killed herself," I said. Pilic nodded, but said no more. "What happened to her chip?" I asked. "Was it recovered?"

And so I learnt that there was more to Sara's story. She had not simply killed herself. Somehow she had retained enough of her rationality to get out to the Farm and break in for a second time.

"She loaded her chip into one of the anthrocines," said Pilic, "and then she opened the big gates in the enclosure. Most of them didn't want to go, but hers did."

Suddenly I understood her farewell words. It was not religious at all, she had merely been stating that she had had enough of life as a human, but she would live on as an anthrocine. Perhaps the disjoint of loading the chip into her suboxy had not thrown her as much as Pilic thought: maybe it had shown her enough to know that the persona operating that alien body would still be *her*. Maybe she had been suicidal for some time, but it was only this promise of an alternative that had finally allowed her to break the taboo against taking one's own life.

"So she's still out there?" I asked, shaken.

Pilic smiled for the first time since starting Sara's story. "Maybe," he said. "She's probably starved, or been eaten. I doubt she'll have gone far even if she survives. If she has any sense she'll still be sheltering nearby while she learns how to use her new body in the wild."

"Could she be found?"

He smiled again. "I think there is a way," he said. "It can be difficult to recognize individual anthrocines. We've found that it can be even more difficult to identify an individual human, when he or she is riding an anthrocine host. One must rely on gestures, temperament, familiarity... perhaps some extra depth of perception. My persona has been in one of the anthrocines, but there are only a handful of individuals I can recognize as the humans they are. The only way, other than an impractical trapping campaign, is for someone to go out, as an anthrocine, and find her. You are the person most likely to recognize her: you could go after her, Mr. Connor. You could go and find her."

Before subjecting myself to Pilic's plan I went back to Saint-André, and checked out the details as thoroughly as I could. What if she had been murdered, and Pilic's story—no

matter how convincing—had been merely a ruse to trap me, to get me plugged into their machines for some obscure reason? But it became clear that Sara had taken her life voluntarily. Pilic's story of the police being called to remove her from the Farm was true; there were numerous accounts of her instability; her suicide leap into one of the city's recycling vats had even been recorded by security camera. And there was the brief recorded message. I knew she had killed herself. But why did they want to find her? Was she somehow the cause of their current problems? There had to be more to this than I knew: that little display of conflict with Kiwolski had almost certainly been set up to make me think Pilic was on my side. But Sara was, presumably, out there still, and I was her best hope. I had to try to find her.

I went back to the Farm and Pilic was ready for me. There was a bench in his office, and he made me lie on my side as he slid a chip into my suboccipital interface, connecting me to the wall by a single lead. "It will take about two hours," he said, and left me to my dreams.

When I came to my senses I was looking up at Pilic, and at myself.

The colours were different, more vivid, somehow. Pilic's face, previously so pale, was now a livid pink, blood vessels standing out hotly under his skin. And my own face was darker, shinier, the eyes staring, the lips working in what I suddenly realised were words, language.

"It's working?" I said, the I that I could see before me, who I slowly realised was not the I working this body.

It was working. I tried to move, but couldn't. I tried again, and although the muscles worked this time, I realised that I was restrained by a kind of harness.

"You have to relax," said Pilic. To me, I realised. "Coordination will come. You must take your time."

I forced myself to settle. I made myself listen to my body, made myself understand what it was telling me. The beating of my heart had been replaced by a rapid triple rush-

ing sensation, a pause, and again, the triple beat. Did anthrocines have three hearts? Or three chambers to one heart? I tried to check this information with my suboxy, and then realised that *I* was now my suboxy. I tried to sense the thought patterns of my host, but either they had been entirely subsumed, or they were so alien as to be unknowable.

I closed my eyes, opened them. I tapped my hard mandibles together and recognized the resultant sound as the chattering I had heard from my first anthrocine encounter.

And I watched as my other self, my *alter ego*, shook hands with Pilic and turned to leave. I had three days, and then Pilic would release me and my search would begin. And if Pilic decided to break his side of the agreement, then I knew that the human me would return on that night to ensure my freedom. I was there to do a job: to find my sister and return her. I only hoped that if I did eventually locate her, I would be able to recognize her as Sara and not simply dismiss her as another anthrocine.

I stayed for most of that afternoon in the room where I had awoken. Gradually, I acquired the use of my body. It felt strange, but at the same time natural. Intellectually, I knew that all these sensations were wrong, that you don't walk like that, don't breathe like that, don't *behave* like that, but somehow my alien body knew different. At first I feared that it was the anthrocine in me: that I was a mere passenger, not in control. But after a period of studying the body's responses, I deduced that it was nothing more alien than my subconscious taking over, running things. You don't have to think about raising a hand or swinging a leg, you just *do* it. I was just doing it.

The anthrocine survived in my perception. It survived in how I saw the colours of the world, how I tasted the scents on the air, how I read the breeze with the bristles on my back. For a young anthrocine these things must take months of learning, yet my body knew how to do them within hours.

As the light began to fade, I was introduced into the anthrocine colony. A middle-sized male came to greet me, and I guessed that this must be host to Anders Pilic. He led me through the undergrowth. We went slowly at first, as my feet padded softly on the dirt and leaves, everything a new sensation, yet not new.

It seemed farther to the colony than I had expected, then I realised that I was a small specimen, and the stiff movements of my hips slowed me. Presumably it would wear off, as I grew accustomed to my body.

The main colony was bustling with life. It occupied one corner of the enclosure. Nests had been woven from grass and glistening strips of bark, and they hung like loose, wrap-around hammocks from the lower branches of a thicket of squat trees. My guide went up to one and chattered, and I guessed from his tone and his gestures that he meant that this was my home, my nest. I wondered if it was a spare one, or if it was one the previous occupant of this body had constructed.

Others crowded round, looking at me, perhaps sensing that I was different, that I was new. I remembered that about three of every four anthrocines in this enclosure were not yet carrying a human implant and I wondered how this experiment must seem to them, if indeed it did seem to them—were they mere automata, slaves to instinct and ingrained behavioural patterns?

We sniffed and nuzzled and tasted the air. It felt good. I began to think of my ordeal ahead, my search for Sara. I wondered if it would be possible to persuade some of them to come with me. Somehow, the prospect of traveling with my human *alter ego* didn't seem so reassuring from my new perspective. He might just be a hindrance. As I swung in my nest that night, savouring the new-familiar sensations, I tried to work out how to communicate my complex message to the others. I suddenly knew that success might depend on getting through to them and I found the problem immensely exciting.



I found Sara on my third and final day in the enclosure, and immediately I was very scared indeed.

On my first full day I had exchanged sniffs and nuzzles with many of my fellows, but there was one in particular who I had noticed. She was a middle-sized female, the sexes being differentiated by facial colouring and the size of the opening of the genital pouch on the belly. I watched her, and noticed that she sometimes looked back at me. We were almost flirting. I began to think of sex and how a man in these circumstances should act on such matters. I knew nothing of the reproductive life of an anthrocine. I wondered what it would feel like, whether I could really be aroused by a creature such as this.

And so it was not until my third day that I realised there was nothing sexual in this foreplay, that it was a ritual of recognition, of is he-is she? And she was.

But I don't think she could have known who I was—logic must surely have overcome any intuition that this was Kieran, come to find her. I had never considered the possibility that she might be here all along, that either Pilic's tale of her escape to the wilds was a lie, or even *he* did not know that she had remained behind. Had she lingered for some kind of lover's revenge? But her suicide message gave no hint of that: her escape must have been foiled and so she had been hiding, and causing trouble, until the opportunity to flee arose again.

We nuzzled and I sensed her desperation, her loneliness. Or imagined it, perhaps. We wrapped long arms about each other and rocked to and fro in a behaviour I had seen frequently amongst the others. And then it dawned on me that I had been deceived: Pilic had known all along that Sara was here, at the root of his troubles, he had simply not known *where*.

He had used me to find her.

And now that I had, what would he do? I was sure that in this artificial situation, in this enclosure, we were far outside the reach of the law.

I straightened, but it was too late already. My initial guide, the one I had assumed to be Pilic's *alter ego* was watching, as he had probably been watching me all along.

Sara sensed that something was amiss. She chattered softly to me and I leant forward again and rocked her in the comforting way of an anthrocine. My arms were round her and I felt that I could never let her go again.

But Pilic was not the one to move, it was the big male who carried the persona implant of Doctor Kiwolski. He charged into the clearing and a number of anthrocines ran, chattering, away. I flinched as he struck me, and then I was rolling away into the bushes, a painful gash on one arm.

But Kiwolski didn't come after me. They could deal with me later, if need be. It was Sara they wanted.

It took me some seconds to recover my breath, and that was all the time it took for Kiwolski to throw Sara to the ground and bury her/his great black mandibles into Sara's face. She was dead instantly, I was sure. I looked for as long as I dared, and then I scampered away, hoping desperately that I could evade them until nightfall. I had made a number of friends, during my three days in the enclosure; perhaps they could be made to understand enough to shelter me.

My success would depend, I realised, on how long it took until Pilic and Kiwolski checked the corpse. Because in that final embrace,

when I had wrapped my long arms around my sister anthrocine's neck, I had reached up and thumbed the persona-chip free of her suboxy.

I returned to the Farm on the third night, as I had arranged with myself. I just hoped that the memory of that rendezvous had survived transposition onto the persona chip. It had been weird looking into the eyes of that anthrocine. It was an alien, an ugly alien, yet I was supposed to accept that it was carrying my thoughts. No, more than that: that it was actually *me*.

I had left as soon as I could, feeling oddly jarred by the encounter with myself.

And then on the third night I returned to ensure that Pilic would fulfill his promise and free the other me into the wilds of Reseda. And just to make sure, I had brought Zil and a couple of her friends, in case there was any trouble. I had learnt enough, during the course of my investigations, not to trust Pilic one tiny bit.

We waited by the gate but there was no sign of him, so we walked the perimeter. There were lights on in the building that housed the offices and laboratories, but I could hardly go to the door and ask Kiwolski if I could set one of her anthrocines free.

An alarm went off when we smashed the lock on the gate, but I remained calm. I stepped into the enclosure and called out my own name, feeling unavoidably silly. "Kieran! Kieran!"

More lights were on in the house

by the time the first of the anthrocines appeared in the shadows. It looked exhausted, and it was carrying a slightly wounded arm. It came up to me, and I thought I recognized it as the one playing host to my chip.

I looked into its eyes and then it held its hand up, found mine, pressed a small piece of plastic into my palm.

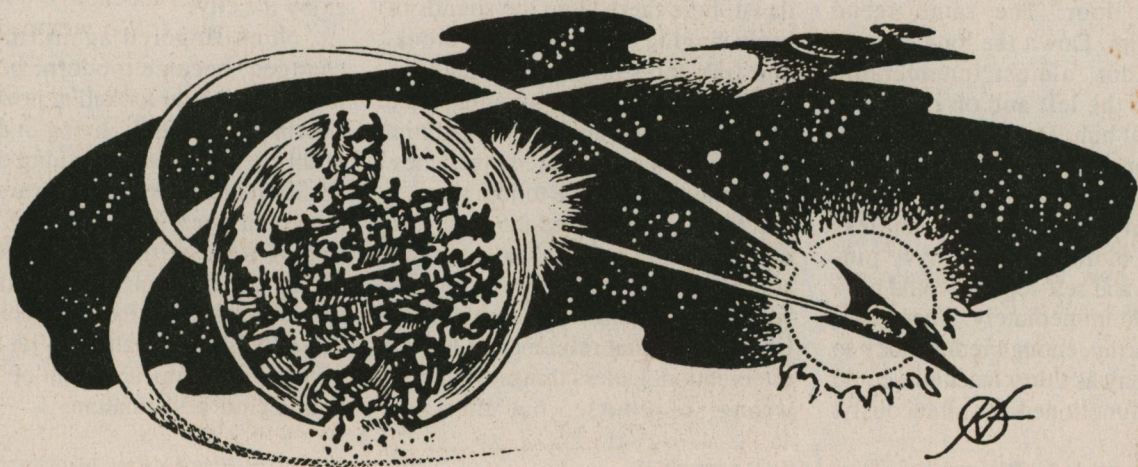
It was a persona chip. I wondered, for a moment, if that was *me* resting in my hand but then I realised that it was Sara, that somehow in these three days my *alter ego* had located her and saved her for me.

I heard a commotion behind me, but Zil's friends were armed, and the protesting Pilic and his anthrocine partners were not.

And then my own anthrocine pushed past and set out, up the hill, losing itself to the trees in an instant. Soon, it was followed by a small band of others, although most remained within the enclosure. "But..." I said, but I could say no more.

I felt a sudden urge to destroy this enclosure, to encourage Zil and her friends to the acts of violence which I knew were near to the surface. But I stopped myself. I thought of those other anthrocines, cowering within. What would become of them? Were Kiwolski and Pilic still their best hope? I didn't know, and I didn't feel capable of making such a decision.

I turned away, towards our vehicle, and put my sister into my pocket. Maybe Sara would be able to decide what was best. I would have to ask her, if she could bear to live again. ■



TIME AND SPACE

Robert Marner

Illustrated by Frank Kelly Freas

There were two cities. Or perhaps an infinity of cities. And they were colliding. Or perhaps not.

In the long, slanting afternoon sun that bathed the long rolling lawn, there was the crack of a bat and then a baseball looped into the pellucid air, arcing high above and beyond the boy. The aging man beside him smiled....

Above the banks of instruments, a single worklight broke the darkness. It was enough to show the racks full of equipment stretching up to the ceiling, each component blank-faced except for a shining green light and a quiescent red, hundreds of such components, forming a solid wall of equipment. Each, vibrating quietly, added its faint voice to an audible chorus that spoke of power, sang of persistence. And each gave off a little heat, and each gave off a slight smell of warm insulation, and the room chanted and smelled, and was uncomfortably warm to human senses. But the machines did not care; they had been in place, and singing of their search, for a very long time.

Shor Nunn closed the door on the roomful of machines, took three steps down the corridor, and opened the next door. The same scene greeted him. Down the long span of the corridor, almost innumerable doors, on the left and on the right, confronted him. He could have spent the day opening and closing doors. To no purpose; had a machine broken down, anywhere in the endless arrays, a monitor would have pinpointed it and self-repairs would have been made immediately. There was, in every array, enough redundancy so that as many as thirty machines could have malfunctioned simultaneously.

That, of course, had never happened and likely never would.

No, there was nothing for Shor Nunn to do here. There had never been anything for Shor Nunn to do. The ship drove on among the stars, unimaginably large though very tiny as far the Universe was concerned, pursuing a track that had been laid down generations ago, or perhaps a track that had yet to be laid down, or perhaps a track that was being laid down at this moment, conducting a search or performing a strike—no one knew, or, rather, everyone knew but everyone knew differently—that likely would never find its target, without real reference to the few humans that inhabited it, ten years at a time, as caretakers without, actually, any care to take.

No one now remembered what catastrophe it was that the city fled. Perhaps there had never been one. Perhaps it was still to come.

Shor Nunn sighed again and turned away; he padded to the cross-corridor along which he had come, retraced his steps, and re-entered the lounge. Here the light was diffused and glowing with the pearly trace of dawn; here there were the sounds of birds singing, and water in a brook, and fish splashing, and a meadow, and trees, and other humans, who waved to Shor Nunn and invited him to sit with them on the low benches. But he did not choose to join them.

Shor Nunn crossed the space and entered the "control cabin," although actual control rested in the central webwork, which went on about its business without reference to human intervention. Unless things went very wrong, of course, but that was

extremely unlikely. He looked at the screens. As if from an outside camera—which meant it was actually a web-work simulation—the ship plunged on among the stars, towing a huge natural satellite which was really Nunn's home, hollowed out to take all of the ancient city of Manhattan.

Nunn fingered the air, and the point of view changed; to inside the satellite. And there the city was, humming with life under a cloudless blue sky, cars tracking back and forth, El trains running hither and yon, ships waiting at the piers on the rivers. Several airplanes left their wakes in the air. Nunn sighed again. He loved the city; loved the opera, loved the theaters, loved the concerts in Central Park. He loved to eat breakfast in Rumpelmayer's, loved to eat lunch in the delicatessen on 57th Street, loved dinner at The Palm. He loved to drop in for an afternoon drink in the Blue Bar. It gave him an almost insupportably great thrill to wander through the Museum of Natural History, the Metropolitan, the Guggenheim for hours on end. To put himself in the place of a native Twentieth-Century American, and enjoy the city.

Nunn fingered again; the city changed, became modern, became indefinite. Nunn looked at dozens of simulacra of himself, living in dozens of different habitats, pursuing dozens of different careers, each separated in time by a fraction of a second, every one of them with a complete universe, full of people, full of things, a split second away from the next universe. All in Manhattan. With not an minim of the appeal to him of Twentieth-Century Manhattan.

In any case, he was on the ship and would be for years, yet. He would decide then, when he returned, where he wanted to live. And in years to come, decide to change his venue. And in later years, decide again. And again. And realize as he did so that he was but a simulacrum, like the others. A shadow among shadows.... But in fact he did not think he would ever return anywhere. He did not know why he thought it, really, but he thought the time for this Shor Nunn was very near.

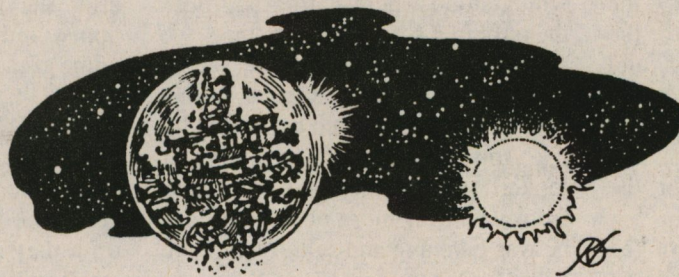
The conclusion of her hypnagogic tape—Japanese paleontology—woke Thecla von Gernsback, and she immediately rose, doffed her night-clothes, and entered the hydrodistribution unit adjoining her somnal chamber. There automatic sensors and dispensers created a mist of water at the ideal temperature. While she bathed, she also subjected her teeth and gums to rigorous brushing. When she emerged, jets of air immediately dried her, and the robotic valet dressed her suitably for the laboratory, since that was what she had entered on the busy little servant's front panel. Baring her arm momentarily to the chef, which instantly sprayed in a nourishing subcutaneous breakfast, Thecla hurried to the descensor, which deposited her at street level, where she signalled a passing taxicab. "To my laboratory," she told the receptors, and the taxicab took flight.

While they covered the short distance, Thecla looked out the window at the passing aspects of the city. She never tired of the sight of the massive bus bars and the electric arcs endlessly climbing the Jacob's Ladders and swirling from the revolving globes of the Ehrenhaft generators. Nor of the thousands of happy faces as they traveled among the city's building on electric-powered walkways or, like her, in taxicabs. "Every citizen productive!" Thecla repeated to herself as always. "Every citizen happy!" But today, as

always for the last two weeks—or was it longer, or shorter?—she added silently: "Because they don't know what is in store for them, and it would be terrible to tell them, since there is nothing they can do about the fate that awaits them!"

Thecla buried her face in her hands for a moment. But then the spunky girl gathered herself, and presented her customary visage of decorum. They were doing everything they could, in the laboratory. Or they would do. Or they had. For a moment, she felt the wetness of the hydrodispenser again, and then she was baring her arm, and then she was back in the taxi, which was just alighting in front of the laboratory. Thecla hurried into the building.

"If I could only have had one perfect love; just one," was Shor Nunn's last complete thought before



he realized that *his* event was now. The asteroid containing Manhattan and Thecla's city approached each other, or perhaps not, and would approach, or had already approached. In one of his shadow aspects, Shor Nunn watched the outside simulation, and watched indescribable hell take place as matter and anti-matter began to collide. For an instant, he glimpsed another city spread out below, with doubtless millions of citizens, and then the asteroid of Manhattan was in catastrophe, and the second city was in catastrophe, and the ship was in catastrophe, and Shor Nunn was exploding.

And it did no good to find time to think of the millions of Shor Nunn who were not exploding—would never explode, or would explode later. It of course did no good to think of the millions of Shor Nunn

who had been in catastrophe at various intervals already.

"For you see," Thecla was explaining to the slower-witted among her colleagues, "Anti-matter is but an aspect of matter, and vice versa. One is slower than light, one is faster. And as they approach each other, they begin to bend time and space in an infinity of ways. Some say a new universe is born from each event; that there are universes that will never collide, and some that will collide later, and some that collided at the beginning of time. And there are those who say that there is an infinity of each of us, living in an infinity of slightly different universes. And some say it is stranger than that."

"But how do we know...."

"Because," Thecla said gravely, "although I am but a girl, for the past two weeks we have seen a steadily falling F-Index on the gravitometric resonator. That is conclusive proof." She broke down suddenly and wrung her hands. "Oh, if I could but have had a perfect love, if only for a little while!" but the city was already exploding.

The boy come back from retrieving the ball. He looked a little like Shor Nunn, and a little like Thecla von Gernsback, though in fact none of the people in this segment had ever heard of either. His grandfather watched kindly. "Come on, Willie, it's time to go home to supper. Your Mom and Dad will be waiting."

"All right, Gramps," Willie said. He looked around. "This is a neat place. Where is it?"

"It's called Manhattan Island, Willie," his grandfather said. His gaze took in the two rivers and the gently rolling lawn. Here and there, bushes grew to prevent monotony.

"Manhattan Island?" Willie frowned. "Isn't it supposed to have tall buildings and things?"

"Why, no, Willie," his grandfather said, laughing. "Whatever gave you that idea?" ■

THE RED FAIRY

Norma L. Hutman

Illustrated by Peggy Ranson

All he had done was build a pair of shoes.

In the center of the neat and tidy and tied and trimmed village, remote from anywhere important and bereft of important personages, the shoemaker made fine boots and sandals and shoes. He turned the leather lovingly in his hands, and soles and heels appeared and grew smooth with craft. He made thick boots for the shepherds' long winter nights, and soft supple high boots for the hunters, and fine suede shoes for the lady of the lord of the manor, and sandals for the girls who ran on the cobbles and took their washing down to the stones below the falls, and tooled and trimmed boots for the manor lord.

And one day, out of bits of red leather he had to hand, he made an intricate, tiny, perfect boot and having made it, he made another.

And when he saw them in their minute perfection he put them on a white table in the middle of his shop.

Now of course whenever anyone came into the shop he noticed the red boots, particularly since in the small shop with its tools and its leather and its work half done and its boots to be mended, any customer had to pick his way carefully around the table which stood where before had been the only free space in the room.

And so everyone asked, seeing the size and the excellence of the boots, "Who are the red boots for?"

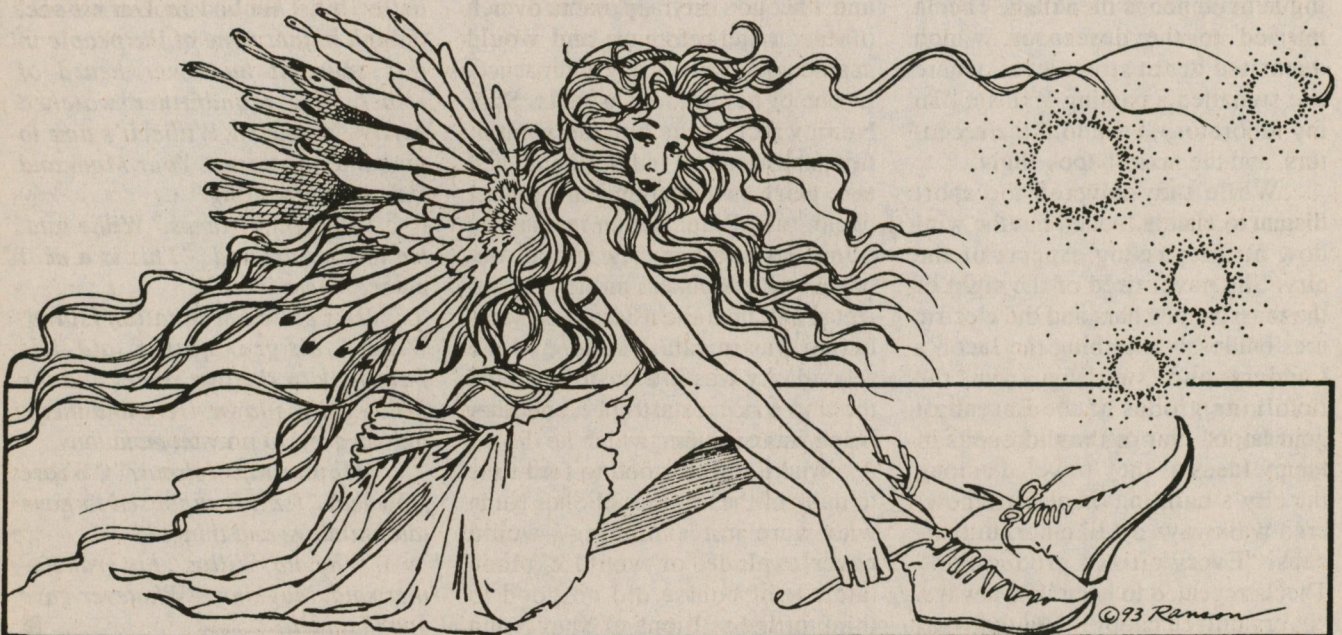
And Dinder the shoemaker looked up casually and excitedly from whatever more pedestrian task he was pursuing and said, "Those are boots for the red fairy."

This, as you may imagine, did a great deal for the prestige of the vil-

lage shoemaker, for though everyone believed in the elven and fairy folk, no one in the village had ever seen one. "Our village is a special place," they said, one to another, "for our shoemaker makes boots for the red fairy."

And even the lord of the manor, when he came to have new black shoes made to wear to church, asked after the nature of the diminutive boots, and to him also Dinder said with great nonchalance and great care, "Oh, those are boots for the red fairy."

Of course in the far and important corners of the kingdom no one heard about the red boots because in truth they rarely if ever heard of the small village and its insignificant affairs. But in the village, children walked on their way from school,



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hoping for a glimpse of the red fairy when she came to get her new boots.

One thing remarkable the village had and that was the daughter of the lord of the manor and his lady. They had only one child and on her they lavished all their time and their skill and their care. And thus she learned all manner of arts: how to ride, and use weapons, and read and write, and understand Latin, and play the lute and the lyre and make songs and swim and manage the manor. And all these things she did very well indeed, so that Andrea, the daughter of the lord of the manor, became a fine horseman, a careful bowman, a sure hand with sword and lance, a scholar and a poet. And all the village was proud of the girl. And the lord of the manor watched her with a pride which was bright in his eyes where she was sun and moon and all the stars of a clear September night.

And they were proud too of their shoemaker with his fairy boots and his clever fingers.

And the shoemaker kept the red boots on the table and looked at them with pleasure.

But no red fairy came for them.

For Dinder had made the boots as a kind of game, not for any red fairy but because he had the bits of leather at hand, given him after the fine covers had been made for a great bible to be put in the village church. He had meant to use the bits to adorn boots for Andrea, when the lord of the manor next ordered new riding boots for his daughter. But they had lain about and one rainy day, between other obligations, he had begun to make one tiny boot.

And having made it, because he was a shoemaker and shoemakers think in pairs, he had made the other.

Then he had made as well his story about the red fairy, which, he told himself, did not one any harm and hoped nothing would ever happen further.

Something of course happened.

The daughter of the lord of the manor disappeared.

She had ridden off on her best stallion to a market in another town

with a thought to shoot a partridge or two in the wood on her return.

But she did not return.

At first no one took notice, for she came and went as she pleased and being late was no new thing with her.

But when four hours had passed and five and six, the lord of the manor took notice indeed.

And soon everyone in the village was searching for Andrea, but no one found her.

Then the lord of the manor went to Dinder and asked his help. "For," he said, "as you know a fairy, you can summon magic to aid you and I have none. And," said the lord of the manor, "if you find my daughter I shall give you anything you ask, though it be all my wealth, my manor, my very life."

Then he left Dinder to the task.

But Dinder put his head in his hands and wept with woe.

For he did not know any red fairy, nor for that matter any blue fairy nor green fairy or silver fairy or fairy of any hue, shape or magic.

He sat before his white table with its pretty burden and wept long hours into the night.

After his tears had soaked the floor and began to dampen even the fire on the hearth, the black cat which visited him each day to sleep before the fire, got itself up, went over to Dinder, stood before the bent sobbing figure and swatted him with a paw. For cats do not love water and the shoemaker's shop was getting ever wetter with tears.

Dinder looked up at the cat and the cat said, "You will get mildew on the leather and the shoes and even the logs, if you do not stop. You'll get mildew on me, if you aren't careful. Whatever is the trouble?"

Then indeed did Dinder think himself mad, for though he believed in elves and fairies which he did not know, he did not believe that cats could talk. But, thought he, if he were not mad, then the cat was magic and he had need of magic. So he told the cat his trouble.

"Is that all," replied the cat. "Oh,

if it will dry up my fireside, I shall fetch the red fairy for you."

Then he went while Dinder, convinced he had gone mad in his grief, sat and wept on.

But in scarcely the time it takes a leaf to fall in autumn, the cat returned and with him came a small, a beautiful, a graceful, a true red fairy.

She entered the little shop and saw the red boots and loved and wanted them.

Dinder stared at the fairy as at something conjured up by his dreams. But finally he gathered together his wits, like scraps of leather, and said, "Hello."

And the fairy, still intent on the boots, returned, "Hello. What is it you wish?"

So Dinder told her his problem. "And if you can find Andrea, the daughter of the lord of the manor," he concluded, "I will give you the red boots," for he saw that she desired them.

"Well, yes, I would like the boots," said the red fairy, "for I have never had any red boots. Indeed I have never had any boots at all or shoes, for fairies do not, as a rule, wear shoes, but I should like to have the red boots. I shall find the girl."

This she did easily, for Andrea's mount had taken fright from a wild boar and had stepped on some briars which hid a sharp drop into a crevice in the hills. He had broken his neck falling but Andrea had broken only her ankle. Trapped and in pain she had struggled to escape the crevice, but could neither get up nor get down. And in the cold and the rain she had become ill. There in the crevice the red fairy found her and released her and when she was taken pale and ill to her father, the red fairy made a potion which cured her at once.

All the village rejoiced and the lord of the manor and his lady rejoiced and Dinder rejoiced.

But the red fairy put on the boots and said, "I think if you but tighten the heels a bit they will do very well." And she smiled at her tiny shod feet, and was content.

The lord of the manor was for

his part very content indeed and he went to Dinder and offered her whatever she should ask: gold, silver, jewels, whatever lay in his considerable wealth to give.

But Dinder said, "What I should like, actually, is to marry your daughter."

This sat not well at all with the lord of the manor, for it is one thing in grief and anguish to promise someone your life itself, and it is quite another in the afterglow of happiness to give your daughter to a shoemaker.

So the lord of the manor said, "Oh, that is fine; I shall do so. But there is one minor condition I have always affixed to the marriage of my daughter, which I have sworn before the gods and therefore cannot put by."

"One minor thing?" asked Dinder, suspicious.

"An insignificant test you must pass."

"And that is?" inquired Dinder, perceiving that the lord of the manor was not about to let him wed Andrea.

"Nothing to it at all. You must merely get the treasure of gold which the dragon left in his cave at the top of the Wild Mountain."

"Dragon?" said Dinder.

"Oh, the dragon is long since dead," said the lord of the manor.

At this Dinder took heart, but as he was no fool, he asked further, "Why then has no one fetched the gold before, if it lies in the cave, unguarded?"

"Oh, it is not entirely unguarded," replied the lord of the manor. "The dragon left his dog to watch it. You have but to bring me the treasure and Andrea is yours."

So saying he left.

And Dinder stood in terror and anger, knowing himself deceived.

But the red fairy still sat on the white table, admiring the boots she wore and she had heard all that the lord of the manor had said.

"That," she declared, "is a nasty trick. A man who does not keep his word should be made to keep it."

"How can I make him do that?" asked the shoemaker. "I cannot face

the dragon's dog and get the gold."

"Oh, easily enough," returned the red fairy. "I shall get it for you. Come."

And she went out on her red shod feet with Dinder following.

They came quickly to the top of the Wild Mountain because magic creatures know all the ways of the wild and even the stumbling mortal feet of the shoemaker took speed and sureness from her knowledge.

And as they went Dinder spoke of his shoemaking and the fairy spoke of the wood and they came in a short time to know each other very well.

Finally the roar of the great dog ended their conversation. Above them they could see his huge head where he stood on the edge of the promontory from which he stood guard over the dragon's cave.

Dinder shook in his well-made boots but the red fairy continued undaunted in her red ones, until she stood on a path which led directly up to the cave.

There Dinder would have hindered her, "For," said he, "you are my friend now and I would not have you slain."

"Do you not wish to marry Andrea?" she asked.

"Yes," said he, "but I would not have you who are my friend risk your life for me."

At that the red fairy looked at him and to her surprise and dismay discovered she loved him. And then, because love is undaunted by risk, she said, "I shall risk it." And she went on.

The great dog roared with laughter at the sight of her and advanced to slay her with one sweep of his great lethal paws.

Dinder cried out.

The red fairy raised her wand and the dog, paw uplifted, was turned to stone.

When he saw this Dinder rushed up the hillside and together they entered the cave.

There lay riches beyond Dinder's wildest imagining. Gold was heaped to the ceiling and scattered with diamonds and rubies and emeralds.

Working all day, he filled ten carts with the treasure. Meanwhile the red fairy fetched mules to pull the carts, and a horse for Dinder. And she climbed onto the first cart and sat with her red boots upon the treasure and said, "Now we shall go to the lord of the manor and claim your bride."

Dinder led the mules joyously down the trail and everywhere people saw them and cried out with wonder. Word soon reached the lord of the manor, who decided that a son-in-law however humble in origin might indeed be acceptable if he brought a king's ransom. And Andrea, hearing the tale, said she saw no obstacle to becoming a shoemaker's wife, provided the shoemaker brought ten carts of gold to his wedding.

He went down to the village singing. But when he put back a hand to guide the first cart around a sharp bend in the path, there fell upon that hand a single silver tear. The tears of magic creatures are always silver, as Dinder knew. Then he looked down and saw that the red fairy was crying.

"Why do you weep, friend?" he asked in wonder, "when we have had such victory? See, I shall give you half the treasure."

But the red fairy shook her head. "I have no need of wealth, and your bride is expecting the ten carts of treasure. I am sorry to have wept. I shall go."

"Wait," he insisted, "I must know why you weep."

"Why, because I love you, which is very silly of me," said the red fairy, looking down at her red boots. "But you must go now, for you will be the next lord of the manor and have a clever and witty and wise and vital and beautiful woman all your days."

Then Dinder looked at the red boots to which clung a few silver tears and he said, "Yes, I have always wanted wealth and I have always wanted to live with a wise and witty and clever woman. But look, I have these already. I am richer by far than the lord of the manor.

And you love me. And you are beautiful and wise and clever beyond a thousand Andreas. Will you come with me?"

"Come with you?" asked the red fairy in amazement.

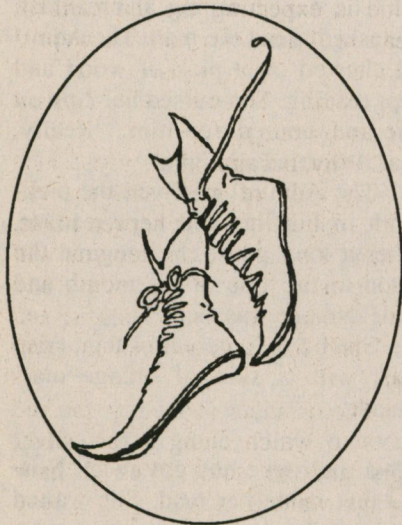
"Yes. For I do not now think to return to the village. I shall go far away where there are important places. I shall hire guards for my treasure and buy a great manor of my own. I shall travel in exotic lands and see wonders. And when it suits me, I shall make fine boots for both of us. Will you come with me?"

And he lifted the red fairy onto the pommel of his saddle where her red boots touched the horse's black mane.

"I shall come with you always and everywhere and bring my luck and magic with me," she said.

And they went off into the world, quitting the distant and unimportant village. And of their travels and their adventures many tales are told.

And the red fairy smiled down at her red boots and smiled up at Dinder and he thanked all the gods of skill and craft that one day, idly to wile away a few rainy hours, he had made the red boots of which such wonder and joy had come. ■



WIGHT KNIGHT

MMMH Hayes

Illustrated by Kandis Elliot

He was sworn to protect her.

She watched him for a week. Every morning at three, the nails of his boots and soft tick of his rifle echoed down the cobbled street. She hid in the thick draperies beside her upstairs window until her painted toes grew cold waiting in the chilly stairwell. He leaned against the wall of an ancient stone house across from her palace and smoked, the coal of his cigar lighting days of rough beard. He wore a blood-red headband and his hair curled like thumbs around his collar. Barely breathing lest he notice, she twisted deeper into red velvet, the same burnt color as her hair, but smelling of dust and onions.

When he left—a final look at her window, his eyes incandescent—she craned her neck to track his red headband until he disappeared beneath the high iron gates to the park. She stood on her toes until her calves ached, then crept into the silky sheets, beside her husband, the Admiral.

Duchess Amy Maitland-Battenberg: after a week her days became as trances, she was that tired, but increasingly she obsessed over the white nights and mysterious walkbys. Of course the Admiral should be informed. But after all, he needed to know *everything*—examine

it, analyze, pigeonhole, *eviscerate*. The duchess deserved an occasional rebellion—and indulged. She kept the stranger to herself. Her worthy husband—confidant of the young Queen, victor of St. Brieuç, hero of the empire—expected her to run his palace with infinite attention to detail and practiced calm, which she did. She spent her mornings tasting foreign spices for his food, freshening potpourri in cut-crystal bowls, blissed out on an intricate *petit point* tapestry of forest labyrinths with hunters stalking mythical animals who fled on elaborate feet or claws. But lately, she pined to...oh, pig out on pasta and clotted cream, spend the day in bed fingering erotic embroidery.

Toward the end of the week, she picked her way through carts and donkeys in town, headed for her dressmaker. At the far end of his alley, a silhouette blocked the light. A flash of red, wad of leather and tobacco—and backlit by sun, the black figure came towards her. Her chest flared alarm. A breastwork of colored glass covered his eyes so she saw only her own round face and high-buttoned lace blouse—which reminded her: *she* was the Duchess; this was *her* town. She tapped his arm with her basket handles. Blond hair billowed on his bare forearms. “Stand aside,” she said. “Who are you?”

Thick eyebrows rose over the glass. His muscular lips pulled together in a bud. “You know who I am, Muffin.” A hoarse voice, an accent indecipherable. He looked down the alley and wiped his square palm across his chest. “I see why you’re needing a little insight around this place. And about these streets—Whew!” He wiped his nose. “Now I know why it’s *me* you sent for, Lamb Chop. You guys can sure use a touch of the future, if I do say so myself. After all this hand-to-mouth stuff.” He waved a broad hand at the street.

“Sent for you! I did no such thing.”

“Oh, ain’t she sweet?” A short, high laugh. “Listen, Lollipop, what

are you doing up there every night then? Huh? Huh?” With one thick finger, he tapped her on the sternum. Hard. She jumped, her sternum shocked. He said, “I’m your future, you could say. And I’d as soon go back there too. I’ve got a ranch to take care of, hay to put up. Fine with me if you want to keep guessing about what’s coming. You worry about those pups of yours, just like real people. No insider information from me. Fair’s fair.” He swaggered down the alley into the street.

Future? Indeed. *A wandering Jacobin!* A soldier from the Committee of Safety. Might the young Queen fail to prevail? Revolution? Amy hurried home to her husband.

The admiral lowered his milk and tea. The shiny bald head rose until his eyes appeared over the tops of his reading glasses. “For a *week?*”

She nodded.

“Why didn’t you tell me?”

She lowered her own head and looked properly contrite while she thought about her husband’s revenge on the mouthy stranger. The pillory, the *Kranz*, or crushing his feet in the *Aufziehen*, maybe twist his bones into the *mal a maison* and let him starve? Even in the warm sunroom, she shivered with a wave of cold. She tasted metal on the tip of her tongue.

Now she had second thoughts. The man was surely poor, a mean creature consumed with thoughts of survival, uneducated and therefore unrelieved of primal evil. Of course he had no soul. Still, his eyes in the night, glowing beneath the tangled blond brows, uncomfortably suggested some inner life.

She jerked herself straight on her floral cushion. “Actually, dear,” she said to the Admiral, “I may have been mistaken, at night.”

“July nights? And you said he was in town. Which is it then?”

“I was tired. And he scared me. Probably some wandering tinker.”

The Admiral narrowed his eyes and watched her, then shook his freshly ironed newspaper. As she reached out to touch his hairless wrist, he said, “Amy,” and stared at

her pointedly. “I rely on your good sense.”

She dropped her hand. Clearly she shouldn’t have told him. Everything interesting peeved the man. She spent the afternoon concentrating on her conscience, all the while needling ferociously, jabbing a dying unicorn into her tapestry. She admitted that her complicity in these secret visitations dishonored her husband. Her own mother told Amy she did not appreciate the Admiral enough. And he was so good to her too. He thought of everything. *Life of the senses*, he said, and his hairless body slid through the sheets with a hiss. Then because he was bald, he shaved his other parts to provide total symmetry. He was so civilized.

By evening, she achieved a sort of remorse. But now, she worried for the poor creature who claimed to be the future but faced a summary fate at the hands of her husband.

That night she waited until her husband’s body subsided above her and slipped, spreading and jerking, into deep snoring. An intricate ormolu clock on the pink marble mantle ticked wildly, a gargoyle chewing. Three o’clock Guards would be seizing the intruder. She listened for sounds: the insects, pulse in the trees, bark of a dog, the cracked *baaa* of a sheep in the park.

The next morning at breakfast, she asked about the man. The Admiral chewed on a pick of wood and kept reading. She nursed her *cafe au lait* and poured for him. “Really, dear, I worried all night.”

The Admiral revolved the pick-tooth in his lips and kept reading. After a long pause, he tongued the wood to the side of his mouth and said, “No one was there.”

She bit off a corner of thin, crisp toast with a skin of orange marmalade.

So the rogue had got away. Now that made her mad. She waited until the Admiral fell into deep snoring and the clock’s tick on the mantle became hammered nails; a mouse sketched alongside the chamberpot

beneath the bed. One o'clock, two o'clock. The room smelled heavily of clothing and bed covers, sour like cheese mold. At three o'clock, she slid from the sheets and felt for the cold floor with one bare foot. Once more she took up her station on the landing, hiding in the draperies. Outside, the row of stone houses shone brightly. The smell of rain purged the air. Slight wind whipped sheers about her body like cobwebs—fifteen, twenty, thirty minutes—and still the man did not come.

Disappointed, fearing his purported desire to return somewhere, she descended the wide stairs. Beneath the hanging wall tapestry of St. Malo, she moved along the tables of miniature soldiers. Light flickered on rows of metal helmets, shifting reds of uniforms, pewter guns. As she passed, the perfect rows seemed to shift axis, changing focus to follow her—rows of heads, silent as skulls.

Blue shadow melted across the kitchen. A scratching, the nick of nails scurrying across the floor and a kitchen cat seized a dark blur and batted it around the room with velvet paws. It shrieked, a sound almost too high to hear. Amy hurried to the back door and slid open the bolts, heaved with one woolen shoulder, and then she was outside where the air smelled of leaves and rain and she heard only the wind in the trees.

She thought once of her warm bed, of the familiar kitchen with hanging utensils, aging mutton, its garden herbs and flowers. The present crowded behind her. *Worry*, the stranger said, *Worry*. He didn't look devilish, just odd. If he brought news of the future, she must not hide, leave the future at large.

She hurried across the slim apron of courtyard towards the trees and their great elliptical black shadows on the park's rolling hills. A band of sheep worked the hills like lice. Amy climbed steadily, beginning to puff and feel her breath burn in her chest. Her feet slipped in the oozing dirt.

The stranger stepped from a black shadow beneath a flat underside

of chestnut tree. She approached his outstretched hand, gingerly touching—it was rough and scratchy. She said, "I didn't make you up. I can touch you. You're real."

"That's what I always think. I feel real to me." His tobacco smell and heat made her ears swell shut, her throat close off sound. He said, "Maybe I made *you* up."

Finally, she said, "No, really. Tell me quickly. Why are you here? You must go away."

"Well, let's see." He touched her lips, her cheek, tucked her fuzzy hair behind both ears. "One of your sons does pretty well; the other's a fuck-up." He leaned closer, his breath like peppermint. "Your queen collects most of the planet and your younger son is her main man. The Grim General. Trouble is," he lifted the weight of her hair and traced the back of her neck with his finger, "down the road you got problems."

"What problems?"

"Oh, famine, pestilence, war—"

"What war?"

"What ain't war? That is the question."

An abstractionist. Her husband quelled these with no-nonsense. "I need some specificity."

"Oh, *that!*" His eyes grew wide, circled with white. "Sure. Two hundred years of war; loss of the empire; century of global espionage; war between cartels. Enough specificity?"

Enough. Loss of the empire meant chaos, inundation by primal evil, survival ethos. But why believe his prophecies—a future return to Dark Ages? She said, "The future will not be like you."

A crooked smile. "Naturally. Not everyone's got my peccs. I work out, you know." An unguous contortion and he placed her hand on his hardened left chest; she jerked it away. He said, "I mean, you might have conjured telephones, computers, space shuttles? But you wanted..." he spread his arms, "...*moi*."

"This is disgusting."

"Don't it beat all?"

She looked for a guard but saw none.

"Look," he said. "Why don't

you and me see if we can improve things?"

"What things?"

He seized her wrist and started down the hill, pulling her behind him. Jerking at his grip, she felt his strength. Her feet cut on the crust of clay and hardened pebbles of sheep dung. They sunk into cold patches of grass while he hurried on towards the castle. She stumbled, trying to keep pace. Branches tore at the wool hem of her robe. Sharp pebbles shot needles of pain up through her knees. She pulled harder. "I'll scream."

"Lovely."

They reached the courtyard and seeing the round house, she croaked, "Guard!" The stranger's boots clacked across the flat stones of the courtyard. She noticed the salting of stars, just as he pulled her through a door in the wall. "Guard!" she screamed, but the sound died in the narrow stairwell.

Rock steps dropped away to mere ledges. Below, water dripped. Amy struggled to brace herself against a wall, but he pulled her after him into the bowels of the castle. Light filtered from an arrow-slit window overhead and caught on the thick fur of his head. Stench of rotten meat and urine stung her eyes. She checked the walls for escape but saw only the one stairway.

The man patted his breast pockets. He found a small length of candle and lit it in a crevice, where it trembled a yellow circle. Her hand slipped on black slime along the walls and she pulled it away. The stranger said, "Point's this, Cream Puff: From my spot, history's a dead weight. So if I give it a little push, right here where it needs some correcting, what'd we have? Right? Worth a try, I always say."

"What are you talking about?" More craziness. Could she talk herself out of this place?

"What if we put you out of your misery before the Grim General is born?"

"I'm not miserable."

"Just scared shitless. Look at all this stuff." He pointed to ankle stocks

embedded in the wall and black forms dangling from the ceiling. "What're those for if things are so great? Bullshit. You guys know what you're doing."

"Well...leave, then. Go home."

"Not so fast one minute there. I can save myself some trouble." He spat and wiped his nose. "No empire, no global economy, no big bang. No wars. I can relax at ranching."

"There'll be other wars."

"Well, I'm the sort sees the glass half full."

She moved away, thinking fast, but fear crept up on her now, spreading like ice water down her neck. Buying time, she pointed to the iron ribs hanging overhead. "Those encase the body, strip its flesh." Moving further away. "This bench crushes bones. That grate over there covers a living disposal. We call it *The Scavenger's Daughter*." She waved at a pulley hung overhead. "*Strappado*. A man hangs from his wrists, which tie behind his back."

"Hey!" he rubbed his upper lip. "Don't be so hard on yourself: Something fast is fine." He looped a hanging chain into figure eights.

"See?" She dipped her wrist in and out of a *Strappado* cuff. "Small. Made for someone my size, I suppose."

"Future people are bigger."

"Your wrists are too big."

"Nope. I'm deceptive 'cuz I work out."

She reached out and touched the muscle of one warm forearm. "You certainly do." She felt the lump move, a faint pulse along its quivering side. The man shivered and his chin sank into his chest. Then, in the shadowy light, she saw his ear—curled like the petals of a rose, intricate as *petit point*. A suction went through her body, pulling out hope, for she knew instantly that the ear wound down, smaller and smaller, endless like facing mirrors, coming not to an end, but to infinitesimal smallness. She bowed her head. His slender wrist exposed a white underside and a flutter of movement in the small hollow. "No bigger than mine," she murmured, touching his

wrist with one finger.

"Oh, sure it is." He held his wrist beside hers. "See?"

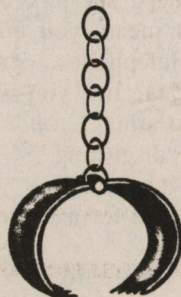
"No. Really. Let me see." She moved toward the light and he did too. Damp clinging cobwebs caught on her face. "Oooooof," and she reached up to brush them away. Involuntarily, he reached over to help. Suddenly, she spun a quarter turn and seizing the hanging *Strappado* cuff snapped it over his wrist. He threw up his wrist, to knock her off, but she was faster, closing the cuff and jerking out the key—one swift fluid move. She had thought it out, moving beneath the cuff deliberately.

"Hey!" He reached at her but she jumped free. Running for the rope, she yanked it hard and his feet ratcheted up, off the ground. He hung off the stone floor, kicking and thrashing. "What good's this gonna do?"

"That would seem obvious," she said and cranked him higher. Snarling and twisting, he clawed at the cuff with his free hand. Then he swung quietly a moment, spinning in a slow dance, his silver eyes glinting. Out the arrow-proofed window, the few stars paled as she climbed the stone stairs.

She would tell her husband. As she passed it, the candle sputtered in its tiny niche. Somewhere below, water dripped. She paused and listened to the man struggling, grunting as he fought the biting cuffs. No. She would *not* tell her husband. No. She would care for the creature herself. Feed him. Lower him when he weakened. Winnow out his secrets.

Amy ascended the narrow stairway, into the bright courtyard. She pocketed the key and strode across the sun-striped cobblestones, relieved and then buoyant. She didn't want to kill the future, after all, just keep it safe. ■

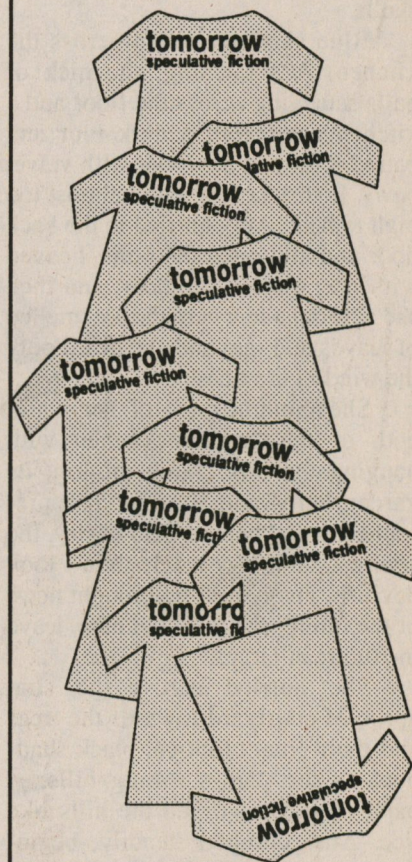


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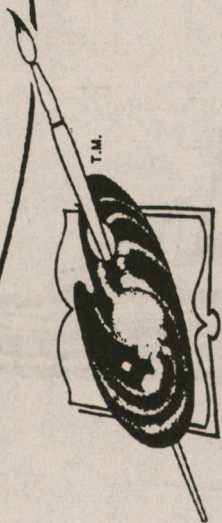
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VAMPIRE JUNKIES

Norman Spinrad

Illustrated by Margaret Ballif Simon

He was THE Vampire. She was just a Manhattan hooker. But they came to depend on each other.

A TRANSYLVANIAN GENTLEMAN

I arrived in New York City with the Hunger hard upon me.

Much nonsense has been written down through the centuries concerning our peculiar tribe, Stoker's silly novel far from being the worst of it, and as for the endless B-movies, the less said the better, yet no one has gotten it right.

I seriously doubt that any of these people ever met a real vampire. Certainly I, the *real* Count Dracula, have never granted an interview, though at times I have been sorely tempted.

What a rotten press I've had down through the ages!

So I impaled a few people in my

callow youth. But they were *Turks*, or collaborators with the Turks, or those who impeded my patriotic crusade against these Asiatic barbarians, or anyway those I suspected of tendencies toward same. Do these yellow journalists tell you that Vlad Dracul was a *hero* to his people in those days? Do they tell you that I made my pact with A Certain Gentleman in order to secure the powers necessary to save my country from its despoilers?

Oh no, no one's ever written that novel, or made that movie, Count Dracula has to be the pure dark-hearted villain, enslaving rat-eating wretches like the entirely fictitious Renfield, terrorizing villages of noble peasants, who, believe me, are nothing but a brutish small-minded rab-

ble, chasing after empty-headed ingenues who are not at all to my taste, impersonated by talentless actors with lounge-lizard hairdos, slandered, and vilified, and—

But I digress. Or perhaps not. All right, so I'm a vampire. I am constrained to avoid sunlight, crosses, holy water, and garlic. But do not millions of ordinary humans share some of the same allergies, if perhaps not in the same combination? Indeed, there are those who are allergic to milk, sugar, common dust, even *themselves*. This makes *me* a weirdo?

True, I dine on human blood. But there are people out there who eat live fish, bugs, slugs, good Lord, *cow blood laced with urine!* I have a loathsome food preference?

So I prefer to sleep in a coffin.



Why not? I can endure without one when I must, and the business about native soil, is, of course, chauvinistic rubbish. But a well-made coffin costs a good deal less than one of your electrically-heated waterbeds, it's comfortably padded, and it's made to last. With the lid snugly closed, it's light- and sound-proof too, an important feature for those of us who sleep during the day, when the rest of you are up and around making commotion and noise. Try it sometime. You might be pleasantly surprised.

Yes, I have superhuman powers. I can turn myself into a bat if have to, at the cost of a severe headache afterwards. Barring exposure to excessive ultraviolet or a stake through the heart, I cannot die. I can reproduce my kind with a careful love-bite. We all have our little strengths and weaknesses. I cannot swim, run a four-minute mile, bench-press more than a hundred pounds, and I am perfectly dreadful at billiards even after a century of practice.

As for my reputed lack of a soul, a base canard! On a scale between Mr. Hitler and the simpering saints, I am surely squarely in the middle of the bell-shaped curve.

No, the only thing that really places the vampire outside the civilized circle of the human community,

such as it is, is the Hunger. the price we pay. Admittedly, it is a nasty business. And of course, the scandal mongers have it all wrong.

Believe me, I don't enjoy it. I may have begun life as little more than a rude tribal chieftain, but after all these centuries, I count myself a civilized gentleman. I dress elegantly, I have good manners, I am by now widely read, and many have been the ladies who would have been proud to have me to dinner with their parents.

You really think I *enjoy* being turned into a slaving beast without a thought in his head save sinking his fangs into the nearest available throat and sucking up blood till I am gorged and torpid? All right, all right, maybe I *do* enjoy it at the time, when my higher being is entirely subsumed by gibbering need, but how would you like to come to your senses stuffed and reeling, your clothing splattered with gore, standing over the corpse of some slattern or lout to whom you would not ordinarily give the time of day?

Elegant, it is not.

Fortunately, the Hunger does not come upon me often. Unlike certain callow vampires of my acquaintance, I do not indulge myself more often than is absolutely necessary. Long

centuries have taught me the discipline to hold back until I am really famished beyond reason, the happy result being that three or four meals a month will suffice, and I have retained my youthful figure. Oh yes, blood *is* quite caloric, and a vampire with pride in his appearance must indeed watch his weight.

Unfortunately, I hadn't had any blood for nearly two weeks by the time my flight from London landed at Kennedy airport, and I was in rather a dreadful state.

Airline travel these days is tedious and grueling to begin with, and being constrained to limit myself to night flights, making the connections from Bucharest to New York, via Budapest, Frankfurt, and London was almost enough to have me wishing I had tried it as a bat.

Particularly since the unfortunate situation in Rumania forced me to sit around in Bucharest for a week before I could secure an exit visa and a flight to the West.

Indeed, it was the unseemly chaos in Rumania that had forced me to flee the country of my birth in the first place. Well, not exactly the country of my birth. For while Transylvania may presently lie within the borders of Rumania, given my history as a Hungarian patriot, I have

always counted myself a Magyar, and more to the point, perhaps, been regarded as such by the local authorities.

As you may know, Transylvania has long been a bone of contention between Hungary and Rumania, and the Magyars thereof subject to much unpleasantness during periods of Rumanian rule. Under the previous administration, I myself had been exempt from such persecutions, for, despite his odious reputation in certain quarters, Nicolai Ceausescu was a fellow with whom I had much in common, and we had worked out a nice little gentlemanly quid pro quo.

After his unfortunate demise, many of his former associates met unpleasant ends, and it seemed only a matter of time before the vengeful new order got around to me. Indeed, as it turned out, I escaped, as it were, by the skin of my teeth.

Why New York? Why not? In a city where five and a half murders are committed in an average twenty-four hour period, many of them a good deal more bizarre and gory than anything in my limited repertoire, my modest and relatively discreet depredations upon the local populace should surely pass beneath the notice of the overworked police.

By the time I landed in JFK, though, I was vibrating with famishment, my hands were shaking, and I was in a testy mood indeed. Waiting half an hour to secure my baggage did not improve my disposition, and by the time I had blustered my coffin past the oafish customs agent, it was all I could do to restrain myself from tearing out his throat.

The cab driver, who charged me a hundred dollars to tie my coffin on the roof and transport me to Manhattan, cracking stupid vampire jokes in broken English all the while, never knew how close he came. As for the desk clerk in the Chelsea Hotel, the only thing that saved him was his admirable attitude to my peculiar menage.

"A coffin, hey?" he said with glassy-eyed indifference. "For an extra ten bucks a night, I could let you have the Sid Vicious suite."

By the time I had wrestled my coffin into the elevator, down the hall, and into my dingy room—for despite its reputation as a hotel for thespians and literary artists, the Chelsea lacked a proper porter—I was sorely vexed with the denizens of this city, and slaving with need. To make matters worse, by this time it was nearly 5 a.m., all too soon till the sun came up, and I freely admit I was in no mood to be choosy.

I stowed my coffin upright in the closet away from the prying eyes of chambermaids as is my custom when traveling (a sort of juryrigged Murphy Bed as it were), opened the door and stepped out in the hallway, determined, if such coherence could be ascribed to my present state of consciousness, to slake my burning thirst in the first available throat.

LITTLE MARY SUNSHINE

Dealers are such scurve, you wouldn't believe it, they've got less class than a sewer-rat, man! So I finally turn my third trick of the night, and I've got the bread, and I go down to the Chelsea to score from Claude, this guy's my main man, you understand, I mean I'm a regular customer, and I always pay cash, I ain't no deadbeat junkie.

I really need a hit, I mean, I'm shakin' already, and I cop a bag, and all I wanna do is borrow his toilet for a fix, not like I'm asking to use his *works* or nothing, I always got my own gear, like you can get *AIDS* from borrowing someone else's spike, especially a creep like Claude, what'm I asking for, five minutes in his crapper, is that such a big deal?

And you know what the bastard does? He tells me he ain't running no shooting gallery and he kicks my ass out!

"Up yours!" I tell him as he slams the door shut behind him. "I'm taking my business elsewhere!"

Yeah sure, but in the meantime, there I am, out in the hall in the Chelsea Hotel, twitching and jerking with no place to fix. Condition I was in, I'm ready to try the toilet in the bar downstairs, 'cept I've already

been kicked out of there ten times, and next time they're gonna call the cops, in the *Chelsea*, would you believe it!

So this guy comes staggering out his hotel room door. Okay, he looks kinda weird, pale as Andy Warhol, and his eyes are like flying saucers, and he's sorta talking to himself. But he's wearing this sharp black suit looks like it cost three hundred bucks, a bow tie even, looks like some old English tourist who once heard that Dylan Thomas puked here or something, booked himself into this fleabag by mistake.

He looks at me.

I look at him.

Man, the guy is positively *drooling*.

I think, hey, this looks like an easy john, I can fix up right here in his toilet, no sweat, and I been with three guys looked worse than this already tonight.

"Hey, whaddya say, man, you wanna have a good time?"

His mouth is hanging open like he hasn't had any in a year, but he seems like he's fried or something, 'cause he just stand there staring at me like a horny old zombie.

"Hey, come on, whatever you like, we'll do in in your room, okay, look, I've got a condom, if that's what's making you paranoid, five bucks for half an hour, you look new in town man, believe me, you ain't gonna get a better deal than that."

His mouth opens even wider, and he starts to grab for me, would you believe it. I've got no time for this crap, I mean, in another couple a minutes, I'm gonna be foaming at the mouth. So I take that for an answer.

"Hey, not here, even this joint's got some limits, in your room," I tell him, and I kind of shove him back inside.

I close the door, and make straight for the toilet. "Just be a minute, man, I gotta powder my nose."

Before he can say anything, I've got the toilet door locked behind me, and my kit out, and I get myself straight in record time. I put my works back in my purse, and I'm

feeling nice and floaty, ready for anything, no sweat and no pain, or so I think as I glide back into the room.

But what's waiting for me none too patiently is like Godzilla on methedrine, I mean his eyes are all pupils, and he's got this look on his face like he's ready to bite the heads off chickens, and like these *fangs* I didn't notice before, and all, and while I'm trying to get it together enough to freak out and start screaming, he grabs me in his arms, and gloms his mouth onto my neck.

What a hickey! I mean I've been with some rough dudes, but this guy is something else. He just holds me in his arms, and bites into my throat, and starts sucking, making these awful slobbering sounds.

Only it's not as bad as it sounds. It hurts a little, but by now the smack has really come on, and all that seems real far away, and I'm drifting kinda, it's sorta nice, weak-kneed and cottony, I mean, what the hell, I've had worse, this feels kind of dreamy, you know, not bad at all, and I go liquidly limp, and let him ease me down onto the bed to do his thing, or maybe I'm dragging him, it's hard to tell, everything's getting so warm and fuzzy, who'd think I'd ever cop a hit of smack this good off that bastard Claude....

AT FIRST BITE

The first taste of blood in such a state of the Hunger is a mere release from torment, a crude animal pleasure, indeed it could hardly be otherwise, since at that moment an insensate beast is what I am. This is usually followed by a slow stepwise return to rationality as my thirst is slaked and I finished my meal more slowly, and by the time I have drained my victim dry, I am fully myself again, and I usually experience a frisson akin to post-coital depression as I emerge into complete clarity contemplating the remains.

But there in the Chelsea Hotel, as I supped on the blood of what appeared to be no more than an ordinary slattern, I unexpectedly found myself in the throes of a blissful ecstasy I had not felt for decades, and indeed had thought I would never feel again.

Great reams of salacious rubbish have been written on the sexual symbolism of the vampiric moment, but all of it, of course, from the point of view of the victim. What the vampire feels is usually about as sexual as what a starving man might feel as he sucks up a bowl of borscht.

Still, we are not entirely asexual creatures, nor are we entirely immune

to pangs of loneliness down through our endless solitary lives, and once in a great while, I have indeed succumbed to the desire for feminine companionship in the throes of the moment, mistaking vampiric release for lustful bliss, easy enough to do when you are not in possession of your full mental powers.

For once the silly novels and sleazy movies have it right. It is indeed easy enough to convert a would-be victim into a fellow creature of the night by the simple expedient of refraining from proceeding to the terminal conclusion. Limiting yourself to a mere pint or two usually does the trick.

"One moment of pain, and then—Eternal Life!" Or so goes the line in that wretched movie, all too true, but once again, the point of view of the vampire has been entirely neglected.

For, once having created yourself a companion in a moment of passion like some mooning adolescent, you are then stuck with the results, and while the unfortunate situation may not really drag on for eternity, it can certainly seem like it.

First comes the embarrassing moment of revelation, and then the recriminations, followed by ecstatic reconciliation, unseemly clinging,



sanguinary greed, competition, jealousy, tedium, boredom, and finally, at long last, a messy parting of the ways.

For after all, I have been maturing for centuries, reading extensively, refining my tastes and cultivating my intellect, and any newborn vampire of my creation is, alas, going to be worse than a callow teenager from my millennial point of view.

Believe me, these relationships never work. Oh yes, it can be gratifying to enjoy the avid companionship of a nubile young acolyte for a year or two, but in the long run, the body grows familiar, the prattle bores, the intellectual vapidness grates, and it ends up being far more trouble than it's worth. Whoever said "You are responsible for the life that you save" must have been a vampire.

Why then, knowing all this, did I succumb to temptation? There's no fool like an old fool? Perhaps. But while I had certainly gone this route often enough down through the centuries until sad experience taught me better, I had never felt a bliss quite like this.

The girl lay dreamily beneath me evincing neither fear nor displeasure at my ministrations, indeed as my consciousness began to clear, I realized that she seemed to be in that state of willing surrender so tediously described by the Freudians and their ilk but which I had never encountered myself in centuries of biting female throats.

Moreover, I found *myself* in a state that I had never experienced before. I had emerged from the usual cafar of brute animal satisfaction in full possession of my mental powers, yet without the usual descent from protoplasmic ecstasy. Far from it! Her blood was the sweetest and subtlest ambrosia. It glided down my throat like a fine cognac, suffusing my body with a delicious warmth, filling my brain with illusive visions of some opium-eater's paradise of the sort that De Quincey has described, bringing me a peace and contentment, a somatic and spiritual completion, that I had never before experienced in this act or any other.

I never wanted it to end, and luckily enough, I possessed the lucidity to realize that I must ration its source, and the mature discipline to do so. Perhaps, I thought dreamily, this time it *will* work. Perhaps she is the one....

Oh yes, hope springs eternal, even, apparently, in the vampiric breast!

Could it be? Was it really possible?

After all these centuries, was I finally in love?

LET'S MAKE A DEAL

I musta passed out, I mean, I don't even remember if we ever even did any screwing, wow was that great smack, and I slept like a brick, man, like maybe ten solid hours, didn't wake up at all till about seven the next night.

When I finally did, my mouth tasted like a toilet bowl, my head was like a sack of broken Coke bottles, I was shaking all over, my teeth were aching, and I had this awful thirst. Oh man, did I need a fix!

The john was awake too, looking a little green around the gills, but he was laying on the bed beside me with this stupid little grin on his face, happens sometimes, you show 'em a real good time, they take it like personal, especially on an overnigher.

Speaking of which, this guy now owes me twenty bucks, which is my going rate for a sleep-over, and which is also more than enough to go down the hall to Claude's and get myself straight.

"Hey, man," I tell him, holding myself together, "I gotta go do me some business, look I know I told you five, but that's for a quickie, for all night I get twenty bucks."

He gives me this funny look. "You're a prostitute?" he says.

Prostitute! Jeez, I been called a hooker, a whore, a bimbo, and everything in between, but no john's ever used that ten-dollar word on me! I kinda like it, you know, it's got class.

But business is business. And I needed a fix.

"No, I'm a secret agent for the Salvation Army, man, and I need

twenty bucks for the collection box," I tell him kinda impatient-like, I mean, I'm really getting the shakes.

He don't get upset, he gives me this kind of creepy smile, and he reached for his wallet and forks over a twenty without giving me any crap. Hey, I could get used to this, twenty a pop, and he's got this convenient toilet right down the hall from Claude's.

"Hey look, what's your name—"

"Vlad."

"Vlad? What kinda name is that?"

"An old and honorable Hungarian name. It's...been in the family for centuries."

"Yeah, well that's nice, hey look Vlad, my name's Mary, and you seem to be a satisfied customer, right, so how about we make a deal that's good for both ball clubs?"

He looks at me like *I'm* babbling Hungarian or something.

"Look, man, I like you, so anytime you like, I'll do you an overnigher for twenty bucks," I tell him.

When he don't jump at that, I figure, what the hell, even the worst flophouse sets a girl back twenty bucks these days, and besides, old Vlad's room is right next door to a *dealer*, right.

"Look, Vlad, whaddya say, you wanna make it regular, like you guarantee me four nights a week, and I'll give ya a bulk rate, *fifteen* bucks a night, that's what a ten-minute blowjob in an alley's gonna run you, 'less you're into real pigs, and you don't look like the type to me."

Hey, that's enough to keep me fixed regular, considering what I can moonlight on the side.

He smiles at me, there's something creepy about it, okay, but what the hell, there's a lot worse out there than guys that're into hickeys, right. If old Vlad's gonna be trouble, I would'a been in it already.

"I was hoping you'd say that, or something of the sort," he says, and he takes my hand and *kisses* it, just like inna movies, far fuckin' out!

"Well A-okay, man!" I tell him, and I bounce off the bed. "Now

don't go away, I'll be right back."

Only it don't come down like that.

I weave out of his room and slide down the hallway to Claude's. I bang on his door.

"Yeah?"

"Open up, man, it's Mary."

"Mary who?"

"The Virgin Mary and the Twelve Apostles, asshole, look I ain't got time for this knock-knock crap, Claude, I'm hurtin', man, I need a fix."

"Up yours, Mary? Little Mary Sunshine? Mary-I'm-taking-my-business-elsewhere?"

"Cut it out, Claude!"

"Take it elsewhere Mary! Piss off! I don't need your shit!"

"Open up, you slimy bastard!"

I bang on his door for a couple of minutes, but Claude don't answer, and when some guy further on down the hall sticks his head out of his room to check it out, even in my present condition, I realize that I had better cool it before someone calls the house dick.

I stagger back to Vlad's room, knock on the door. I'm gonna have to cop on the street somewhere now, I'm pissed off, I'm shivering, I'm feeling like rat turds, and old Vlad, when he opens up, he don't look all that much better. His eyes are all bloodshot, and he's shaking, and man, I've seen that look before, and the thought occurs to me that maybe this guy's into smack too.

The idea appeals to me, I mean, he's got the hots for me, he's got money, maybe he's got a dealer too, could make life a whole lot easier. But hey, I know I'm not cookin' on the front burners just now, and if I'm wrong, I could be blowing a real good thing.

So I tell him, "Look man, this is gonna take a little longer than I thought, don't go away, I'll be back in an hour or two, okay?"

And he gives me this awful pasty smile. "That's quite all right, Mary," he says, "as it turns out it appears as if I will be occupied for a while myself."

"No sweat, man, catcha later."

The thought occurs to me that *he's* going somewhere to cop. He's certainly got that look and he's talking the talk. It's a real temptation, but I'm in no condition to trust my instincts right then, besides, Madison Square Park's not *that* far away, shouldn't be such a problem to score.

CRACKHEAD MUGGERS HAUNT LEATHER BARS

What was happening to me? First I find myself falling in love with a prostitute, and then, no sooner do I arise than the Hunger is upon me again.

Do not mistake my meaning. I am a man of the world, and I have lived far too long in a formerly Marxist dominion to harbor moralistic bourgeois prejudices against the Ladies of the Night. Indeed, a prostitute, cut loose from the social fabric, from the judgmental moralism of the groundling masses, subsisting, like myself, as a solitary creature on the margins of civilized society, as it were, represents the ideal potential consort for a prudent vampire. And who am I to look down on those who prey upon the fleshly needs of the common herd?

From a certain perspective, the Vampire Lady and Rosy O'Grady are indeed sisters under the skin.

But to feel the Hunger again after having slaked my thirst only the night before! This is unprecedented in my long centuries of experience!

Nor was the Hunger that I was unexpectedly feeling of quite the usual kind. There was the usual onset of craving, but never before had the Hunger been accompanied by this trembling of the limbs, this queasiness of the stomach, this throbbing headache, this aching not merely of my canines, but of every tooth in my head, this feeling of actual weakness, this senseless panic.

Of course, never before had I flown across the Atlantic either. Europe was now six hours ahead of me, my body was suddenly six hours out of joint with the local diurnal cycle; this must be the well-known time-zone effect that humans com-

plain about. I had hardly expected to suffer from it myself, but then I had done most of my air travel as a low-speed bat, and come to think of it, this did indeed feel something like the familiar post-bat unpleasantness, writ quite horrid, and exceedingly large.

There was nothing for it but to seek out another meal. And come to think of it, I *had* limited myself to only a pint or two of Mary's luscious blood.

I left the hotel and set forth into the night streets of New York City, nauseous, shaking, in a foul mood indeed, but nowhere near as foul as what confronted me.

New York's feral reputation had penetrated even Ceausescu's Rumania, but I had granted it the usual discount for rampant hyperbole against the degenerate West. As it turned out, not even the most fervent belief in the absolute verity of the former regime's crude propaganda could have prepared me for the awful truth.

Never had I prowled such sinister streets. Overflowing garbage cans were everywhere, and the grimy sidewalks were littered with unspeakable ordure. Raggy figures lay comatose in every other doorway, or so it seemed, lying in puddles of urine, reeking of their own fecal filth. Angry eyes regarded me with open hostility. Cars and lorries rattled over the decaying roadbeds, their drivers shrieking obscenities at each other in languages I had never heard. Madmen stood on street corners, baying at the moon, while pedestrians rushed by fearing to pay them heed. A sickly, grayish-yellow glow, compounded of city lights, auto exhaust, and overcast came off the dismal scene, there was a odor of gas fumes, ozone, garbage, human fear-pheromones reeking at a fever pitch. Traffic rattled and squealed, heavy noises lumbered beneath my feet, mysterious industrial mists issued forth from gratings, and always in the distance, the sounds of sirens wailing like the Children of the Night.

The total effect was of some nethermost pit of Hell, a Hades superheated beyond any control, its

crazed and savage denizens vibrating with high speed violent energy, where even its satanic proprietor might prudently fear to tread.

This is not to say that I was afraid. Wooden stakes, holy water, and crosses were nowhere in evidence, though the rancid stench of frying garlic issuing from food kiosks purveying the indigestible was something else again.

But it was truly appalling. Potential victims, in theory, lurked everywhere, and it would certainly serve them right, but even in my present state of queasy need, it was difficult indeed to spy out any throat I would care to soil my fangs upon.

Instinct and dim memory carried me westward towards the Hudson River, where surely this chaotic bedlam must at least thin out into the usual quiet nocturnal seaport docklands. Sailors and their attendant trollops were always a discreet and reliable source.

And indeed, I was soon walking down a deserted side street between darkened buildings, festooned with what appeared to be illiterate Arabic inscriptions, which gave out onto a riverside quay, albeit one unlike anything in my considerable experience.

A roadway churning with honking jouncing vehicular traffic blocked my access to a depressing riverside vista of abandoned docks, where not a single vessel was to be seen. The quayside avenue too was ominously deserted, save for the ever-present parked cars, and a dimly lit storefront a block to the south, from which I spied occasional figures emerging, wearing strange black leather garments unlike any seaman's attire I had ever seen.

Any port in a storm, as the sailors have it, though certainly even the most disreputable dockland environs of Hamburg or Istanbul would have been preferable to this. Still, there was nothing else for it, and I was fairly bilious with aching need, so I headed south towards the only visible human denizens, such as they were.

I had not gone more than half a block when my attention was attracted by liquid groans and muffled

thumpings emanating from the shadowy cavern formed by the space between the rear of a large lorry and the front of the next car. Upon investigation, I encountered a hideous spectacle that aroused both my ire and my gorge.

A creature in a filthy brown greatcoat held a sailor by the throat with both hands and was battering the fellow's head against the back of the lorry. The sailor wore a tight-fitting black leather jacket, an officer's cap of the same material, and a large silver death's head earring. His black leather trousers were pulled down around his ankles, exposing his private parts. Fresh blood was oozing liberally out of his mouth and nostrils, the sight and smell of which drove me quite beyond rational control.

I seized his assailant by the shoulder and threw him aside to get at the victim myself. He spun out of my heedless grasp, whirled around, and came for me.

And I found myself confronting a monster.

Believe me, I do not use the term lightly. Deeply bloodshot eyes with enormous black pupils. Nostrils oozing nasal slime. A gaping maw full of rotten teeth, spraying saliva right in my face as he rushed at me with a wordless animal shriek and filthy outstretched claws.

I forgot all about the poor sailor in the face of this hideous outrage, grabbed the creature by both wrists, snapping them smartly to incapacitate him, pinned his arms to his side, and sank my fangs directly into his jugular.

That he thrashed and kicked and cursed wordlessly during the whole procedure did nothing to ease my vexation, and I sucked and slobbered avidly in an admittedly unseemly manner until I had drained him dry.

Only when I was finished and had let the remains slip from my grasp did I recover the composure to realize that I had just unthinkingly gorged myself on the foulest-tasting blood it had ever been my misfortune to ingest.

While I count myself something

of a gourmet, no vampire can afford to be too fastidious when the Hunger is upon him, and as a consequence we come equipped with the proverbial cast-iron stomach. I have dined off diphtheria victims, syphilitics, hepatics, even victims of the Black Plague, all without ill effect, since the vampiric digestive processes are proof against all microbial or viral infection.

But *this!* This creature's blood had been contaminated by some crude but exceedingly powerful chemical that had given it the bitter taste of concentrated quinine laced with renal toxins. Ugh! In the moment of insensate need, I had managed to get it down, but now the very memory of it made me gag.

And to my profound shock and horror, I discovered that this was no mere metaphor, as I began to retch uncontrollably, as an enormous bubble of nausea seemed to burst in my innards, and bolus after bolus of noxious vomit lurched sickeningly out of my throat.

By the time it was finally over, my sides ached, my head was pounding, my knees had gone rubbery, my whole body was trembling uncontrollably, and it was all I could do to change into a bat and flutter weakly back to the hotel.

PANIC IN NEEDLE PARK

Goddamn crackheads, they're taking over, man, there oughta be a law, used to be you could cruise over to Madison Square Park, Union Square, Washington Square, Tompkins Square or Times Square if things were tight and you had to, and street-dealers would come crawling out all over you like cockroaches, all you hadda do was stand there and look like you were maybe even *thinking* of chipping a little smack.

I mean, scoring from guys like Claude for so long, got it together enough to deal out of a hotel room, I hadn't tried to cop a bag on the street for a long time, and man, was I out of touch!

Dealers are still there, bigger cockroaches than ever, but now all

they do is yammer “crack! crack! crack!” at you like a buncha rabid ducks.

By the time I get over to Madison Square Park, I’ve really got the shakes, and the way I’m feeling, I got no patience at all for these scumbags. By the time the upteenth zomboid crack dealer has hassled me, I’m ready to tear his dick off, I mean, I never had it so bad, must be that last hit of Claude’s, so good the goin’ up’s giving me this real bad comin’ down, I mean this is a real ominous dope market, man, and these crackheads are famous for bein’ world-class bad-asses but the way I’m feeling, the next one better look out for me, I don’t care if he’s Attila the fuckin’ crackhead Hun.

So I give up on Madison Square Park and blitz on up to Times Square, but there’s nothing there but more crack dealers and asshole pimps giving me a hard time, later for that, like the 21st Century, so I flag down a cab, and tell the space-case in the driver’s seat to take me to Tompkins Square Park, I mean, if there ain’t no smack dealers *there*, there *ain’t*, know what I mean.

Well the cabbie, he’s this moldie long-haired oldie, I mean, he actually speaks *English*, would you believe it, and he’s got a *Nico* album playing on the deck, so I figure, what the hell, it don’t hurt to ask, right.

“Hey, man, you wouldn’t know where I could like, score, I mean, I’m hurtin’ real bad, hey, an’ I don’t mean el cracko crapo, Jack, I’m lookin’ for the real thing, you unnerstand....”

Like I’m babbling and bouncing up and down onna seat, my teeth are throbbing, and my gut is aching, and I’m feeling nothing but pain, and man, I’m ready to ask a *narc* for a hit, not that that would be such a bad idea, they always had the best stuff, and for a quick blowjob, you’d be surprised....

Well the cabbie, he’s from outer space himself, and at first he thinks I’m after coke, *the real thing*, get it man, but once the airwaves have cleared between us to the point where we can communicate, it turns out that

I have lucked myself into one of the last survivors of a dying breed.

Like, he’s dealing smack *himself*, got it right in the front seat, the price is bullshit, and I don’t wanna think about how much it’s probably been stepped on, but hey, under the circumstances, right....

So I cop myself a bag, and I tell him to blow off Tompkins Square, and take me to the Chelsea, need I say more, and the traffic is screwed up as he’s comin’ up Eighth, I’m turning into a basket case waiting for this fix, I mean *I’ve got the stuff*, right, back to Vlad’s room before I’m on my hands and knees, so to hell with this jive, man, just drop me off here, and I’ll walk the last two blocks.

Or run, shamble, slither, like I can’t take it anymore, I’m oozing up the avenue like a speedfreak amoeba, man, get your ass outa my way, and some fuckin’ arm like *grabs* me and pulls me into this alley.

“Hey babe, how ’bout my dork on the wild side?”

Man, I don’t even *see* this grab-ass son of a bitch, I mean it’s like this red fog by now, I do believe I have had E-NUFF!

He grabs me, I grab him, it’s a lot of snorking and grunting, I’m not into freebies, and we make like a tag-team match, and in the course of the procedure, I find myself with my *teeth* in his throat, screaming and slobbering, did this really happen, don’t ask me, man, I wasn’t really there, but somehow I’m running down the block, and ’round the corner, and into the Chelsea, and I don’t bother with the elevator, I’m blasting up the stairs, and banging on Vlad’s door.

After five million years, the door opens, and there he is, looking like elephant puke for some reason, not that I care at the time, you unnerstand, and I blast past him into the toilet, “Gotta powder the old nostrils, man,” puffing and wheezing like an asthmatic flounder, slamming the door behind me, and somehow manage to fumble my works out of my purse.

Not to bore you with the gory details, under the circumstances, a

good vein is hard to find, you always get the other kind, but finally, I’ve got what I came for, I’m floating high above it all, free as a bird, I’ve clean forgot, it’s all behind me now, he’s pounding on the door, and out I come, Queen of the Milky Way, riding the Nova Express, oh yeah....

DRACULA IN LOVE

Mary had burst into my room in a state I had recognized all too well, or so at least at the time it had seemed, her eyes frantic and bloodshot, her body trembling with sickly energy, her very aura, as it were, vibrating with desperate need.

Which is to say she had looked much as I still felt after puking up that spoiled blood, with the Hunger now tormenting me with a cellular pain far worse than anything I had ever experienced, and as she repaired to the toilet in total disarray, I collapsed back on the bed barely able to move.

This, of course, was not entirely unexpected. The newborn vampire, having been drained of a significant quantity of blood and vital energy, enters the Life Eternal with the Hunger upon her, and must soon be induced by her mentor to feed.

Needless to say, this is a delicate task under the best of circumstances. There is really no diplomatic way to announce the nature of the transformation to the beneficiary thereof. The inevitable initial reaction is disbelief, nor does the truth of the matter really sink in until the initial onslaught of the Hunger proceeds to the point where slobbering desperation overcomes so-called civilized skepticism.

Then there is the usual unseemly outrage, followed by a long blubbering bout of guilty self-recrimination, which does not abate until the Hunger proceeds to the point where the cellular demands of the vampiric imperative overcome all lingering engrams of bourgeois morality with a slaving demand for blood.

At which point, the mature vampire finds himself the custodian of a gibbering neophyte avid to attack the first available throat, entirely inca-

pable of rational restraint, and totally indifferent to the consequences of public exposure. One must then control this creature like a savage dog on a leash while teaching her the intricacies of selection and stalk. Nor can one expect anything but boorish ingratitude for several weeks.

A tedious business even for a vampire in full possession of his mental clarity, which I, deeper into the agony of the unsatisfied Hunger than I had ever been before, certainly was not.

Common folklore to the contrary, I count myself a being of honor, and it is not at all my style to shirk a responsibility I have willingly assumed. But in my present state, patience was not exactly my strong suit, and I was in no condition to endure the usual horrid scene.

At the moment, my need was far greater than anything she could presently conceive of, and first things were going to have to come first.

Imagine my delight, therefore, when Mary emerged from the bathroom a creature transformed; radiant, beaming, gliding forth like a vision of satoric tranquility, like a thoroughly content and thoroughly satiated Vampire Queen out of my fondest unfulfilled dreams!

How could this possibly be? What miracle had come to pass inside the toilet?

Frankly, Scarlet, at the time, I didn't give a damn!

Preying upon the newly transformed vampire is generally speaking not recommended; her energy is drained, her blood depleted, and she is usually not exactly in a submissive state. But on the other hand, Mary seemed to be the one glowing with vampiric energy, and I was the one slobbering with somatic need.

I'll be careful, I'll exercise restraint, just a pint or two to get myself into condition to go out and seek a proper meal. Just a pick-me-up, as it were, no harm in that....

"Mary..." I said huskily, summoning up the voice of vampiric authority with the dregs of my energy. "Come here, Mary..."

She drifted over to the bed with

the most beatific smile on her face.

"Lie down here beside me, Mary."

"Sure, man, why not..."

She lay down supine on the bed beside me, staring up languidly at the ceiling.

"Mary... Mary... my need is great ... try to understand..."

She rolled over on her side to face me. There was a strange vacancy to her gaze, but I sensed no trepidation. "Hey, no sweat man, I'm a pro, I could do ya in my sleep," she said in a hazy voice, fumbling with my trousers. "What'll it be, somethin' kinky, or just a little of the old in and out?"

I was in no mood to attempt to explain matters, nor to thwart her sexual ministrations, to which, in that moment, I felt as indifferent as a stick of wood. I summoned up enough of my waning energy to prise myself onto my side facing her, and take her in my arms.

"Thas' sweet," she muttered thickly, as I nuzzled her throat, rolling up against me, and hiking up her skirt.

Gently, carefully, weakly to be truthful about it, I inserted my fangs into the tender flesh of her throat, as she attempted to perform her own insertion with my soft member down below.

"Whazzamatter, man, doncha like me?"

I was in no condition to reassure her, though indeed I liked her just fine, for no sooner had the first sip of her ambrosial blood glided down my yearning throat than a delicious coolness followed in its wake, drenching my desperately parched innards like a sudden desert rain bringing the bright flowers of springtime, suffusing my aching limbs with a wonderful relief, unfolding in my brain like rosy sunrise, taking me far, far away, through caverns measureless to man and down to an endless sea.

It was all I could do to restrain myself from draining this noblest of sanguinary vintages to the very last drop, nor can I claim that it was the return of mental clarity that prevented me from doing so, for I lay there

in infantile beatitude like a babe suckling gently at the nourishing teat, my mind as equally empty of coherent thought.

Yet strange to say, I fed only briefly, I could not have taken more than a pint or two of her blood, before I felt as contentedly satiated as if I had gorged myself to the last full measure. The ravaging Hunger was quite gone, I seemed to be floating on the softest of clouds, my body's energy restored to its accustomed level, albeit of a peculiarly languid sort, and indeed, to my distant dreamy bemusement, I even found myself rising to the occasion, as it were, and ultimately achieving sexual release.

Afterward, we lay there in each other's arms without speaking, finding a mutual contentment in the contemplation of the cracks in the ceiling, in the comings and goings of the cockroaches thereon, which, in that endless moment seemed a nirvanic mandala of perfected bliss.

Never had I attained such a state of tranquil completion. Never had I felt anything like this.

This *must* be love.

What else could it be?

CHELSEA GIRLS

Hey, not bad, considering I had scored that shit from a space-cabie, fixed me up a lot better than I woulda expected, slept real good after I made it with Vlad, not like he was any sunshine superman, you unnerstand, and when I woke up, I felt like human, you know, like no real crash, as good as it gets, wondered if I could find that cabie again, kicked myself for being too wasted to get his hack number or something, though on the other hand, who could have figured, right.

From the light leaking around the edges of the ratty windowshade, it looked to be getting on to noon, and a sunny one too. In my business, you don't exactly develop no sunshine jones, but Vlad was still totally sacked-out, wasn't much else to do, figured I'd check out the weather and see if there was any point in having a go at the day shift.

So I ease off the bed, tiptoe to the window, lift up a corner of the shade to have a look, and—

Pow! Wow! Yow!

Man, that sunlight whacks me in the kisser like a yellow lightning bolt inna brain! I mean, it knocks me ass over teakettle onto the *floor*, twitchin' and jerkin' and screaming like some sleazebag dealer slipped me some Ajax inna goods, I'm itching all over, clawing at bugs that ain't there like a wino with the DTs, my eyes are burning like sandpaper, and I can't see nothing but this spotlight like they do you with the rubber hoses in the backroom of the cop-shop!

When I come out of it, like what seems about ten million years later, I'm laying on the floor, sweatin' like a pig inna steambath, pantin' like a walrus in heat, and screaming about what I'm gonna do to that son-of-a-bitchin' cabbie when I get my hands on him at the top of my lungs, and old Vlad, he's kneeling beside me with his hand over my mouth to prevent the advent of the house dick.

Kinda embarrassing, you know? Like what am I gonna tell this guy? Uh, was a bad dream? I got epilepsy? Some asshole dealer cut my heroin with toiletbowl cleaner did not seem like it was gonna exactly smooth things out....

"You must never do that again, Mary," he says. He looks kinda weird when he says it, but at least not pissed off, for some reason, not like he's about to kick my ass out.

"Uh, yeah, sure, I'm sorry man, it'll never happen again, musta been a nightmare, musta been...uh, that greaseburger I et, didn't taste right, now that I think of it, ya know some of these joints ain't above steppin' on the beef with a little cat...."

I'm staggering to my feet as I babble out this lame crap, I ain't feelin' real chipper, but I think I can maintain.

"It's nothing you ate, Mary," he says, taking my hand and leading me over to the bed.

Jeez, has this guy figured it out? Come to think of it, I kinda made him for maybe a junkie last night, didn't I...? Maybe I should just—



We sit down on the bed. He's still holding my hand. And *he's* the one looking like he's gotta explain some junkie dingo act to *me*.

"It's the sunlight, Mary," he says. "You must never expose yourself to it again—"

"Hey come on, man, so I'm your basic night-person, but—"

"You are one of the Children of the Night...."

"Well, yeah, I suppose you could put it that way if you gotta get fancy about it, but—"

"I've given you a great gift, Mary—"

"Twenty lousy bucks? Hey come on! I earned it! And come to think of it man, you still owe me for last night...."

"—the gift of Eternal Life."

"Say what?"

SVENGALI AND TRILBY

"A vampire? Count Dracula? Like Anna movies? Sure, right, man, you' a vampire, and I'm the tooth fairy in drag...."

"You don't believe me, do you Mary?" I said. Not that it was entirely unexpected, of course. The initial response is almost always skepticism.

"Hey, why shouldn't I believe you?" she said, inching away from me. "Don't get yourself in an uproar, Vlad." The secondary response is almost always fear, not of the Undead, but of an apparent maniac. What a tiresome business!

I touched my hand to her throat. She flinched back. "These marks, where I have drunk of your sweet blood...."

She actually laughed. How admirable. "Hey, in my line of work ya meet all kinds, man," she said. "I once had this john, all he wanted to do was enemas with Jack Daniels, a few serious hickies, that ain't exactly my idea of severe kink...."

Irked, I rose off the bed, opened the closet door, pulled down the coffin, stood there beside it with my hands on my hips.

"Wow," she intoned.

"Now do you believe me Mary?"

"Well, I gotta admit you're seriously into the gear," she said. "Maybe you do really *think* you're a vampire, but hey, I knew this john was convinced he was *Bugs Bunny*, hadda rabbit suit inna gunny sack, ate carrots in bed, and paid me ten bucks extra to talk like Elmer Fudd...."

This was becoming quite exasperating. "What do I have to do to convince you, Mary?" I demanded. I went over to the window, turned my back, lifted the corner of the shade.

"Ow! Jeez! Hey, cut that out, I've got like this awful hangover!"

I dropped the shade, stood over the bed. She was rubbing her eyes, shaking, muttering to herself under her breath. "I *told* you, Mary, we vampires cannot tolerate sunlight, and you will find you no longer enjoy the fare in Italian restaurants, either. We are *vampires*, Mary! What other explanation can there be?"

She looked at me most peculiarly, seemed about to say something, nibbled her lip as if to bite it back. "Hey, I don't eat no garlic anyway, man," she said instead. "Ain't exactly good for business, know what I mean?"

"Ye gods, what do I have to do to convince you?"

She shrugged. She grinned. "Well," she said, "you could always turn yourself into a bat."

"If you *must* insist on cheap theatrics," I sighed, and I did.

I took a few quick turns around the room as she shrieked and squealed in the usual manner, then quickly resumed a more seemly form.

She stared at me slack-jawed and wide-eyed, as if she had seen, well, a vampire.

"I guess...I guess you ain't puttin' me on, huh?" she said in a tiny voice. Under the circumstances, her composure was admirable.

"Life Eternal, Mary," I told her. "You and me together. Children of the Night."

She glared at me coldly, perhaps now finally experiencing the greater shock of true belief. "Well, I guess you save a lot of bread on cab fares," she stammered. "I can do that too?"

"Not as easy as it looks," I admitted. "Close you eyes, extend your arms, visualize them as wings, flutter them a bit, think bat...."

The transformation was far from facile, as was to be expected. She turned into a rather oafish fruit-bat, fluttered spastically out of control around the bed for half a turn, bounced off the ceiling, and collapsed back on the bed in a human heap.

"Shit!"

"It takes considerable practice," I told her. "But then, you have all eternity to learn, and the Prince of Vampires himself as your willing mentor, my dear—"

"Don't you dear me, you asshole!" she fairly screamed at me in a fury. "What right did you have to do this to me you...you male chauvinist pig! What made you think I *wanted* to be a vampire, man, like *just* what I need, *another* jones, fer chrissakes! As if I don't have enough trouble scoring in this burg already, now I gotta cop blood! You stupid son of a bitch!"

I shrank back from her gibbering tirade. This was not going well at all. "Think of the advantages, Mary—"

"Advantages! Crashin' inna coffin! No more days onna beach! Biting necks! A blood jones! Thanks a lot, man, I—"

"Eternal Life, Mary! With me at your side! True love forever!"

"Huh?"

In the heat of the moment, I had blurted it out like a pimply adolescent, and now there was nothing for it but to pour out my heart.

"Yes, Mary, I love you," I told her with undisguised passion. "In my whole long life, I have never loved anyone as I love you—"

"Where have I heard *that* one before?"

"It's true, Mary, it's true! Of course, there have been others, but they were nothing to me, passing fancies, mere infatuations, I've never really been in love before, I—"

"Lame, man, really lame!"

"You've got to believe me!" I protested miserably. "Never have I known the bliss I have felt in your

arms! From the first moment I tasted the sublime ambrosia of your blood, I was transported to heights of ecstasy beyond anything in my centuries-long experience—"

"Sublime ambrosia of my blood? Heights of ecstasy?"

A change seemed to have come over her. At least she was calming down, regarding me with speculative attention rather than mindless rage. And as for me, I had had more than enough of this unseemly jejeunery. I was after all, Vlad Dracul, Count Dracula, a man of the world, a mature vampire of distinction, not some lovestruck bumpkin from the hinterlands. What an embarrassment to have so lost control! How could I expect to win her heart with such boobish gushings?

"I realize all this is quite sudden," I said, pulling myself together. "But I am a vampire of refinement, experience, independent means, and besides, the deed is already done. Think of me as your mentor, your benefactor, perhaps I can expect nothing more at present, the rest will come later...."

"Independent means...? Benefactor...?"

TAKE A HIT ON ME

Man, there are times in this life when a girl's gotta think fast no matter *what's* coming down! Pow! Bam! Wham! Thank me ma'am, you're a vampire, gonna spend the next zillion years sleepin' inna coffin, sucking up blood, and zippin' around like Batman!

And oh yeah, by the way, it's love at first bite, hope you don't mind if I drool all over you for like forever, my dear, I'm head over heels for the sublime ambrosia of your blood.

The sublime ambrosia of my blood? Transported to heights of ecstasy beyond anything in his experience?

What a jerk!

His first two hits of smack, and he's already halfway to Jones City!

I mean, I wasn't born last Tuesday, I spend a couple nights with this clown, we make it once, and it ain't

nothing to write home about either, and it's eternal love, right.

The fact that I had just fixed up both times he gets loaded on "the sublime ambrosia of my blood," that ain't got nothing' to do with it, right, and I'm the fuckin' Queen Mother of Transsexual Transylvania!

And like I'm so pissed off I'm about to blow the whole thing! I'm about to tell him where he can stick his fangs, and, oh by the way, Count, I do hope you're gonna have fun with your new jones, when he stops blubbering like a john in heat, and starts talking turkey, and not of the cold variety either.

Independent means? Benefactor?

Hey, Mary, cool it, this guy's got *bread!* And he's got the serious hots for you, or anyway, the smack he's been mainlining from your veins' got him convinced. Hey girl, you ain't never had no sugar daddy!

Besides which, face it girl, you can't take the sun, you just turned yourself into a *bat*, you're a *vampire*, and you know about as much about how to score what you need to keep *your* new jones happy as some poor New York junkie finds himself dropped down inna middle of downtown Moscow.

And old Count Drac, he's dying to pick up the tab, and show you the moves, he's in love with you, right, or anyway with what you're shootin'. How long can it take, a week maybe, you can put up with his high-and-mighty Vampire Prince crap that long, now can't you?

Yeah, that's about how long it'll take you to learn the ropes, that's about how long you gotta keep him chipping at your heroin Bloody Marys, and *then* he'll see who's gonna wanna be whose dog!

So....

"Hey, I'm sorry if I like freaked on you, man," I tell him. "I mean this is all kinda sudden and all, first I'm a vampire, and then I've got a new boyfriend, ya gotta give a girl time to think, I mean talkin' about being swept off your feet, an' all...."

"I understand completely, Mary," he says. "And I can be very patient." He gives me this toothy

smile. "I've had centuries of practice."

Sure you do. Sure you can. Sure you have.

Let's see how much good it does you, man, when you try tellin' it to Mr. Jones!

BATMAN AND ROBIN

We slept away the daylight hours rather fitfully, Mary refusing the cozy but admittedly cramped confines of my coffin for the cheap hotel room bed, arising endlessly and with ever-increasing frequency as afternoon oozed towards evening to check out the position of the sun in the sky, vibrating with jagged energy, fairly slobbering for blood, or so it seemed, by the time it had become decently dark.

"All right, all right, get your ass up, man," she babbled, "it's time to score!"

Perhaps it was because my rest had been so disturbed, or perhaps it was her infectious enthusiasm; at any rate, much to my surprise, I found myself once more in the Hunger's grip, aching, nauseous, even light-headed, with need.

Then again, I had not really fed properly since I arrived in this city; just two light snacks of Mary's sweet elixir, and a dockside meal so vile I couldn't even keep it down. I really *did* need a proper meal.

We descended to the street, which presented no more savory a spectacle than it had the night before. Blaring traffic. Ordure-strewn footpaths. Wailing sirens. Not ten yards from us, a man urinated messily against a wall, at the end of the block two drunken tramps pummeled each other ineffectually, and across the street, a rag-clad woman lay face up on the lip of the roadbed, staring vacantly into the greasy gray sky like a corpse, while citizens dashed along the sidewalks at frantic speed, eyes stonily averted as if all this were no more than the ordinary life of a civilized boulevard.

A shaggy scab-faced mendicant reeking of alcohol and foul body odor lurched up to us with an outstretched

palm. "Hey, man, don't mind if I do!" Mary hissed, barring her virgin fangs, and reaching for his throat. "I'm the vampire queen of Chelsea, an' I need a hit a what you got!"

I had to grab her by the collar to restrain her like the wolf I once made the mistake of attempting to domesticate as she snapped and snarled like same while he fled, wide-eyed and gibbering, down the block.

"*Really*, Mary! Restrain yourself! Not here! Not rubbish like that!"

"Come on, man, don't be such a chickenshit!"

"Lesson number one, my dear, take no prey in the vicinity of your lair," I told her. "Lesson number two," I said, remembering the results of my unfortunate dockside impulse, "don't trade famishment for an upset stomach."

"An' what's lesson number three, mommy?" she snapped irritably. "Don't play with your food?"

"*Really*, Mary!"

"So okay, Svengali, what ya got in mind?"

To be truthful about it, I had no idea. The usual dockside venue did not seem recommended. "Is there a red-light district nearby?" I suggested.

"The Minnesota Strip? Hey, forget it, man! You ain't inta winos, I ain't gonna take a hit off no slimeball pimp!"

"I was thinking more in the line of a Lady of the Night...."

"Like yours truly?" she said indignantly.

I sheepishly averted my gaze. I could not help but admire her sense of professional solidarity. "Well then, you know this city better than I do," I admitted. "Where do you suggest? Someplace reasonably secluded, where we are not likely to be observed, frequented by the sort of citizen whose demise is not likely to provoke an unseemly hue and cry...."

She considered that thoughtfully for a moment. Then her eyes lit up with a startling vengeful sparkle and she favored me with a perfect vampiric leer.

"Hey, I know, man, oh wow!" she said. "Let's do Central Park!"

VAMPIRE MUGS MUGGERS?

Oh man, was I gonna enjoy this! Like, what New York girl wouldn't, right? Bungle through the jungle, that's Central Park whenna lights go out, zillion square miles of don't let the sun set on you here, whenna muggers anna weirders sleaze out from under their wet rocks ta play with Mom and Dad space-case tourist from Cleveland and yuppie assholes stoned out of their minds on Perrier think they can get away with a fast jog through the woods.

We cab it up to the Columbus Circle entrance, none of this bat crap, the Count he can afford the fare, right, and into the park we amble, like I don't have ta tell ya I ain't never done *this* before, I mean it's dark in here as a narc's heart, man, an' if that ain't the animals inna bushes I'm hearin', it don't mean they ain't there, and here we come guys, meat for all you monsters like yucks from Yonkers, come and get us, boys, we're all yours....

I'm tryin' ta imagine I'm your airhead ditz from Jersey, puttin' out those soft bunny rabbit victim vibes, my fuckin' word, Matilda, it's dark in here, I ain't seen a police officer for the last five million years, you don't suppose there might be *ruffians* lurking inna woods do you, like maybe this isn't such a hot idea after all....

Only me and the Count, we ain't exactly Fred and Matilda from Peoria, we're Mr. and Mrs. Bite Your Neck, Bozo, right, we're *vampires*, hee, hee, hee, we're Bernie Goetz from Transylvania, assholes, come out, come out, wherever you are!

Well, it don't take too long.

We waltz into the tunnel that leads up to the south end of the boat lake, pitch dark and smellin' of mugger-piss, if that ain't askin' for it, what is, and sure enough, there they are, three or four of 'em, lurkin' up against the walls, it's hard ta tell, got this vampire night vision, yeah, but it's like that sniper scope footage onna TV from Iraq, ya know, just these glowin' human shapes, kinda....

So I like elbow the Count inna ribs to gain his attention. "Hey, Irving," I say real loud and dumblike, "ya don't suppose there's sharks in these waters," and it comes down.

They come for us, maybe they got baseball bats or pipes or something, there's a lot of bangin' and clanging around, but whatever it is, it's just floppin' off me limp as a john what's been mainlining saltpeter, an' one of 'em grabs me, flips me up against the wall, he's grinding against me snarkin', and slobberin', and I throw my arms around his neck like to give him a big kiss.

"Hey, big boy, so you wanna have a good time?" And I sink my choppers into his throat.

There's a certain amount of thrashing and screaming while I'm rooting around with my fangs for a sweet spot, I mean, I never done *this* before, but hell, I know how to find a good vein under worse conditions than this, right, and it don't take long for me to hit the mainline.

Wow, what a rush! The good old familiar surge, kinda, not exactly like I ain't been here before, but it goes straight down my throat and into my brain, where it goes off nuclear, and it just keeps comin', and comin', and comin', like the world's biggest spike, like a fuckin' *horse-needle*, man, oh yeah, I could get used to *this*!

Phew! I don't know how long it lasts, this was smack, it'd be OD City for sure, but anyway, after however, there's me and the Count, kinda wobbling out of the tunnel, wipin' goo off our chops, and sort grinnin' at each other like high school kids just made it together for the first time.

Only Vlad, he don't look too good. Looks kinda bloated around the edges like he's scarfed a million miles of pasta or somethin' and it don't agree with him. Also, he's kinda vibratin' and twitchin' and sweatin' like a junkie who's late for his....

Oh shit.

Lookin' at him, I realize that I ain't exactly feelin' no pain myself, I mean, yeah, I'm feeling kinda floaty maybe, but old Mr. Jones, he's got his

claws in my guts and he's giving them a nice big squeeze, like to say, "Hey, girl, don't you forget you got *two* of me to feed!"

"Hey, Vlad, howya doin'?" Dumb question, right, like he's doin' like me, only he don't even know it, and I ain't about to tell him just yet.

"To tell you the truth, Mary, I'm feeling a bit strange...."

"Must be someone you et, right, hah, hah, hah...."

Yeah, real funny, only if I don't score pretty soon, we're both gonna be chewin' the paint off the walls and forgetting why. And this time, man, that Claude, he ain't goin' to get away with givin' old blood-sucking Mary no no for an answer!

JUNK FOOD JUNKIE

For the first time in my long, long life, I found myself seriously wishing I could consult a physician, though of course I knew full well that I could expect no succor from the devotees of Hippocrates, who could hardly be expected to be conversant with the vampiric metabolism, let alone this malfunction of same.

We vampires enjoy robust health. Being Undead, as it were, we are not troubled by microbial or viral infections. Our digestive systems are able to secure all necessary vitamins and nutrients from our simple sanguinary diet, rendering deficiency diseases unthinkable as long as the Hunger is kept fed. Being immortal, we do not suffer organic degeneration.

True, we do have our allergies, but I had been nowhere near garlic, holy water, sunlight, or crosses. Yes, there is an effect analogous to a human hangover if one spends too much time gadding about as a bat. And indeed, as I had so recently learned to my disgust, it *is* possible for truly polluted blood to give me a momentary upset stomach.

But the blood I had taken in the park, while admittedly not what a connoisseur would deem a noble vintage, a bit fruity for my taste perhaps, and lacking in sophistication, had been quite acceptable in an unassuming manner, and certainly could hard-

ly account for this horrid malaise.

Yet I found myself staggering out of the park in a terrible state, sweaty, shaking, chilled, sick to my stomach, nursing a horrendous headache, weak in the knees, as if I were suffering from the most severe extremes of terminal Hunger, rather than replete with the meal of a few short minutes ago, far worse than anything I had ever experienced, even that dreadful period during World War II when I was forced to subsist for six full weeks on one starveling gypsy.

Returning to the hotel as a bat was entirely out of the question, and I don't know what I would have done were it not for dear Mary, who finally managed to secure us a taxi, piled me into it, managed to ease me past the hotel clerk and into the elevator with a shrug and a wink, helped me to my room, and tucked me into my coffin.

"Mary, Mary...."

"Hey, don't worry, Vlad, it'll be all right," she said, laying a finger on my lips. "Don't go way, I'll be right back."

And she left me there, panting, and sweating, and consumed by a seemingly unslakable need.

VAMPIRE BAT-GIRL

"Open this door, Claude, or I'll break it down!"

"You and what army, Mary?"

"Me and the Army of the Living Dead, asshole!" I scream at him. I mean, by now I'm shakin', I'm ragin', I'm like foamin' at the mouth, rattling at the doorknob like I've got my hands around his throat.

"Piss off, or I'm gonna call the house dick!"

"Yeah, right, sure you are!" I rattle the doorknob some more, and I think about just kicking the sucker in. Ain't vampires supposed to have superstrength or something, like Superman or Arnold Schwarzenegger? Besides which, at this stage of the game, I've got like *junkie* superpowers, man, I mean what's a crummy hotel room door to stand between me and the shit when Mr. Jones is got his pitchfork this deep in my

brain?

Yeah sure, maybe I can, and maybe I can't, but if I do, that's sure to attract the house dick, and there's old Vlad turning green in his coffin down the hall, and even inna Chelsea, it's all gonna be just a little hard to explain, well you see officer, me an' my old man, we're vampires, see, and that ain't our only jones, and this scurve dealer wouldn't sell me no hit....

And then it hits me. Why not? I open the hall window a little wider, stick my head out, and by stretchin' my neck all the way, I can just about make out the window to Claude's room. Yeah, it's open about six inches onna top, should be enough, and it's only maybe ten feet away.

Like I didn't do too good the last time, but practice makes perfect, right, and anyway, what choice do I have?

So I feel kinda stupid, but I close my eyes, hold out my arms, start flappin' away, and I think *bat*. And before you can say fuck a duck, I'm fluttering around the hallway, more or less, I mean, it's like a terminal teenage speedfreak from Pluto tryin' ta fly daddy's hotrod flying saucer through rush-hour traffic onna FDR, but, hey, I been in cabs with less control than this, right.

I weave and wobble out the hall window, better believe this batgirl ain't about to look down, and I just manage to hook like these fingernails on my wings on the top of Claude's window before I really freak, an' I squeeze myself inside, flutter around for a few spastic turns while Claude runs around screaming in his dirty jockey shorts, and then I bounce off a wall and actually land on my feet human again.

More or less. Jeez, what you gotta go through to score in this burg these days! I mean, banging around as a bat ain't exactly done much for my condition, my head's a Jamaican steel drum, my arms are achin', and my ass is sore from where I whacked the wall.

It ain't exactly improved my attitude, either, and neither is Claude, this scrawny junkie dealer scurve in

last year's underwear plastered up against the wall, droolin', and blubberin', and crossin' himself over and over again like he's pickin' off the bedbugs, like he's seen a...a *vampire* or something, disgust you to see it, know what I mean.

I lurch across the room, and I grab him by the throat, like I'm really annoyed, not exactly in control, and I'm about to sink my fangs into his crummy neck and do what comes natural, and he's mewling and twitching, bloodshot eyes as big as manhole covers—

—when it comes to me that some crummy junkie dealer's blood ain't exactly what I put myself through this bat crap for, whoops, sorry man, wrong jones!

By this time, his eyes are rolling up like he's ODing, so I bang his head against the wall a few times to bring him back. "This is really a pain, Claude," I scream in his face. "You better not put me through this crap again, you unnerstand?"

He manages to nod his head, and I let go his throat, and he oozes down the wall, and collapses onna floor in a blubbering heap. Man, dealers got no class *at all!*

"Get it together, Claude!" I tell him.

He looks up at me with eyes like sunnyside up. "Whu...whu...whad-dya want, Mary?"

I yank him to his feet by his stringy hair. "I wanna discuss nooclear physics anna sex-life of Donald Duck, asshole!"

"You...you do...?"

Man! "Smack!" I yell at him. "SMACK! SHIT! A BAG! HEROIN! THE STUFF! Why the hell else you think I waste my time talkin' to a scumbag like you?"

"Well, hey, why didn't ya say so inna first place...?" he sez, and he slithers across the floor to the bed on his hands and knees, reaches under, and pulls out a cigar-box with the goods.

"Good stuff, Mary," he babbles like he's runnin' on automatic.

"Yeah, yeah, I know, it's only been stepped on by fifteen circus elephants onna way to Madison Square

Garden," I tell him as I snatch the bag out of his hand and blast out the door.

I'm practically on my hands and knees myself by the time I'm back inside Vlad's toilet, and in my condition, it takes about a half a dozen tries to hit a decent vein, and Claude's stuff, hey, it's *Claude's* stuff, whaddya expect, a rose garden, but at least it's enough to get me straight, and after I ride the surge for a while onna toilet seat, I'm ready to go give Vlad *his* fix.

The Count, he don't look so hot, to say the least. He's laying there in his coffin sweatin' like a locker-room and smelling about as sweet, twitchin' and shiverin' like conditional terminal, man, a pretty disgusting spectacle, I mean, no one likes a junkie what can't maintain.

'Course Vlad, he don't know about his new jones yet, I gotta remind myself, and it ain't time to tell him yet, though by the look of him, it won't be long now before he's as hooked as a fuckin' flounder and feelin' twice as flat.

"Howyadoin', man?" I say as I drape myself over him, like as if I of all people don't know.

He looks up at me with this sick slobbering hunger, only it's worse than that because the poor bastard don't even know what he's hungry for, and he probably ain't gonna like it at all when he finds out and it's too late.

"Not too well, my dear, I'm afraid," he says with this weak little smile, Jeez, like gallant, you know, like if this guy hadn't given me *his* jones, I might sorta be feeling ashamed of myself, I mean for a junkie who don't even know, old Vlad, he's showin' class, of which from same I ain't seen all that much.

"Don't worry, man, I got just what you need," I tell him, offering my throat. "A little hair of the dog'll do the trick."

"I don't think so, Mary...."

"Hey Vlad, you're the one what was goin' on about the sublime ambrosia of my blood, right, come on, it'll do ya good, have a little hit...."

"That's quite touching, Mary, but—"

"Trust me," I like purr into his ear. Oh man, I ain't exactly pleased with myself when I hear myself sayin' it, and it don't get much better when he gives my neck a little kiss before he gently slides in the old dental spikes, and he does.

MAKES THE WORLD GO 'ROUND

It was the best of times, and it was the worst of times.

It may seem odd for a vampire to disclaim all belief in the supernatural, but after all, to those of us accustomed to the Life Eternal, it is by definition our nature, we understand it, we live within its parameters, and there is nothing magical about it at all. Nor, in my millennial travels about the Old World, have I ever encountered witches, wizards, demons, fairies, elves, or even a certifiable werewolf, save in the hyperbolic tales of the gullible peasantry.

I had lived for centuries without the slightest belief in magic.

But Mary's blood....

How else but magic to explain its power to transport me from the depths of the deepest and most inexplicable misery to such heights of purest bliss?

The magic of love, a phrase which I would have previously scorned as the hoariest of kitschy clichés. But after all, love too had been something entirely outside my previous experience, nor had I ever exactly been a devotee of the popular literature devoted to same.

For all I knew, this bliss in the presence of one's beloved was as common as dirt. And indeed, for all the groundling masses knew, the ecstasy to be obtained from quaffing the blood thereof could be theirs for the taking too, if only they had the wit to try it.

The best of times....

All that week, I sipped sparingly each night at Mary's willingly proffered throat, and found that a pint or two, no more, was enough to send me soaring into the cottony cloudland of loverly delight. Our conjugality eased gently into a sim-

ple but satisfying rhythm.

We would sleep the daylight hours away, I in my coffin, Mary on the bed. Soon after arising, Mary would slip out of the room for a time, to ply her trade, or so she claimed, "girl's gotta maintain some kinda independence," she would say, but more likely to try her hand at the vampiric hunt, need or not, as is so typical of the enthusiastic neophyte.

Upon her return, I would feast upon her ambrosial elixir, and lie there on the bed beside her for long hours; occasionally aroused to amorous activity, but for the most part more than content to just drift along quietly in a delicious rosy haze, transported to the most arcane waking dreamland.

No doubt to an outside observer this would have seemed like some mooning vegetative state, but to the lover himself, it was a contentment that passed all understanding, a peace I had never thought to know.

The worst of times....

Alas, it was that too. For the first time in my life, I experienced illness. What else could it be? Each sundown, I would awake with a raging headache, a parched mouth and throat, a cold sweat, a nameless, ravaging need, as if I had not fed for weeks, as if the Hunger had my innards in its iron claws.

But it couldn't be that. For one thing, I partook daily of Mary's blood, and for another, contrary to the needs of the deep Hunger I seemed to feel, a mere pint or two was sufficient to entirely ease my malaise, indeed to transform it into a state of perfect contentment.

I would await her return with growing anxiety, sweating profusely yet chilled to the marrow, my very bones aching, a nameless dread surging through me, stronger and stronger; and stronger till I was fairly shaking with an incomprehensible rage at I knew not what.

And yet, no sooner was she in my arms once more with my fangs gently planted in her throat, than it would all evaporate like a fever-dream.

Of course, for all I knew, this too

was the common experience of the quotidian masses. Having discovered the blissful ensorcelment of the magic of love, had I perhaps not fallen prey to the malady of lovesickness too?

RECORD HEROIN BUST IN BROOKLYN

Like, it was gonna happen sooner or later, right? I been putting it off, I mean, how was I gonna tell him, so call me a coward, man, but I just couldn't. Until that scurve Claude made me do it.

I get up like always to go down the hall to score, by this time I got Claude trained real good, he ain't interested in another conversation with the vampire bat-girl. I knock on the door, and he don't answer. I knock again. Nada!

"Open up, man, it's Bloody Mary!"

Zilch. I can't believe it. I've got no time for this shit!

I do the bat thing. It's a little easier this time, I get into his room without no serious dings or bruises. But he ain't there.

I reach under the bed for the cigar-box to glom myself a freebie, serve the bastard right!

Empty as a dealer's heart. I mean, looks like someone's been lickin' the last few grains outa the box!

I'm really hurtin' for a fix by now, and I get kinda testy, know what I mean, like I rip the fuckin' place apart, the drawers, the medicine cabinet, the pillows, the mattress, a real DEA search and seizure job. Not so much as a hita No-Doze!

Panic time, man, like I'm gonna haveta hit the street!

Not to bore you with the gory details. It's the Big D out there, figures don't it, your main man evaporates, it's gonna be inna middle of the Drought! I mean, there's *nothing* out there but goddamn *crack*, junkies are shootin' up *Ajax* and croakin' onna sidewalk, what street dealers are still upright, and there ain't many, they babble some crap about The Big Bust when I shake 'em by the throat, of

which I do plenty, better believe it!

I mean *everywhere*, like all over town, believe me, I been there, *Spanish Harlem*, even, I'm *that* desperate! Hours and hours and hours, I'm scratchin' at spiders that ain't there, I'm doin' the dry heaves, I'm arguing with traffic lights, I mean, I'm like crawling on my belly like a reptile.

And, oh shit, the bars are closing! Meaning it's four a.m. Meaning in another couple hours, up pops the sun! Oh man, Just what I need! What am I gonna do?

What *can* I do? I gotta get back to the Chelsea before I turn into a pumpkin, man! I try the bat-thing, but I'm so screwed up best I can manage is to get about four feet off the ground, an' flop inna a garbage can where a rat takes a bite outa my ass!

Well, hailing a cab inna wee hours in my condition ain't exactly easy, I finally haveta run upta one at a red light, rip open the door, toss out an unhappy citizen, an' grab the driver by the throat the whole way to the Chelsea to make him see things my way, and when we finally get there, it's gettin' on ta five-thirty, an' he gives me lip 'cause I only leave a fifty cent tip.

I shamle up the stairs, I ain't in the mood to wait for the crummy elevator, and I bang on the door, screaming and babbling like I think it's Claude's, which for all I know at the time, maybe I do.

It takes the Count like a century to open up, and when he does, he looks like I feel.

He's shaking like his butt's hotwired to a microwave oven. Eyes like broken glass. Fangy drooling snarl like a pit-bull in terminal heat.

"Where have you BEEN?" he screams in my face, spraying spit by way of greeting.

Well, it takes one to know one, she smiled, but I ain't in no mood ta put my hands in my back pocket, Bette Davis style, I mean, this is like what broke that camel's back under the circumstances.

"Bustin' my chops trying to score while you're gettin' your beauty sleep, whereya think, asshole?" I

scream right back, I mean, I ain't even there by now, and neither is he, it's Mr. Jones talkin' to himself now, and we're right in the middle of our first little lovers' spat.

Like, he grabs me offa my feet, an' drops me down on the bed, an' flops down on top of me like Attila the John, and he sinks his fangs into my throat none too gentlelike, and he's suckin' and slobbering, and I'm pounding him onna back with my fists, and I'm screaming "It ain't gonna do you no good this time, man, my veins ain't holding, I'm dry as a bone, cut it out, man, CUT IT OUT!"

Well the Count, he may be Dracula, but I'm not exactly Little Mary Sunshine at the time either, an' I got more experience dealin' with *this* jones than him, and I manage to knee him inna nuts, and he screams his teeth clear of my throat, and I roll out from under him, and we're like squatting on the bed snarling and spitting at each other like, you should pardon the expression, junkyard dogs.

"WHAT'S HAPPENING TO ME?"

"YOU GOTTA JONES, MAN!"

"WHAT'S WRONG WITH YOUR BLOOD?"

"IT'S THE BIG D! WHOLE TOWN'S DRY!"

"WHAT ARE YOU TALKING ABOUT?"

"SMACK, MAN, HEROIN! I COULDN'T COP A GODDAMN THING!"

Well, that's like a slap inna face or something, finally gets through to him somehow, like he's still foamin' at the mouth an' snarly an' all, but behind it, or in front of it, like he's suddenly got this look like he's bitten into a turd.

"Heroin..." he says in this other voice, all queasylike. "You're... you're a junkie..." And he shudders and like wipes my blood off his mouth with the back of his hands.

This sorta pisses me off, know what I mean, he's lookin' at me like I give him the clap, like I'm this cockroach he just found in his hamburger, I mean, this guy's a *vampire*, right, not like he didn't give nothing to me, *he* should talk!

"One good jones deserves another, don't it, Count?" I tell him.

He like turns red. Purple. Green. He slithers off the bed, staggers into the bathroom, sticks his head inna toilet bowl without botherin' ta even close the door, an' I gotta watch him throwing up.

INTRODUCING MR. JONES

"How could you *do* this to me, you slut?" I shouted at her in a fury when I returned from the bathroom.

Never in my life, not even in the reddest depths of the deepest and longest Hunger, had I ever felt a rage such as this! My whole body burned with a painful need such as I had never known, I shook not only in physical torment, but with disgust and self-loathing, for now I knew that the source of my agony was no natural need for pure organic blood but a hideous and helpless craving for a vile drug.

Nor was that the worst of it! I had been betrayed by the woman I loved! I had given her the precious gift of Life Eternal, and she had repaid my beneficence by turning me into a slavering junkie!

"You did it to yourself, man!"

"I certainly did not!"

"Did too! You gave me your jones, and you got yourself mine!"

"You never told me! You never asked me!"

"And like *you* asked me whether I felt like havin' a blood jones before you stuck your spikes in my neck?"

"That's different!"

"Oh no it ain't!"

"Oh yes it is!"

We stood there shouting at each other in a fury. And all the while, this...this...this *monster* inside of me was ravening to be fed. In that moment, I would have ripped her throat out and drained her quite dry to find surcease, only...only....

Only I had just tried that, and it didn't work.

"Look, man, this ain't gettin' us nowhere, the sun's gonna be up soon, and we both needa fix, like *bad*, man, so we better save this shit for later,

and go get us some smack like right now!"

"But I thought you said—"

"Maybe Claude's back. Maybe *he* managed to score. Or you gotta better idea?"

At the time, I had *no* idea, scarcely a coherent thought in my head, only the sickening need to beat back this horrid new hunger with something equally foul.

What would happen if we *did* manage to secure a dose of heroin I dared not contemplate. Like all decent vampires, I have a perfect loathing of needles. Could I possibly bring myself to *pierce my own flesh with metal stakes*? But what would happen to me if I could not?

What sort of loathsome creature had I become?

JUNKIE VAMPIRES

I heard these gruntings and moanings when I started banging on Claude's door. "Open up, Joker, I know you're in there, it's Batgirl and Robin, and we're gonna be real pissed off if we gotta do this the hard way."

More gruntings from Claude, but the rude bastard, he still don't come to the door. "Come on, man," I tell the Count, "we're gonna haveta do the bat-thing, wait'll I get my claws on the son of a bitch!" And I hold out my arms and start with the flap-flap.

Well, I'm seein' red, but Vlad, he's up there like inna ultraviolet, or maybe he just knows his own strength better'n I do, or maybe he just got no respect for cheap hotel room locks, I dunno, anyway he just grabs the doorknob, gives like this kung-fu yell, slams his shoulder against the door, an' it just pops open, bink, tah-dah, like inna movies.

We blast inside, I flip the door shut behind us, and sure enough, there's Claude in T-shirt an' jeans, sacked-out onna bed, with his eyes rollin' up, and droolin' and all, and his skinny arm still tied, and the bloody spike still stickin' in his vein, kinda disgusting spectacle gives smack a bad name.

On the other hand, he obviously

ain't feelin' our pain, the guy has somehow managed to *score!*

Like he's so high he don't even have it together enough to notice the Mod Squad has arrived, and man, he can expect the same. I reach under the bed for the goodie-box, but the cupboard is bare.

"WHERE THE FUCK IS IT, MAN?" I scream as I grab Claude by the throat and yank him to his feet.

"Whuh...whuh...whuh...glug...glug...glug...."

This ain't exactly the information I'm lookin' for. "THE SMACK, MAN, THE STUFF, FORK OVER BEFORE I BITE YOUR GODDAMN NOSE OFF!" I pump him up and down like I'm clearin' a stuffed up toilet bowl and he's like the plunger.

This shuffles his brains to the point where his mouth makes some kinda connection. "Ain't no more, I shot it all, so kill me, motherfuckers, hee, hee, hee!" he gabbles.

That just *does it*, man, know what I mean? No class at all!

"YOU SELFISH SON OF A BITCH! ARRGH! GRRR! YOWL!"

It's all like claws and teeth and animal sounds, I don't even know what I'm doin', well maybe I do, or anyway Jonesy does, or the vampire junkie batgirl, or whoever's like freakin' and makin' like a human tree-chipper, biting into his throat and gobbling for the mainline.

Thrashin', and gnashin', knees and elbows, and like the Count, he's gone dingo too, he's shovin' and pushin' at me to get at his share, the old boarding-house reach, it ain't exactly time for good table manners, we're grunting and slobbering, and suckin' it up, an' I guess we don't really care what Emily Post's gonna think.

And...and....

And the Surge hits me, man, like a bright golden glow explodes in my stomach and rolls in wave after wave up into my brain, and takes me up, up, and away, oh wow, what a relief, old Claude he musta had enough smack in his veins ta stone a bull elephant!

Or anyway, for sure, me and the Count. 'Cause the shakes are gone,

and Mr. Jones has gone far, far away, and I'm floatin' groovy, and now I'm just kinda sippin' at the last few drops just for the taste, know what I mean. And Vlad, he's suckin' away across the neck from me like a happy little baby, makin' these sweet little gurgling sounds, feelin' no pain, just like two little kids sharin' the same malt, kinda romanticlike inna sappy teenage kinda way.

I look up at him. He looks up at me. Like we've finished our malted and we're just staring at each other over the empty glass all dreamy-eyed. Hearts and flowers. Be my Valentine.

I smile at him. "Not so bad, hey? Better than a poke through the heart with a sharp stick...."

He hesitates. Then *he* smiles, like a shy little grin, and a red drop falls off his fang and onto his bloody lips. I lean closer, I run my tongue over my own lips just for the taste, I mean, I don't lick 'em, clean, that don't seem right, know what I mean.

We freeze like that, Just for a moment.

And then we give each other a nice wet kiss.

VAMPIRE JUNKIES

Our fortuitous discovery at the expense of the wretched Claude eased not only my momentary agony, but my displeasure with Mary for having inflicted her addiction upon me.

We repaired to my room in a state of rosy contentment, lay down side by side on the bed, contemplating the secrets of the universe, the cracks in the ceiling.

"Ain't so bad, now is it Vlad?" Mary said dreamily. "Sorta like bangin' yourself onna a head with a hammer, 'cause it *do* feel *so* good when it stops...."

I could only nod, something I was to find myself doing quite a bit of in this condition, for under the spell of the poppy, I found myself feeling rather, well, stupid, indifferent, happily disconnected from the sharp-edged imperatives of Hunger, intellect, logic, morality, history, indeed anything but the drifting

dreamtime of the drug itself.

In this state, it was the vicissitudes of life, Eternal or otherwise, that seemed like the endless hammering of the world upon my skull, and heroin rather like a timeless respite from same upon the torpid beach of some lazy tropical isle.

Alas, like all such vacations in tropical climes, this one too came to an end, after which came the presentation of the formidable bill. For, after passing seamlessly from the waking dreams of lotusland into the oblivion of quotidian sleep, I awoke soon after sundown with an aching brain, a wracking shiver, a queasy stomach, a mouth that tasted like the inside of an old boot, and a ravening Hunger.

Which was to say that Need was hammering at me insistently once more. And now I knew that blood would not be enough to bring surcease.

In Mary's vernacular, I needed a fix. Mr. Jones was demanding his due, and being none to gentle about it.

"Now what?" I demanded quite crossly, to say the least.

"Now I gotta set my ass in gear ta go out and score."

"Every day?"

"Lessen you wanna find yourself chewin' onna mattress, man!"

"This can't go on!"

"Hey, man, you wanna cold turkey, you go right ahead but like count me out, seems like a good idea at the time, but about halfway through, you kinda forget who you were when you decided to try. Like, you ever try ta kick your *blood* jones, Vlad? Gotta way of kicking back, know what I mean?"

Alas, it seemed that I did. "Well, perhaps just this one more time...."

"Uh-huh.... Seems like I heard that one before. Seems like I said it a couple million times myself."

"But no needles!" I exclaimed rather shrilly, remembering the loathsome sight of the dealer with a bloody hypodermic dangling from his arm, my flesh crawling at the thought of desecrating myself in such a hideous manner.

"Snortin' it just ain't the same, man!"

"We could go on as before," I stammered in something of a fright. "I'll be gentle, I'll be careful, I won't be greedy, I'll only take enough of your blood to—"

"Like you was with *Claude*? Hey, forget it man, I know junkies, Mr. Jones, he gonna get hungrier and hungrier, an' sooner or later, you're gonna lose control, only reason it ain't happened yet is my jones is bigger'n yours, but give it a few more weeks—"

"I could force you, Mary!" I snarled.

"You could fuckin' *try*!" she snapped back.

She shrugged. She smiled all too knowingly. "See what I mean?" she said. "Jones is already startin' ta do your talkin'! Maybe you do me, maybe I do you, but if we get inta that shit, you lose either way, 'cause without me, you gonna haveta do your own scoring and end up using the ol' works anyway whether you like it or not."

"You're not the only junkie in this city!" I cried in a rage. "There's surely plenty more where you—"

I caught myself short. I looked at her. She looked at me. I smiled. She smiled back.

"You thinkin' what I'm thinkin', man?"

"Indeed I am, my dear."

"Well then let's hit the streets!" she said, running the tip of her tongue slowly across her fangs. "Junkie vampires, you and me together, man, and tonight's our night ta prow!"

STRUTTIN' ON DOWN THE AVENUE

Well it seemed like a good idea, but like I said, the Big D was comin' down, there wasn't much to be had inna usual places, I mean even scoring ourselves a *junkie* was a severe ass-pain, like one who was holding, Tompkins Square, Madison Square Park, Times Square, they was fulla junkies, yeah, but in even worse shape than we was at the time, wouldn't ya knowit, nothin' but

crack and downers and ravin' loonies woulda done their own mother for a lick off a spoon, only there was nothin' ta be had, nada, zilch, like zero city.

Not like we were like *desperate*, you unnerstand, oh no, but finally I decide the only move left is to go to the back end of the fuckin' *Port Authority Bus Terminal* and pick up a sleazoid *pimp*, I mean this is where the scum of the universe hangs out ta pick up fresh teenage meat offa bus from Minnesota, how the Minnesota Strip gets its name, they can't do shit less the Maf gets to dip their beaks, these guys could score with their hands tied behind their backs inna snowstorm, so if it ain't *here*, it just ain't.

Not that this is a bad neighborhood, but the squad cars go in pairs and they get mugged anyway, an' even the rats got Uzis, dead bodies turnin' inta mummies in alleys, cockroaches the size of cats with a real bad attitude, alligators peeking up outa sewer gratings, fuckin' charmin', know what I mean.

Lizards in decaying *pimpmobiles* park back here waitin' for airhead cheerleaders from Keokuk come ta the Big Apple ta crack Broadway to make a wrong turn, like *real* wrong, better believe it, pardon me, sir, could you point me inna direction of the Barbizon....

Well, at four in the a.m. there ain't much action, but there *is* this pink Eldorado parked up the block looks like Elvis drove it before he hit the big time, anna top is down, and draped over the front seat is this black dude inna dirty white ice-cream suit anna Panama hat with a cruddy peacock feather stuck inna leatherette snakeskin band, thirty-five poundsa junk jewelry from Canal Street, an' some kinda hideous junkie jazz runnin' down the battery sounds like dogs and cats goin' at it inna cement-mixer fulla tin cans, like *suave*, know what I mean.

"Do a fade," I tell the Count.

He gives me a say-what look.

"Turn into a bat or something, man, an' let me play Debbie the Ditz

lookin' for the Ritz."

Vlad does the bat-thing an' he flutters none too steady up ahead where he perches onna dead street lamp to watch the audition, and I sashay up the street as stupid as possible, real slow and meatlike, wiggling my butt like I'm lookin' ta ball the nearest available basketball team.

I'm about halfway down the block when the *pimpoid* finally gets it together enough to start clockin' me with these eyes look like somethin' inna week-dead shark anna tongue got trouble keepin' in his head.

"Say, man, what a bitchin' set a wheels, we got nothin' like it in Dogpatch Junction, I mean, I hope you won't think I'm like no hussy or somethin', but I just got offa bus, and I'm kinda embarrassed for funds, know what I mean, you wouldn't happen ta know where a loose piece of ass could pick up some honest spare change, now would ya...."

Or words to that effect. Not that it matters. Up close, this guy looks like somethin' been floating face down inna Hudson for the last week or two, his eyes are all bloody side up and big black pupils, his teeth all rotten and like *green fungus* an' all, and he's so fucked up I coulda been babblin' Korean.

I mean, he gives me this standard slobbering grin like he's just about able to run on automatic. "Hey there, sweet thing," he says, and a wall a zombie-breath nearly knocks me over, like rank, like dead skunk and gorilla jock-straps, but the nose knows, man, I can smell the smack on it, and I start to drool.

Not that he notices, even when I haveta lick it off my fangs, and I ain't in a mood to play hard to get. "Look, listen man, there ain't no cabs around, an' I'm kinda tapped anyway, so could you like run me up to some cheap hotel, I'd make it worth your while, you unnerstand...."

This finally gets through, sorta, or anyway he lights up like a 20-wattar smeared with bugjuice inna cut-rate flophouse, some kinda dim connection with the outside world, more or less. "Hey babe, blubble rama

gluck," or some such brilliant come on, an' he manages to get the car door open.

I slither in beside him, and he sorta makes a spaced-out fumble like a human octopus inna tub of lime Jello not to let down the side.

"Now that ya mention it, don't mind if I do," I tell him as he's more or less reaching for me, and I hold a deep breath and sink my fangs into his throat, suckin' and slobbering like crazy, hopin' I can get off before I'm forced to catch another whiff.

He's thrashing and screaming inna usual manner, and I hear this fluttering, and a curse, anna thump, and the Count, he comes down hard in the back seat, human, you might say, like he couldn't keep it together all the way as a bat.

He kinda leans over the car seat without botherin' to dust himself off and starts chowin' down right beside me, and with the two of us going at it, it don't take long.

Good to the last drop, like they say, and afterwards, we give each other a little bloody smooch, like it's getting to be a habit, kinda romantic, know what I mean.

"We make a fine team, Mary," he says kinda moony-eyed.

"Like they say, Vlad, a family that preys together, stays together," I tell him, and I give him a little wink.

JUNKIE VAMPIRE CLAIMS FIFTH VICTIM

It has certainly been said often enough that necessity is the mother of invention, that love will find a way, that one must make the best of a bad situation.

And after all, I had no more chosen the Life Eternal for its unknown pleasures than I had chosen this opiate addiction for the surprising delights thereof.

I had made my pact with That Certain Gentleman out of selfless patriotism, in order to secure the powers to better defend my people from the depredations of the Turks, and only much later, when all that had long since become dim history, did I come to appreciate the vampiric

existence for its own sake.

Nor had I chosen my allegiance to that which Mary called Mr. Jones of my own informed free will, never dreaming I could find love and blissful contentment within this reluctant morphic embrace.

Yet, as I was to learn, my ancient pact with That Certain Gentleman, and my new arrangement with Mr. Jones were in many respects one and the same.

Both demanded the ingestion of a vital substance, both punished one with exquisite agony in its prolonged absence, an agony quite capable of reducing an otherwise sentient being to a mindless creature of slavering need, and both provided an all-but-orgasmic ecstasy in the blessed moment of release.

And neither would let mere grounding morality stand in the way of the Imperative Absolute.

True, the sanguinary addiction of the vampire was the elixir of Eternal Life, whereas all that the junkie could expect from heroin was a transitory state of rapture from the next dose, but ah, as we had happily discovered, when the two could be taken together in the same potion from a single vein, that was truly conjugal bliss.

Nor need we remain outside that blissful state for long agonizing hours, not when this city abounded in potential donors of the savory cocktail even during the unfortunate condition Mary called the Drought.

Indeed, as I learned, the fabled agonies of the junkie, far from being the result of addiction to the drug, were caused by undue abstention from same.

"Sorta like bangin' yourself onna head with a hammer, 'cause it *do* feel *so* good when it stops..." Mary had said.

But when blissful surcease was readily enough available in the veins of such an abundance of social pariahs, why bother? Why wait for the throes of the Hunger before partaking of pleasurable release when Mr. Jones, kept properly fed, far from being a sadistic tormentor, could be such a genial companion? No doubt

my initial horror of heroin had, in retrospect, been a horror of the conventional method of ingestion and the distasteful process of obtaining the substance from the disreputable purveyors of same. After all, piercing one's vein with a sharp metal stake for the purpose of injecting a vital substance, being the exact converse of the natural vampiric act, is about as appetizing as the thought of drinking a beaker of urine, as it were. And doing commerce with the foul denizens of the heroin-dealing demimonde was something no gentleman of refinement, vampiric or otherwise, should be forced to endure.

Ridding the body politic of one more such wretch, however, was quite another transaction.

True, Mary had introduced me to her Mr. Jones without so much as a by-your-leave, so that my wrath against her had not been entirely unjustified, but true too, as she had pointed out, I had done much the same. Perhaps neither of us could lay claim to moral perfection from any viewpoint save our own.

Perhaps that was our bond, after all, baptized over and over again in junkie blood, and sealed with a vampire kiss.

JUNKIE VAMPIRES PROWL THE BIG APPLE

Gotta hand it to the Count, he sure got it all figured out, 'course havin' ta score like *blood* for the last few hundred years or so might have somethin' ta do with his instant street smarts, I mean, blood, smack, whatsa difference, scorin's scorin', same shit ain't it, 'specially when it's all like inna same bag, vampire junkie, junkie vampire, alla same jones when it's alla same jones, know what I mean, two hits for the price of one, right....

Only *this* way, the price is like zilch! No more turnin' three cheap tricks ta scrape together the bread ta score a bag from some sleazoid dealer, avoid the middle man, like they say, and cop yourself a freebie!

An' hey, long as it's free, no need ta be like *anal* about it man,

who wantsa go through all that withdrawal crap, right, who needs it, what a drag! Getta up inna evening, breeze on over to the Port Authority, East Village, Spanish Harlem, score yourself a little breakfast, like who cares how bad the local animals think they are when you're Mr. and Mrs. Monster, I mean, whata they gonna do, *mug* us, hee, hee, hee. Long about midnight, we step out for lunch, and that just about holds us till dinner, an' then maybe a little nightcap, or like a *daycap*, or whatever ya might call it under the circumstances, an' it's time for beddy-bye.

It's like Heroin Hog Heaven! Summer vacation, man! No more needles, no more crap ta cook, no more dealers' lizard looks!

An' hey, like we was doin' the citizens a favor, right, always complainin' 'bout the junkies what's infesting the neighborhood, Maude, a few more or less ain't gonna cause the peasants to come out into the streets with their crosses and pitchforks, hey, you could say we was doin' our civic duty, anna papers, they start doin' just that, like they start puttin' one an one together, like two hard-core hickies onna same junkie neck comin' ta a theater or a doorway near you, we even made the TV news, junkie vampires claim another victim, disgusting pictures at eleven!

JUNKIE VAMPIRES ARE REAL!

Mary might have been delighted with all this ridiculous attention in the newspapers and television, but I, out of long sad experience with the purveyors of sensationalist literature and yellow journalism, knew that nothing good could ever come of it. Down through the centuries, after all, I had been slandered and vilified in endless trashy novels, turned into the butt of countless tasteless jokes, impersonated by third-rate actors in unspeakable movies, all to the enormous enrichment of generations of parasites and mountebanks, and when have I seen so much as a penny of any of it!

And *they* have the temerity to

call me a blood-sucking vampire!

All right, so perhaps I was a bit out of control, perhaps all the heroin had to some extent effected my better judgment, indeed, no doubt I *should* have been more discreet, but that T-shirt...*really!*

We were returning to the hotel afoot after having fed from the veins of a rather well-dressed gentleman whom we had found nodding in a doorway of a side street close by the malodorous Minnesota Strip. His blood had been well-laced with heroin of an unusual purity, and such was our state of delightful intoxication that we barely noticed that we were sauntering down Broadway towards Times Square, an avenue thronged with pedestrians and street commerce even at the midnight hour.

Not that even bloody-lipped vampires would've attracted undue attention, for Broadway was infested with far more sinister and outre children of the night—scrofulous prostitutes, savage gangs of marauding youths clad in leathers and metal, feral street-urchins, maniacal raving shamblers wearing the contents of trash-bins, hordes of drunken and toxicated potential victims of same—and nothing amiss would have occurred if not for that vile garment.

Indeed, the whole sorry spectacle could have been avoided entirely had not Mary called my attention to the thing.

“Hey man, lookit that, hee, hee, hee!” she babbled, tugging at my sleeve.

My attention was drawn to a foul creature standing close by a marquee promising XXX TEENAGE MUTANT NINJA LESBIANS XXX. He was an immense, obese, filthy, and entirely loathsome fellow, wearing a long black raincoat well-caked with mud, what appeared to be dried vomit, and the remains of several weeks' worth of the detritus of street snacks. There was a stack of folded garments piled messily at his sneaker-clad feet.

I could not imagine what had caught Mary's eye until the fellow noticed that my own attention had fixed momentarily upon him, at which point, he winked lugubriously,

and opened his coat in the manner of a comic-opera degenerate displaying his private parts for the delectation of an ingenue.

“Ten bucks, pal, five offa da best Canal Street price, two for fifteen!”

What was revealed was far more disgusting than his pathetic manhood, revolting as such a sight no doubt would have been.

Underneath his coat, he wore a white T-shirt of entirely incongruous cleanliness. Upon it was emblazoned a crude black line drawing that sent me into a roaring red rage.

A slanderous caricature of, well, *myself*, or anyway the cinematic version, a slavering fanged monster with ape-like beetled brows and pomaded hair-do, dressed in the sort of cowed black evening cape I haven't worn for the better part of a century, clutching a hapless junkie around the neck with one clawed hand, a bloody hypodermic still dangling from his arm in case anyone failed to get the point.

“SUPPORT YOUR LOCAL VAMPIRE” the blood-dripping legend said.

I quite lost control. In a single bound, I was upon him, ripping the thing from his chest. He snarled, and fetched me a powerful but naturally futile blow to the solar plexus, which hardly served to ease my ire, and I grabbed him by the neck.

I was dimly aware of a plethora of shouts and screams from the street, of Mary tugging at my garments, but in my fury of righteous indignation, I cared not a whit for such distractions, as I pulled his head down into position with a bone-snapping crack, and angrily tore out his throat.

Mary's fastidious trepidations seemed to have been eased by the smell of blood, and she rushed to join me, snarling and gnashing, and we made fast work of him indeed together.

Only when he was quite drained and we had let him slip to the sidewalk did the red fog lift, as it were, did we return to conscious awareness of the here and now.

Here we were, standing bloody-

mouthed and panting over a corpse on a crowded sidewalk, with people fleeing in all directions screaming at the top of their lungs, other people standing frozen around us in gape-jawed astonishment, still more people approaching from every point of the urban compass, drawn to the commotion like horseflies to fresh turds. Now there were shouts, and police whistles, and the howl of approaching sirens.

“Jeez, man, here come the cops!” Mary shouted in a total panic. “We gotta get outa here! And, flapping her arms, turned into a bat in plain view of our impromptu audience. A squad car pulled up. Police officers emerged with drawn guns. There was nothing else for it, I followed suit, and we escaped in a ragged fusillade of gunshots, not daring to resume human form till we had safely returned to the hotel room via the window.

“That was stupid, Mary, that was very stupid!” I told her crossly. “One does not turn into a bat in public! It just isn't done!”

“Yeah, well we wouldn'ta had to you didn't do your dingo act, Vlad!”

“Surely you couldn't expect me to—”

“Hey come on, man, no harm done! Hey, maybe we'll make page one, won't that be a gas!”

“Exactly what I'm afraid of!”

“Vampire Junkies a hit on Broadway! Hey, man, we're gonna be stars!”

JUNKIES HEAD FOR THE STICKS

Well the Drought, it wouldn'ta lasted long anyway, when does it ever, what do they call it, law of supply and demand, just the Big Boys holdin' back, the semi-annual Big Bust, you unnerstand, it ain't me what's jacking the price, blame the fuckin' DEA, like the Prez, there's a War on Drugs goin' on, ain't you heard, you're lucky to cop at any price, you don't like it, you can take your business elsewhere.

Yawn.

An' after the papers anna TV

gets the word out that we're for real, these assholes, like they're singing another tune they ain't even heard before, like brother can you make a dime.

I mean, the panic hits the streets, hey boys, there's sharks in these waters, JUNKIES DON'T LET THE SUN SET ON YOU HERE, sez the *Post* on page one, an' accordin' to the TV, them what can is feets do ya stuff outa here, like busload of shiverin' junkies are pourin' outa the Pig Apple in every direction like cockroaches when you lift up the kitchen garbage bag, busts are way down, an' like the Maf is sayin' there outta be a law, 'cause it don't take too long before the street price starts to drop into the toilet bowl, anna Big D it becomes Discount City, three for the price of two, and a free weekend in Atlantic City besides.

'Course, there's junkies, an' then there's *junkies*, know what I mean, there's always those with a real *attitude*, your hard-core, hey man, so there's vampires out there, so fuckin' what, where else isa smack so cheap, you wanna play the odds, there's always OTB, and hey, it ain't gonna happen to *me*, I don't even read the papers, man, I'm born every minute, so the Count and me, we ain't feelin' no pain, livin' off what remains of the fat of the land, 'least for a while.

So okay, maybe we go like a little apeshit, so maybe we shoulda known it couldn't last, maybe we let old Mr. Jones go a little over the top, maybe if we was smarter, maybe if we wasn't so loaded alla time, maybe we shoulda cooled it a little, maybe we got a little greedy....

But hey, com'on, wouldn't you, itsa great big candy store out there, an' like we got the whole city cheerin' from the bleachers, right, T-shirts, an' graffiti, an' some asshole sellsa TV movie ta Hollywood, an' there's jokes onna *Tonight Show* and Letterman, and the TV news is like keepin' count right between the weather anna ball scores, shit, one guy even like asks for an *autograph* as we're about to do him, wouldya believe it, I mean we're ridin' higher'n King Kong onna Empire State,

how's that for a monkey onna back of the world's biggest spike, we gotta image ta maintain!

Was Warhol said everyone gets ta mainline this stuff for fifteen minutes. So you could say we was way ahead of the game. We got ta be famous for *six whole weeks* before the shit came crashing down.

CRACKHEADS NEXT FOR JUNKIE VAMPIRES? TRY IT, YOU'LL LIKE IT!

"Hey, man, maybe there's somethin' to it, think we *should* try it?" Mary babbled, perhaps only half-seriously, but certainly entirely desperately, as we headed east on 4th Street.

"I do believe I *have* tried it, and it made me vomit," I snapped angrily, tearing the newspaper to shreds, in no mood for more of her callow jocularly. "Have you?"

"Well, yeah, once," Mary admitted sourly. "Sorta like snortin' Lysol an' rat turds, half an hour of screamin' at fireplugs what seemed like Martian robots at the time, an' a crash like a swan-dive off the World Trade Center."

She gave me a glassy-eyed stare, and a stupid little shrug. What had I ever seen in this vapid creature? "Guess you can't always trust what ya read inna papers, huh?"

I could only snarl, for I was infuriated four times over, to say the least.

The fury of the first part, of course, was at her for having afflicted me with this vile addiction in the first place, a condition which now found me prowling these meaner and meaner streets at her side like a famished and admittedly churlish beast.

The fury of the second part was at Mary's jejune obsession with the media coverage of our exploits, and her idiot delight at every mention of "Junkie Vampires" in print, even to granting at least momentary credence to this yellow journalist's sardonic suggestion that we shift our attention to the city's endemic infestation of crack addicts, now that, as he put it, we had "provided the Big Apple with

the Final Solution to the Junkie Problem."

The fury of the third part was at the horrendous results of that so-called Final Solution.

Oh yes, the good burghers of New York had much to thank us for, nor, in all justice, could it be said that they were remiss in the rendering of their peculiar homage to the "Junkie Vampires" who had all but rid their fair city of its "human rats" with a technique akin to a reversal of that employed by the fabled Piper of Hamelin. That worthy had seduced the vermin into following him out of the city via the sweetness of his song, we had caused them to flee via the terror of ours, but as far as the citizenry were concerned, the happy results were much the same.

No doubt we could have secured choice tables in the finest restaurants merely by announcing our presence to the maitre d', enjoyed endless rounds of free drinks in the taverns, made the rounds of the television talk shows, indeed we even received favorable mention in the "Toast of the Town" column of a well-regarded weekly magazine.

Mary, in her juvenile avidity for celebrity status, had even suggested that we pursue such a boulevardier's course, until I pointed out, none too gently, that wild-eyed slaving vampires in a more or less semi-permanent state of heroin withdrawal might be a good deal less welcome in the flesh than in legend.

"Yeah, like maybe it wouldn't be so good for our image to do public appearances before we get ourselves straight," she was forced to admit.

We *were* in a dreadful state, and that was the fury of the fourth part. The Pied Piper had been repaid with ingratitude by the citizens of Hamelin, but while the good burghers of New York could not be accused of the same when it came to coverage in the press, that was little solace under the circumstances.

The Piper, at least, had not been constrained to feed upon the very vermin he had banished from the city limits, whereas we, thanks to the magnification of our legend by the

modern media, had all but succeeded in piping the city clean of our own prey. The Pied Piper had taken vengeance on the mingy citizenry; we, thanks to the press, had done it to ourselves.

The bounteous days of yesteryear, when we had heedlessly gorged ourselves on the junkies who seemed as numerous as fat sheep in a springtime English meadow and just as easy for a predator to take, which is to say a few short weeks ago, were now a dim memory in a bleak winter of famishment upon the Russian Steppes.

For a week now, we had roamed the city like gaunter and gaunter starveling wolves, growing more and more desperate under the leering goad of the vile Mr. Jones, snarling, growling, snapping at each other's flanks, reduced to a sorry state indeed by the ravening hunger for heroin that went all-but-unfulfilled.

Of blood, there was of course a surfeit, and in our avid desperation, we gluttonized daily, to the point where I had begun to develop an incipient paunch, hoping against reason and dire knowledge that we were wrong, that the next innocent's veins did flow with junkie blood.

All to little avail. In the past week, we had managed to score only once, and that a full three days ago, far north in the abandoned urban wilds of the Bronx, where, after a full night of wanderings in the uninhabited ruins, we had happened at last upon what must have been the last junkie, if not the last human, in the entire vast disaster area, a skeletal creature nodding off in the toilet of a disused subway station who seemed to have taken the wrong train.

Now we were shambling eastward, shivering, shaking, fairly drooling with Hunger, driven by the crueler and crueler knout of the ever-demanding Mr. Jones deeper and deeper into the agony, into the nadir of need, into the protoplasmic feral core, into an hallucinated landscape that seemed to mirror that internal descent from civilized concern, from sentient awareness, down, down, down into the terminal ruins of time and mind.

Even the blasted wasteland of the Bronx, reminiscent of bombed-out Berlin or a town thoroughly sacked by the Turks, had not been like this.

We turned south onto a broad avenue with strangely empty sidewalks, a long straight canyon that seemed to descend into the darkest heart of the urban jungle, indeed backwards beyond civilized time into a ghostly abandoned necropolis where the colorless buildings with their boarded windows and shuttered storefronts, though darkened, lifeless, and plastered with graffiti and generations of tattered handbills, were eerily intact, as if the unimaginable denizens had but recently fled, might someday return.

Or perhaps, in some elusive way, lingered still, just beyond the threshold of visibility, for a miasma lay heavily over this avenue like a foul shadow, like a temporal pall. One could imagine, one could all but visualize, this avenue thronged, not with good burghers of the city, but with the human flotsam and jetsam of many a derelict tide, a human Sargasso of tramps and vagabonds, drunkards and addicts. And indeed the ghost of a bleak and sour odor seemed to assail the nostrils, compounded of cheap alcohol, urine, sweat, vomit, and perhaps, dare I hope, of the opiate object of my famished desire.

JUNKYARD DOGS

Man, talk about desperate, like I've had my downs and outs, but I never been on the Bowery before, 'cept ta cross it maybe on my way to Tompkins Square, I mean just the words *The Bowery*, like *bein' on the Bowery* had meant you had reached Condition Terminal for I dunno a couple hundred years.

Was once an El line here, an' a zillion flophouses an' wino bars inna shadows, an' a couple hundred thousand old drunken bums pukin' an' pissin' inna street, drinkin' *Sterno*, man, like brain-burn city, stoppin' cars atta cross-town lights an' wipin' the windshield with million-

year-old snotrags, and like barfin' all over 'em if the citizens didn't cough up, but your basic harmless degenerates, like too fucked-up to be dangerous, sweet sorta, know what I mean.

So the Donald Trumps, they persuade the city to tear down the El hopin' ta clean things up and do likewise themselves, like the roaches are supposed to run for cover when you turn on the light, ain't they?

Lotsa luck! They close the flops, anna result isa lotta bums frozen stiff inna winter, but hey, there's more where they come from, right.

Takes the junkies to finally do the trick. Not your garden variety traditional types what turn a few tricks or do some second story work ta score, but the kind what gives smack a bad name, these whacked out kill-crazy fuckers what met Mr. Jones in 'Nam, I mean these dudes end up onna Bowery when they reach Condition Terminal 'cause it's so easy ta mug the bums. Poor fuckin' winos panhandle all day to collect enough coins to score a can of *Sterno* inna Army-Navy, anna junkies down here waste ten of 'em a night ta score themselves a bag.

Well, that can't last forever, ya run outa bums, an' then you got junkies muggin' *each other*, not exactly Fat City ta begin with, and then the fuckin' crack-heads move in and start eatin' the junkies, and then *they're* down to eatin' each other, an' now, you got the present scene, like the New York version of a wild west ghost town where nobody with half-a-dozen brain cells still firin' is about to go, like haunted by the ghosts of ol' Doc *Sterno* an' Wild Bill Jones an' the Crackhead Kid.

Seemed like old home week for vampire junkies, like where else do you end up with a terminal jones and no place to go—onna Bowery, right, Elephant's Graveyard, Ground Zero, maybe it's some kinda animal instinct, know what I mean.

Besides which, if there's one fuckin' junkie left inna whole city ain't even heard of the Junkie Vampires, gotta be in this time-warp down here, where the bars don't have no TVs, an' the last newspaper head-

line anyone's seen is when the Brooklyn Dodgers beat the Yankees inna World Series.

Or maybe that's just Mr. Jones talkin', maybe—

"I smell something, Mary!"

The Count, he suddenly stiffens like one of those hound dogs onna point. He's snortin' the stinkin' air like it's an endless line a coke. His eyes are glowin' like a cat inna dark. His lips are skinned back over his fangs, he's drooling, and there's like this weird energy coming off him.

I mean, I been running with this dude for weeks, but I ain't seen *this* before, this is like *Count Dracula*, oh yeah, what been a vampire for a thousand years, scary stuff, you better believe it.

He like growls. "Blood! Heroin!"

I start to back away, but then I smell it too. Kinda faint and far away, like the smell of a joint down at the other end of a subway platform, but the nose knows, man, an' in my condition, it like goes right to the back of my brain, and before I know it, I'm droolin' too, Mr. Jones, he's got his pitchfork up my ass, an' I'm bobbing and shaking, an' babbling "Smack! Smack! Smack!"

The Count he gives this howl what curdles milk as far away as Hoboken, and he's off and running down a side street, hunched over, baying and slavering, and I'm tear-assing after him, kickin' over garbage cans, trippin' over dog turds, oh yeah, I can smell it, I can taste it, an' it's drivin' me wild!

THE LAST JUNKIE

Heroin! Heroin! It's out there somewhere, I can feel it in the base of my predator's nose, sharp, and tangy, tormenting me with desire! Heroin! Heroin!

No room for thought. A thousand years of Hunger takes over, a thousand years of instinct, and I willingly let it fill my brain, as I ride the red tide, the foaming bloody breaker, as it surges down the darkened side street, around a corner, down another street, backwards so it seems through time, through the streets of New York,

Budapest, Bucharest, back into the Transylvanian forests of my long-ago youth, and I am that feral young vampire once more, in the aching rush of that first and deepest Hunger, horribly and gloriously possessed by the quest for Blood! Heroin! Blood!

"Blood! Blood! Heroin! Heroin!"

I bay at the moonless night, a mighty beast of prey in full cry.

Stronger! Closer!

Down a narrow alley clogged with refuse, ordure, remains of packing crates, overflowing garbage cans. This close, my need knows no bounds, my strength is enormous. I shamle down the alleyway with such speed that I am hunched over, practically on all fours, kicking the cans aside, tossing them clattering against the brick walls with a dreadful din as if they weighed nothing at all, and then—

Sprawled against a dumpster, the object of my desire.

Clad in layers of rags so ancient that they have reached a uniform greenish gray, the color of moldering shrouds. Long stringy snow-white hair yellowed with decades of unwashed filth. Matted vomit-caked white stubble encrusting the shriveled and sunken parchment visage of a rotting mummy, wide eyes with sclera the color of bloody urine, mucus leaking from pinched nostrils, a mouth full of broken brown teeth struggling feebly to begin a scream.

A dirty hypodermic dangling from one grimed and callused claw.

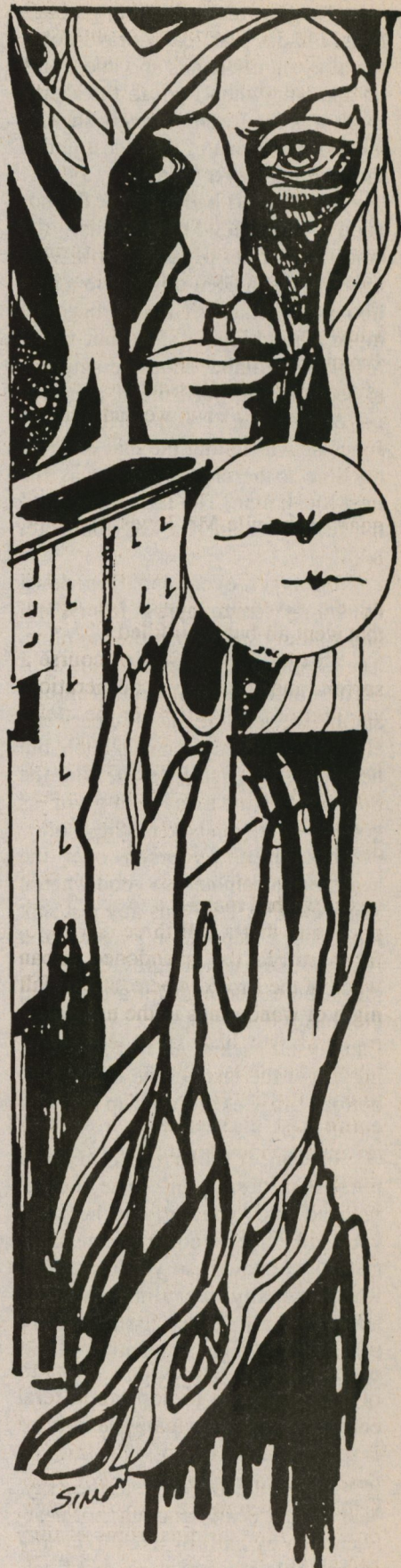
The most beautiful thing that I had ever seen.

The scream died in his throat as I leapt upon him with a howl of joy, and sank my fangs, deep, deep, deep into his jugular.

The first taste of his heroin-rich blood fairly sent me into convulsions of ecstasy, and the world narrowed down to the pulsing elixir, my avidly sucking mouth, and a voice in the back of my brain screaming "More! More! More!"

CONDITION TERMINAL

"**H**ey, asshole," I yelled, "leave some for me!"



Dodging fuckin' flying garbage cans, I hadta practically crawl down the alley on my hands and knees like an ape, and when I got to the scene, there was the Count, already suckin' away at the throat of the oldest junkie the world had ever seen.

I mean, this hadda be the Granddaddy of All Smackheads, the Ancient Mariner of Junk, know what I mean, musta been down here a million years, like left over from jazz musicians chippin' shit inna backroom of Birdland, should disgust ya to see it, right, but I mean, this was *the Bowery*, an' I was on it, so Mr. Jones he was telling me that this was no time to be choosy, this was the Last Meal, man, The Last Junkie, an' the fuckin' Count, he was gonna get it all!

I stagger over, and flop down onna dirty cement across from Vlad, and sink my spikes into the mainline. The Count, he's suckin' and slobberin', and growlin' and grunting, and he's given' me the old knees and elbows, the greedy son of a bitch, but hey, after the first little hit, after the Surge blows me away, I'm givin' as good as I get, you better believe it!

Like hittin' yourself over the head with a hammer, so good when it stops, only the stuff this guy just shot musta been stepped on by the 101st Airborne Division, figures, don't it, I mean there's enough for a taste, but the shakes don't stop, not even after I find myself suckin' air like a kid trying ta get the last couple drops inna bottom of a Coke bottle up through the straw.

I mean, it's like you're dyin' a thirst inna desert, an' some fuckin' raghead finds you, only all he gives you is like a teaspoon a water, just a taste, just enough so you remember what it's really like, almost worse'n nothing at all, 'cause it starts every cell in your meat screamin' More! More! MORE!

WOULDN'T YOU?

Good to the last drop, as they say, but not nearly enough, not nearly enough by half, by a tenth, by any conceivable measurement, and final-

ly, when every vein, every artery, every capillary, was drained bone-dry, I found myself staring across a flaccid neck at Mary, that insistent voice in my brain, in the very molecules of my being, clamoring for More! More! MORE!

Mary's eyes bored straight into mine, down to the depths of my soul, her mouth, her lips, her chin, dripping with warm, wet, heroin-laden blood.

"Hey, babes," she said softly, "no one here but you and me. That's all there is, there ain't no more."

I nodded, panting, trembling with aching desire.

More! More! MORE!

I stared avidly at her.

She stared back all too knowingly at me.

More! More! MORE!

A pulse in her throat seemed to beat like a jungle drum.

I felt my lips curling back over my fangs of their own accord. She shrugged, her eyes seemed to glow, grew heavy-lidded, sensuous, then closed as her bloody lips parted. She leaned closer, sighed, and I could smell the warm fragrance of her opiated breath.

She ran her tongue slowly, tantalizingly, over her teeth, once, twice, licking them clean, moaned softly. Then she arched her neck over like a dying doe presenting her throat for the coup de grace, reached out with her tongue, and licked teasingly and hungrily at my dripping chin, the corners of my mouth, the aching tips of my famished fangs.

Our two hearts seemed to beat as one.

More! More! MORE!

Such was my last coherent thought as I gathered her up into my arms and we pressed our lips together in a final vampire kiss.

VAMPIRE JUNKIES DIE IN EACH OTHER'S ARMS

It's like two kids inna backseat of a Chevy inna drive-in, French-kissing like crazy, swappin' spit, like they say....

So these two junkies, they're real

tapped, got just enough bread to score a single bag. Finally make the buy, anna first junkie spreads the shit out on his palm, an' starts dividing it up with a razor blade, real careful-like, grain by grain, takes about a million years a hassle, one more for this line, no two over there, gotta get it just right, fair's fair, man....

And then we're lickin' each other clean like a coupla cats in heat, he's like kissin' his way down my neck, seems real natural-like when he sinks 'em in, like a love-bite, right, so you could hardly feel it, and he's suckin' it up like a little baby boy, and like I'm feelin' no pain, it's all kinda driftylite, sweet, kinda....

Goes on forever till the second junkie is like satisfied it's perfect, two equal lines, like you could count the grains with a microscope an' it comes out right....

Only...only....

"Okay?" sez the first junkie.

Second junkie looks, nods.

I kinda twist my neck around, real gentle, so he don't lose his grip, so he won't even notice... "You sure?"

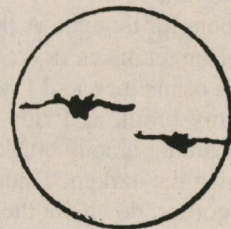
I scrape around careful with my fangs until I can feel the vein....

"Uh-huh."

And I hit the mainline, and I feel the Surge, and somehow it's all right, could be worse, like it feels so good when it stops....

"So kill me, motherfucker!" sez the first junkie, and snorts it all.

Know what I mean? ■



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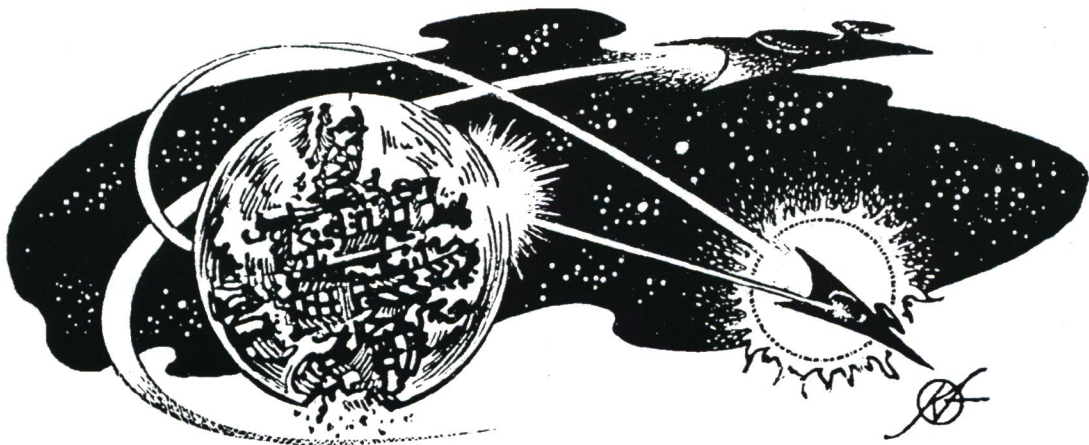
Della Van Hise, with "INFINITY, INC.," a story not at all like the above;

Steven Rasic Tem, with "PATHETIC FALLACY," about a man in a park;

John F. Moore, with "A JOB FOR A PROFESSIONAL" which is about a job for a professional;

Don D'Ammassa with "THE LIBRARY OF LOST ART," about a most remarkable house; **Steve Martindale**, with "THE WHORE WITH A HEART OF GOLD," oh, yes; and quite a few other stories and features, including yet another "WRITING." Plus the usual good illustrators, the usual eighty-page format, and a growing sense that we are on the right track.

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