

edited by Algis Budrys

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WILLIAM BARTON • K. D. WENTWORTH • ROBERT REED • OTHERS



tomorrow

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EDITORIAL

AIDS is beginning to change. Now that it's obvious it's not a disease specific to blacks, homosexuals, and other groups below the pale—in other words, now that it's made significant inroads on the white heterosexual community—it is being given very sophisticated handling. On the one hand, frantic efforts are being made to find a cure. On the other—because no cure has in fact been forthcoming—we are beginning to hear things like “Well, heart disease and cancer kill far more people a year,” and “It is, after all, a purely preventable disease.”



The idea, apparently, is that people with AIDS—except for a few cases that were apparently innocent, and got it through blood transfusion (though of course we can never be sure of absolute innocence)—could conceivably not have gotten it. Blacks, Latinos and homosexuals are understood to not have the power to deny themselves; white Anglo-Saxon heterosexuals, however, are made of sterner stuff, and are therefore more to blame. Unable to face up to what they are really saying, many commentators are therefore now saying the disease is not so terrible after all.

But it is. This is a point that I have not seen made elsewhere: the disease is terrible because it destroys one of the principal ways by which we at least temporarily disarm ourselves and truly share something with another human being.

Heart disease and cancer—which, by the way, are also at least partly preventable—and kidney stones and hives and hangnails—do not as a rule affect us so deeply. AIDS is at the heart of what we are.

Perhaps you have never made love to anything. But most of us have, in some fashion, and there is, really, nothing like it. For many, there is a moment of tenderness and sharing that cannot be attained in any other way. And for many, frankly, that moment has been shared with many partners, out of love or out of habituation—and suddenly now that is fundamentally different. Even the monogamous have to approach the first time with a certain degree of fear, and for those who for any reason must have more than one partner, the odds in favor of death are very clear.

Death. Not just herpes, or syphilis, or the clap, or any of the hundreds of other venereal diseases that shorten and miserate lives, but at least can be lived with for a long time. AIDS brings sure death into the lovers' bower.

I am not prepared to entertain the self-righteous. I know, without your having to tell me, that the disease is preventable. Now prevent the impulse toward love. And if you tell me that love is meant for the marriage bed only—the heterosexual marriage bed to be precise—and everybody else can go to hell, I will simply walk away from you. You have not thought the matter through, and until you do, you and I have little to say to each other. But let me try. You have friends? Acquaintances on whom you depend for something important? Children? Do they love? Then don't talk to me about monogamy. And if you consign those people to hell, including any children who slip out from under your control—and some will—then I think your own place in Heaven is not fully secure.

It is in what it does to the human spirit that AIDS is the deadliest disease. I first became aware of this some years ago, driving through Missouri, when I happened to catch a radio program hosted by Doctor of Divinity Lilywhite and featuring as a guest a gentleman who was Ronald Reagan's Surgeon General. And Doctor Lilywhite explained soberly and calmly that AIDS was primarily a disease of black males, because all black males were bisexual.

And the Surgeon General did not get up and leave the studio. I thought to myself that this was by far not the opening gun in a barrage of calm and sober lies that would eventually sweep away every vestige of good sense and true love. I thought that in the fullness of time it would destroy so much that was valuable about being human, and erect in its place a race of fear-ridden, cold-hearted *doppelgangers*, coupling not out of love but out of hate...but coupling, nonetheless.

Show me the cancer that can do that.

—Algis Budrys

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"Nightingale" was suggested by a cover painting by Paul Lehr, copyright © 1993, Paul Lehr.
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ALONG THE OLD ROSE TRAIL

K. D. Wentworth

Illustrated by Kandis Elliot

She was a new orphan, and suddenly she had all those roses to care for

The sky had deepened into a velvety blue-black by the time Ella shoveled in the third grave. She'd left Will's quilt-wrapped body for last. Three years in the world was such a short time, it didn't seem right to put her baby brother under the raw red dirt one second sooner than she had to.

The chill May wind was sharp with the greenness of newly sprouted leaves and the bitter tang of smoke. Head bowed, she stood beside the mounds of soil marked by rough scrub-oak crosses. "I'm—sorry, Papa," she whispered, as though the outlaws who had done this might hear her and come back to finish the job. "I don't remember the words I'm supposed to say."

She wiped her wet eyes with the back of a dust-caked hand and picked

up Papa's old hunting rifle. The battered stock had still been clutched in his fingers after she'd finally managed to heave his dead body off the root cellar door and climb out. When the party of grimy, rough-looking men had ridden up, he'd sent her inside and told her to be quiet, but Mama and Will had been in the house, too far away to make it to safety.

Her eyes ached with unshed tears. She was nearly fifteen, almost an adult in her own right. She should have disobeyed Papa, should have stood beside him and protected Mama and Will. If she had, maybe they would all be sitting right this very minute, huddled together against the spring chill, watching a yellow-flamed fire, talking about rebuilding....

She turned away from the graves to what was left of the barn. The outlaws had torched it along with the cabin, but by some quirk of fate, the flames had guttered out before the roof was more than half-burned. Three of the walls still stood and part of the fourth.

She stretched out in the scratchy hay and gazed up through the ragged, smoldering holes in the roof. The stars glittered down at her like tiny points of glass, shiny and hard, uncaring.

When Ella crawled out of the hay in the thin gray coolness of dawn, a wild, sweet perfume spilled through the air. On the other side of the barn door, a host of rustling, raspberry-pink roses carpeted the heaped soil of the three graves and spread



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out into the newly plowed fields beyond.

She stared, her bare toes curled against the dirt. They had to number at least two or three hundred. That many prime roses couldn't make it on their own; they'd never find enough water or the right kind of soil, especially not around here where the rain dried up by midsummer and the relentless sun burned everything to cinders. They must have gotten loose from a flower drive. The famous Old Rose Trail, that led from the big nurseries down in Texas all the way up to the railroads in Kansas, ran only a few miles away. From time to time, as she had grown up, a stray rose or two had straggled by, but she had never seen so many together in one place before.

Mama had always called her to look at the bright red or yellow blooms creeping through the prairie grass and putting the Indian paintbrush and daisies to shame. Ella remembered how Mama would gaze over the fence and sigh, thinking of her garden back in the civilized state of Kentucky. But flowers like these were meant for up north where folks could afford to cater to fancy vegetation. They were useless in this harsh, unforgiving land, just things to look at when it was all a body could do to survive. And, of course, every time Papa had seen a rose, he had cursed and run it off to avoid the wranglers who would tear up his fields to ride down strays.

She padded barefoot across the grass. Close up, the blooms looked worn and dry, their petals blotched with trail dust and drooping with weariness. She studied them—she really should go into town and find the sheriff so he could hunt down the outlaws and make them pay for what they had done, but that could wait a little while longer. It was plain to see these poor roses would die without some water.

She leaned over the lip of the stone well and, hand over hand, hauled up a bucket of cool water. Then she tipped it and let the water slosh over the ground. The roses rustled and crept forward. She repeated

the process until the fingers she had blistered digging graves the day before were bleeding. The roses trembled at her nearness, but she made no move to touch them and they finally settled down enough to sink their creeper-roots into the moist ground.

She spent the rest of the morning scavenging whatever she could from the ashes—the singed remains of her little brother's Sunday shirt, the familiar iron skillet in which Mama had cooked a thousand breakfasts, Papa's favorite walnut pipe carved in the shape of a bull, now blackened and cracked from the fire. Her heart felt numb as she knelt on the hard ground and looked over the remnants of her life. She had no living relatives that she knew of, nowhere to go.

A petal brushed against her leg, cool and feathery. Startled, she jumped up. The roses flinched and scuttled out of reach, leaving a trail of pink petals behind.

At sunset, she again hauled water out of the well until her fingers ached. With each bucketful poured over the dusty ground, the flowers edged forward until they piled up knee-deep around her legs. She wished she dared touch the velvety blooms, but she'd heard of two children over by Milliken who had been badly scratched last year when they had thoughtlessly teased a stray rose.

When she lay down in the hay that night, thorns rasped up the barn wall and across what was left of the roof. She huddled into the summery-smelling hay and closed her eyes to dream of turning her face up to golden Texas sunshine that poured down on her skin smooth as melted butter...wading through vast nursery fields filled to bursting with raspberry-pink roses and smelling like Heaven...peace and beauty wherever she looked.

In the morning, the roses slithered after her, twining and twisting together into silly shapes, obviously begging for water. She smiled and scattered a cool handful over their uplifted heads. One brave vine crept

up her skirt and encircled her waist where it trembled at its own boldness, the thorns just pricking through her thin calico dress. She grazed her fingertips against its silken petals.

Hoofbeats sounded behind her. She looked up and saw a man astride a rawboned roan mare, with a black bull-whip coiled over his shoulder. Ragged red scratches crisscrossed his face like the stitches of a badly made quilt. His mouth sagged open. "How in the—"

Fear ricocheted through her. She ran back to the barn and snatched up the rifle. The vine around her waist dropped to the ground as her shaking fingers clacked the rifle's lever down, then up. "Get off our land!"

"Don't you know it's dangerous to fool around with them flowers like that?" He stood up in his stirrups.

"You've got no business here!" Her voice quavered as she poked the rifle's barrel through the open door. "Go away!"

Out of the corner of her eye, she saw two scruffy dogs pad up and flop onto the grass, their tongues lolling out of their mouths like pink rags. The man slid off the weary horse, still staring at her. He was older than she'd first thought, bent like a scrub oak from hard years in the saddle, burned to tobacco-brownness by the sun.

"I ain't gonna hurt you, girl." He held out empty hands. "Rustlers hit me two nights ago, stampeded my whole flock. I was so scratched up, I could hardly crawl back into the saddle."

She let the rifle barrel sag and stepped into the doorway. "Maybe—they were the same ones who hit us."

The wrangler's eyes widened as he looked around at the gray-stone fireplace rising from the ashes of the cabin, the half-burned barn, the trampled garden. "Lordamighty, where're your folks?"

"Over there." She glanced at the little cemetery.

"You mean they're all dead?"

She nodded.

"That's a shame, a pretty girl like you out here all alone..." He drummed his fingers against his dusty

pants leg. "Well, don't you worry. Old Jeb will take care of you."

The roses skittered to the other side of the yard, their leaves fluttering.

"I can take care of myself." Her chin rose. "I have Papa's rifle."

The old man wet his lips. "I can see that. It's a mighty fine piece, too. Why don't you let me have a look?"

She jerked the rifle up. "Keep away!"

"Don't you worry now, little darling; it's gonna be all right." He cackled. "I just want to—" His right hand knocked the rifle aside while his left grabbed her wrist and twisted. She stumbled to her knees as he snatched the rifle.

"Now..." He smiled so broadly that his faded eyes were buried in a maze of sun-wrinkles and scratches. "Let's just get ourselves a little better acquainted."

Rubbing her aching wrist, Ella struggled back onto her feet. "Stay away from me!" The anxious pink roses edged toward her.

"Stay away, hell!" He rasped his fingers over his bristly chin. "It's time you became a woman, girl."

A roaring red mist danced behind her eyes. She thought of her mother's blood-spattered body lying amidst the tatters of her blue gingham dress, her father's horrified eyes, staring up into the dusty sky at nothing. Her hands clenched so hard her nails broke the skin of her palms. "If you touch me, I'll kill you!"

"Now, don't go talking like that." He motioned with the rifle barrel. "Just sashay that yellow-haired head of yours over here. We're gonna have us a party."

Rose petals, smooth as satin, brushed against her ankles. She looked down at a sea of trembling vines. She scooped up an armful. Without hesitation, they twined around her waist, her arms, through her hair.

"Are you crazy? Them roses is fresh off the range and wilder than a Saturday night in Abilene; ain't a one of them gentled to hand. They'll strip the hide off your body quicker than you can sneeze!" He shrugged the whip off his shoulder. The two dogs

rose to their feet and trained their gleaming black eyes on the roses.

"Just move away real slow-like," the old wrangler said in a low, tense voice and shook the whip out. The flowers shifted nervously.

She raised her rose-covered hands to her face and breathed in the heady fragrance. It smelled like things she had always wanted, but never known about, like places on the other side of the world, and places inside a person's heart.

The old man cracked the whip, shredding vines and blossoms. "Back off, you consarned, misbegotten weeds!" He lashed the roses around her feet until pieces flew through the air like green snow. The two dogs raced back and forth, barking furiously, trying to drive them back.

One bunch of creepers leaped forward and tangled themselves around his legs. He swore as they dug their thorns into his flesh and swarmed his face. The whip flailed as he toppled over backwards and the angry roses buried him in a living blanket of green and pink.

The old man screamed as the frantic dogs snarled and tore at the vines. Ella hesitated, unable to breathe or think, then darted forward and, heedless of the scratches, dug down through the leaves until she found the braided leather coils of the whip.

She flung it away as the old man's body writhed under the flowers, then searched until she found her father's rifle. She pushed the roses back with the stock. "It's all right," she told them. "Let him go."

The roses hesitated, then slowly withdrew until she could see his blood-streaked face and his quivering mouth.

"Get up." She leveled the rifle at his nose.

His hand pulled a handful of creepers off his chest, then fell back. "I—I can't."

"Yes, you can." She forced the rifle's lever down, then up. "On your feet!"

He rolled onto his stomach, then rocked up to his knees and hung there, breathing in short, hard gasps.

"Take your dogs and get off my place."

"I'm—all tore up." He dabbed at the bright blood streaming from his face with the back of his filthy sleeve. "I've got to have water, bandages."

"Get going or I'll blow your fool head off!" she heard herself say, the words springing up from some deep, dark place inside her.

He limped over to the barn and leaned back against it. His legs shook so much she thought he might fall down again. "All right, just give me a minute. I'll take my flock and go."

Her stomach contracted with fear. "No, the roses stay here!"

His whiskey chin sagged. "But every cent I got in the world is tied up in them!"

She felt the hairy tickle of root feet creeping over her shoes and ankles. Her eyes flickered down to the anxious vines. "It doesn't matter. After the way you treated them, you'd never get them up to Kansas now."

"They're my roses and, by God, you little sodbuster, I'll take a match and burn the whole lot before I let anyone steal them!"

A large, robust vine snaked forward and darted up his leg. He flinched and peeled it off.

Ella felt sick suddenly; her knees turned to water. "Get going." She mopped at her damp brow with the back of her hand. "And don't ever come back."

"Oh, I'll be back all right." The lines in his forehead were deep enough to plant corn in. He threw her a vicious look, then snatched his horse's reins out of the dust. "And I'll bring the sheriff with me!" He leaned heavily against the mare's side, trying to find the strength to mount. "I suppose you know what they do with rustlers down here in Indian Territory?" He swung into the saddle and jerked the horse's head toward Lone Grove.

"I'm not—rustling them," she said lamely to his back. Then she realized that, strictly speaking, perhaps she was.

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But the roses trusted her, and it was plain to see they would have died to the last creeper before they went with him. She stared around at the scattered pink petals and shredded leaves. What now? No doubt, he would come back, as he had threatened, and then the sheriff would put her in jail.

There was nothing left, but to take the roses and go so far away that no one would ever find them.

She would take them back to Texas.

She watered them from the well. One last time, then gathered what unspoiled provisions remained, a singed chunk of ham and a trampled piece of corn bread. She wrapped the food in the remains of Will's shirt and knelt to say a final prayer beside the three graves.

The flowers hesitated as she left the yard, then drifted after her in groups of twos and threes, their leaves whispering through the tall grass. She set off to the southeast, heading well away from the Old Rose Trail.

The sun rose higher and higher in the vacant blue sky, beating down on her unprotected head and arms. The roses crept along at their own pace, easily distracted, often going off to climb rocks or scrub oaks and bask in the sunlight. Over and over, she had to go back and round them up. After only a few hours, she despaired of ever making good their escape. There were just so many of them.

About noon, she stopped beside the steep banks of a creek. The thirsty roses brushed past her as they crept down to the water and soaked their root-feet in the shallows. She knelt beside them, drank, then bathed her sweat-sheened face in the cool water. The rippling image of a yellow-haired girl stared back at her, hollow-eyed, her nose already pinkish-red with sunburn.

The remainder of the day, she kept to the twisting, chattering stream and the roses straggled along behind her. She saw now that her plan was foolish. At this pace, she would never

get to the next town, much less all the way to Texas. Maybe she should give up and let them root here where they would at least have sunshine and rain.

But if she did, sooner or later, the wrangler would catch up with them. If they had rooted, he could take his vengeance by burning them, just as he had threatened. No, she had to go on until she found some place they could be safe.

In the solemn blue-gray of twilight, she saw a pale thin ribbon of smoke spiralling up into the darker sky in the east. It made her think of someone's supper laid out nice and hot on the table, a hungry family gathered around. She tried to remember which folks lived out this way, Collinses, Van Horns, Subletts—it could be any of those, or even some she'd never met.

Her empty stomach twisted; she'd eaten what little she had brought with her at noon. She didn't know how much farther she could go without some supplies, but it wouldn't be nearly enough to get the roses to safety. Crossing the stream, she found a small grove of river birches and left the vines lazily contentedly over the silver-gray branches.

The cabin was bigger than her family's, and she thought she recognized the horse that drooped its neck over the corral fence, a distinctive gray with one white eye. A red-headed boy of about ten or eleven was chopping wood as she walked up, her feet aching, her skirt torn.

She stopped behind him. "You're Josh Van Horn, aren't you?"

His head whipped around and he almost dropped the ax. "Ella—Ella Hasty?"

She nodded. "Are your folks here?"

"Ma is." The boy leaned the ax against the wall and picked up the scattered sticks of firewood. "Pa's gone for the doctor. Our Annie's bad sick with the croup."

She handed him the last few pieces of wood. "Can I talk to her?"

"Sure. Come on in." He backed against the door and pushed it open.

Inside, the cabin was yellow with lamp light. Mariah Van Horn sat beside a small bed, bathing a little girl's forehead. The fire was already roaring, the air thick and warm.

"Ma," Josh said, "we got company."

Mariah looked up. She was a round-faced woman with a dimpled chin. "Ella! Did your mother send you to sit with Annie?" Her eyes were wet.

"No, ma'am." Ella ran a self-conscious hand back through her tangled hair. "But I'd be glad to spell you with the little one. I—I need some food. Outlaws burned us out three days ago. Mama and Papa and Will—they—" Tears escaped down her cheeks.

"Outlaws!" The older woman hurried across the room and folded her against the comforting softness of her bosom. "What about you? They didn't—?" She looked down at the rifle Ella carried in her right hand.

Ella shook her head and pulled away. "Papa made me hide in the root cellar when they rode up. He—" She swallowed hard. "He knocked the door closed and stood on it. He—said to be quiet."

Mariah Van Horn's gray eyes brimmed with tears.

Ella took a deep breath. "I'll work for whatever you can spare."

"Work?" Mariah shook her head. "Heavens, child, you look almost as bad as my poor Annie. Let's get you cleaned up and fed, then, when the doctor goes back to town, he can take you with him so you can tell the sheriff what happened."

Ella stiffened. "I don't want to go to town. I'm going south."

"South?" Mariah's strong, capable hands took the rifle and leaned it in the corner, then urged Ella into a chair at the table. "Why?" She smeared a chunk of bread with a blob of strawberry jam and handed it to her. "Have you got folks down that way?"

Over in the corner, the little girl in the bed convulsed in a fit of deep, wracking coughs. Mariah squeezed Ella's arm, then hurried back to the child's side. "There, there," she whis-

pered, smoothing her daughter's dark hair. "Your pa will be back with the doctor soon."

Ella swallowed the last of the bread and jam. "Why don't you let me sit with her?"

Mariah looked dubious. "Well, I can't say as I've had any sleep for the last two nights, but you look all done in yourself."

"I'm feeling better." Ella rose and walked over to the bed. "I used to sit with Will sometimes."

"Well, maybe for a few minutes, just until the doctor comes. It should be any minute now. I'd thought he and Charles would be here a good two hours ago." Mariah stood up and kneaded the small of her back. "Josh, you go bunk out in the barn. Ella will sleep in your bed tonight."

"Yes'um." The boy fumbled at the latch on the door, then closed it behind him.

Ella settled on a stool beside the little girl's bed. Her face, round and dimple-chinned like her mother's, was flushed and hot, her small body restless under the frayed quilt.

"I'll just close my eyes for a few minutes." Mariah stretched out on the bed on the other side of the cabin. "If I fall asleep, you call me when the men arrive."

Ella watched the girl's chest rise and fall, listened to the phlegm rattling in her throat. She bathed the fevered little forehead with cool water from a blue basin and tried to think what she would do tomorrow. Maybe the Van Horns would let her work in the garden or the barn in return for a few basic supplies. Then she would go back to the roses and lead them farther away from the Old Rose Trail. Even though Texas was too far, there ought to be open land out here with enough water that they could wander free without bothering anybody. They could live wild and—

A horse neighed in the yard, then was cut off. Hooves clopped on the hard-packed ground. She stretched, then walked to the door and opened it.

Instead of Mr. Van Horn and the doctor's shabby black buggy, a

group of mounted horses milled outside; one of them a pinto with a brown spot over his withers like her father's missing saddle horse. Grimy men held up torches that threw dancing shadows around the yard. One motioned with his chin toward the barn. Several men dismounted and slipped inside. Her heart pounding, Ella closed the cabin door until there was only a crack she could watch through.

Seconds later, the two men reappeared, dragging Josh between them, a dirty bandanna stuffed into his mouth. She saw another man lean down from his horse and whisper into the boy's ear. Josh shook his head, his eyes wide with fear. The man back-handed him to the ground. Ella closed the door and eased the long wooden crossbar into place.

It had to be the same outlaws who had killed her family and burned her home into smoking ashes, and now they meant to do the same to the Van Horns. Her knees shook as she crossed the room. She knelt on the bare wood floor and touched Mariah on the shoulder, then laid her fingers across her lips as the older woman started to speak.

"It's—them," she said softly. "The ones who came to our place—and they've got Josh."

The latch on the door lifted. Someone pushed the door, but the wooden crossbar held it closed. Mariah's eyes widened. "Oh, dear God!" She threw back the blankets and rushed to the corner where she'd propped Ella's rifle against the wall.

The door creaked as the men outside threw their weight against it. The crossbar groaned.

Mariah pumped the rifle and poked it through the shutters of the tiny window in the front wall. "Get away from that door!"

There was only silence outside for several breaths as the shot echoed through the night. Someone barked an order, too low to make out. Then a child's voice shrilled, "Mama, it's me, Josh! Don't shoot, please don't shoot!"

Mariah drew the rifle back inside and leaned against the wall, tears

streaming down her haggard face "My God, what am I going to do?"

Ella's heart was beating so fast that the blood whizzed in her ears. She glanced around the dimly lit cabin. "We've got to get out of here!"

"There's a couple of loose boards in the back of the cabin on the other side." Mariah handed the rifle to Ella, then picked her small daughter up and wrapped the blankets around her.

"Mama?" Annie stirred in her arms, then began to cough.

"Shh! You mustn't make a sound!" Mariah clutched the feverish child to her breast and rocked her. "Do you understand Mama? Not a sound!"

Something crashed against the door. Men laughed and it crashed again. The bottom hinge gave and the door sagged inward.

"Come on!" Mariah thrust the wrapped child at Ella, then pushed a wooden trunk out of the way and wrenched at the boards in the far corner. First one came loose, then the other. She tossed them aside. "The pegs rotted," she said ruefully. "Charles always meant to make more." She bent down and peered out the hole into the night. "I can't see anyone."

Ella knelt beside her, clutching Annie's hot little body. "But it's too small."

Mariah took the child from her arms. "Nonsense. You go first and then I'll pass Annie out to you."

"But what about you?"

The door crashed again. Several boards splintered.

"Me?" Mariah shook her head. "I'll never fit. I'll stay here and hold them off with the rifle. Now go!"

Her stomach heaving, Ella lay down and scooted through the narrow opening on her back. In her mind, she heard the screaming again, Mama... Will. Papa hadn't cried out. He'd just died where he stood.

Outside, the cool night air was bitter with smoke from the men's torches on the other side of the cabin. She brushed the hair out of her eyes and accepted the bundled child from Mariah.

"Go for Charles!" the older woman whispered as she fit the boards back into place. "He must be close!"

A few seconds later, Ella heard the door break. The rifle cracked twice. She stumbled onto her feet, holding the child so hard against her chest that Annie cried and struggled feebly against her grip. Ella's shoes slipped in the grass as she ran into the cooling darkness.

The child in her arms was crying and coughing in great wracking gasps. She pulled the blankets aside. "Annie, it's going to be all right, but you have to be quiet." She touched the curly dark hair. "Do you understand?"

The little girl continued to wail. Ella heard the rifle fire again, then hooting laughter. She remembered coming up from the root cellar to find her mother's body, thrown into the ashes after they were done with her, the terror on her dead face....

"Not again!" she whispered fiercely. There must be *something* she could do. Mariah had said for her to go back towards town and meet up with Charles and the doctor, but obviously they had been held up. Either the doctor was out, or he had another patient too sick to leave. It was entirely possible they might not come until tomorrow.

And tomorrow would be too late.

She ran back towards the west, towards Lone Grove, her feet sinking into the lush spring grass, her lungs straining. The half-moon had risen behind her, silvering a grove of slim trees in her path. Something moved in the grass, shifted in the moonlight. She stopped, the breath wheezing in her chest.

A low flutter of movement crept slowly through the grass toward her. For a moment, she was afraid, then she made out a faint pinkness here—and there—and over there—as the grass came alive and she was surrounded by an uneasy sea of roses.

Screams shrilled through the night. She whirled around and saw the firefly-bobbing of torches headed her way. She wavered, fear burning like fire through her veins.



The roses piled up around her legs. Thorns pricked through the thin cotton of her dress as they climbed up her skirts.

Frightened, Annie cried louder. Ella laid her hand across the small mouth. "Shh! You have to be quiet! They'll find us!"

One light turned toward her. She watched it, transfixed like a rabbit when the coyotes are closing in. She wanted to run, but there was nowhere to go—the roses had walled her inside a thick barrier of leaves and thorns.

"Over there!" one of them called. "I hear something!"

Hooves beat across the ground, black shapes moving beneath the torchlight. She cleared a hole in the thicket of roses, set Annie down inside it, and pulled the blankets back over the child's face. One rider reined to a stop before her, pulling so hard, his horse slid on its haunches.

"Well, what have we got ourselves here?" A bearded man leaned down over his saddle and held the flickering torch closer to Ella's face.

Several more riders pounded up. Behind the black outlines of their bodies, Ella saw the sickly glow of flames licking at the cabin. "Stay away from me!"

A beefy-faced man with thick cruel lips laughed and spurred his horse into the roses. "This heifer looks more my type than that old cow back at the cabin." He grabbed at her hair.

She ducked, then picked up an armful of creepers and threw them into his face. "You killed my family!"

He swore as the vines clung to his clothes and slithered around his arms. His horse squealed as thorns dug into its tender flesh.

Ella waded forward, picking up more vines as she went and flinging them at the outlaws. The rose army followed, flowing around the horses' legs and entangling them.

A startled horse plunged away into the darkness. Its rider swore, then tumbled off into waist-high prairie grass. He screamed as the roses buried him.

Ella ran toward the burning cabin, still knee-deep in vines. Desperate, blood-slicked fingers raked at her ankle from under the leaves, but she shook them off. A terrified riderless horse raced past her, covered in creepers, trying to buck them off. The cool night air thickened with smoke and bits of black ash.

"What the—" A startled man looked up as she rounded the corner of the burning cabin. Mariah lay beneath him like a broken doll, her dress torn and bloodied, her face white as the rising moon.

"What's the matter, sweet stuff?" He stood, his bearded face shiny with sweat. "Can't wait your turn?"

The breath rasped in her lungs as the roses whispered through the grass after her. "Leave her alone!" Ella stopped, her eyes and throat stinging from the smoke. She felt like she was still trapped back in that dark root cellar, trying to get out. "She never did anything to you! None of us did!"

He sniffed. "Don't matter. That's the first rule you'd better learn in this world, girl—get them before they get you."

The roses pooled around her ankles, anxious, uncertain.

"Where did all them flowers come from?" He snatched a wooden-handled revolver out of his holster and leveled it at her.

Her heart hammered. "Don't you recognize them? You stampeded them, right before you burned my family's cabin."

His eyes narrowed and he cocked the trigger. "Bill, Horace, what in the hell are you doing over there!"

No one answered over the crackle of wind-whipped flames. He licked his lips.

"Ch-Charles?" Mariah's arm stirred limply in the dirt.

As his eyes flickered to Mariah, Ella darted across the open yard. He jumped, then shot at her. Liquid fire slid across her ribs and spun her sideways. Her legs melted and she fell across Mariah's body.

From the ground, she saw the roses follow her, a living tide of

dark-green leaves and tattered flowers that swarmed the man's boots and scrambled up his body, carving bloody tracks. He screamed, hoarse and terrible, then clawed at the relentless vines tightening around his throat. His hand convulsed, firing the gun again and again until it was empty. He tumbled backwards and disappeared beneath the angry creepers.

By the time the sun rose, swollen and red in the orange-pink sky, the cabin had burned to the ground. Ella had made Mariah comfortable in the barn, then retrieved Annie from her protected nest inside the roses. Fortunately, the child seemed no worse. The boy, Josh, was still unconscious, but moaned from time to time. Ella sat beside him and bathed his face with a scrap torn from her skirt and dipped in cool water from the horse trough.

Wheels clattered into the yard. "Mariah!" a voice called. "My God, Mariah, where are you?"

"Charles!" Mariah glanced up at Ella, then pulled to her feet and wavered outside. "Charles, we're in here!"

Ella followed her through the splintered barn door out into the red-dish early morning light, holding her left arm stiffly against her aching, bullet-grazed side.

A sandy-haired man leaped off a lop-eared bay gelding and threw his arms around Mariah. He buried his face in her tumbled hair.

The doctor, a tall, balding young man, stepped down from the buggy, holding his worn black bag. "Mariah, are you hurt?"

"I'm bruised and beat up and sore from end to end, but I'll live." Her eyes glistened with tears.

"Who—did this?" Charles rotated slowly, taking in the devastation. Then he stopped when he saw the rustling pink roses that covered the corral fence and trailed out into the grass and across his fields.

"We'd all be dead, if it wasn't for them, and for Ella." Mariah turned in his arms and looked back at the girl.

The doctor eyed Ella's blood-stained dress with professional concern. "Why don't you let me have a look at you, young lady?"

"I'm all right," she protested. "But you had better see after Annie and Josh."

Something rustled in the barn. "Ma!" a young voice cried. "Ma, I'm hungry! What's for breakfast?"

"Joshua!" Mariah picked up her skirts and ran back inside.

That afternoon, Doc Hamilton joined Ella as she sat on the corral fence and watched the roses drift lazily across the outlaws' unmarked graves. He braced one foot on a rail and leaned his angular body forward. "They're talking about roses back in town, you know."

"Oh?" Ella's fingers tightened on the rough-cut rails.

"This old wrangler came in, scratched up something terrible, saying rustlers had stampeded his flock, then a bunch of farmers stole what was left."

A sudden heat flared in Ella's cheeks. "Farmers?"

Doc nodded without looking at her. "At least ten, I'd guess, from his description. Sheriff Riggs sent a deputy out with him to look for his stock."

Panic built inside Ella's chest.

Hamilton stepped down. "They were supposed to be bright pink—real distinctive." He caught her arm as she jumped off the fence. "You don't really think I'd turn you in, do you?" His dark eyes sought hers. "Not after what you and these roses did here last night?"

"He—said it was time I became—" She couldn't meet his eyes. "—a woman. Then he whipped the roses because they wouldn't let him. He said he was going to burn them." She raised her chin. "They took up for me—I couldn't let him hurt them, and besides, he was terrible mean. They didn't want to go with him."

"I don't blame you." Hamilton released her. "But that doesn't solve the problem of what to do with all those roses. Rose-wrangling's slow and difficult work, especially without

dogs. That's why the price of roses is so high up north. Even if you ride, you'll never outrun him and the deputy. I would guess you've only got a few hours, half a day at the most, before his dogs trail you here, and then the law will be on his side."

Ella cursed herself for being so stupid; she should have left at the first light. "I have to go."

"You can't go," Mariah's quiet voice said behind her. "You're family now."

"You don't understand." Ella turned to her. "I have to take care of the roses."

Mariah glanced toward the house where a few of the sunning roses had crept up to the smoking remains of the front step. "They're so beautiful. It seems unfair that the only time we ever see them is when they're passing through."

Like far-off heat lightning, a faint idea flickered in the back of Ella's mind. "Mariah, how much would you pay for a rose?"

Mariah shook her head. "I can't waste cash money on flowers."

"But you could trade for them, things you already have on hand like flour or bacon or beans." Ella's mind raced. "I could take them west, trade them to settlers a few at a time. They'd be safe then, scattered out like that, and folks like us would be able to enjoy them."

"But how could they keep them?" Mariah sighed. "If they don't follow you when you leave, they'll still just wander off."

"That's no problem." Doc leaned back against the fence and laced his fingers across his worn belt. "How did you think folks up north keep them home anyhow?"

Doc patted the mound of the red dirt into place around the rose's root-feet, then stood up. "You'll have to water it every day for a while, and don't let Annie or Josh get too close until it's really settled down."

Ella stared down at the planted rose. "It seems almost sad to do this to it."

"It's what it was meant for—to grow in the sunlight and bloom and give pleasure to folks." Doc smiled. "My mother raised red roses back in Kansas City, big as your fist. I can still close my eyes and smell that sweet perfume drifting up through my bedroom window on a hot summer day."

"Ella, after you take the roses, Josh and I will drive the cattle up from the lower pasture across your trail." Charles Van Horn's tanned face crinkled. "I don't think you'll have to worry about anyone following you."

Josh led her father's pinto out with several loaded saddlebags buckled into place behind a battered old saddle. His young face was swollen and black with bruises. "Where will you go, Ella?" he asked solemnly.

"West." She gathered the reins and swung up into the patched saddle. "I'll stop at each cabin I find and see if I can trade them a vine or two until all my roses are settled."

"Ella, there's two, maybe three hundred roses out there. It's going to take a long time." Charles Van Horn handed up her father's rifle along with a box of cartridges. "You take care of yourself."

"And when you're done...." Mariah reached up and caught the girl's cold hand between her two callused ones. "Don't you forget to come back to us, Ella Hasty."

"That's right." The doctor nodded across the yard at her. "Some folks might like to see what you've made of yourself."

The feelings inside her were too big for words, so Ella just dug her heels into the gelding's sides and headed out toward the golden prairie and the waiting roses and her journey to the land of tomorrow. ■

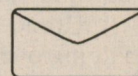
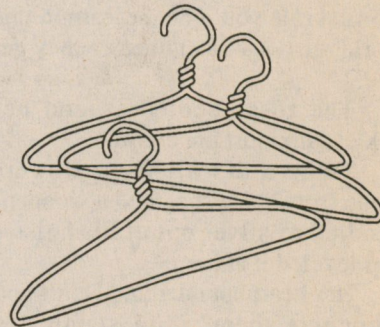


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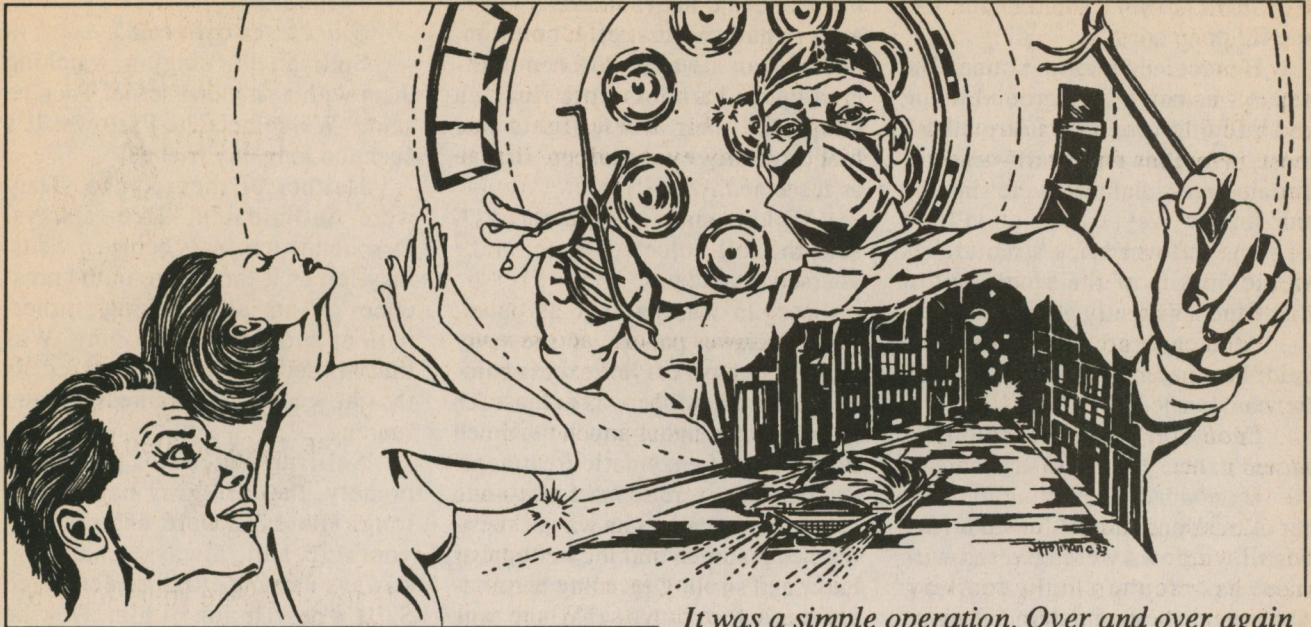
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It was a simple operation. Over and over again

TO KNOW EACH OTHER ALL THE BETTER

Robert Reed

Illustrated by Judith Holman

Everything seems—
—older, thought Alan.
Dirtier, Megan added.
Worn out... isn't it?

Neither spoke aloud. They rode with fists over their mouths, faces nervous and alert. It had been ten years since they'd last come into the old district, and the decline was obvious. Glass towers were coated with grime and left half-empty, most of the lower windows shattered and then covered with milky fiberboards or thick sheets of fluoroplastic. The gray streets were potholed by a succession of winters, abandoned cars and flitters outnumbering those capable of motion. Apparently the navigational beacons had failed, or per-

haps been stolen, because suddenly their flitter lost its way, coasting to a stop along the curb. Now someone would have to drive. Not looking at one another, they waited for speech or audible thoughts...and finally, with a small tense voice, Alan growled, "I will," and deployed the touch-stick. *Hang on.*

Megan glanced at her husband, for an instant.

They moved faster with him driving, the tiny motions of the hand translating into a delicate shimmy. Alan barely slowed as they passed through a large intersection. *It's the next block, isn't it?* Megan said, "I think so..." "We turn right?" *Now...!* Their flitter gave a low

moan, and they were pressed sideways. Suddenly they saw the flashing red lights of police flitters, plus the telltale glare of an energy dome set over the crime scene, every clue preserved. Alan kept his eyes forward, and he slowed down. Megan saw the uniformed officers standing around the dome, then the dead man inside it. A murder! Some woman sat in the back of a flitter. She was a witness or the prime suspect...and Megan couldn't help but turn her head forward, moaning, "Alan—?"

"Ignore it," he warned.

She said nothing, shifting her weight in the seat.

"It happened last night, probably—"

Small comfort, she thought, trying for poignancy.

He pretended not to notice. The street was narrowing around them, old buildings pressing in from both sides. Another right turn—he felt certain here—and they were slipping into an alleyway, ending up in front of some leftover brick structure set in the middle of the block, out of sight and apparently abandoned.

Alan activated their defense grid; Megan didn't step outside until he was finished.

Looks the same, she thought. *Doesn't it?*

He nodded, examining the clutter of trash and the red-brown bricks. Small windows were covered with bars, as was the single doorway. Over the door hung an eroded sign:

TERRENCE SULLIVAN
DOCTOR OF SPIRIT

As they approached, the door sprang open with an officious buzzing sound. There was a brief staircase, rubberized strips coming unglued and curling, then a second doorway. *New*, both of them realized. It was modern, a lightweight composite obstruction meant to slide into the wall. Only when the first door closed and sealed itself—a solid *thunk*—did the new door pull open. Side by side, they entered the waiting room, familiar and medical-smelling, the furniture and framed artwork enough out of fashion to seem exotic; and Megan, as was her custom, paused to wipe at the dust on the nearest tabletop, measuring the state of the place. *Not too bad—*

"Good to see you two!"

The nearby voice was oversized and friendly. And tall. It took them several moments to remember the loudspeaker above the receptionist's booth. The booth was empty, just like the last times. No staff for the good doctor. Everything automated, discreet. Alan remembered their first visit and the young woman who had greeted them. Smiling and pleasant, she'd been dressed like a nurse, probably to reassure nervous patients. Even now, Alan could picture her pretty face and the smile that

had made him buoyant. Pretty ladies always had had that effect on him, and Megan always had been bothered by his harmless little flirts... a couple of their worst fights had hinged on wayward glances, strange as it seemed....

"I'll be out in a few moments," said the tall voice. "Please, make yourselves at home."

Megan was pacing, as usual. Such a nervous person, yet she never seemed to burn off her excess calories. Alan knew she was at least ten pounds overweight—much too much in this age of enzymatic treatments and painless exercise machines—and her nervousness had its way of twisting her features, making her appear bitter and shrill. Degrading her middle-aged looks. Not that she was ugly, he thought... and he stopped himself, suddenly cautious. He had nearly engaged the telepathic system, which would have been a mess.

His wife paused and turned to him. Sensing something?

He offered a smile, then made himself approach her and wrap both arms around her shoulders, squeezing until he realized that she wasn't paying any attention to him. She was standing on her toes, looking across the room, and Alan turned in time to see a single foot that had appeared beside the empty booth. A bare foot, pink and long, tapping to some unheard song. Then the foot vanished, pulled back out of sight; and an instant later, Dr. Sullivan strode into the waiting room. A tall man, always exceptionally thin. A tremendous smile showed the yellowed teeth. His voice was solid, strong... he began to sing to them, Alan recognizing the tune. It was a pop hit some years ago, sung by a local duo—their one success—and the doctor was doing an imitation of them. It was eerie, startling... the gray-haired man making his old voice alternate between high and low notes, the result instantly recognizable.

Sally said, thought Megan.

I know.

That he's gotten somewhat... different.

Peculiar.

Quirky, she corrected.

Sullivan quit singing, watching them with a subdued smile. Then he said, "Welcome! The Farlows! It's been too long, my friends!"

Neither of them spoke. They were intimidated, like always. Despite the ten years between visits, they felt as if they were in the presence of an all-knowing father, patient and infinitely loving. Was that his secret? Alan wondered. Is that he keeps his business up and running...?

Sullivan's face was pleasantly homely, the thin gray hair grown long. His eyes were astonishing, youthful and always changing. Always moving. Alan remembered Sally's description of him. How he looked, how he acted. Quirky, yes. But solid. State-of-the-art equipment, like always. Once again, the good doctor's magic had enhanced Sally's marriage to Phil, and wasn't that the truest test of his worth?

Sullivan extended a long hand, and after a moment, he said, "The Farlows are such bittersweet people."

It was Megan who took the hand, shaking it with both of hers. She said, "Yes, we are. Bittersweet!"

Alan felt warmth spreading along his neck, a little angry to hear that easy confession. He'd thought that they were doing relatively well, thank you. When was the last time they'd actually fought—?

"A sadness mixed with your joy," said Sullivan. "And I blame myself, in part."

"Why?" asked Megan. "You—?"

"Because these are golden times," he assured them, "and with the gold comes a dilution of old wealth. You love each other, of course. But according to old scales of love. You see others, friends and strangers, who are enraptured with one another—"

"Enraptured," Megan repeated, impressed with the word.

Quiet.

"What was love enough," Sullivan told them, "is now inadequate."

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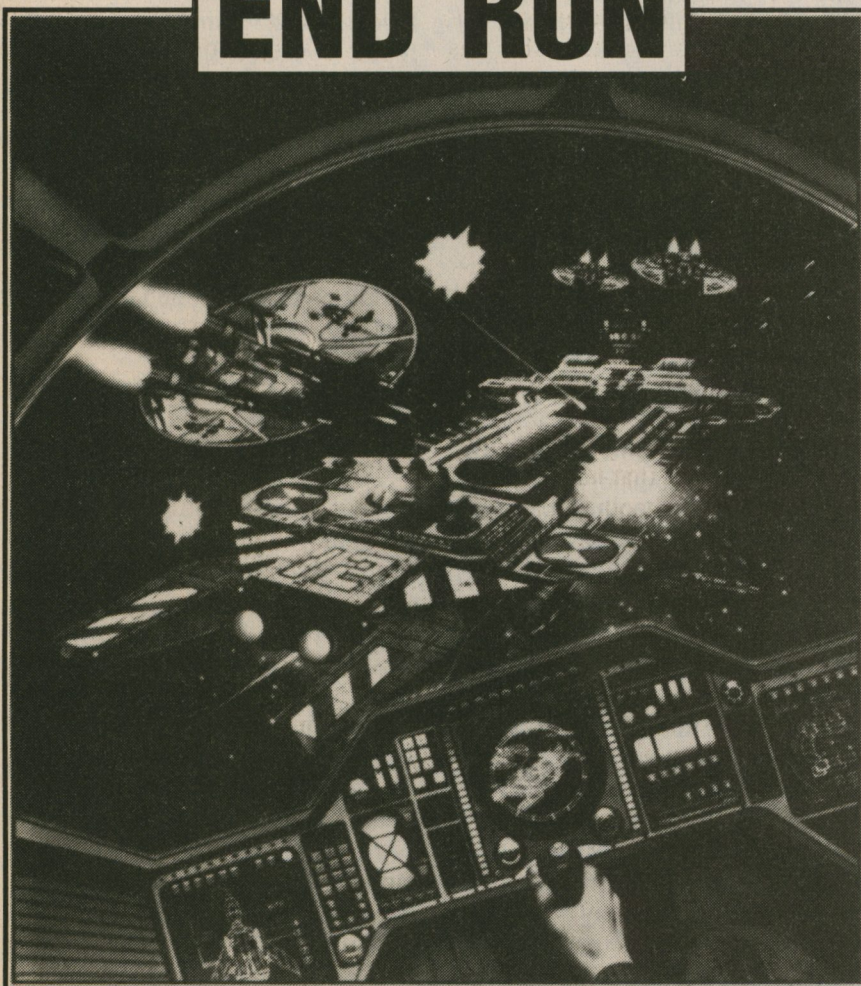
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You can expect more from each other, and you deserve more. Why? Because love and marriage are the cornerstones of our society, and that's why you're here. You've come back to see your doctor!"

Neither spoke, nor breathed.

"Let's move to my office and talk. Shall we?" The long hand beckoned to them. "Please, follow me."

Alan hesitated for a moment.

Are you coming?

Alan looked at the doctor's old suit and the bare feet, watching the long toes curling in the footworn carpeting.

Or am I the only one committed to this marriage?

Stop! he warned. *I'm just thinking...we should be careful...!*

You should be, yes!

That was someone else's voice. Not Megan's. Then Alan remembered that in this office, when he needed, the good doctor could eavesdrop on his clients' telepathy...and they turned toward Sullivan, the old man's face bright and watchful.

Always be careful, he told them. *But remember this. Careful in one place means risk somewhere else. Caution merely changes the risks we take.*

Believe your dear doctor with this...!

It was Phil, Sally's husband, who had first told Alan about the doctor. They were having their weekly golf torture. Alan had been married for three years, their first daughter just born and Megan's interest in sex on the wane. Maybe it was the baby. Maybe it was boredom. Or maybe her weight gain. He didn't know, he admitted to Phil; and his college buddy interrupted, asking, "Why me? Not that I don't want to help, but you're not the sort of person to talk about private stuff."

"Normally, no." Alan shrugged his shoulders. "But you and Sally...you're like teenagers. You embarrass us, the way you hug and kiss all the time—"

"We've had help," his friend admitted.

"Help?"

"Of a professional sort."

"What sort?"

That's when he learned of Terrence Sullivan. And after some extensive research, Alan had become convinced that the man was legitimate. Perhaps he lived on the gray fringe of his profession, but his credentials were in order. He'd never been arrested, nor suffered so much as a lawsuit. He was expensive, yes, but after enough prodding, Megan agreed to go downtown and meet the man. The pretty receptionist had greeted them, wearing the tight white nurse's uniform; a younger version of Sullivan had welcomed them into his spacious office, the glare of the fluorescent lights erasing shadows and somehow enlarging the constant earnest smile.

"What I offer," he had told them, "is an experimental procedure. You'll have to sign several releases, but I can assure you of the results."

"To help our sex," Megan had blurted.

Alan, embarrassed by the circumstances, had shifted his weight, saying nothing. Did she have to sound so brittle?

And the doctor had nodded, cool and professional. "Yes, exactly. A type of enhancement, if you will. What I can do is implant sophisticated chips into certain nerves—in the penis and clitoris, plus inside the pleasure centers in your minds—and your chips have tiny transmitters. Short-range, low-energy ones coded for one another. During coitus, you'll be able to feel each other's pleasures and act on them. Greater arousal, enhanced intimacy."

"With just each other," said Megan. "Right?"

"Naturally." A sober nod, then he had admitted, "I'm a conservative fellow, you see. And my goal here, first and foremost, is to help all of my patients find happiness."

There was no picture of a wife in his office; Sullivan resembled every man married to his career, not another person. His charm and confidence were what won them over. Indeed, Megan surprised her husband by pressing for the surgery. It

shocked him when she admitted that their sex life was boring. Predictable, and ritualistic. And while she described their mutual failures, Alan had taken his revenge, consciously fantasizing about the receptionist. What were her pleasures? How would she look naked? She'd appreciate his rituals, he told himself. More so than his overweight, undersexed wife, no doubt!

It was later, after the operations and their first bedroom marathon, that Alan asked himself: What kind of life does Sullivan lead? Laying beside his wife, dehydrated and nearly exhausted, he wondered if their dear doctor used the electronic trickery for himself. Maybe he and that receptionist...or maybe several different women, a full harem all sharing the same frequency...wouldn't that be wondrous...?

Sullivan seemed like a decent, conservative man. But who knew?

More and more, Alan was learning how people were complex and full of secrets. The older he became, the better he appreciated the baffling nature of everyone.

They had come back twice again, for two more enhancements.

Sex was never the problem. But how much sex is possible in a day? No, their problems were elsewhere. Both of their daughters were in school, and Megan was back at work full-time. More and more they found themselves uninvolved in each other's lives. "There's an emotional distance," Megan had reported, her words clinical. Certain. "He doesn't appreciate what I do—"

"I try," Alan had interjected.

"—and I try with him and his work. But it's so hard, and I mean for both of us."

Their doctor had nodded soberly. With gravity.

Alan had wondered about the vanished receptionist, just in passing. Then he'd mentioned Phil and Sally. "The Cambells? They're our best friends, and they told us that you've got a way of joining people—"

"Sharing eyes," said Megan.

There was a new method, yes. Sullivan explained how it had been developed for law enforcement. Known felons had chips implanted on their optic nerves, random images recorded and squirted off to some command center, recording crimes and alerting authorities. Unfortunately, he allowed, the courts had determined that the method was unconstitutional; it remained the duty of certain pioneers to adapt the technology, giving it new and useful applications.

He convinced them to accept the new implants—and to pay him a premium fee—and for a little while they had enjoyed themselves. Alan could eavesdrop on whatever Megan was seeing, and vice versa. The images were fuzzy, due to poor transmission, and typically bland—the insides of offices; the faces of coworkers—and some of the sights were actually disgusting. Alan never appreciated shutting his normal eye, initiating the trickery by pressing on his temple, then seeing his wife sitting on a toilet, dealing with some female issue. Thank you, no.

Those implants had been removed at the local clinic, autdocs doing the work and the overseeing surgeon giving them odd looks. Then their marriage had fallen back to its old routine, good sex with a certain distance otherwise. And then after a few months, the Cambells started to rave about Dr. Sullivan once again.

“No, no!” Sally had exclaimed. “He admits that the eye business was a failure. He would have removed the chips for free, if you’d asked for his help. But his latest advance... well, it’s better. A wonder!”

“Telepathy, sort of,” said Phil. Then he and Sally showed off their silence, staring at each other, grinning happily and breaking into laughter at the same instant.

“How’s it done?” asked Alan.

“Subvocalized speech. Implants. I don’t remember the details,” Phil had confessed. “It just works.”

Megan wanted to know how long they’d had it.

“Several months,” Sally had replied. A toss of her head, and she

told them, “It’s wonderful. Even when we’re miles apart, we can talk. In private. The system uses the existing cellular phone linkups—”

“Pragmatic,” interjected Alan.

Then Megan had turned to him. “We’ll make an appointment. Soon.”

It was a gimmick, he had thought. A continuous phone call, right down to the monthly bill. But Megan had grown to trust Sullivan, and she was jealous of everyone else’s happiness. Somewhere in the midst of their meeting, Alan’s careful skepticism had broken down. Maybe it was the man’s charm; maybe it was the cost. (Less than sharing eyes, at least.) Or maybe it was because of Sullivan’s little speech, him asking both of them:

“Why do you suppose I do this work? Do you wonder?”

Alan had been tempted to say, “For the money.”

And Sullivan had smiled, as if he could read the cynicism. “I do it,” he had promised, “because I have a mission. A deep, personal mission.” A pause for drama, then, “This world is complex and violent, more so every day, and wouldn’t it be lovely if we could bring everyone together? If we could somehow bridge every difference, uniting our souls...can you see what that would mean?!”

“Everyone?” Alan had muttered.

“But where to begin?” A distant look, then he had answered his own question. “In the holy union of marriage, naturally. With loving, caring people like yourselves. People committed to deep, inseparable relationships such as your own...”

It sounded so noble, coming from Sullivan. Maybe that’s why Alan had agreed, in the end, accepting phone-call telepathy and then making some very big mistakes in the first weeks. Both of them blundered. Thoughts became words, initiating some bad fights. But afterwards, yes, there was a new closeness, a richer sense of sharing. The only trouble was that practice had a way of cancelling their mistakes. They weren’t any more honest in silence than they were in speech; and now, after almost a decade, Megan

was falling back to her old pattern, deciding that it was time to do something, anything, to put their relationship back on its foundation....

Sometimes, lying awake in each other’s arms...sometimes both of them felt as if they were in sight of perfection, a seamless and everlasting marriage out on the proverbial horizon....

A deadly illusion, if ever there was....

“We were talking to the Cambells,” Megan reported. Now they were sitting in Sullivan’s office, side by side, and of course she took charge. “They told us that you’ve got a new technique. Something wondrous.”

“Tsk, tsk,” said the doctor. But he smiled while making those disapproving sounds. “My patients promise to keep my magic secret.”

“But it’s so obvious,” she responded. “Their happiness, I mean!”

“They claim to know each other perfectly,” Alan offered. “But no, they didn’t give out any details.” A lie.

“They have such *intimacy*,” said Megan, that word rich. Magical.

Sullivan gave a slow nod, eyes distant and smiling. Then he blinked, returning from wherever he had been, telling them, “Yes, I’ve been doing the surgery for several years. No significant complications.”

They nodded and said nothing.

And Sullivan explained what they already knew. He was implanting neural tissues. The human mind was holographic by design, and by grafting tissue into each other’s mind, there was a considerable improvement in their mutual understanding. A fingertip-sized piece of neural matter wouldn’t compromise anyone’s identity. This wasn’t a complete transplanting of the soul. But like Phil had told Alan, it felt as if he had an intuitive sense of his wife’s wishes and desires. And memories. He’d had the surgery six months ago, as had Sally, and every day he discovered new memories that weren’t his own, looking at their lives from this fresh perspective.

"Not that we're unhappy," said Megan, interrupting Alan's daydream and the doctor's thorough lecture. "But you understand. More is possible now. We can enhance our relationship, our love for each other. Frankly, we'd appreciate *anything* you can offer us."

There was a pause, too long to seem natural.

Alan found himself staring at the homely face, noticing little details that he'd missed in the waiting room. Details expanded by the bright lights; clues surfacing like the first bubbles in water ready to boil. He saw twitches and odd little motions around the man's mouth, smiles begun and aborted, his breathing a little too quick and never quite regular. And those big eyes moved back and forth, back and forth. He glanced at Sally, then Alan. Then off into the distance, at something nobody else could have seen.

Suddenly Sullivan made a low sound, almost a groan, and his face settled down. A single radiant smile emerged, and he told them, "Oh, I do want to help you. You are my family. I consider all of my patients to be my family, I feel that strongly about you!"

Megan made a soft flustered noise, saying nothing.

Alan merely said, "Thank you... and we're fond of you too..."

"Now here you are!" The doctor sat up straight. "Your children have grown up, and you're approaching your autumn years. Your best years, you hope. And don't you deserve the best?"

Megan said, "We do," and glanced at Alan.

He agreed, telling everyone, "We want the best, yes."

"Of course you do." Sullivan's face changed for a moment, again with that boiling-water sense of chaos. Then he said, "Yes, I might exchange little twists of neural tissue. It would be a help, I'm certain." A nod, a smile. "But perhaps I can offer you something more. Something not even your friends, the dear Cambells, have learned about yet. Something very very very new, and special."

Neither of them spoke, nor dared to move.

"It's a radical method invented for accident victims. Perhaps you've heard of it? A severely damaged person can be regenerated from a partial body, even one that seems hopelessly mangled. Even with severe brain damage, if you can picture it."

Alan recalled something... wasn't it just the other day? Regenerations; rejection-free transplants. Every victim left better than new...!

"It's expensive," Sullivan was admitting, "but not too expensive. Not if you want to make your marriage into something remarkable."

Megan gave a little moan, reached and squeezed Alan's hand.

"The truest marriage, body and soul." Sullivan's expression settled into something infinitely benign, even saintly. They could feel his love washing over them. Was that possible? Every word, every expression and gesture and wink of the eyes, encouraged them to toss away their skepticism; and the Farlows sat mute, spellbound, absorbing the impossibilities as swiftly as they came.

The doctor said, "I've done it seven times to date. Three of my participants"—the word having a particularly peculiar ring to it—are willing to cast aside their privacy, if you are serious. If you are, I can contact them and arrange meetings. Speak with them, then decide. Only then. Careful considerations first and last and always."

What are we talking about? asked Megan.

I'm not quite sure—

"A bonding," said Sullivan, hands lifting and fingers lacing together. "An ultimate bonding!"

Of course. Of course.

"Brains are fantastic machines," he continued. "Durable and amazingly sophisticated. Right now, at this instant, each of you feels *you*. Your identity, your specific personality. But if I mix your minds together, using the same tricks used in massive rehabilitation...using the finest autodocs available...then your

linked minds will meld in a matter of weeks. Will become one. Just ask my patients. After two or three months of modest therapy, there's not even a residual sense of strangeness—"

"We'll be one person," Alan gushed.

"How would we look?" asked Megan.

The old man gave a dreamy smile. "You wouldn't be Alan on the right, Megan on the left. If that's your concern, rest easy."

One concern in a stew of them.

"I'll blend you together. You'll share traits, and strengths. I can even steer your united self to some pre-planned end. For instance, I could make you into a mannish woman with Megan's pretty face. Or I could make you into a functional, self-stimulating hermaphrodite. We have endless possibilities, but please, consider all the aspects before you decide."

Alan sighed, astonished by this whole business.

It was Megan who responded first, in silence. *Wouldn't the Cambells die? And everyone else—?*

Our kids, said Alan. "How would they react?"

Megan gave him a long intense stare, then said, "We will become one another, darling. For always."

And Sullivan said, *The ultimate intimacy, yes.* In thought. Then aloud, he said, "My friends. My lovely, loving friends."

There was more talk, explanations and a brief tour of the elaborate facilities, the doctor's considerable wealth sunk into bright machines eager for work. They ended up in the waiting room, questions answered and nothing more to say for now. Alan excused himself. He went to the men's room just to stare at himself in the mirror. An aging man, he was. The last dose of youth nearly spent. He had no business regretting his wife's fading looks when he considered his own...and suddenly something obvious occurred to him at last, making him smile at himself for a long while.



Alan washed his hands in the sink, then he reemerged, hearing Megan's voice and then nothing. An abrupt silence, and she watched him entering the room, eyes wide and peculiar. "Are you ready, love?" Her voice broke at its edges, and he said: "Ready. Absolutely."

The doctor touched the inner door, making it slide open. "Just tell me that you'll consider the possibility," he told them. "Be fair and thorough, just as you always are."

They nodded like dutiful children.

"Good day, and have a pleasant drive, my friends."

But outside, after unlocking the flutter's doors, Alan said, "Oh, I forgot my wallet. In the bathroom, I guess."

"What?"

"Get in and wait," he told Megan. "I'll be right back."

Hurry.

The building opened as if expecting him. As if the doctor knew him that well. Alan went to the bathroom and found his wallet waiting on the sink, then he looked for Sullivan in his office. *Just a minute*, he told Megan. Where was the man? Not in the office, not in the waiting room. No, he was sitting in the receptionist's booth, his liquid face smiling at one of the bare walls. Lost.

"Sir?" Alan muttered.

The doctor turned to him and said, "Another question, perhaps?"

"Yes," he managed. "Just that...I was wondering about all those excess parts. What are they? Half of my brain, a kidney and a lung—?"

"What will I do with them?"

"I'm curious," he allowed.

Sullivan leaned back, the old chair squeaking. A shifting smile, then he asked, "What do you think I should do with them?"

And Alan said, "I love Megan. I do. I'd do almost anything for her, you've got to believe me."

"Oh, I do. Absolutely I do."

"I'm just wondering..." He thought of the receptionist. Where was she today? Had she married?

Had she kept her looks? "Half of me is fused with Megan," he said, "and that's okay. Maybe that's perfect. Maybe in fifty years, everyone will be married in that way."

"A lovely thought," Sullivan offered.

Then Alan repeated himself. "I would do *anything* for my wife."

"And she would do everything for you, my friend. I know that."

He couldn't speak, couldn't find his breath. What had Megan and Sullivan been discussing while he was in the men's room that first time? Could it have been—?

"Isn't it remarkable?" the doctor asked. "On the one hand, I give you the ultimate commitment. Yet on the other, using your precious spare parts, I can reconstitute you as a new individual. I bestow on you a freedom, an authentic rebirth!"

Which was what Alan had guessed. What he wanted, almost able to taste it now.

Alan, called his wife. *What's keeping you?*

One last issue. Full of a sudden resolve, he leaned over the booth's counter and brushed at the doctor's hair with one hand, lifting the long gray hairs and catching a glimpse of his scalp. Sullivan never moved, not even to blink. He seemed amused. And Alan asked, "Where did you get those scars? You've got dozens of them!"

"Hundreds," Sullivan corrected.

"You've been taking pieces of your patients, haven't you?" The Cambells. That pop-singing duo. And who else? "Of their brains, right? Isn't that it?"

"Little, little pieces, yes." A self-satisfied nod. "At first, as an experiment. A curiosity answered. But the cumulative effects...well, they are remarkable to behold...."

Alan?

Just a minute! he shouted.

"Sullivan...the man you met years ago...he lives, of course, but in a community of many, many, many...." The face slackened, the mouth wide open. A multitude of people were struggling to speak at once, Alan guessed. Each one eager

to explain this astonishing business. "We are a great marriage, my friend. Each person being a spice, and Sullivan—your dear good doctor—is the stew!"

Alan waited to be outraged, but instead he felt a kind of weary awe. And a curiosity of his own, wondering how it would feel to be one of those pieces. Then he asked, "What happened to your receptionist?" The words came out of their own volition. "I remember a girl—"

"Marigold."

Was that her name?

"A friend as well as my employee. And a loyal, loyal patient too!"

Which meant that she was in his head now. At least some potent little sliver of herself—

Alan! Megan called. I don't like being left out here!

Sullivan grinned and told him, "Go. Go to your wife. Then deliberate and decide and call us with your wisest answer."

Alan nodded, saying, "Okay."

And the old voice became softer, higher and distinctly more feminine. "It was good to see you again, sir. I do hope we can help you and your lovely wife again soon."

He turned and crossed the waiting room, through the doors and out onto the parking lot. He saw Megan sitting in the flutter, safe within its array of defensive machinery, yet gazing at him with such longing. Such need. He began to cry, thinking about everything at once, and nothing, his heart pounding and both hands wiping at the tears. Three miracles for the taking, with a single simple yes; and he realized that the only thing he couldn't decide was which of his new lives would be sweetest—

Hurry, please!

—and he was running towards her, taking great glorious long strides. ■



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LAZELLE FAMILY CHRISTMAS

Nina Kiriki Hoffman

Illustrated by Peggy Ranson

And to all a good night

Beryl's Tree

At my house, we talk our trees down for Christmas. The youngest who's gone through the transition sickness and has Earth skills does the tree talking, and this year, that was me. So, with Mama driving, I sat in the front seat of the van, where I hardly ever get to ride because my brothers, Flint and Jasper, and my sister Opal usually fight for it first (my sister Gypsum gave up scrambling for the front seat a while back). All alone, Mama and I drove up to the mountains above the Southern California town of Santa Tekla.

"I hate this," I said, clutching my pouch with my left hand and the door

handle with my right, as Mama negotiated the twists and turns of the narrow mountain road.

"You say that every year, Beryl."

"Why do we need to kill a tree?" We were rising above the fog line. In winter, the fog drifts in off the sea in the mornings, usually burning away in the afternoons. For my tree day, Mama and I started early, driving through the gray. Now when I looked up past the tree branches tangling above the road, I saw blue sky with drifts of gray across it, cloud constellations and galaxies that shifted as I watched.

"It's tradition," said Mama above the purring labor of the engine. "It reminds us of important things."

"I don't understand," I said. I had looked at trees for thirteen years, watched them die under the weight of Christmas, and I had never understood. "Maybe I can find a tree that's already dead."

"Beryl!"

"Then it won't mind so much."

"When you find the right tree, it will come of its own accord, because you persuade it."

"How can I persuade it when I don't believe in what I'm doing? Why couldn't Flint do the tree? He liked doing it the last two years."

"It's a tradition for the youngest capable one to do it, and traditions don't exist without a reason," said Mama, in her "that's final" voice. "I'm the youngest, and I'll stay the

youngest for years. Even if my oldest sister Opal married and had babies, I'd have to wait until her kids went through transition, which usually happens at thirteen. I hugged my pouch and frowned at my future as a tree killer.

A few more kinks in the road, and Mama pulled over into a wide space and said, "Here is the place for you to start." She gestured toward a narrow gap between shoulders of dusty, tree-clutched cliffs. I opened the door and dropped to the ground, slinging my pouch over my shoulder.

The air was chill, and quiet except for the purring of a little creek between the mountain flanks. I smelled something sharp and sweet and spicy, my favorite plant odor, though I didn't know what made it. Sycamores had dropped leaf stars on the road, and beyond their dusty mosaic trunks I saw live oaks. I knelt and said the little star prayer that asks for guidance, then rose, picked my way down to the creek bed, and hopped rocks away from the road. I listened for tree talk. Great-Uncle Tobias had taught me how. For a little while I was deaf to anything but the brief murmur of leaf on leaf above and around me, and then I heard whispers: "Sun sun sun WATER bug sun sun sun carbon dioxide!" "Wind bring me bits of other to join with self, make seeds big and fat." "Water, water, sun."

"Seek," I whispered, "I seek I seek." I whispered and sang it as I walked, and after about half an hour, they realized there was something new in the conversational atmosphere.

"Seek what?"

"Seek one who desires to die."

When that penetrated, they got louder, and talked faster. "Axe murderers!" "Fire hands!" "Teeth faces!"

They were so loud I felt scared they would fall on me. Great-Uncle Tobias told me trees had a stretchy sense of time. Usually people walked past so quickly the trees didn't notice them, unless the people did something obnoxious. I wanted to run back to the car, slip out of the conversation and beneath their notice,

forget all about the Christmas tree. But I remembered Mama saying that traditions existed for a reason. I waited, murmuring, "I seek one who desires to die, for tradition's sake."

Eventually they stopped speaking about things they'd suffered or heard of other trees suffering. I kept repeating myself. Tree voices dropped away, until I was standing, cold, in the forest, talking to myself.

I quieted. I waited. I wondered whether I should go back to the car and tell Mama there wasn't going to be a tree this Christmas. Then I noticed a small voice saying, "For tradition's sake?"

I walked toward it, and discovered the speaker was a small oak sapling.

"Speak to me," it said.

"If you come with me, I will cherish you. I will try to keep the life in you as long as it can be kept without soil. I and all my family will worship you, make offerings to you of things that look beautiful to us, and stare at you, each time reminding ourselves that you are a wonderful lifeform and you and your seedmates share the Earth with us and we love you. And you will die. And we will love you even as you die and lose your chance to scatter seed." I murmured the words over and over, and somewhere deep inside I wondered what Flint had said to his trees the two years he did this, before I went through transition. The first year he brought home a pine, a small one with two tops. The second year, a eucalyptus sapling. I said, "We will celebrate your death with fire, the great transformer, and keep the image of you in our memories forever."

At last the little tree said, "I will come. I give up my seeds to you."

I felt stabbed to the heart. What did any of the things I said mean to a little tree? Why should it care if humans remembered it, or decorated it? What did that have to do with the perpetuation of its seedline? I opened my pouch, already murmuring the ritual thanks to the Lady and to the Lord, to the Elements and to the Spirits, to the falling of the fates. I took

out my packet of tobacco and offered some to the tree and to the Earth that raised it. I got out my bottle of water and poured it at the base of the little tree, then dug with my hands and with my trowel to loosen the earth binding the roots. I was just going to add the unrooting powder that would let the roots become slippery and muscular enough so the tree could follow me back to the van when I stopped.

"Why?" I said. "Why do you say yes to me?"

"Trees have traditions. Every cold time, someone goes to live as humans, always the ones who are most curious. I grew knowing it might be me, thinking I might not mind choosing a death instead of waiting for an unknown one, realizing that at least my curiosity would be satisfied, and that this is a piece of the great Greenwork I can do."

"Thank you," I said, and loosed the unrooting powder, and the words to give the tree mobility. All the way back to the van, as I walked with one hand clasped to one of my tree's branches and the tree shuffled and rustled beside me, I pictured two peoples having traditional ceremonies that intersected at their heights, each achieving something mysterious, each not understanding what the other was accomplishing. Just before my tree and I climbed up to the road where the van waited, some other tree dropped an acorn on me. I put it in my pocket, and wondered: was this too a part of the ritual of the trees? What part did I play?

"A beautiful tree, Beryl," Mama said, opening the back door of the van. I helped the tree up into the van and bound wet earth around its roots and sat beside it all the way home, one hand around a branch, the other cupping the acorn, wondering who answered whose prayers.

Flint's Lights

I always thought, when I hit eighteen, bam, out of the house, away from the family, GOOD-BYE.

It's much harder than that, though. I'm going to be eighteen two

days after Christmas, and I'm having second thoughts. Now I understand why none of the others have left. Opal's the oldest, twenty-four already, and I never heard one movin'-on word come out of her mouth, before she turned eighteen or since. Jasper acts restless, but he doesn't leave, either; sometimes he goes off for a while, but he always comes back. And what could Gypsum do if she went out in the wide world, among the ungifted? Ungifted herself, but raised in the expectation of gifts. The world must look even scarier to her than it does to me, and my gifts are strong.

I always thought, gifts after transition. Stick around long enough to have Great-Uncle Tobias train me in them. Then go out and wreak havoc. Toe-to-toe with the wide world, and I planned to cheat, win, grin, and start over. But that's another broken dream. Used to be, when all my world was what could balance on a skateboard, my only dream was thrashing with the guys. I couldn't wait to gift so I could zoom up walls and across ceilings, maybe over water, maybe *underwater*! Crash, tinkle. Gifts don't work like that. All mine did was make me scared of everything, because when I address my gifts, I never know what they'll give me.

Mama told me I was in charge of the lights this year, since Beryl's doing the tree now. "Strike some sparks, Flint," she said, which was her idea of a joke.

I went upstairs to try making lights, in case it was a skill that needed practice. I didn't want to ask Great-Uncle Tobias about it because he always tells me more than I want to know about things. Jasper wasn't home, and even if he had been, he might have been in a mean mood. He might withhold information just to spite me. Opal was concentrating on her own Christmas project, a special ornament, and she was sneery anyway. So I went to my room, turned on the goosenecked lamp by my bed, and sat on the rug between piles of dirty laundry, pieces of driftwood I'd been studying for the shapes inside,

and pieces of driftwood I'd carved to let the shapes out. I stared at my hands in my lap.

Lights. We needed lights to put on the tree, and last year Jasper summoned up enough lights to festoon my tree, and dot the front of the house, making it look like a fairy palace after nightfall. He'd even placed lights on the ceiling of the living room. Was Mama expecting me to do all that? Jasper was always better at everything than I was, which was why I got interested in things I knew he wouldn't like, like wood-carving.

How the hell did you make a light?

I thought about Jasper's gifts. He seemed so much more in control of his than I was of mine. If he wanted to turn Gypsum green or make it rain on me, he did it, no hesitations, no problems. He probably just said "Lights, appear," and his gifts obliged. No, he probably said something that rhymed. He was good at that stuff, what Great-Uncle Tobias called a power lubricant, something that made the interaction with gifts work better and easier.

I held my hands up. "Lights, appear before me here," I said, and felt the stirring under my skin that meant something gifted was happening. Then a small purple rip shimmered in the air in front of me. It widened into a floating curtain about a foot high and two feet wide, strings of purple and lavender beads made of light that shifted as if a wind were blowing them. It was beautiful and strange. The rustling in my hands went on, and tiredness stole over me. Great-Uncle Tobias said my main problem was learning when to stop supplying power and let what I had reached for exist by itself. I closed my hands into fists, cutting off the flow of power. The lights shivered and slipped away, a bead string at a time.

"This won't work," I said as the last strand of lightpearls winked out. Why wasn't the curtain there enough to stay, when I had put so much power into it? Jasper hadn't played battery for his lights last year. He just set them up and left them.



I went down to the kitchen. It smelled like warmth and butter and fresh cookies. Gypsum was there, dropping spoonfuls of batter on cookie sheets, looking wild and fuzzy and contented. She had dough in her hair, a streak of chocolate across her nose, and a dusting of flour on her shirt. I grabbed a cookie off a cooling rack and bit into it, then said, "How do you make light?"

She shoved one tray in the oven and pulled another one out. "It's an emission in the electromagnetic spectrum somewhere between heat and X-rays," she said. "I can't remember if everything makes it or if reflections count. I mean," she held up her hand, staring at the outstretched fingers, "if the light is coming from the fixture on the ceiling, and it hits me, am I emitting photons or does the light bounce off—no, I'm all mixed up. Anyway, you could try getting something hot and heat it up into the visible spectrum, or you could do what I do—turn on a light."

I finished my cookie (chocolate chip, still warm and chewy) and held out my hands. "Tree lights, free lights," I said, and suddenly there was a swarm of little green lights above me. I closed my hands right away to stop the power flow. These lights didn't disappear. They started out in a globular cluster, then peeled off, darting everywhere. Some flew into the living room, some headed for the dining room, three flew into Gyp's bowl of cookie dough, and one landed on her forehead.

"Hey!" she yelled, reaching up to touch it.

"Is it hot?" I asked, going to her.

"No. Is it still there?"

"Yes." It looked like a glowing green penny, pressed into her skin just above her nose.

"I can't even feel it."

"It looks funny."

"Thanks a lot! Free lights! What kind of powers do they have?"

"I don't know," I said.

"How long are they going to last? How do I get it off?"

"It looks kind of neat, actually," I said.

She frowned at me and looked at the lights in the cookie dough. At first I thought they were just perching on the mountain of tan-and-chocolate-chip dough, but then I noticed —

"They're *eating* it," said Gypsum. The three lights in the dough were sinking into pits of their own creation. She lifted a wooden spoon. "Shoo!" she said, swatting at them. They giggled and tunneled deeper into the dough. "Damn!" she said. "This is no way to make light," she told me.

"But it worked. Better than the last thing I tried."

"Get specific," she said, leaning her elbows on the counter and staring at me. The light on her forehead looked like a third eye, greener than her other two, staring harder. "Map out exactly what you want, then put it into rhyme on paper, *then* try it out loud, okay?" Like the rest of us, she had sat through a lot of lessons with Great-Uncle Tobias. Nobody knew ahead of time who would gift and who wouldn't. She remembered her lessons better than I did.

"That's too worky," I said.

"A little work won't hurt you. It doesn't hurt me."

"Sure it does," I said, grabbing three more cookies and heading for the door. "You should see your face." Conjured cookies never tasted as good as ones somebody actually made from scratch.

In my room, three cookies later, I sat on the bed. I held up my hands. "Uh—lights on house, lights on tree, lights on ceiling, lights on—" I had been about to say me, but that would never do. Tomorrow was a school day, and effects I had conjured before sometimes lasted two weeks.

Despite my breaking off the rhyme before the end, I felt a prickling that started under the skin of my palms and spread up my arms, washing over my shoulders and down my chest and back. Oh, no. A major effect. At this point there was nothing I could do but wait and see what my gifts brought me, and try to pretend I had done it on purpose.

Heat flushed along my skin. I felt the power rising, flowing out of

me, felt it take the form of needles that rushed everywhere, poking holes in things, tiny punctures that let light through from some other place. A moment, and my ceiling was speckled with constellations; through my connection with my power, I knew that all the ceilings in the house were, and the front of the house was, and off on some road, needles dived into the open window of the van and poked light holes through the air around Beryl's tree.

I tensed my muscles to cut off the power flow, and waited a moment, exhaustion pressing down on me like a lead blanket. Yes, I had managed to stop the flow. And yes. There were still lights on the ceiling. After that, I fell asleep.

I woke up some time later, and there was no light on the ceiling. Great-Uncle Tobias was sitting in a chair by my bed, watching my face. His thick white hair looked more peaky than usual, and his eyes looked tired, and they danced.

"What you did, Flint," he said.

"Yes?"

"It was fascinating. And very dangerous. It took your mother and Hermetta and me to undo it."

I sighed. "What was wrong with it?"

"Well, the place the light was coming from is closer to a source than we like to be. More than light was coming through. Hard radiation, too. Not good for people and other living things."

"I'm sorry, Uncle."

"Well," he said, and patted my knee. "You'll do it differently next time, won't you?"

"Yes."

He left.

I sat up, still tired in my bones, like I'd been skateboarding down the biggest hill ever, tense the whole way because I needed to pick a direction at the bottom, which was coming faster and faster, and I couldn't see far enough ahead. "Light," I said, staring at my hands. "Light."

I got up and went to my desk, opened the top right-hand drawer, and fished my cash stash out from behind a stack of graph paper, old

math assignments, and some chewed pencils. I sat on the floor and counted it. Twenty-four dollars, sixty-three cents. It ought to be enough to buy some normal Christmas lights.

Maybe next year I'll get it right.

Gypsum's Cookies

Nobody can do anything without ingredients. That's what I tell myself, because in one sense it's true, and so it makes what I do as important as what the rest of my family does, even if what I do is less impressive. So what if one of their main ingredients is magic? So what if that's still a secret ingredient to me? So, I can still bake a good batch of cookies, and none of my siblings bothers to read recipes and learn methods, so that's beyond them. So there.

Before I came up with the Gypsum Theory of Ingredients, the kitchen in our house was just a big place I went several times a day in hopes that somebody had powered up some raw stuff into something edible, which they usually had. Everybody in the household was supposed to do some work, and I usually chose dishes, because I knew how to do dishes; my brothers and sisters and I had learned how in the years before they went through transition sickness. Grown-ups did all the cooking back then.

I woke up one morning when I was about twenty-one and thought about that. In the novels I'd been reading, I'd noticed that normal people cooked their own food instead of waiting for somebody with magic to do it for them, and it occurred to me that I wasn't just ungifted and incompetent and pitiful. I was *normal*. So why not try doing things like cooking? So it took longer, who cared? If it didn't work, that would be what everybody expected of me, and if it did work, I could surprise them all.

Now the kitchen is the heart of the house for me. I write things on the shopping list. I know what the more obscure tools are for. I've left my fingerprints here: I've scored the breadboard while chopping vegeta-

bles, and I melted a hole in the plastic spoondrip once when I left it too near the burner. A lot of what I've learned strikes my relatives as arcane and beyond them, so one of the secret things I cook up in the kitchen is my own smile.

This is the second year I tackled the Christmas cookies. This year I actually bought a book of cookie recipes, and I tried things that didn't even seem like they'd taste good. I didn't have to eat them. I just wanted to make mountains of cookies that would sit around the house testifying to my worthiness, and if I made cookies nobody wanted to eat, that meant my monuments would last longer.

Everybody wanted Tollhouse chocolate chip cookies, though, so first I made millions of those. Then I started frenzying my way through a bunch of recipes with foreign names like *Berlinerkränzer*, *Krumkake*, *Pfeffernusse*, and *Sandkager*. It was weird how big a difference the way you treat butter, sugar, flour, and eggs made. I loved that.

It was like a spell, the ingredients the magic, the expression a result of how I shaped them.

I was rolling pieces of *Berlinerkränzer* dough to form wreaths when Jasper came in from outside, taking off his gold motorcycle helmet and running a hand through his light hair.

"You have something green on your forehead," he said.

"One of Flint's lights. He decorated me by mistake—I think."

Jasper picked up a piece of dough and bit it. "Yum," he said. Then he frowned. "Orange?"

"Orange rind. I think baking will make it taste better."

"It's pretty good now, just weird."

I watched him sample the dough again and thought, I wish we were children. Jasper and I were close before he went through transition. We got into so much trouble together. Mama seriously considered sending one of us off to live with cousins, but Daddy talked her out of it. I worked the dough again, rolling it into pen-

cil-thin lengths, then joining the ends. Jasper watched me load a baking sheet with cookies. I brushed their tops with meringue and added green and red candied fruit accents, then put the cookies in the oven, and he still stood there, a slight frown drawing a line between his brows, his hazel eyes shadowed.

"What?" I said as I went to the fridge for more dough.

"This stuff you're doing is so picky. You've already made the dough. I could spell it into those little rings in half a minute."

"Don't you dare," I said, then clapped a hand over my mouth. I hadn't said 'no' to Jasper in a long time. It wasn't safe.

But he didn't look mad. "Why not?"

"Because, this is what I'm doing for our celebration," I said. "You do your part, and I'll do mine." It had been years since my heart was in the prayers we offered up on Christmas, because I thought the gods we honored had abandoned me; I was tired of petitioning them to take me back. I was normal, and I would make do with a normal lack of faith. Still, I said the prayers. And now, I discovered, I wanted to make my offering, too, whether there were gods to receive it or not. The people were here. They would receive. "This is a part of the job I like," I said.

"Cutting little leaves out of green fake fruit?"

"It's citron."

"Whatever it is, it's taking you longer to make these things than it will take us to eat them. They'll disappear, Gyp."

"That's the way cooking always works."

"I could snap them out, and you could have the rest of the afternoon off, do something more important or interesting."

"I want to be right here, doing this right now."

His frown deepened. I was afraid I had gone too far. Suppose he spelled me into living in the kitchen, baking endlessly until he was tired of the joke? Suppose he ignored me and snapped my cookies done anyway?

Jasper's Carol

Jasper could outspell everybody in the house except Mama, and she almost never interfered; "let them fight it out" was the LaZelle philosophy of child-rearing.

When Jasper didn't say anything, I leaned across the table and took one of my finished wreaths from the cooling rack. I held it out. He reached for it, his gaze still on my face.

"This is my spell," I said. I dropped the cookie in his hand, and the little wreath broke.

For an unbearable moment, we stared into each other's eyes. At last Jasper blinked, then turned away. "Thanks," he muttered. He stalked out of the kitchen, the broken cookie in one hand, his helmet in the other.

I pinched a ball off the chilled dough and tried to roll it into a snake. My fingers trembled too much. I got out the kitchen stool and sat down, staring at the floured surface of the butcher-block table, the leftover morsels of dough, the big ball, the little bit I had tried to work. Was I lying to myself? Was this work silly? Worthless? A waste of time?

"I smell something burning."

I turned. Helmetless, Jasper stood just inside the kitchen door, his face haunted. I jumped up and looked into the oven. "Damn," I said, and pulled out the sheet of burnt-bottomed cookies. I turned the sheet over the trash can and shook it till all the cookies fell into the trash.

"All that work," said Jasper.

"Yes, well," I said.

"Can I—"

I wiped the burnt bits off the non-stick cookie sheet with a paper towel. When Jasper didn't go on, I glanced at him.

"Can I try it?"

So many things to say jumped into my mind, but I let one after the other pass unsaid. I brought the cookie sheet to the table and reached for my abandoned dough, then glanced over my shoulder at Jasper. After a moment, he came to join me. I gave him a piece of dough. "You roll it out, like this," I said, and thought, thanks.

I find it hard to be thankful for something I'm still suspicious of. Thanks for the cake (are you sure it isn't poisoned?). Thanks for the toy (I think it's broken).

Thanks for my powers. (How come they work this way? How come Gyp's don't work at all?) They work really well. (When are you going to make me pay for them? If I use them wrong, will you take them away?) Merry Christmas.

Mama told me I was to write the carol this year, an expression of praise and thanksgiving for a whole year given us by the powers, Elements and Spirits, Lord and Lady, the Source, and of course, I should toss in a verse about hope and thanks for the year to come. I said I'd rather do any other Christmas chore than this.

She said everything else was too easy for me now.

But what if the carol wasn't good enough?

"It will be," she said, and smiled her "or else" smile.

I noodled on the piano and brooded about this year, wondering what had been good about it, and how I could express that in music. Art wasn't like magic; I couldn't just say, okay, gifts, here's some notes, give me back a meaningful song that'll make everybody cry and feel good at the same time. I might be able to work backwards, though; start with the feelings, and say, please supply the notes to make these feelings happen. Of course, I'd need to be having the feelings first. Not very likely.

What did we have to be thankful for? Gyp got a job tutoring English at the community college. I had a new girlfriend. Flint managed to stay alive, in spite of everything. Beryl retained most of her innocence. Opal was prettier than ever. Mama and Dad still loved each other, and Great-Uncle Tobias hadn't moved out. Those were all things we could probably agree to be thankful about. So how come I felt mad instead?

I played the chords for anger, stomping doom chords, to get that

out of my system. I thought about the Christmas carols I heard at the mall or on the radio, and tried making up something bright and gladdened, prancy and bouncy. That was easy, and incredibly unsatisfying. I started fitting words into the catchy melody I had come up with, and when I found myself rhyming "Presence" with "presents," I slammed the lid down over the keyboard and stomped out of the living room. I had figured out where the anger came from. Mama wanted me to feel something I didn't feel, thanks / glad / appreciate / love / return / blessing. Of all the sins I had committed, one I'd stayed away from was forcing anybody to feel something they weren't feeling. I'd avoided that one without realizing it, and now I was trying to violate my own somewhat elastic code of ethics.

I paced through the front hall, then through the dining room, the kitchen, the back hall, the study and the living room again. I nearly tripped over the cord to Flint's lights as I stalked past the tree. The tree rustled at me, and I glanced at it, annoyed. It was a scruffy little oak tree, wearing Flint's white electric lights if they were a pearl necklace. After a minute, I went over and collapsed on the couch, amid puffy squashed pillows that belched dust. I stared at the tree. "Look at me," it said, "look at me!"

"I'm looking," I said.

"I see you," it said, its voice faint but joyous, and I thought about my trees. I had collected seven before Flint figured out how to tree-speak, and each year I'd been glad to go, because something happened in the course of finding a tree that made me feel like no matter what I was like, or who I was, I was doing something right. Trees didn't care that I'd hurt my sisters or terrorized my little brother. Trees didn't care that I was spiteful and mean at school. Trees just wanted to acknowledge that I was a human and they were trees and here we were, on the planet together, and it was nice to think about that at least once a year.

"You are beautiful," I told Beryl's tree.

"You are beautiful," it told me.

We stared at each other for a long time, and then I went to the piano and played what that felt like. It was a song with no words, and it wasn't really about gratitude or anything like that. It just said we're here together and I'm glad. I worked it over until it felt just right, then talked to the piano. It accepted the song. It liked it. It went on playing after I stood up, and I wandered out to the hall with my carol going on behind me. The house felt different. I ran upstairs and lay on my bed and fell asleep to the muffled sound of the carol seeping into the walls.

Opal's Ornament

I held them all when they were babies, even Jasper. I remember when he was an infant and I was two-and-a-half, I sat on the big couch and Mama put Jasper into my lap. I hugged him so hard he squeaked. Mama taught me to be gentler with my love. I adored them all, before they could talk.

Something happens when babies start talking. I'm not sure what, but you just feel differently about them.

I was thinking about my ornament. I'm sure Mama just gave me this assignment because she couldn't think of something more useful for me to do. My gifts aren't up to anything major; she's already tested me on lights and Spirit invocation and fire, and I flunked them all. I'm not musical like Jasper, and even if it was all right for the eldest to tree talk, I never succeeded at that, either. So for the past six years I've made an ornament for the tree.

Last year, all I thought about was how to make my ornament more beautiful than the ones I'd made before; that's been my focus since I started. Beauty is something I understand. This year, though, I was thinking about babies instead of silver lace snowflakes inside iridescent bubbles, or mirror-bright stars with faint images of flowers etched into their surfaces.

Babies, and traditions. If the heart of the Christmas tradition was

love and thanks for the family being together, maybe I should try to illustrate that somehow. I thought about loving my family, and somehow it got all tangled up with babies—nontalking babies. I took some woodchips I'd stolen from the woodpile, and cupped them in my hands, and thought, gift me with the beloved image of Jasper, please, and there in my hands was a tiny baby with hazel eyes, wearing nothing but diapers.

The same thing happened when I asked for the beloved images of Gypsum, Flint, and Beryl.

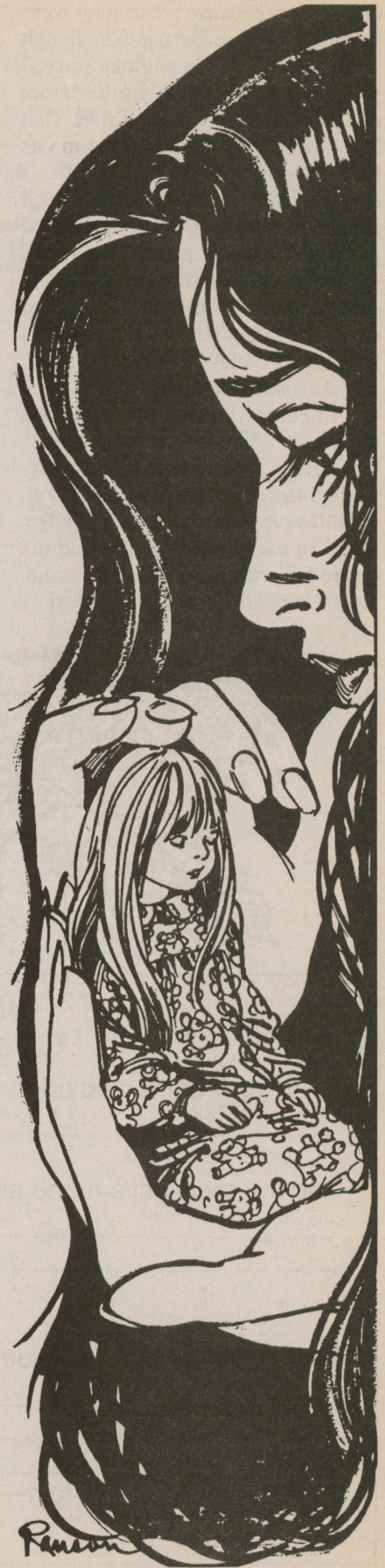
I set the babies on the pink bedspread and studied them, and felt my heart melting. They looked wide-eyed, curious, wistful. Jasper reached up a chubby hand. Gypsum had her hands clasped over her belly. Flint was curled on his side, leaning on his fist. Beryl's hands lay open at her sides. I loved them all.

I took some more woodchips and asked for the beloved image of Opal, please. For a moment a tiny haze clouded my hands; when it cleared, I found the figure of a little blonde girl with wide violet eyes. She was sitting back on her heels, her hands flat on her thighs, and looking down. She wore a flannel nightgown with teddy bears patterned on it. She looked about four. I felt like crying and didn't know why.

I set her among the others.

I took a stick and asked for the image of the beloved Daddy. He looked just like he always does, shy, smiling, his hair a little mussed. The image of the beloved Mama made her look different: she wore a smile I couldn't ever remember seeing on her face, so that she looked soft and pleased. The image of the beloved Tobias came out just like him, tense and relaxed at the same time, his smile broad.

I thanked my gifts for their help. I set everybody on the bedspread and spent time arranging them, seeing who they'd be next to, logically. Mama and Daddy together, of course, standing to the rear, looking down at the children. After a hesitation, I put Gypsum and Jasper next to



each other, because when they were babies, they were inseparable, though since transition it's another story. I put Beryl on Gypsum's other side, and Flint on Jasper's other side. That left Great-Uncle Tobias and me as loose pieces. We didn't fit together. I knew Great-Uncle Tobias loved Jasper and Gypsum the best. I asked my gifts to change him from a standing to a sitting position, and my gifts obliged. I set Tobias at Jasper and Gypsum's heads, just in front of Mama and Daddy.

And was left with me.

I held my image in my hand and cried.

After a while I rearranged everybody into a chronological spiral, Great-Uncle Tobias at the outer edge, Beryl in the middle. It satisfied my desire for order, but it looked stupid. I put everybody back the way they

had been the first time, and then put me, kneeling at the babies' feet, facing toward Great-Uncle Tobias and my parents. That, at last, felt right. I was a little outside, a little beyond, looking back at them. They were absorbed in each other.

I gripped a stick of wood and asked my gift for a solid cloud big enough to hold my little beloveds, and a cloud formed in my hands, puffy and pearl-gray and strong enough to support a whole family. I set everybody on it the way I had planned. I hung it in the air and stared at it for a long time. Maybe everybody would laugh at it. They had all said they liked my earlier ornaments, but maybe that was the Christmas talking and not them. Maybe Jasper would hate being a baby. I listened to all these thoughts, and wondered if there was something better I could

make, and decided there wasn't.

I took my ornament downstairs to the living room, where Beryl's tree stood, garlanded with Flint's lights. The music of Jasper's carol was playing, coming from everywhere, not from the stereo. A big plate of Gypsum's cookies sat on the piano. Daddy was alone in the room with all these things; he was sitting in his armchair, just looking. I walked over to him and held out my ornament. He accepted it. He studied it slowly, the way he looks at everything, turning it this way and that, looking at it from below and above, and at last he looked up at me with bright eyes and said, "Oh, Opal." He put my ornament on a side table and got up and then he hugged me so hard I almost squeaked. Then I knew everything would be all right, no matter what everybody else said. ■



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WRITING, PART SIX

Algis Budrys

Certain things to keep in mind

Now that you know how to write—that is, now that you've read the previous five installments of this series—there are nevertheless certain habits you would do well to learn, and certain things you would do well to keep in mind.

Try very hard to establish a particular place where you are going to write. Set up your computer, typewriter, or legal pad and pencil in a particular place, with whatever you need to facilitate the act of writing; a lamp, supplies, a chair—unless you will be more comfortable standing—and allow no one to violate that space. No one—not your spouse, not your mother, not your helpful friend. Clean or don't clean the space, as you prefer, but allow no one else to touch it, ever. Be absolutely certain in your mind that whenever you leave the space for any reason, it will be exactly the same when you return.

Then, pick a time during which you will write. Pick an hour.

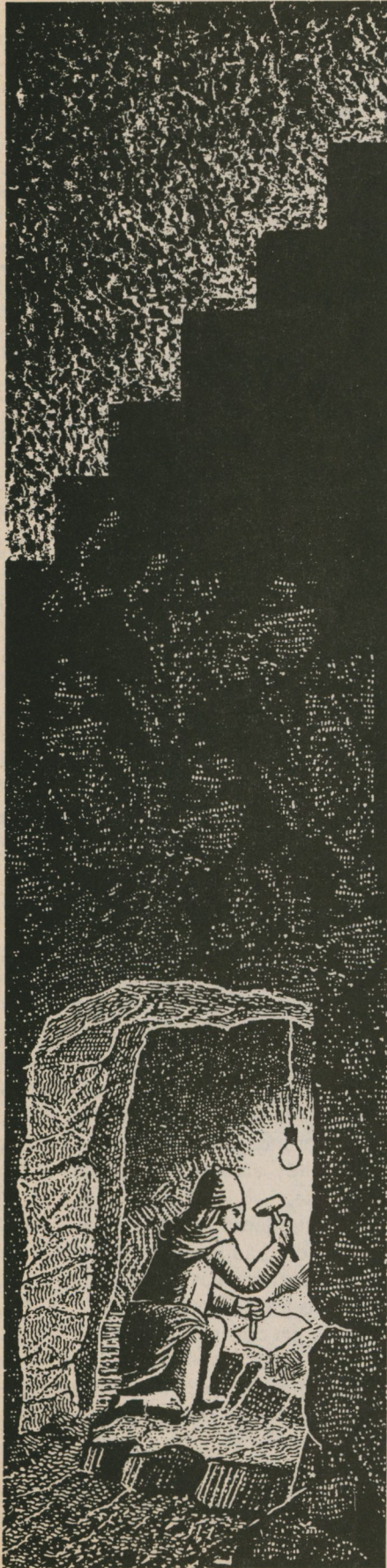
Pick the same time every day. And allow nothing to disturb you. Nothing. You are *working*, just as if you had gone to the salt mine, and the heavens may fall around you, but you are working. It may take a while to make this perfectly clear to the spouse, the young ones, and the kitten. But you really have no choice. Either you are a writer or you are something else. You will find that

even the most agreeable spouse, darling child and cute kitten will persist in their efforts to interrupt you. (Jesus, Honey, I only want a *minute* of your time!) Be strong; others *can* solve the problem, or there are few problems that actually can't wait a little while. You may have trouble believing that yourself, at first. Be strong. After a few days, things will shake into their new routine, and suddenly it will be as if it had always been. (Shh! She's *working!*)

I said an hour. One hour out of the day. Pick the hour that's most comfortable for you; experiment until you've found it. And sit at the keyboard, or stand at the legal pad, or whatever, with the full intention of writing something, whether you have anything in mind or not. And stay there for the full hour, with no other intention.

The late James Blish did that. He was basically a medical PR man, and he worked very hard and well at it for many years, for the top accounts, at Hill & Knowlton and similar shops. You can get no higher in the profession. But every night when he got home, he sat in front of his typewriter for an hour.

He didn't have to touch the keyboard if he didn't want to. He just had to sit. And some nights, I suppose, that was all he was up to, though truth to tell I doubt it. The



fingers begin to flex, the hands rest on the keys, there's a sheet of paper in the machine, and the next thing you know....

Try it sometime. Sit for an hour at a keyboard, and try to keep from writing. Jim turned out innumerable novels, novelettes and short stories, over a period of many years, in science fiction, fantasy, and many other fields. He built, as a matter of fact, a career anyone might envy—and except for the last few years, he did it in his spare time.

I said an hour. In an hour, the average proficient person can type one thousand words. But let's say it's a hundred words. That's 36,000 words a year. That's half a novel. Ten short stories. But let's say it's five hundred words. Let's say after the hour's done, you're on such a roll that you don't stop.

Don't kid yourself. With rewrites and stuff like that, you won't turn out two and a half novels a year unless you're part of a very elect crew. It can certainly be done. A lot more than that can be done, as a matter of fact. But the bottom line is that if you sit at the keyboard for an hour a day, every day, without regard to the number of words you did yesterday, or the number you are sure you will do tomorrow; if you train yourself to do that—and it's not as hard as you might think; try it for a week—you will have a very nice accumulation of manuscript in a very short time.

As I said, lots of things will conspire against you, including things you do not anticipate. There will be times when you just can't get it done—although Frederik Pohl and many others define their workspace as anywhere they happen to be, and simply take a laptop computer along. (Fred works on the basis of a thousand words a day, rather than an hour, but the principle is exactly the same.) There will be times, especially in the beginning, when you will be tempted to tear up what you did the day before. And you will find, I think, that you will amaze yourself with your ingenuity at creating excellent reasons why you can't do it today but will surely make up for it

tomorrow. You will rail at the spouse and the kids for *not* respecting your space and time, when in fact they can plainly see that you don't respect them either. But if you persist, long enough to get through an initial period of systematic experimentation and adjustment, you will produce, steadily, an amazingly large pile of manuscript.

Will it be any good? Of course it's going to be good, if you followed what I said in the previous five parts of this series. Or at least it's definitely going to be better than four out of five unsolicited manuscripts that go out in the mail every day, guaranteed. And sooner, rather than later, you will be practiced up enough to get notes of rejection, rather than printed rejection slips, and sooner, rather than later, you will make a sale, and after that, the sky's the limit. But you have to get it in the mail to begin with.

The chief obstacle to getting it in the mail is your conviction that it's not good enough. And the chief obstacle to getting it in the mail first to the highest paying market, and second to the second-highest paying market, and so forth, is your conviction that it's not good enough; if you're going to mail it at all, you'll pick some mediocre market because it stands a better chance there.

Well, as the late John W. Campbell said in relation to his magazine, *Astounding*, "How dare you edit for me!" And there's a lot of truth in that. Most writers have an inexact idea of how good their stuff is. It does not cost that much to have an editor give you his opinion.

There are all sorts of editors, with varying capacities to discern what you intended. But they are always editors—that is, persons who buy or reject. Theirs is the *only* opinion that counts. Not your mother's, or your good friend's, or another writer's. Do not bother or embarrass those people. Send your story to an editor, who is paid to read it and render a meaningful opinion.

And if you don't like the opinion, remember that it's just one per-

son's opinion. Send it to the next market down the list. Robert Heinlein said it best: Keep sending it out, and don't rewrite unless an editor asks you to (with a definite promise of money if you do the rewrite to the editor's satisfaction). Meanwhile, write more stores. And send *them* out.

The secret of success in a writer's life is really a firm grasp of the fact that it is a solitary profession; no one else can help you significantly once the basics have been passed on to you. Most of the time, outsiders, no matter how well-intentioned or how earnestly solicited, will only confuse you. Sometimes with very good advice. Good, but irrelevant.

Editors of course can guide you, sometimes by the crudest sort of trial and error, but the thicker your skin, the better. If you keep writing *stories*, as defined previously in this series, and keep sending them out, sooner or later you will find your editor. This is hard to do; the returned envelopes and the printed rejection slips pile up on your soul like leeches. But if you learn to keep going no matter what, you will almost certainly make it.

As to where you send it, in order to maximize your chances, go to the reference room of any public library, and ask to look over their indices of publishers. These listings will tell you what a publication buys, and lots of other useful information. They won't be exact, because things change between the time an index gets printed and the time you read it, but they are far better than sheer chance.

Incidentally, I personally have had very bad luck sending stuff to a publication I haven't actually seen. There are too many variables that don't get covered in a listing. On the other hand, it's almost impossible to get hold of copies of some publications. On the third hand, that tells you something about them, doesn't it?

Well, next time we'll talk about how to send stories out, and about agents, and that sort of thing. ■

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TANGENT II

The Science Fiction & Fantasy Short Fiction Review Magazine



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Reviews of Fiction in *Asimov's*
through *Tomorrow*
Also: Review of *Full Spectrum 4*

**First
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FOREVER

William Barton

Illustrated by Kelly Faltermayer

They traveled down through the ages, together and yet...

I ke awoke with a start to bright morning light, shadows shifting overhead as the tent material billowed in the soft, unending breeze. Jesus, he thought. Like a dream....

He looked around then and she was standing there, just a few yards away, naked, hands on hips, looking down at him, face shadowed and expressionless. Unreadable.

Now what do I say....?

That familiar old feeling, waking up in the arms of an unfamiliar woman, wondering just how offended she'd be, hung over perhaps, appalled at herself for...hell. He could see their faces now, reincarnated in his imagination from so very long ago. Angry looks. Disappointed looks. How did I end up with *this* scumbag....

But Shaaeh only smiled and said, "Welcome back...."

Right. Back from that *other* shadowland, where perhaps you can never

go.... She kneeled beside him, seeming somehow bright and brittle, reaching out for his hand, urging him to sit up.

"Uh. What do you...." After 84 years, you'd think I'd...or, again, after coming a billion years into the future....

She rocked back onto her heels, still tugging at him. "Come on. Time to go swimming." She stood, impatient, half turned away, enticing him with a slim, full-body profile...come on, it said, let's go.

Ike sat up, looking down at himself, searching out faint signs of the night before. Not a dream then. But still with a dreamlike feel. He stood and followed her out into the sunshine, seeing the light reflect off her smooth skin, wondering. So different, and yet....

Hell. Absolutely no way that I can read this behavior. Or read meaning into it. I don't *know* what's going

on here. Or with Shaaeh. Just have to let it happen then. See what transpires....

Sudden shock of recognition.

Let it happen, then.

Isn't that always the way?

And then they were lying beneath the unchanging black sky, Ike looking up at a light-dust of stars, Shaaeh snuggled under his arm, one leg tossed over him in familiar embrace, body damp and quiet against his side.

Unchanging, he thought. Like I've been here forever. But I haven't, and the unchanging quality of the sky lies in my snapshot memories of it, for *look* how much it's changed.... Many nights like this, lying out under the stars, in remoter parts of the mountain southwest, far from city lights...it was a familiar sky, all the bright stars known to me, familiar patches of nebulosity here and there,



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even the regular and eternal bumps and knots of the Milky Way. I used to lie there and look up at Old Friend Sky and wish there would be great ships standing overhead, waiting for me to board, waiting to take me away....

And what did I visualize above the sky? Not a world of steel ships and magic men, no, not any more than a field trip to Utah consisted of crossing the continent in the whispering cocoon of an airliner. Worlds above the sky. Flat landscapes, where I could lie on a hillside under a starry night, with the star patterns subtly changed, and, in the background, that familiar Milky Way, beyond, the distant, eternal galaxies....

This.... He could imagine himself on an alien world, under subtly changed skies, but...right. Even the shape of the star-clouds is gone, for the galaxy has turned five times and more since I went to sleep. It's as if I transited to another spiral galaxy, very far away, across the eternal deep. Only the black sky has remained the same....

Maybe not even that. I wonder how much more the anisotropic background has cooled?

Shaaeh stirred against his side, running her hand through the fur of his chest, down across his miraculously flat stomach, stroking, leaving behind cooled places, her palm nonetheless a warm spot. He squeezed her gently, grateful for her presence. And her acceptance of me, this....

Strange to think of this...immortal child. Young in an eternal world. She probably knows people whose lives and memories stretch far back toward my own era. And the mind-thing implication, that, just maybe, when people choose to... "shut down" as they say, their memories are left behind, in the care of the collective human soul....

And what will I be like, when I've lived as long as she has? Not a child, certainly, in a few thousand years, but.... Right. And what will I be like in ten thousand years, a million, ten or twenty million? Come to think of it, what will I have to become in order to live so long?

Images, then. Himself changed to a sexless little being like Shaaeh. Smile into the dark. No, not sexless. She's definitely not that, but...not a man anymore, certainly.

He rolled toward her, pushing her off his chest, onto her back, holding her down against the ground, kissing her softly for a while, feeling her gentle response, tasting her. When it was over, she was smiling up at him, teeth reflecting starlight, eyes liquid dark wells, mirroring the outline of his head against the starry sky.

She said, "I can hardly believe it."

"What...."

"All of this. These things...that are happening here."

"Well...." What do you say to that? Unknown. As always. Women say these things, and how do you respond? What can it mean? He said, "I'm glad you like it, Shaaeh. I was afraid...."

She reached up and stroked his cheek softly with her palm. "You needn't be. We have time...."

Time. We do have that. "When they change me, uh, when I'm changed...will I become...more like you?"

Her puzzled look was hard to make out in the shadows. "What do you mean, 'when you're changed?'"

"Well...I've been assuming I'll have to undergo some...medical procedures, in order to, uh, extend my lifespan to modern standards...." Odd look on her face....

Now the look was definitely troubled. "Ike. We're not *changed* to become like this, we're born this way. And the changes to the race were made long ago, by genetic engineers...."

Long, hard pang, sudden resurgence of terror. "But...surely the techniques must still be known. You...."

She nodded uncomfortably, sitting up then, looking away from him down hill, out toward the distant, lightless plains. "I have no doubt we could...look them up." She turned to face him, eyes earnest in the starlight. "The first...people like us...didn't live so long, you know."

No. I didn't know. No one told me, Shaaeh.... "If no changes are made, how long will I live?" Somehow, the night seemed freezing cold, wind raising gooseflesh on his arms and legs.

"How long did they tell you? Back then, I mean...."

Ike lay back on the grassy hillside, looking up again at the faraway stars. "Maybe thirty years, Shaaeh. Maybe not."

And she was lying across him then, warm, soft, and quiet, just holding him close.

He awoke again to bright morning sunshine streaming through the tent's wide-open entry flap, with Shaaeh kneeling over him, legs straddling his hips, pubic thatch tickling the skin of his abdomen. Her hands were on his shoulders, sky-blue eyes open wide, staring down at him, serious, measuring. What now....

He stared back, silent for a little while, wondering, then, defeated, said, "Good morning...."

Quick flash of small, even smile, bringing out the basic *prettiness* of her face. She leaned down for a long, gentle kiss, then sat back on him, weight resting across his pelvis. She was, apparently, so light that the pressure was negligible. Or so strong that her thigh muscles could keep that weight aloft indefinitely.

A little of both, probably, for those differences....

But that expression was becoming serious again. And, of course.... "Well," he said, "I guess you've, uh...." —no point in delaying things— "finished your research.

She nodded slowly. "While you slept." The expression on her face was definitely *shadowed*, boding no good.

"Well?"

"The...*change* was accomplished in three stages, Ike. The first generation was made up of standard twenty-fifth century human beings, much like yourself. They received surgical and macrogenetic modification, coupled with reproductive genome engineering. Two generations were allowed to grow up for informational purposes, then further mods were made to the

grandchildren. After another two generations, final adjustments took place, resulting in the present...near immortality."

He lay back watching her, conscious of sexual pressure despite the gravity of the topic. Says something about my own genetic and biochemical priorities. Gene lines immortal, if not individual beings. And what she said tells me very little. How long *did* they live? And how does it apply to me....

Jesus. Thirty years...maybe only twenty.

"Shaaeh." Tell me. Eyes pleading.

"Well...." Visible dithering. "My own great-grandparents were among the first generation of 'true immortals.' They, uh, shut down after only a few score million years. Bored. Tired. Their children and grandchildren lived successively longer."

Calm. Very calm. That's *not* your heart racing...just excited by the sexual positioning.... "And *their* grandparents?"

Shaaeh shrugged, uncomfortable. "Eventually, with careful health management, it seems to have been a few hundred thousand years."

The length of an interglacial era. Time enough to witness the process of evolution, to conduct experiments in planetary engineering. You'd think that would have been long enough. "And the, uh, *first* generation?" His heart was pounding so hard now she must surely be aware of it.

Pain on her face. "It varied by circumstances, and in relation to their original genome component. A couple of thousand years, Ike. Some of them only a few hundred."

The weight began to lift a little, the mass that had grown in his chest fading. A couple of thousand years! No, that wouldn't have been enough, but...something.

"I'm sorry."

Sharp inner pang. *Sorry?* "Um. Isn't the original surgery still...available?"

She nodded sadly. "Yes. Of course. It's just that...it hardly seems worthwhile...."

"*Worthwhile!*" He laughed suddenly, reaching out, pulling her down

to his chest for a brief, fierce hug. "A thousand years! *Two* thousand! Oh, Shaaeh...it is very *much* worthwhile...."

Troubled look, levering herself up on her arms, looking down at him. "It *will* end, though, and then you'll be dead anyway, gone for good...."

He nodded, staring up at her seriously. "And in the end, so will you."

"And glad to go long before that end arrives."

"Yes. But I'm only eighty-four years old. To me a thousand years is forever."

"I suppose so...But it won't be...."

Her eyes were very wide now, blue light reflected from the brilliant outside world. Cold prickling in the back of his neck, an inkling of time to come. No, it won't be, but....

The time came then, as he knew it would, as these things always did, creeping up out of the darkness, with little fanfare, no announcement, nothing you could anticipate, even though you *knew*....

Ike sat picking at the little breakfast she'd gotten for him, surprised at being allowed to eat before...anyway, eating lightly, keeping his mind off things, stomach muscles tight. Shaaeh was sitting naked on the couch, watching him struggle with himself, sitting in one of those new poses she seemed to be adopting. Changing, somehow, for me. Each day a little more like what I think of as a real woman. Learning to move, somehow...it seemed odd. I always thought women moved that way because of their bone structure, the way they...well. Maybe not. Maybe they move that way. Walk that way. Sit just so, because of subtle cues from men...silly. Why would they bother? Why would *Shaaeh* bother?

As usual, I haven't got a clue. Life, people, a big, black box to me....

Seeing him look at her, Shaaeh smiled, eyes flitting away for an eye-blink, that back, staying focused on his face. "You're too worried," she said. "This will be very easy. Nothing can go wrong."

Hospital imagery reared in the back of his mind, invasive tests, surgeries, all so horrible...long, hard memory. Sitting on the gurney naked under a damp, open-backed gown, drinking from a cup of water, gagging, gagging, water spilling down his chest and onto the floor, tears in his eyes, as an exasperated young intern shoved long, hard plastic tubing up his nose, feeding it in bit by bit. Sigh. "Mr. Thomas...." as if speaking to a child, "you've *got* to get this down so we can...." What had that one been about? Merely gallstones. This....

"I'm just afraid," he said. "It always hurts."

Another smile. She reached out and ruffled his hair, the friendly hand of a lover. "This time it won't. I promise." The look in her eyes willing him to believe.

Doctor with long, shiny needle grinning down on terrified boy: This won't hurt a bit, son.

After a while he stood up, terror enlarged to the point where his mind was otherwise blank, and she led him into that now-familiar other "room." The long white table, materializer of shorts and soup, was still there, empty, beside it a stand with a little tray of what looked like *Star Trek* "instruments," cleverly forged from futuristic salt shakers.

He got up on the table, shaking, lying down to stare at the billowing tent material overhead. I'm letting her do this to me, he told himself. Letting her. I'll just go to sleep and, when I awaken, the future will be...longer. Nothing to fear. Nothing can go wrong. And she showed me the changes...images floating before us. Changes too small to notice. I'll *seem* the same....

Shaaeh rubbed her hand across his chest, feeling his heart hammer under her palm, smoothing the delicate hair, smiling. Her hand was warm, with a calming effect. Hardly enough, though. She reached down and cupped his genitals with one warm palm. "I promise," she said, "that I won't lose them...."

Ike tried to smile back, but the fear was too big, making him grimace

instead. Then she touched him on the forehead, quickly, abruptly, and said, "Sleep now."

Gray haze, then gone.

Ike blinked hard, staring up at the billowing tent material overhead. The quality of the light had changed slightly, sun angle shifting, as if some time had passed....

Hard heart-thud under his breastbone. Time....

He turned his head and saw Shaaeh, still standing beside him, wiping something off her arms and chest with a towel. Something. It looked like blood, spattered on her here and there.

My blood. Jesus.

She smiled and said, "All done."

Done. Over with and...he struggled up on his elbows, looking around. There was a little bit of blood on the tent wall beside him, another little pool on the floor at Shaaeh's feet, waiting to be cleaned up. Waiting patiently. None on his body though. And everything seemed to be...intact. No scars. No stitches. No...well. How do I feel? Funny, but...still me. "Shaaeh?"

She nodded. "It went well. No problems."

"And?" Will her to speak. Don't make me ask.

That shadowy look crossed her features. Sad, upset maybe. Hesitating.

"Tell me."

She dropped the bloody towel to the floor and pushed it over the little pool with one foot. "All right. Better than it might have been. Not as good as I hoped." She look away from him then. "All other things being equal, the most you can hope to survive is another fifteen hundred years."

"Fifteen hundred...." He dropped back on the table, head clunking softly, feeling the world open up before him, as mere years suddenly turned into decades and centuries. "My God."

"I'm...sorry, Ike. I..."

"Sorry! No. You've given me...all I could have wished for. Time and more time."

"Very little time."



He looked up at her and saw the softness in her eyes, tending toward real sorrow. How long will she live? Six hundred billion centuries to my fifteen? *Very little time....* He reached out and took her hand, pulling her close, and said, "Not to me. Thank you, Shaaeh...."

She smiled and put her hands on him again, trying to do the things he seemed to like.

They were sitting on an ocean beach far from home, watching the surf boil white in the moonlight, listening to it roar and hiss, when she told him about love, eyes wide and serious, buried in pools of deep shadow, smooth face reflecting patches of light.

Ike listened to her, carefully, the way he had listened in memory at different times in the past, nodding when he thought he should nod, grateful for the words, not really understanding.

They said these things, and a part of you said, Aha. I've won. This is my captive. And another part of you, the part that had no idea what was being said, crawled with unease and longed to leap up and run away.

Love? Me? Forever? Impossible.

There is a theory that language was invented by women, for their own purposes, the complex business of child-rearing and family, and that artificial selection gave it to men at a later date. If I'm going to lie down with this filthy brute, at least let him *talk* to me afterward...the selectees, of course, never quite kept pace with the selectors, and explained it away through myth....

But Shaaeh *isn't* a woman....

Afterward, they made love, clumsily, carefully, handicapped by the differences between them, but it was the same thing, really. Just two human beings....

And, after that, they lay together by the surging sea, quiet together, watching the full moon set on the far horizon, making its eternal path across the water.

No, not eternal. Someday the Moon too will die. But I'll be gone long before that.

Fifteen hundred years.

That'll have to be enough.

Right now it seemed like forever.

Shaaeh was holding him close, curled against his side, one leg drawn up across his abdomen, one arm across his chest, head resting on his shoulder.

Familiar pose. Not just now, but from the...past. Other times. Other places. Other women. Hell. Another world. Gone.

She's just waiting for me to sleep. Then she'll get up and be about her business. Monitoring me, maybe, so she can be here when I wake. It seemed strange, but nice. After a while, listening to the soft pink noise of the sea, his thoughts came apart into disparate fragments, then he slept.

On a brilliant, dark, moonless night, they sat out on their favorite hillside, cool breezes brushing their skin, watching the stars roll overhead. A perfect night, the days and nights passing like butterflies in the sun, flickering like the Time Traveler's days and nights as he moved on into the age of Eloi and Morlock.

How many of them? I forget to count the days, for there will be many of them to come. Something like those first days of retirement, back in the 1990s, when, at first, every day was Saturday, then it ceased to matter. How old am I now? Still eighty-four? Maybe not. Surely more months have gone by. I must be eight-five by now.

Shaaeh was beside him, holding his hand, staring up serious-faced at the stars, as if she'd never seen them like this before. Child-like. And yet...in all her millennia she must have seen these same stars so many times that every one is familiar and dull.

If, that is, she ever watched the stars.

He put his arm around her shoulders, squeezing her close, and felt her shiver, felt her return the embrace.

I've come all this way, then, for...what? Familiarity? So it seems. And yet....

In times past these things were bounded by life's tiny limits. I would fall in love with a woman and love her for three years or five or ten, then watch as she went away, bored by my routines, having heard my every thought a hundred times over. Then those years were lost to me, time filling up with regret and resentment.

They used me for their own purposes, then went their way when they felt I was...used up.

But what's a year now, or three or five or ten, when I've got a thousand years and more to play in?

He said, "You have no idea how fortunate I feel just to be here."

And felt the hot scald of her tears on his chest.

Cold chill freezing him inside, drawing his stomach muscles tight. Something new, just now, but tellingly familiar besides. That first sign that the moments of Heaven would come to an end, when she grew tired of his presence, as they all did....

And I have no way of reading her feelings.

Pulling back a little way, looking down at her, he said, "What's wrong?"

Starlight made the tear-tracks a faint glimmer in the otherwise featureless shadows around her face. That and the liquid hint of her eyes. "I...don't know."

Oh, God. Terrifying, familiar words.

She sighed and wiped her eyes, sniffled like a girl. "When you said that, all I could think of was how *little* time you have to be here...I'm sorry." She reached up and touched his face gently,

Ike smiled in the darkness. "Don't be. It's all new to me, and it seems like forever."

"But it isn't forever, Ike. A day will come when you're gone and I'll still be here, moving on into a future that's as empty as the one I had before you came."

Moment of intense wonder. Before I came? And what am I, to fill someone's world? Nothing. No one.

"But...you'll have had this time. Just like me. A nice memory, at least...."

She shook her head and when she spoke her voice was thick with suppressed anguish. "Before you came I...didn't know." A small shrug. "When you're gone I'll have to face that empty time again. Only now I'll know how empty it is."

So all I've done is bring her pain. And, perhaps, prevented her from forming a proper relationship with one of her own kind. "It makes me feel good," he said, "to know I'll be remembered with love long after my bones are dust."

"You will be," she whispered.

They made love then, as they always did. Later, lying on the grassy slope waiting for him to sleep, she continued to cry.

Over dinner, as they sat naked on the soft carpet beside the little table, the whole business came up again, Shaaeh looking earnestly into his eyes, saying things that were hard to understand, and he listened, nodding, trying to smile, usually without success.

And she said, "I can't face the future that's bound to come, a world without you...." Miserable look off into the distance. "There must be something we can do...."

Ike put his hand on her arm. "Are you sorry I came?"

Frightened look. "No."

He smiled. "Neither am I. And if you haven't given me an eternity in which to be happy, you've given me many years...and yourself." Smooth words there, tell them what they want to hear, however little it really means.

She looked up at him, eyes liquid with fear. "I'm glad you feel that way, Ike, but...when it's over, when you're gone, I'm the one who'll have to go on...without...." She seemed to swallow upwelling emotion. "I may be left with no option but to...follow you. Shut down."

He suppressed an urge to get up and walk out of the tent, out into the brilliant vermilion sunset. You would think that this...*being* would be beyond saying something like that.

Or am I the cause of all this? It's as if I've somehow made her behave the way I expect women to behave.... "Shaaeh. I...you don't really mean that."

She looked away from him, through the tent flap into fading day.

"You'll...get over me. People do. In a million years, this will all be just the tiniest moment of aberration in your life."

"I can't accept that."

He sighed. "You may have to. I'll...try to help. Let's try to...make the best of things. Be happy while we can."

She came into his arms then and seemed to forget the matter.

Some time later, months, years, Sunknown, Ike lay naked on the grassy bank above the swimming hole, lazing in the warm sunshine, staring up at the clouds, listening to the wind, watching little bits of debris drift by on the water. Calm. Very calm. All I need now is a mantra. *Om* on the range. Heh. The jewel is in the quatro pro...I may yet sink into complete nonsentience. There were things like water striders living in the big side-eddy where the current was slow, and sometimes long, thin yellow leaves would drift by, as if, somewhere, the world experienced Fall. Not here, though. It's always June here.

The sun was moving overhead, however. Drifting across the track of day. Bouncing from solstice to solstice. If I thought about it, I could probably count the years...why bother?

A shadow dropped across his face, Shaaeh standing over him, looking down, half smiling, naked as well. They seldom bothered to dress nowadays, sometimes just for fun, and clothing seemed, somehow, unnecessary in Eden. Looking up at her, Ike could measure the slow increase of his appreciation for her beauty. Maybe I've just forgotten what real women were like, but.... Short blond hair, wide blue eyes, breastless chest, narrow hips and long, smooth-muscled legs. Focused. And my attention becomes focused as well.

Shaaeh's smile broadened, at what it was fairly easy to determine. She sat down beside him, one small, warm hand on his chest. Ike reached up and stroked her hair, soft, fine, always a constant length, cut and texture. Almost as if it never grows... and his own. He touched it. Not growing either. And it had lost the stiff, dead feel of gray hair that it had had since his mid-thirties. When? God. I've had gray hair since JFK was in the White House....

Shaaeh ran her hand through his hair as well. "It feels better now. More like a person, less like animal fur...."

Jesus.

And she said, "Your appearance has changed since the operation. Your face is smoother, like...." Sudden loss for words.

Ike nodded. "Like I'm getting younger. I noticed. It's...the second time something like this has happened." Old man sleeps in the ice. Wakes to middle age. Now? I feel like I'm thirty years old...what was it George Burns said when they asked him if he *really* wanted to be eighteen again? Eighteen, Hell. I'd be glad to be sixty-five again. "Will I, uh, grow old again?"

The shadow crossed her face, very briefly. "Yes. But," in answer to his unspoken question, "not until right before the end. It'll be...relatively sudden."

It always is.

He reached up and pulled her down onto his chest, holding her close, realizing, always with a start of amazement, no matter how many times it happened, that his body thought it was time for sex, no matter what else was going on. Makes it hard to participate in romantic mush, even when you *like* it....

But Shaaeh pushed away from him, sitting up, glancing at his crotch with what seemed like a wry grin. Familiar with my foibles already.... She said, "I've thought of something else we can try...."

Something else...Of course. "Shaaeh...."

She put her hand to his lips, fingers small and delicate. "Mind-thing

doesn't hold the sum total of past human knowledge, Ike. Only what we thought worth keeping. I've been doing a little research. I...."

He kissed her fingers and said, "Shaaeh. I really don't need...."

A mild look of anger creased her brow. "Maybe I do, Ike. I want you to listen to me."

He sighed, but kept it as well suppressed as he could. "OK."

"During the empire days, we maintained a capital of sorts on a terraformed planet near the center of our major activity, pretty far from here, in another spiral arm. During the long decline, it was taken over by a variety of successor species, who regarded it as an...irreplaceable resource."

Right. *Arsenal of Miracles*. "How long since a human has been there?"

"A billion years, maybe."

Right. Longer than the span of the Phanerozoic at the time I was born. "So how do you know it's still there?"

A shrug, a smile. "I told you we get visitors from time to time. They know. And that's how they know who we are. It's why they're afraid of us."

Ike sat up, looking down at the spinning pool water, watching leaves and bugs drift by. "So...."

"If there's a way to...finish the job, the knowledge will be there."

Finish the job. Sudden speed-up of heartbeat. Fifteen hundred years seems like enough time, but...ten thousand, a million, ten million...A future that disappears into the mist surrounding concepts of infinity. "How far away is this place?"

Shaaeh put her head on his shoulder and he could hear her sigh of relief. No refusal. He *wants* to live.... "Around 9,000 parsecs," she said.

Nine thousand. Is that a long way, or just a trip around the block? "How do we get there?"

He was looking at her face then, and the shadow was back. "Well. I thought about using the fueling ships. I checked, though. They can't make the trip."

"Could we modify one?" Cold hand reaching back into your heart.

When did fifteen centuries seem like *too little time*?

"No."

"Then...."

"It seems I'll have to build a starship. I found some designs from...the empire days...." The shadow on her face seemed very heavy now. Something she's not telling me....

And... 'build a starship....' How hard is that? Are we talking about building a stock racer from parts? A kit-plane, maybe? He waved around at the park-like countryside. "How...."

Another shrug, very cool and distant. "The resources still exist. The automated factories are still there, on Venus, where we left them. I think the last one was shut down maybe five hundred million years ago. I'll have to get there, of course, get them started up, feed all the designs in... it'll take me a while to figure out how things work, of course...."

"How long?"

The shadow deepened. "Working by myself...a couple of thousand years, I guess."

The cold hand squeezed his heart to a stop. I'll be dead then. Too little, too late, as always... Stop talking like a fool. You're *here* aren't you? The phrase is, *just in time*. "So... what's your plan?"

Strangely, she seemed almost on the verge of tears again. "I can... fix up your stasis canister. Jump you forward in time a little bit...."

Another cold pang. The canister almost *killed* me! Then, "Oh, Shaaeh...." Hand on her bare shoulder, pulling her in.

"It's all right," she said. "I can do it, as long as I... know I'll get you back." She pushed into his chest, hugging him hard.

Separations forced by events, he thought. Sometimes bringing people closer, usually breaking them apart. But she won't *find* anyone else, and I certainly won't....

Time passed, and the moment of departure arrived.

Ike stood looking at the stasis canister, which she'd situated right in the middle of the "living room," marveling, afraid. It wasn't the same one,

of course, not really, just bits and pieces, rescued and repaired. Like a little isolation chamber or maybe an orgone box. Gray plastic, an offset, truncated cone with a door in the front and a chair inside, little racks of "instruments" mounted on the walls.

Like an old Soviet space capsule.

Like something from the 1960s.

The *last* time I was a young man.

Hell. I was thirty-two years old when 1961 began, and thirty-three when it ended. Still in my first marriage, with small children, a job that seemed important, was starting to pay well....

Times past. And gone.

Shaaeh clung to him, arms around the barrel of his chest, squeezing hard. Very shaky. Out of his own fear, Ike said, "Will you be all right?"

She looked up at him, eyes visibly moist, and nodded. "I can put the feelings away for... for a while." She smiled. "If I need you I'll... open the door."

Right. Leave it at that. So he kissed her, stepped in, and sat down.

She stood looking at him for a long, silent moment, then said, "Watch the panel. If two thousand years go by, shut down and get out. Something's wrong."

He started to speak, but she backed away, slamming the door in his face, getting it over with.

He sat in the comfortable chair, in the dim light, watching the numbers fly. Five damn minutes, that's all it will take. And if it takes that long, I'm in deep shit again....

Hard thoughts. Emerging into another new world, unfamiliar. No Shaaeh, maybe no people, maybe some big, universal disaster....

I could open the door and fall right out into space, or into some world rendered uninhabitable by... something.

He reached out for the control panel, hand shaking, wanting to punch out, fly through the door back into her world.

Too late, though.

A thousand years have gone by already.

Hollow feeling.

She doesn't *really* need me then....

How could I imagine she *did*? This was just a momentary aberration for her, like falling in love with a pillow or something. Just an advanced and peculiar form of masturbation. I wonder how long it took her to realize she'd become mentally ill? Hours? Days? Maybe even years, but....

I'll open the door and be in the zoo....

Or she'll be there, but different, ready to tell me....

A bell chimed in the control panel and the numbers stopped. 1374 years....

The door opened and Shaaeh was there, smiling. And she stepped right in and sat down on his knees, slid as close to him as she could get, taking his head in her hands.

"I missed you."

He held her close, heart pounding, wondering what the reunion must seem like to her. He said, "I wondered, when you didn't take me out...."

She said, "I didn't want to waste your time. It was... all right. I had a lot to do. To keep my mind off...."

Holding her against his chest, feeling the first inevitable stirrings of desire, Ike looked out over her shoulder into the unchanged tent. The light outside seemed shadowy. "What about...."

She pulled back, grinning into his face. "All set. It was easier than I thought."

She wouldn't let him go outside right away. "No hurry," she insisted, "it won't go away." And they made love on the rug then, familiar sensations for him, new hungers for her, complaining about how *long* it had been.

Very nice, he thought, face rubbing against her belly, hair tickling his chin. All my fears for nothing....

As if, maybe, fears themselves are for naught....

But we do torture ourselves.

Perhaps on purpose.

Perhaps with purpose.

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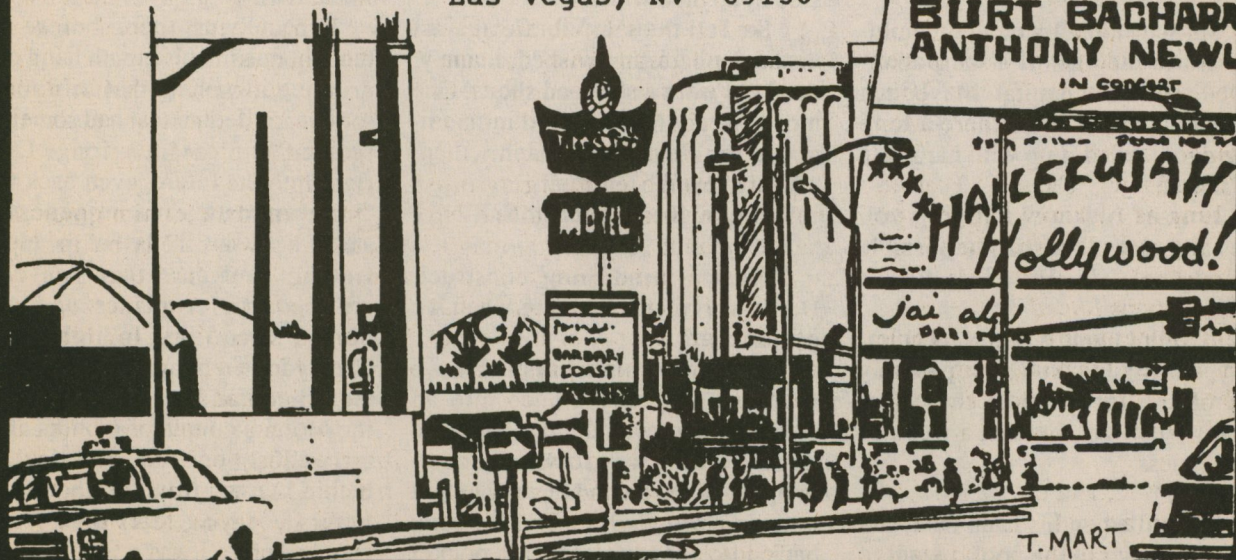
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Finally, they stood hand in hand and walked out into the bright light of day. The shadow was from the ship. Vast, sitting astride the land beside the tent like an alien colossus. He stood still, staring at it, something from the past. It was a familiar past, warming him with memory.

Not really all that big. Just huge against this self-limiting landscape. Maybe forty meters tall, gray metal dinosaur, looking like a cross between the Apollo Lunar Module and the BIS 1946 Moonship. Rounded. Bug-eyed. Entry-hatch like kissing lips, pouting out at the world.

"You know, it doesn't look like a starship."

Shaaeh laughed, voice clean and clear, forever young. "This is just the lander," she said.

"Oh."

She was squinting up at the cloudless blue sky. "There." Pointing.

Feeling sick, Ike looked up, and something lurched hard in his stomach. Pale, faint, stained full blue by Rayleigh scattering, it hung behind the sky. Motionless. Cylindrical, with rods and pods sticking off every which way. Lit by the sun but not very bright. Not like the full moon, which burned right through the sky and seemed so *near*....

"Uh. How far?"

"Synchronous orbit."

Big, then.

Shaaeh said, "I wound up building it into the hull of a long-abandoned asteroidal habitat. Maybe ten thousand people lived there a long time ago. I filled it up with hardware we'll need."

Lots of old books giving you cues and clues, but still, impossible to imagine. "Uh. How fast does it go?"

"Well. I found a nearly functional hyperdrive unit on Venus, probably one of the last models they ever made. We'll get there in a week or two, I guess."

"Oh."

She pulled on his hand then, and said, "Let's go to the pool. I want to make love some more."

Ike followed her, completely undone.

Finally, another little while later, Ike lay back against the leatherette-like upholstery of the lander copilot's acceleration chair, beside Shaaeh, on the other side of the center console. Like the cockpit of a Gemini capsule he mused, Jeminy, not Jemin-eye, I remember, a little bit, at least. The windows above them were big though, like the Shuttle's windows, maybe, or those of a big jet airliner. That's probably the more apt image....

Shaaeh looked over at him and smiled. "Ready?"

He nodded, more or less unable to speak. Am I *ready*? Jesus.

"I guess you've been waiting for this for a long time...."

Seeing right into my head... probably so obvious nothing like telepathy is needed...he laughed, a shallow, scratchy sound against faint machine noise, distant whine of pumps, hum of electric motors, all, like himself, swept here from remote corners of time past. "I guess you could say that."

She reached out her hand across the center console and patted him on the arm, raising gooseflesh. "All right, then...." Her arm came back, gripping what looked like a throttle lever and slid it forward a fraction of an inch. Lights lit, blue and green on the control panel, then the world outside lit up blue-white.

Ike felt the seat vibrate against his sticky back and wished, inanely, that he'd worn a shirt and shorts. One more sweaty Neanderthal moment, not a problem for Shaaeh...then, "What about the tent?"

She laughed. "Long gone."

"Oh." But....

"Just a mind-thing construct. Don't worry, it'll be there when we get back...."

Don't worry, she says, *when we get back*...an easy glance into an unknown future. And Shaaeh slid the throttle all the way forward. Something bellowed behind them, the light outside glaring white, and Ike sank back into the soft seat, air pocket under his spine farting out its little gasbubble, turning him into a giant suction cup. When I was a kid, silly,

getting stuck to the bottom of the bathtub as I lay there, letting the water drain out....

Silly thoughts, whirling round and round, while, before him, the sky began to grow dark. One spark, then another, then a thousand. Stars.

The Earth, from space, looked much the same, as in remembered pictures, blue-white ball striated with clouds, half lit by the magically unchanging sun, and yet different in detail. The old familiar land masses were long gone, replaced by a string of small continents strung along the equator, mostly lying low, mountain-building episodes in the distant past, in the distant future. Pangaea would form again one day. Not now, though. Not even close. And one of those flat, sandy islands our little home....

Odd that it still works that way. Like the refueled sun, of course, when I asked her about the terminus of the geochemical cycle. Maintained, she said. Artificially maintained....

They didn't go into orbit right away, just climbing out on a spiral course, mystery engine rumbling away, putting brilliant fire behind them. When he asked, Shaaeh said something about meson-catalyzed nuclear reactions and pseudo-stable heavy-element mass wasting. Ike said, "Oh."

Space was there before him though, making his mouth hang open, drinking in wonder that he'd longed for over a lifetime that had sometimes seemed unpleasantly long. I rode right into the future, even back then. Grew up with earache-generating steam-heat, saw the last of the biplane fighters and cars that you could crank-start. Jet planes and atom bombs when I was in high-school. The hydrogen bomb in college. Then jet airliners and space ships. Men on the Moon a couple of months after I turned forty-one. Pocket calculators before I turned fifty, then home computers not long after that. Video-phones before I was retirement age. I had nothing to complain about....

Except my own personal judgment day. Unwilling to lie down and

go out like a used-up light bulb. Too many wonders yet to be seen...I wanted to see men on Mars. Hell. I wanted to see the first starship arrive at its destination.

Now *his* starship, next ride hitched on the long voyage to immortality, began to swell in the window, vast, a planet in its own right. Waiting for him.

And all, he thought, glancing over at Shaaeh, because something vaguely like a woman can still fall in love.

Ike sat alone on a soft chair in the starship's forward observation deck, a lounge that had been meant for hundreds, a recreation room of sorts when this had been a habitat for space miners. Some very long time ago, he thought. Almost back to my own time perhaps, preserved all this way by magic whose power and reality I may never understand....

Maybe. Then again, should I live long enough....

Like Shaaeh. Who could learn and forget and learn again. For her, knowledge was a subtle thing, bled off, at need, from that mind-thing, the thoughts of Earth's people....

And yet, she shows no unease at the thought of going away from it, separated from the wellsprings of her being by nine thousand parsecs of space. No accounting for what's happening. Those components of her are beyond my reach. All I seem to understand are the parts I've superimposed....

Out of the air, her voice whispered, "We're leaving now...."

The air around him was like glass, the world unreal, far away. What am I expecting? Some *Star Trek* imagery, the Earth falling away faster than light to the sound of a subway train rolling in its tunnel? The stars stretching out into sudden bands, perhaps trailing rainbows? Well....

The universe turned around the ship. That was what must have happened, for he felt no motion, no inner ear disturbance, momentarily bringing the Moon into view. Good old Moon, unchanged...except for that

squarish thing on the lit-up part of the farside now coming into view....

We're *moving*....

And the Earth was falling away, though not so fast. Something wrong with my eyes. Have to blink hard to see. Christ, I must be crying....

"Clear of geomagnetic field. Accelerating...." Shaaeh's voice was still a warm whisper, as if she were sitting right beside him. Outside, the stars changed color, bluish one way, reddish the other. Not quite what Pynchon had in mind when he made up his book title, or even Pohl, long before that....

My God. Transfixed by beauty.

Shaaeh's voice said, "Translight jump."

The universe of stars, the material of the sky, ripped open, revealing red Hell, and the ship fell in.

"Secondary acceleration...."

Red Hell burst apart, shattered by the tone of some great bell, then they fell through cool and featureless blue.

In a little while, Shaaeh joined him on the observation deck, where he sat motionless, looking out at soft blue satin. Not *quite* featureless. Distant ripples on the edge of vision, wind blowing through the material of space, bits of light you could see if you didn't look right at them....

"Pretty," she said, putting her hand on his shoulder.

Ike looked away, still reluctant, to smile up at her. "One more reason," he said, "to be glad I've come all this way...."

Face pressed to the substanceless glass of the ob-deck window, Ike looked down on the Archive world and thought, Trantor? North Am? The city as world. Still planet-shaped, still striated with clouds, though very lightly. More than Mars. A *lot* less than Earth. The seas were still there, perhaps, but buried under vast constructions, their vapor escaping only through sewer vents. The city would be a desert then, but no one would mind. So long as there was water to drink, so long as mist sprayed from the shower heads, people preferred to live in the desert....

And who knew what other species would prefer?

Aliens. Marveling at the thought. I'm actually going to meet aliens from other planets. Lunatic commentary went on: As opposed to aliens from Guatemala, or aliens from L.A.?

The world glinted like jeweled bronze under its reddish-orange sun, low K or high M, this whole world and all its biome probably artificial. Tan metal everywhere, but scintillae of color flashed from angles here and there....

The lander set them down on a broad, flat field of brass, dropping to the center of an indigo oval that must have absorbed the engine's heat, for it was cool under his bare feet. If the engine even makes heat. It must...all that *light*....

But the aliens were there, erasing little mysteries with the larger wonder of their own presence. Hard to take in the detail. Something big and scaly, like a centaur, but with six legs and two arms, big green eyes that rolled like a man's until you looked close and saw the faceting as well. A little one, covered with what looked like white fur, until you looked close and saw...not feathers, really, but something like them. No eyes at all, or at least not visible. Just shaggy white hair. And a pair of spindly little bipeds, one green and one blue, arm and leg joints flexing universally, skin bending like shoe-leather.... Hell. Two races of Kermit the Frog, each with a silly, fixed grin.

Keeping their distance, too, looking at each other, focusing on Shaaeh, though with sidelong glances at Ike. Nervous. They look goddamn nervous. How can I tell? Most animals look nervous, but with good reason. Maybe these have good reason, too. We made this world. They only inherited it....

A voice whispered from the air, very soft, more or less feminine, perhaps coming from the big quasi-centaur, perhaps not. It was just an impression you got....

"Welcome to the Central Repository, honored human. We thought you'd...never be back."

Charming, very human, up to and including that delicate little pause, in just the right place. Of course, what was here, on this world, must be ancestral to the Earth's mind-thing.

Shaaeh nodded and said something that Ike couldn't quite catch. The sounds of her real "language," the one beyond his capacity to learn. And no one bothered to translate it for him. So much for that.

The soft voice said, "Of course, honored one. This world is, after all, yours...."

Nervous? Of course they were nervous.

The aliens were looking at him now, suddenly inspecting him closely. Finally, the voice said, "Is this a construct?"

Meaningless noise from Shaaeh.

"Interesting. We thought they were extinct."

While she worked, Ike wandered the city alone, at first along the bottoms of canyon-like thoroughfares, surrounded by alien throngs who evidently failed to recognize him for what he was, mistaking him for one of their myriad number, then braving the flying bridges that connected one fairy-castle with another.

Despite all the wonders he found in the city, the world, the museum came as a distinct shock. At first, it was just one more building to be investigated, thronged perhaps a little more than usual by disparate alien beings. Little gaggles and clusters, segregated by species, going in and out through a thousand doors. Walking, hopping, prancing on birdlike legs, rolling in things like wheelchairs, even imprisoned in little glassy tanks of colored gas, like all the primitive science fictional imagery compressed onto a single vast stage.

Dream world, he thought. Dream life for me. I always imagined I'd one day be here. No. I never really believed that. I always knew I would one day die.

Inside, he found the history of the universe. Age on age on age since the beginning of time, that beginning farther, so *much* farther back than the scientists of his birthtime could possibly have imagined. Lords of creation, one relic empire after another, here, then gone, mankind not the first, certainly not the last.

And yet, we were a larger-than-life character in the galactic drama, doing more, building more, discovering more, in our little age of dominance, than many of our predecessors. Coming out to the stars, building our empire, then retiring, gracefully going away, back to our little homeworld. Leaving behind...*this*.

Because, like me, the human race was afraid to die.

Have we?

Maybe so....

Ike stood before a vast mural in the large human section of the museum, something done by an artist whose command of depth and complexity, in two-dimensional representation, surpassed anything he'd ever seen before, staring, transfixed, at scenes of splendor, featuring men like himself.

Around him, the crowd of alien beings began to stir, staring, pulling away, leaving him alone in a space before the mural. Ike looked around, appalled. They're...afraid of me.

Embarrassed, he moved on, going back out into tawny sunshine, walking the streets of what began to seem like an eternal city.

With the sun standing high in the sky, ruddy light throwing vertical shadows down the sides of tall buildings, Ike stood in the middle of a busy thoroughfare, feeling his hunger wax and wane. Even when I was a young man, truly young, just out of adolescence, I would have been exhausted by all this. Now...he smiled and shook his head. What does it mean to be near the beginning of a fifteen-century lifespan? I don't know.

He walked diagonally across the road, already having ceased to question the absence of vehicular traffic, the universality of the pedestrians,

however strange, however bewildering in their diversity, heading for the nearest thing that looked like a cafe, sitting down at a little round wrought-iron table, painted white. There were other tables here, all of them occupied by various sorts of biped. Somewhere, one supposed, there would be other cafes whose furniture catered to other body plans.

Funny. Very funny. Here I am, a billion years and nine thousand parsecs from home, imagining myself in the middle of some Parisian street scene from the 1920s. Hemingway in Paris, working all morning, revising, revising, that famous "one true sentence," then coming down here, going for a little walk, smelling the crowds, the people, going to his favorite cafe, getting coffee, a little liquor perhaps, satisfied that he'd done...something.

Did I ever do *something*?

Not worth the effort of wondering. And yet, when I was born, those people were *alive*, still wandering the streets of Paris, still happy with themselves, with their world. Dead and gone now. No. Not gone. In the mind-thing, their work. In the museum, perhaps, a few of their artifacts.

The waiter—Ike smiled, thinking, *wait-thing*—came and stood over him, a tall, fuzzy blue-green biped, stinky arms folded against its narrow breast, and stared down at him, or seemed to, its eyes motionless, featureless fields of yellow.

"Sir...." it whispered. At least, there was the sound of a human voice, nothing had moved to indicate it might actually have spoken.

"Um." Now what? "I don't have any money, but...."

It said, "Shaaeh."

So much for that. "Coffee? How about a grape-jelly doughnut?" All the things Shaaeh had been giving him, plucked, unaware, from the depths of his primitive mind. It turned and walked away, seeming feather-light, clawed feet clicking softly on the metallic pavement.

Strange, strange new world. Why am I already at home in it? Prepared. Long ago prepared for this. What you *wished* for so hard, so long ago.

So damned long ago.

Past gone. Not regretted. Not now.

Not ever, he realized.

The coffee, when it came, was thick with sugar, just the way he liked it, the doughnut rich and sticky, jelling oozing out like purple lava at every bite. He sipped and ate and sat back, licking his fingers, wondering whether he would feel sleepy soon or merely re-energized.

A shadow fell over the table and Ike looked up, hoping he hadn't misunderstood the waiter's terse "sentences." A different being this time, rather more humanoid than otherwise. Arms and legs and head with velvety hair, dark, liquid eyes, mouth set in something like a frown. No nose though, which made it look a little cartoonish. Especially with that pale gray skin.

When it spoke, its lips moved, plainly forming words. English words at that, actually speaking to me....

It said, "My name is Dr. Ilsegnur."

Ike smiled and held out his hand. "Ike Thomas. Pleased to meet you."

It looked at his hand for just a moment, as if considering what to do with it, then reached out and shook, conventional grip, fingers feeling small and fragile. "May I sit?"

Ike suddenly felt a little foolish. Cast back into real society again, expected to behave...just so. He said, "Of course," gesturing to a chair.

It sat and Ike waited, arms folded across his chest. Nothing. Finally, he said, "What can I do for you?"

Ilsegnur looked away for a second, an extraordinarily human gesture that made Ike feel, very briefly, a little homesick. There *was* a real world once. Once upon a time.

It said, "We haven't been able to make contact with your...companion. She seems to be ignoring our queries."

Ike shrugged. "I'm sure she's very busy. What's it to you?"

Another long look down the boulevard, then, "I am the director of this research facility. We need to know what she is doing here."

Director. Research facility. A minor functionary? Or maybe the

planetary governor. That nervousness back again. Animals in the presence of guns. Guns and the men who fired them. They would treat this as important, not knowing whether they had reason to be afraid.

"She's just here to do a little research."

"Research? What can it be that the...that *they* have forgotten? Ike Thomas, we know who you are. Who *she* is."

They. I wonder what he almost said. What do they call us? Us. Funny. As if I were one of them. He said, "Then you know more than I do, friend."

Dr. Ilsegnur stared at him, eyes expressionless, for a long moment, then stood and, without a backward glance, strode away.

Ike repressed an impulse to rise and shout after him: What do you want? What do you *want* from her pet dog?

He sat and sighed, then stretched and got to his feet. There were, doubtless, sights yet to be seen.

Toward midafternoon, Ike found a vast swimming pool under a fragile-looking, iridescent dome. It looked for all the world like a giant soap bubble, colors moving on its inner surface as if driven by the random forces of Brownian movement, a subtle play of hue and changing density, nature's beauty in abstract. Inside, the air was warm and moist, the water full of—what?—*creatures*, splashing and babbling and frolicking together.

I wonder if any of them are children?

Maybe. Maybe not. Here, interestingly enough, they broke their little species groupings, things far more alien to each other than any two denizens of Earth, and played together. Things, he realized, more different than a mushroom and a lion. Drawn together by a common love of fresh water, of splashing and noisy play.

He stood for a while, watching, then slipped out of his clothing, dropping it in a pile on the pavement, and plunged in naked. Opened his eyes under water. Something with roughly

a dozen legs, it was hard to tell, thrashed on by, frothing the water as it swam. He surfaced, blinking, looking around. Something nearby, something that looked a little bit like a raw oyster with big green eyes, chattered and splashed water at him. Ike laughed and splashed back, shaking water out of his eyes, brushing his hair back.

There. Far out in the pool, something big surfaced and spouted. Something that looked just a little bit like a whale. Impossible, the pool wasn't *that* big...and when this thing swam, it seemed to have spindly arms that churned by its sides.

I wonder if there are whales back on Earth, back in those wide blue oceans I saw from space? Artificially maintained oceans, I suppose. There could be. Even though most whale species were extinct before I died.

Comforting thought, that such things might live on.

Sudden start. There were a dozen or so beings, all different, surrounding him, ringing him in, starting to grow closer. Ike looked around and saw Dr. Ilsegnur among them, looking somehow bedraggled in the water. A committee? Because they have a problem. One too important to be left alone. He folded his arms and waited.

Ilsegnur stood in the water before him, bobbing lightly, regarding him with those wet, expressionless eyes.

"Well?"

"Ike Thomas, we have to do *something*."

He shrugged, trying not to look at the others, focusing on Ilsegnur. Some of the beings he had with him looked large and strong, tough skinned, with things like fangs and claws. Carnivores? From high gravity worlds? Again, the imagery came from a thousand places, resurrected from old, cold storage.

"Ike Thomas, she has locked us out of the main memory core, putting a stop to all other research in this facility. We have to know what she *wants*."

And what can I tell them? That she wants me, alive forever? Will that mean anything to them? "I'm sorry. I

doubt it'll last all that long, um...are you in some danger?"

"No. She has...left the principal life-support controls outside her sequester."

"What're you afraid of then?"

It suddenly thrashed the water with one agitated hand, the other beings stirring a bit, tensing up perhaps. "Because we never expected you back. No one else ever came back."

Because no one else was ever so afraid to die? Scenes from the museum, humanity's predecessors, those elder species from whom humans had once...learned? Was that the right word? Species growing old and tired, going home, never to be seen again. Ultimately, perhaps, dying out, gracefully, as nature seems to have intended. As if nature *had* intent. All but me. All but us.

That word again. All right. I *am* one of them. That much is clear. He said, "I'm sorry." Another shrug. "Sorry for the inconvenience."

It continued to stare at him and he imagined he could read its mind, as Shaaeh certainly could. *Inconvenience!* it would be thinking. Inconvenience. And fear. Fear that we've come back to reclaim our belongings and take them away with us. Or, worse, that we've come back to stay, terrible gods reborn.

"You've...got to do something. Help us." Clearly, an anguished plea.

Ike shook his head. "I...don't think this'll last much longer. But..."

After a while, they went away again, huddled together, still afraid. Watching them go, watching them climb out of the water, dripping, Ike suddenly wished he hadn't said that last word. Let them hope. Just like me.

He turned then and swam in the warm water, out toward the whale-like thing. Maybe it would have something interesting to say. Or maybe not.

Finally, at sunset, he leaned on the railing of a balcony surrounding the top of one tall, square tower, the highest building he could find, looking out across a cityscape that

stretched to the horizon. Nearby, it was like looking down on any large city, scale lost because the buildings were all of a size. Farther away though...in all directions the buildings leaned away, then grew hazy, just as they grew small, colored purple by intervening air and dust.

The sky was pink down by the world's edge, in all directions, dark blue overhead. Where the red-orange sun was falling, it had taken on a layered look, like rosy mother-of-pearl. Dust. From where? Probably from all the different worlds, brought here on trillions of feet...some number higher than that. People...beings have been coming here for a billion years and more. With questions. Leaving with answers.

And here I am, so stupid, so primitive, that I don't even have questions. Another bitter thought. I am too much a part of my own dead past. I can't even appreciate this place. I'm like a tourist wandering the world, passing by its wonders, complaining about my poor, tired feet....

But the sunset was glorious, coloring the sky in differential hues, a little bit of nature in this artificial place. I have a starship now, and there are other worlds, and some of them must have what I crave....

If...Shaaeh will let me go. What does she want? Only me? Unknown.

And, just then, her voice crooned, soft in his ear, "Come to me..."

And I must go.

The voice led him on through the streets, then deep into a massive edifice filled with alien life, threading corridors jammed with bustling, inhuman crowds, to a high-ceilinged chamber full of blue light, shining from unseen corners. Shaaeh was there, sitting cross-legged on the deep blue carpet, inviting him down before her.

He sat, stilling his questions, heart pounding, as it always did on judgment day, until he looked into eyes full of fear. Oh, God, Shaaeh. It can only be bad....

She said, "I've traced the knowledge thread all the way to it's conclusion. I can go no farther."

Don't torture me like this....

Eyes glinting dreadful moisture. "I am...so sorry, Ike. No more than a few hundred thousand years. At best." The tears spilled over.

They made love on the carpet then, Shaaeh aggressive and hungry, as if he were going to fade away right then and there. A devouring hunger, almost oppressive in its desperation. Ike let her have her way, waiting out the storm, then they were lying in the soft blue light, huddled together on the carpet, hearts quieting together.

Finally, he spoke, "A hundred thousand years, Shaaeh? A few hundred thousand?"

She nodded gently, face pressed against the side of his chest.

"God. And I thought fifteen centuries was a long stretch!" He pulled away, looking into her still-sad face. "I lived eighty-four years and became a very old man. Now you're telling me that I may live five thousand times that span..."

Moue of grief, almost comical. "And I will live thousands of times longer still..."

My God, Shaaeh, he wanted to say, I lived long enough to have six generations of pet dogs live and die...but he couldn't bring the words out. She would be...offended. Besides, when he was gone, Shaaeh wouldn't be able to buy a new puppy.... He said, "Then it will have to be enough. It's enough for me. Truly."

Still sad.

He said, "You had me for a few short months, then did without for a thousand years and more. Surely..."

"It wasn't forever, though." She looked into his eyes then and even tried to smile. And she wanted to make love again, gentler this time, comfortable with him again. Afterward, she said, "Let's go home, Ike," and led him away by the hand.

Time passed, healing as it does, until one day they were making love on a wild hillside somewhere in



Shaaeh's vast domain, rolling in the grass under a bright blue sky filled with a million yellow butterflies. Even occupied as he was, Ike could watch them drift fluttering overhead, like snowflakes of sunlight, filling his mind with concepts of beauty.

It makes this better, he thought, taking away the cries of animal heat...for this is all those pretty creatures do. They live to mate. And then die. Trivial. And eternal.

I wonder if they live on because butterflies belong to the world, or merely because Shaaeh's people wanted them to stay? By now evolution should have changed them into something utterly different. Or maybe not. They remain because the flowers remain. And the flowers remain, because they contain beauty.

And are themselves so trivial... for flowers are ephemeral as well, here to live and die in their sexual way....

When it was over the thoughts quieted as well. They lay side by side on the hill, holding each other, looking up into the sky, watching the butterflies pass on toward their distant horizon. Shaaeh's hands were on him, stroking heated flesh, smoothing away sweat, not quite ready, perhaps, to let it be over.

Ike snuggled closer, enjoying the feel of her small hands on him, and thought, Never quite ready to let go. Because, for her, there won't *always* be another fine day on which to make love and watch the butterflies float away on the wind.... For me though...it seems as though I've found eternity at last. I lie here in Heaven, and it stretches on beyond any passage of days I can possibly imagine....

Shaaeh kissed him on the chest, then rolled over on top of him, nuzzling at his face, looking at him with those same fathomless eyes. Not soulless, no, but not anything I can ever understand.

She said, "I've thought of something else we can try."

Ike looked away, up into the thinning cloud of insects. They would be gone soon, then sunset would come, then night. "No. Let it be, Shaaeh. I have enough."

"But not me."

He looked at her seriously. "Do you want to make those 'few hundred thousand years' hard for me? I'm happy. I'll do my best to make you happy...while I'm here."

She returned his look, equally serious, and said, "I've been thinking about the few months we had at the beginning. And about those centuries you slept away while I built the starship. It wasn't hard at all."

Didn't even miss me? No, don't be trivial now. You don't want to hurt her, now or ever. "And?"

She rolled off of him, sitting up, then standing, facing away, looking out over the world. Slim and beautiful. A creature of her own time. Or of any time. Certainly for all time to come.... "I am not immortal," she said, "not even to myself...especially not to myself."

I wondered. I wondered how she felt about that. Finite time. Never eternity.

And she said, "Nothing is eternal. One day the world will die. And the sun. The galaxy. The vast universe beyond."

He nodded to himself. "One day we'll both be dead and gone. I'll die. Some time later you'll join me. No Heaven, of course. But that night of nonbeing is the only eternity."

"You could last a lot longer, if you'd use the stasis device."

Heart suddenly pounding. "What good would that do?"

"Your absence is easier to take, if I know you will be back."

"So...." What? Of course. "Skip down through your life. Visit you like a traveling salesman....then what? Die together? Or as close as we can manage? Why not come with me?"

Wistful then. "I hadn't thought of that, but...I have a life that I don't want to give up. A life I *can't* give up. A life not so familiar to you...."

Of course not. How well I know the meaning in what you say. I am here...only because.... "I feel the same way."

She turned and looked down on him then, eyes calm, almost happy. "Travel down through the years of my life then, until my remaining time

is as short as your own. Visit with me from time to time. A few years here. A decade or two sometimes. Maybe even an occasional century or millennium. We'll...find things to do"

He nodded slowly. "And, when the time comes, perhaps we can voyage onward together?"

She smiled.

Smiled.

At him.

And they made love, one cold and brilliant day, atop the tallest mountain on Mars. Green Mars. Terraformed Mars. Changed Mars. Abandoned and turning red again....

And watched the sun go down on an artificial world circling a young star in the middle of a cluster only a few million years old, flat, blinding

disk in the sky, surrounded by a mist of reddish hydrogen, sun going down, stars coming out, hundreds of them, brilliant white sparks puncturing the night, Ike recalling a thousand Bonestell illustrations....

And sat waiting, holding hands, for a dying sun to explode....

And kissed in the darkness, on a world lost between the stars....

And lay naked on a cool, windswept hillside, looking up into a starless night, huddled together while a galaxy rose out of an ink-black sea, pale, like faint mist, a spiral void, lost on the edge of vision....

And, in the end, like sunset over distant mountains, then like the brilliant flash of a tropical dawn, they saw the universe die. ■



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NIGHTINGALE

Jeffries Oldmann

Illustrated by Kandis Elliot

His is the course of the angels, Babe

It was August, in the year 2000. In a few months, the Second Millennium would end.

It had rained, but not hard, in the morning. By early afternoon the sunlight had broken through, and the *autostrada* was a joy to drive, the tires biting surely on the barely wet tarmac. It was in the mountains, with the road swinging around innumerable deep curves, only two narrow lanes wide, a sheer rock face on one side, a drop-off into empty space on the other. Traffic was so light as to be almost nonexistent. He passed it easily. He drove with a little smile on his face, shifting up and down, working the wheel, happy in what he was doing.

He sang:

*Yours is more bitter than mine,
Babe,*

Yours is more bitter than mine.

*Mine is like sweet apple butter,
Babe*

Yours is the store-bought kind.

His name was Delbert "Duke" Littlefrench, and he had been, quite recently, a top Formula One driver. Could be again, if things happened to break that way. But at the moment he was near to crossing over into Italian Switzerland, and after that into other parts of Europe, and he was not at all sure he would be back on the Circuit ever. Nor did he much care, suddenly. Suddenly he had other things to do.

*Yours is more tacky than mine,
Babe,*

Yours is more tacky than mine.

*Mine is like mountain-made
liquor, Babe,*

Yours is the labeled kind.

Delbert "Duke" Littlefrench had never, to his knowledge, tasted moonshine whiskey, though it was a dis-

tinct possibility, considering the amount and variety of things he had drunk over the course of his career. He *had* tasted apple butter, aplenty, in the orphanage, where they used it as a substitute for real butter on most things. That was quite a few years behind him, too. Quite a few things were more behind him than remained in front of him, probably. But he liked the song in any case, it having occurred to him first in Turn One at Indianapolis Speedway the one year he had raced there, and by the time he had completed ten laps he had it all, and an angry earful on his helmet radio, too. But he liked to sing.

*Yours is more steady than mine,
Babe,*

*Yours is more steady than mine.
Mine is the course of the angels,
Babe;*

Yours is the Earthbound kind.



"Nightingale," Delbert "Duke" Littlefrench said to himself over the hum of twelve cylinders and the bass note of Pirellis on tarmacadam. "You're a fuckin' nightingale, Duke," and laughed. Truth to tell, he could barely stay on key, and his range was about an octave and a half, but that was part of the fun, when there was no one around to contradict him.

He went through Swiss passport control at the border, and realized he was hungry. He found a little village with a central square. He parked the car and found a *trattoria* and ordered espresso and some of those good rolls. He sat at an outdoor table and ate slowly, barely concealing a grin as he thought: "Jesus, Duke, you have come a long, long way from a red brick orphanage in Wilmington, South Carolina. And you don't ever have to go back."

He looked at his red Lamborghini, brand spankin' new, the engine cooling out and contracting various sheet-metal parts with faint spanging noises, and did grin. Jesus Christ! Just because it turned out he could drive a pickup on dirt better than anybody they could find to bring against him. The rest was detail — the dirt tracks, the paved tracks, the Dodges and the open-wheel cars, and all the years. The fact was, he had all this because he could drive a pickup on dirt better than anybody they could find to bring against him. That he had also learned to lower his voice and not get soup-bowl haircuts any more was basically irrelevant. He touched his ascot and shook his head; Jesus Christ!

"Is everything all right, *signore*?" asked the waiter.

"E bene, grazie," he replied. "E molto bene." And things were, indeed, very good. The thing he had coming up with Bruckner would be a blast. Or he could die, of course.

The thing with Bruckner had started in Montefiore, with Bruckner sitting opposite him at a table for two in a discreet corner of the Hotel Alvierto dining room. Bruckner was a very large man, who could not but-

ton his blazer, with massive hands and a few strands of graying black hair combed sideward over his domed head. "Duke," he said in his disproportionately high voice, "We've known each other a long time."

"Yes," Delbert "Duke" Littlefrench replied noncommittally. He would have said that he and Moss Bruckner, who was one of the people who had racing teams, had inevitably brushed elbows now and then over the years. But he had never raced for Bruckner and doubted that he would ever; Bruckner tended toward last year's cars, and desperate drivers. Still and all, when Bruckner had invited him to lunch.... He put a piece of *osso bucco* in his mouth and waited.

"I don't want you to race for me," Bruckner said, surprisingly. "You've got too much class."

"Thank you," Delbert "Duke" Littlefrench said after a brief pause.

"No," Bruckner repeated, "I don't want you to race for me. This is not an approach for that."

"Fair enough, Moss. What is it an approach for?" Delbert "Duke" Littlefrench almost said, but instead he had another portion of lunch and simply said "Ah."

Bruckner said in a quiet way: "I want you to steal something for me."

Delbert put down his fork.

"You didn't know I knew you steal, did you, Duke."

"I think you've got the wrong Delbert "Duke" Littlefrench."

"Well, that may be. The "Duke" I mean drives racing cars for a living. Do you know anybody like that?"

"What do you think I steal, exactly?"

"Jewels, cash, negotiable securities, things like that. Anything that can be carried easily. Your confederates do the actual stealing, and you run these items over national frontiers and sell them. Then you split the take."

"Confederates."

Bruckner smiled. "One of those confederates happens to be a confederate of mine, as well. It happens.

We've never conflicted, over these years, so neither I nor the confederate have seen the need to mention it. Until now."

"Ah. What do *you* do, Bruckner?"

"A little of this and that. Export/Import. You know."

Delbert "Duke" Littlefrench suddenly put together the few things he had heard about Bruckner—women, and dope, as might have been said for quite a few characters on the Circuit—and upgraded them from a private weakness to a commercial enterprise.

"Oh."

"Well, I have to support my racing team somehow." Bruckner smiled again, trying and rather failing for an air of guilelessness.

Delbert looked at him for a considerable period. Then he said: "Well, now, if I say No, you can't very well turn me in to the fuzz, can you?"

Bruckner reared back in his chair and put up his hands chest-high. "Oh, no, no, no, no, no!" he protested. "Never! Honestly, I am not a blackmailer. I don't have to be, in this case. When I tell you what I want you to steal, you will not be able to resist, I promise you!"

Delbert took the last bite of his lunch. "Tell me about it," he said. He picked up his glass of Orvieto and sipped from it, studying Bruckner over the rim.

"In the German Alps," Bruckner said, very carefully keeping his voice neutral, "for some years now, a special Army group has been researching and then building something. They are about to field trial it. Some of my confederates have infiltrated the group. I think we can steal it. I think we can steal it because the Army group thinks they are completely hidden, because they do not know some of its members actually belong to me, because they think like soldiers instead of thieves like us."

Delbert considered that. Then he said: "This thing the Army group is ready to field trial—what is it?"

Bruckner looked steadily at Delbert. "It is a large tank."

After a moment, Delbert said: "A large tank."

"You mistake my meaning. It is not merely large. It is *large*."

"How large?"

"How high is a three-storey house?"

Delbert's eyes widened. "That large?"

"No. A three-storey house does not quite come up to the axles on its driving bogeys."

Delbert said nothing for a moment. Then: "You're joking."

Bruckner smiled genuinely for the first time. "Hard to believe, isn't it, my friend?"

"You *are* joking."

Bruckner shook his head slowly back and forth.

"How large is it in total?"

"Several hundred meters high, and essentially the same in square meters in the floor plan. It's essentially invulnerable to anything less than an atomic bomb. And even then, I think I would rather make sure and use a fusion device."

"Jesus Christ. And where do I come in?"

"Duke, it needs a driver."

Delbert "Duke" Littlefrench finished his rolls but had a little coffee left. He sat in the square and contemplated the future. Bruckner had gone on to explain where the thing was, precisely, and the various moves his people would make to overcome resistance to the theft. That, when all Delbert's questions and objections had been met, sounded feasible after all. And the driving had been explained to him—that is, it required someone who could sit down in the cockpit and in a minimum amount of time figure out the controls. And there, Delbert "Duke" Littlefrench had no doubt; if it was meant for a man to drive at all, which it surely was, he could drive it.

The rest of it, though....

Where was he to drive it?

That would be explained to him later.

How long a drive was it?

That would also be explained.

When delivery was made, how would he be paid, and when?

On delivery, in Swiss Francs, deposited in numbered accounts, five million dollars to Delbert Littlefrench or any other name he chose to give the people with the money.

How would they get away from the delivery point?

Well, they would leave quite a trail, Bruckner admitted.

They would get away because it was a *fait accompli* and there was no point in prosecuting them; the tank would have been turned over to the purchaser and prosecuting the actual thieves would gain nothing. Of course, large parts of Europe would be closed to them. While the whole thing would be subject to news blackout and disinformation from all sides, it would not do for Bruckner or Delbert to ever, ever, break the law in any way again. But then, of course, they would not need to.

No, I suppose not, Delbert "Duke" Littlefrench had agreed. I suppose not.

They parted.

And now Delbert "Duke" Littlefrench paid his bill in the *trattoria* and left the square with a rumble from his exhaust pipes. And he was grinning and singing.

He left the car in a lockup garage in France and went the rest of the way by train and hired car, looping around the turns in the German Alps with a little less dash than if he had his Lamborghini, but that was all right. When he took the dirt road to the research facility, after a few kilometers he began to pass signs of tumult and disrupted organization. No one tried to stop him; no one was in any of the dummy houses built of cheap plywood and painted canvas at the foot of the principal mountain, and the mountain itself—whose footing had been cleverly built out with fiberglass and chicken wire—was emitting puffs of smoke here and there along its base. Bruckner's men were setting the stage properly, behind the false front. There was also a great amount of flame and noise; Bruckner's men were setting off pyrotechnics, as well.

He abandoned the car, and, wearing a senior officer's Army uniform, purposefully jogged the rest of the way to where a group of bewildered and befuddled soldiers was trying to peer through the dense smoke seeping out, dodging back whenever one of the flashpowder bombs went off. Some of the men had their rifles poised, and junior officers were attempting to make sense out of what was happening, but no one tried to stop him as he slipped an oxygen mask and infrared goggles over his face and cut a path through to the inside with wirecutters. No one tried to follow him; they were blind and breathless, and only grateful that someone with the proper equipment had finally arrived.

Inside in the hellish light, he saw the abandoned buildings of the actual village that had been there, and he saw the front of the tank, looming far over his head, its upper reaches disappearing into the dimness. A figure who had to be Bruckner, also in uniform, also wearing an oxygen mask and goggles, was standing at a ramp extended from a hatch, and beckoning to him. As he ran up, he could hear Bruckner laughing in high, yodeling bursts, excited and relieved that it was all going well so far, anxious to get Delbert on board so they could go on to the next phase.

"Hurry!" he exclaimed.

"Yes!" Delbert replied. "I am hurrying."

Inside, it was quieter. Inside, there was light from scores of overheads and computer monitors, and the smell of grease, and hurrying men of Bruckner's force, closing shutters. Inside, the tank was rapidly separated from the world as the last shutter was closed. And Delbert heard peculiar noises that meant the engines were starting—steam turbines, driven by a nuclear reactor.

He looked toward what had to be the nuclear control panel, and paused for a moment. "Hello, Alois," he said, and the confederate—who was a small, stocky, bald

man—looked at him and said: “Hello, Duke,” in a neutral manner, and then turned back to the controls.

But mainly for Delbert there was an elevator, with Bruckner crowding into it with him, that slid upward an unknown distance, and stopped, and put him out at the cockpit.

The cockpit featured two form-fitting seats, each with dangling crash straps, pedals and two floor levers, facing a display of video screens. It was about what he had expected. He slid into the left seat. Bruckner was fumbling at the other seat. Delbert said: “Just don’t touch anything.” There must have been something about the way he said it. Bruckner quickly put his hands in his lap.

Delbert “Duke” Littlefrench studied the control panel. He put his feet on the pedals. He grasped the steering levers. His head bobbed a little as his eyes ran down the control dials and knobs. His feet tentatively pushed the pedals. He worked the steering levers a fraction of an inch. “Hmm,” he said. At the same time, the tank resounded to the first outside blow. The Army had finally gotten going. Delbert disregarded it; either Bruckner was right about the vehicle being essentially invulnerable, or it made no difference what he did.

He looked again at a button labeled “Gang.” He looked at a dial labeled “K.” He pushed the button. The world moved. Smooth, powerful, and nearly silent, the world moved. The K dial went from 0 to 2. He depressed the right pedal, and the K dial went to 10, to 15, to 20. The aspect of the video monitors changed; suddenly they went from smoke and flame to bright, August light, and underfoot the village that had been put up to disguise the fact that the mountainside had moved outwards was crushed, and in the rear monitors the real mountainside was revealed with the shreds of the broken false mountainside hanging from it, and because Delbert had found the switch for the microphones—it said Mikrofonen—the noise of all this came into the cock-

pit, overlaid with a whine that mounted in intensity as he depressed the pedal further and the K dial went to 60. He grinned sideward at Bruckner, who was hanging on to the chair, as he corrected the direction of the tank a little. “Now what?” he said.

They had been running along the east bank of the Rhine at a steady 100 K for an hour and a half, smashing and splashing, listening to the sound of futile detonations. Without asking, Delbert spun them to the left and resumed running. Bruckner glanced at him. Delbert shrugged. “If we were going to France, we would have turned off long ago, and been there long ago. We’re not going to Germany, obviously. So it has to be Poland...or beyond. And this is the first clear chance to do that without running into mountains.”

Bruckner laughed quietly and nodded. “Quite so.” He was watching a formation of bombers trying to lay a pattern of high explosive in front of them and churn up the ground enough to make a tank trap. The pattern, however, was placed wrongly for their new course. In any case, Delbert doubted very much that it would have worked; the air force simply had an inadequate idea of how much ground was covered by the thing’s footprint; the air force had never heard of the tank until an hour and a half ago. Delbert’s grin widened as the ground became more open, and he depressed the pedal further, and the K went up to 150. He loved this; he purely loved it.

“They don’t dare to really try to destroy us,” Bruckner was remarking. “Knock us off the treads, yes. But they hope to get the tank back, somehow.” Bruckner smiled.

“They will hope that until we cross into Poland, an hour from now.”

“Yes, but that just opens a new set of problems. If they bomb in Poland. And the Poles—do they think this is a new invasion? Then why are the Germans trying to stop us? Are we going to sell it in Poland? They are too poor to be buyers. Will they fight us, or will they let us pass?



The Germans are undoubtedly negotiating with them even as we speak, but *do we care?* I don't think so."

"So we're going to the Ukraine. Or Russia."

"And what are the Germans going to do? Bomb there? Drop a fission bomb there?" Bruckner laughed a deep, satisfied belly laugh. "Again, I don't think so. Do you?"

"You really had it all figured out. Once we had the thing at all, we couldn't lose."

"Exactly, Duke. We can't lose."

"I take my hat off to you, Moss."

"Well, Duke, every once in a while an opportunity comes along." Bruckner's eyes twinkled and he chuckled.

There was a subtle change in the outside whine of the tank's drive. Delbert frowned and kicked the appropriate pedal, but the 150 K became 145. Bruckner straightened in his chair. "Alois," Delbert "Duke" Littlefrench said into the intercom.

"I know," Alois replied in an even voice. "I'm checking it. It can't be much, I don't think."

Bruckner began to chew on his lower lip a little.

In a moment, the speed had dropped to 142. And on the intercom, there came the faint sound of Alois shouting to someone. His voice rose at the end. Then he said into the intercom, with some urgency: "Duke! Stop!"

"What do you mean, Alois?" Delbert asked.

"Stop us! Stop us right away!"

"Christ!" Delbert worked the brake pedal and fought the steering levers as the tank tried to swerve. The speed dial went to 139, 125, 115, 98, 85...but it was taking a long time...70, 62, 50, 39...it was taking forever, and there were muffled shouts as men were hurled off their feet in various compartments, and Delbert was hanging in his straps, his eyes bulging, and Bruckner was open-mouthed, shouting "*schiesse!*" and the entire inside of the tank suddenly resounded with a metallic clattering as the speed wound down through 25 and 18 and 9 and finally stopped. The tank rocked viciously

on its suspension, and somewhere a man's cry was cut off abruptly.

"Jesus! Alois. What happened?" Delbert cried.

There was nothing for a moment. Then Alois said quietly: "Fuel spill. Somebody didn't quite secure the hatch, and there's fuel pellets all over the engine compartment."

Alois was a dead man. They were all dead men unless they moved fast, but Alois was a dead man anyhow.

"Everybody out! Emergency hatches! Out! Out! OUT!" Delbert "Duke" Littlefrench screamed into the intercom. He shot a glance at Bruckner. "An opportunity!" he said.

Bruckner was staring at him. Then he was up and pulling a red handle on a hatch, and the next moment he was diving through it, and the hatch was hissing shut behind him.

Delbert counted the lights blinking on the instrument panel in front of him. In a moment, everyone had left the tank except Alois and he.

Delbert depressed the driving pedal. The speed went to 30, to 45, and so on. He pivoted on the driving levers, the tank reversed course. Alois said: "OK, chief?" and Delbert "Duke" Littlefrench said "Uh-hunh," and they proceeded.

"Where are we going? Alois asked.

"Belgium," Delbert "Duke" Littlefrench replied. "I know the Queen. She offered a nice price. And it's a nice country." They rolled along in relative 150 K silence for a while.

Then Delbert "Duke" Littlefrench said: "Do you mind if I sing, Alois?" but he had started before Alois could offer an opinion.

Yours is more bitter than mine,

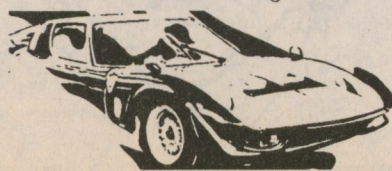
Babe,

Yours is more bitter than mine.

Mine is like sweet apple butter,

Babe

Yours is the store-bought kind. ■



OUR ARTISTS

Paul Lehr has done hundreds of paperback and magazine covers, including the ones for our second and fourth issues. His illustrations have appeared in publications around the world, including *Time*, *Fortune*, *Playboy*, *Reader's Digest*, *Omni* and *Analog*. 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 draws her principal salary as a biological illustrator for the University of Wisconsin, and provides illustrations for her own and others' science fiction stories. She is also Production Manager of this magazine. **Kelly Faltermäyer** was born in El Salvador in 1965, and came to the USA in October, 1980, learning the basics of English during his first year of American schooling. He is a graduate of the High School for Performing and Visual Arts in Houston, TX and subsequently attended the Otis Parsons School of Design in Los Angeles. He first came to public notice in L. Ron Hubbard's *Illustrators of The Future Contest* a few years ago. He works as Promotion Assistant for a chain of weekly newspapers in Houston. **Judith Holman** has an MFA, but refuses to give details. She chucked all that to illustrate science fiction. She is scheduled to have yet another show at Philcon, which, if it is like last year's, will only add to her luster. **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*. **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. Now she has won the 1993 Hugo Award as best fan artist. **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 non-fiction. ■

"I AM A CAMERA, MR. JOANS!"

Annis Shepherd

Illustrated by Peggy Ranson

And she was. She was

Not many people have a screwball psychic for a coffee lady. Yet thanks to the arbitrariness of life and the Federal ruling of forced hiring of all wards of state, we have that "privilege."

I did not ask to become involved in the events of the past few days. On the contrary, I tend to see myself as a spectator of life, a voyeur of the peculiarities of the human species—too lazy for the most part to become much involved with others unless necessity compels.

In this recent occurrence, however, I found myself caught up in the flow of a series of capricious events, so bizarre, it precluded disinterest. I was pulled willy-nilly into the radius of action of two such human peculiarities that only Fate could have forced us to meet.

There we were, strangers on a train who, for a few hours each day shared the same space, and whose only link was the incomprehensible powers of divination enjoyed by our apparent lunatic of a waitress.

Mad Helen, we call her. The appellation amuses her—most of the

time. Occasionally, however, a glimmer of pain fills those pale blue eyes, a look which shames me, especially after an insensitive passenger rebukes her for some unintentional clumsiness.

She meets us each morning at the Chicago-New York Commuter Underground at the ungodly hour of 5 a.m., smiling and weaving her head back and forth like a besotted snake. Most of the regular commuters in ComCar 4 ignore her. They accept her service because the law compels them to. Forty years ago, Mad Helen would have been put in an institution. Now, as a ward of the state, she is given a public job as therapy—to make her feel needed.

Personally, I like the woman. She has the quality of the truly idiosyncratic—that of being totally unaware of the reactions of others. One cannot help wondering how such a being evolved. Maybe her eccentricities are just a protective façade between a true original and a society of block-heads.

Mad Helen's most unusual characteristic is that she does not talk—

not in the usual way, that is. She has the unnerving habit of repeating movie titles as if they were conversation. In fact I have never heard her utter a single word or sentence of her own making.

Being an old movie buff, I recognize most of the titles she uses. Some date back to the '70s and '80s, others as far back as the '30s, so I am kept active trying to guess who were the stars of the movies she names. But her memory is impeccable. Why, only this week she almost stumped me, with her admonishment to each customer to "Laugh, Clown, Laugh."

Who is the philosopher here, I said to myself. It took me a whole evening at the library before I located the old Lon Chaney movie.

Her oddity of speech makes communication difficult. The majority of the commuters are indifferent, some like myself amused, and others irritated. I have often pondered over what mental block caused her to avoid the normal method of speech enjoyed by the rest of our society. Was she an autistic savant with a quirky sense of humor? If so, she appears to have one



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up on us. She is the only one laughing.

Why do I think she is psychic? Because the results of her predictions are such that I am left with no other conclusion.

I recall the first time I met my wife in the ComCar. To me she was just another pretty face in a crowd. Mad Helen, however, took one look at her then turned to me and bawled out,

"April Love! April Love!"

I can still feel the hot rush of embarrassment. Her next comment was worse.

"The Bells are Ringing!" (Cackle, cackle.)

I could have squashed that old face with the greatest of pleasure. Yet three months later, I was ecstatically announcing my engagement.

"I'm getting married, Helen," I told her.

She looked me over with these almost lidless eyes of hers and cooed, "Good News!"

I smiled. Trust her to find a movie title to fit the conversation. But my smile turned into a grin of awkwardness when she giggled,

"And Baby Makes Three!"

Now, if that did not squelch my excitement, nothing would have. I was not too keen for the whole car to know that Sue and I had bedded before we'd wedded. But the old woman was right. Three weeks later the doctor confirmed that Susan was pregnant.

After having two such major events predicted so accurately, I began to listen to Mad Helen's movie titles more closely.

Enter Mr. Joans!

Common name, strange spelling, strange man.

The first morning I saw him, I said to myself, this guy has got to be a foreigner. In his own way, he was as eccentric as Mad Helen was in hers.

It was obvious to me that the old woman also sensed the difference. Maybe that was why he avoided her.

I at least observed him unobtrusively. But not Mad Helen. She

would stand at her doughnut-shaped counter at the back of the car, eyes blinking in an odd, almost hypnotic, way as she stared at him. When handing him his free cup of coffee, she would cough and hem, as guttural as an old drunk. Often her hands would shake so much that the liquid would slosh into the saucer, earning her a glower or a bark of irritation.

For some unaccountable reason, she was terrified of him. And he knew it.

There was something about Mr. Joans that made one want to stare. The way his body was put together seemed all wrong, or should I say, out of proportion. Maybe it was his head. It was too big! It had a stretched look about it, almost as if he had been stuffed into a body that did not quite fit him. He had a habit of flaring his nostrils like a nervous filly before a first race, sensing pressure, sensing danger. Heck, whoever shuffled his genes around at conception sure lacked artistic vision, for he was the queerest-looking human I had ever seen.

It wasn't just his looks, but also his manner that made him seem ill at ease—an alien in an alien setting, you might say. He would stare at his newspaper, holding it out as others did, but with a look of complete bafflement on his face. Had he never seen a newspaper before? He also had an odd trick of balancing his coffee cup on his slab of a hand, as if trying to pluck up courage to drink from it.

Then, of course, there was his name. It was printed in bold black letters over his reserved seat. I have never seen a spelling like that. It is almost as if he, a foreigner, not knowing any better, had taken the most common name available and spelled it phonetically.

So, what with Mad Helen at one end of the car, and Mr. Joans at the other, I usually had plenty of amusing byplay to contemplate. The oddity of the former and the misogyny of the latter afforded me a good laugh.

The problem is, it isn't a laughing matter anymore.

* * *

The seriousness of the situation was not apparent to me until last Thursday. My mid-weekend was over, and it was my first day back at work. The prospect of five days of monotonous labor ahead of me was not encouraging. So I was looking forward to Mad Helen's cheery nonsense to lighten my spirits.

She offered me only silence and a vacant stare.

"Good morning, Helen," I said, feigning cheerfulness.

She rolled her eyes as if she were bringing me into focus. Then with a kind of gasp, she whispered,

"Hello, Dolly!"

I could not restrain a grin. I mean, I have a beard and I'm thinning on top. But my smile faded when I observed the tortured expression on her face and the way she struggled to control her trembling lips. Her hair, straw gray and untidy, accentuated the dryness of her skin.

"Is something the matter, Helen?" I asked.

She appeared not to hear me. Her pale eyes swept over me as if she had wiped a blackboard.

"Had a bad night? Is that it?"

Slowly she made me a part of her world. Shaking her head, she leaned towards me and muttered,

"They Shoot Horses, Don't They?"

The way she uttered those few words, pathetically begging for confirmation, unnerved me. I refused the sweet roll, and clutched my saucer to me, one hand stilling the shaky cup.

What on Earth was she trying to tell me? What was locked in that crazy old mind? Maybe I was just imagining that all these movie titles made sense. (Perhaps she bred championship mares and one had broken its leg.)

I took my place, too unsettled to do anything but stare at the steaming black liquid in the cup. The soft hum of the ComCar as it zoomed through the interstate tunnel mesmerized me. The woman is crazy, I told myself, over and over.

I looked up as Mr. Joans put his paper aside and rose to get a refill. For a big man, he is incredibly silent,

his moves smooth and balanced. There is a lightness in his stride that has the effect of making him seem weightless, almost as if gravity had no effect on him.

He approached the counter, his mouth pulled tight in his habitual controlled expression. Sipping my coffee, I watched them. I was curious to see the effect his proximity had on the old woman. Her cheeks, creased and pendulous, filled out in anxious excitement like a ruffled wood pigeon.

"I Am A Camera!" she told him, barely above a whisper.

Mr. Joans lifted his gaze impatiently.

"Damn you, woman. Give me some more coffee and leave me alone."

His indifference worried her.

"I AM A CAMERA!"

"You can be a projector for all I care." His voice cracked with the coldness of ice. Impatiently he put down his empty cup and returned to his seat.

Her words obviously meant nothing to him, but they disturbed me. What was she trying to tell us now? If only she would speak good old common-sense English for once! But she continued to gaze at him, a pathetic droop to her rather pendulous lips.

When we reached New York, I could understand why Mr. Joans was only too eager to escape from the old woman's stare. He had jumped off the car and was hidden in the crowd long before any of us had even gathered our things together. As I left, Mad Helen caught my attention.

"Goodbye, Mr. Chips," she said, but her voice lacked its usual good humor.

Friday wasn't much better. Mad Helen managed to draw Mr. Joans' attention once again by blurt-ing out, "I Am A Camera!"

Mr. Joans shifted in his seat nervously. I still could not understand why she kept repeating that movie title of Isherwood's Berlin Stories. Of what significance was it to either of them?

Mad Helen raised her fist in desperation.

"Believe In Me!" she said.

Mr. Joans, knowing that her words were aimed at him, slammed his paper down on his knees and glared at her.

"Sitting Target!" she said.

I recalled the old Oliver Reed movie, and wondered if Mr. Joans had ever seen it.

Receiving no response, Mad Helen again pleaded,

"I AM A CAMERA!"

The stridency in her voice brought her many an irritated stare.

"Sunday, Bloody Sunday!" Her head bobbed up and down urgently.

I wanted to laugh as I saw the large man's expression, but stifled the desire in time. I didn't know who I pitied the most.

Yesterday being Saturday, the ComCar was half empty. The hour taken to get to work seemed endless. The old woman's distress was so blatant that it was positively embarrassing. Most of us kept silent, looking anywhere but at Mad Helen or Mr. Joans. She tried again and again to communicate her fear to him, but he ignored her.

"Eyes in the Night!" she said. A spoon was slapped down on the counter.

"One Spy too Many!" A fork skidded across the floor.

"36 Hours."

The man next to me murmured furiously, "This is too much. I'm going to report her."

Mad Helen restlessly let her hands wander over the upside-down cups, picking up spoons, then clattering them back onto the counter. Finally she brought her hands down hard, palms flat, as if to emphasize the sudden upward jerk of her head.

"Alien!" she roared. The explosive word made the resultant silence electrifying.

"Sunday, Bloody Sunday!"

I could not refrain from shuddering. Her bull-like tones filled the car, an exclamation mark of sound that hurt my ears. It was obvious to me that the poor woman had something urgent to say. Her inability to communicate with us was a terrible thing to witness.

His face, pale with barely controlled fury, Mr. Joans rose out of his seat like some looming shadow from a nether world. Raising his arm as if it were a sledge hammer, he roared, "I'll bloody you if you don't stuff that insane mouth of yours. I'll bloody it good."

Mad Helen stared back at the enraged man, her eyes unblinking.

A few men, myself included, slowly moved between them. I refuse to think of what would have happened if we had not reached our destination just then.

Mad Helen was silent for once. She watched us move hastily out of the sliding doors onto the platform. Looking back, I saw her strike the counter with a closed fist, then strike it again, and again, and yet again.

That evening when we boarded the ComCar for our homeward journey, I was relieved to see that Mad Helen was absent. The replacement told me the old lady was sick, but I surmised that she was avoiding Mr. Joans. I could not help wishing that she would stay away long enough for the whole situation to be forgotten.

But Sunday morning, there she stood, a lonely and unhappy figure. She concentrated on her job, hands trembling, without mumbling a single movie title. Mr. Joans did not join the line for refreshments, but hunched his oversized body into his corner as if it was his last defense.

Later, as I returned my empty coffee cup, I felt compelled to comfort her. There was a pathetic desperation in the way she clutched her apron, eyelids flickering as if locking back tears.

"Helen, don't take it to heart," I told her softly. "You're a good friend. We all know that."

I wished I had kept my mouth shut. What was I, only a spectator, becoming involved for? Where was my famed superficiality? But there was something so utterly sad about the woman, that suddenly it was important for me to comfort her.

Mad Helen drew in her breath sharply. It was like the gradual bursting of a dam, the release of her pent-

up frustration. Slowly, rhythmically, she began to rock on her heels, her mumbled words so soft only I could hear them.

"I Am A Camera! Alien! Alien! Alien! Sunday, Bloody Sunday! Too Hot To Handle!"

She was a witch singing a lullaby to her imaginary brood. She repeated the words, emphasizing certain syllables with an expulsion of breath.

Hurriedly, lest further explosions take place, I bent over the counter and whispered, "Helen. Listen. I understand what it is you are trying to tell him." This wasn't strictly the truth, but damn it, I knew something was up.

At first I did not think she had heard me. Then, hesitantly, she glanced at me, a wary joy flooding her face.

"They Only Kill Their Masters!"

I stared at her. I remember thinking idiotically, surely that can't be the name of a film. Could it? Knowing her, I was sure it was. She repeated the title urgently, loudly, as if it was of deadly importance.

Mr. Joans looked up, a frown accentuating his intent gaze. Something about what she had said had meaning for him, because instead of anger, his expression held fear.

What did she mean? I looked at both of them, and for the first time felt an outsider.

Never have I wished more strongly for the gift of tongues. She was psychic, I knew it, and I felt pleasure in the knowledge.

Who was he? Master of what? Or was he out to kill someone? Was that why she was terrified of him? I could believe it, since even I got the shivers looking at him. There was that touch of cruelty about his expression, an almost inhuman indifference to those around him, that was a warning signal.

I felt a prickle of fear heat my face. Larger than life, the silence between us had sound. They looked at each other, those two, aliens both in an alien landscape.

The hum of the car as it finally drew to a standstill, the swish of the doors sliding open, reminded me it

was time to leave. I straightened, telling myself it was time for a shrink session. What a fool I was! This was Sunday, and so far nothing had happened to warrant Mad Helen's pathetic fears.

As I returned to collect my briefcase and hat, I saw Mr. Joans move towards the exit.

There was a moment of silence. Then. With a deafening roar, in one last desperate attempt, Mad Helen poured out her knowledge.

"I AM A CAMERA, MR. JOANS!"

The words echoed in my ears. It couldn't be!

I swung towards her, dropping my hat in my excitement. It was the first time I, or anyone for that matter, had ever heard her say a person's name, the first time she had ever formed a complete sentence of her own.

Her face seemed to glow with excitement as the realization of what she had done penetrated her mind. She had spoken. I exulted with her. What unearthly fear had caused her to change, had caused her to finally break her crazy speech barrier?

Suddenly her excitement turned to an expression of horror as if at some inner knowledge.

"THEY ONLY KILL THEIR MASTERS!"

The plaintive bellow, mournful, warning, rang out above the heads of those passengers pressing towards the exit.

Mr. Joans heard her.

Towering above the others, he turned his large equine features towards the old woman. A flash of comprehension crossed his face. It was as if those titles of hers synapsed in a moment of thought, to form a meaningful verbal jigsaw that only he could understand.

With a cry of alarm, he reached toward us, trying to push his way back into the car. But there were too many disembarking passengers preventing him. Slowly, inexorably, Mr. Joans was pushed between the doors, out onto the platform.

Maybe it was the awful desperation in his gaze, the mute pleading of

his twisted mouth, that woke the humanist in me. The terror he was experiencing had to be real.

I found myself pushing my way through the impatient throng, reaching out my hand in an effort to pull him back. Instead of helping, however, my presence increased the barrier even more.

It was then that his expression began to change.

His gaze focused on something beyond my vision. His mouth contorted with rage as if seeing a hated enemy, and his eyes were the eyes of a trapped animal rejecting death.

Finally his control broke. He lashed out with his arms, the weight of them striking the surrounding travelers like an axe. Whatever was inside him, whether rage, fear, or demon, was determined to get out. His skin lost all vestige of color, and his jaw became slack.

"No!"

The word shot from his mouth with piercing intensity. He lunged backwards, away from me, from the train, from whatever it was that he saw.

A backwash of people filled the space he left, preventing me from seeing anything but his face, pale and distorted, and looming like an alien flower above the crowd.

He was now at the far side of the platform. I felt as if caught in a Van Gogh landscape of swirling colors, a crazy mishmash of energy gone wild. People were turning like predators hunting for the source of disturbance that would be their thrill for the day. They could sense his fear, smell it even, and it drew them. Crowds are like that, driven to savor the grotesque, and I was part of the crowd.

Mr. Joans waved a threatening arm as if at an unseen foe closing in. They were there, I knew it, just as Mad Helen had predicted. I could hear her behind me, singsong style, repeating, repeating, "Sunday, Bloody Sunday."

Who were they? Who was he? I searched frantically for some sign, but all I could see was that face, no longer human, staring at us, at me, at

OUR WRITERS

Mad Helen, as if we were his last successor.

People encircled Mr. Joans, avidly watching, avidly hoping for the worst.

Mad Helen's words kept echoing through my mind. Alien!

Alien! They only kill their masters! Didn't the ancient Greeks sacrifice their kings to mollify the gods? Was Mr. Joans a sacrifice on the run? I shuddered and my pulse raced in anticipation of what my thoughts predicted. I was not a voyeur any longer. I was part of it, part of this surging humanity, part of life, and I could not turn back.

Mr. Joans' mouth opened in a snarl of denial, as if anticipating the fall of his own special sword of Damocles.

Something struck the side of his head, raising a hideous welt which stretched from temple to mouth. Blood oozed from one nostril. Passengers stood by, intent, fascinated.

Again he was struck.

And again.

And again.

His huge head appeared to collapse inward at the jawline. Like a boxer in a slow-motion movie, the blood spurted up and out in a crimson arc, spattering the bystanders before him.

Sunday, Bloody Sunday, Mad Helen's warning spun a crazy path through my thoughts. Where were they, these invisible assailants?

Mr. Joans was hardly recognizable. The shape of his face, its color, became so fearful and anomalous, that I struggled to wrench away my gaze. But I was held by more than horror.

His assailants (God, maybe there weren't any, and it was all my imagination) had hold of his body now. Up into the air, his body arched in a perfect curve, only to crash against a station pillar. His body buckled, embracing the stone with a meaty sound.

I felt my gorge rise and could hardly breathe. Each detail had a technicolor brilliance, almost a cartoon effect, making me wonder if in some incredible way this wasn't happening.

Mr. Joans was crawling now like a crushed snail, leaving a path silvered with saliva from his broken mouth. Never a scream had he given, just grunts of pain, inhuman in sound.

If he was an alien as Mad Helen intimated, he was magnificent. And I? Insignificant was the word. I was the detail in a grand design that was meaningless to me.

I have never cried, but I wanted to just then.

Each inch he pulled his mutilated body made me realize that we wouldn't recognize an alien if it walked among us. Who in that group was a murderer, a psychotic? Impossible to tell.

Mr. Joans had reached the far edge of the platform. The crowd had held back. Like me, they were voyeurs but did not recognize it.

The throb of an approaching ComCar from a different direction lifted the moment into a crescendo of anticipation.

Mr. Joans hefted himself up into a sitting position, one arm raised—whether in accusation or forgiveness, I could not tell.

Then, like a light blinking out in the darkness, his body tipped backwards in front of the decelerating train. The massive car slid to a halt. The silence that followed was worse than a scream.

I turned and looked at Mad Helen. Would she find an appropriate movie title for an epitaph? Somehow, I knew that she would not. Movie titles were not necessary any longer.

What the crowd did, I do not know. I have the horrible fear that they would go about their business, not really accepting the reality of what they had seen.

But she knew the truth of it, more so than I. She stood there, a part of the furniture of her life, of mine. She adjusted the apron strings tightly behind her, as if she had to tie up a loose end to the morning.

I could not swear to it, but I thought there was a hint of moisture at the corners of her eyes. She hesitated a moment as if remembering, then wearily said to no one in particular,

"I am a Camera, Mr. Joans!" ■

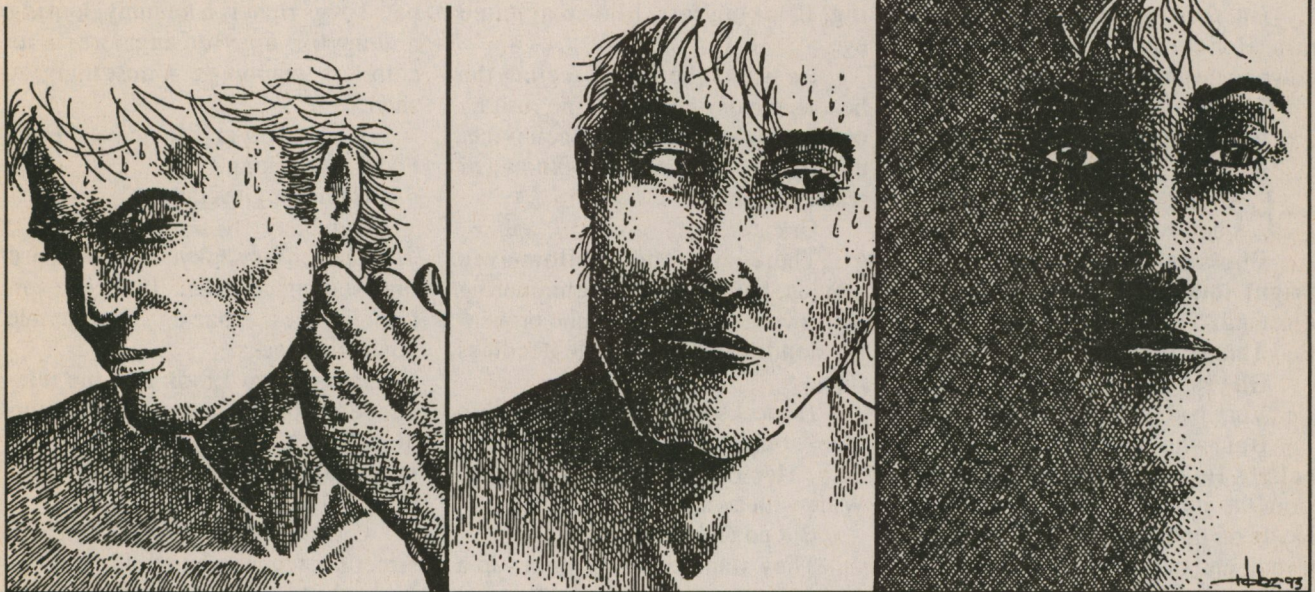
William Barton is an engineering technician and educational software developer. He has been writing professionally for twenty years. He has written five science fiction novels, published by Ace, Bantam, and Doubleday. His most recent is *Dark Sky Legion* (Bantam Spectra, 1992). His nonfiction has appeared in such diverse periodicals as *Ad Astra* and *Commodore Magazine*. **Nina Kiriki Hoffman** is the sixth of seven children and grew up in Southern California. One of her day jobs involves channeling other writers, most of them still living. Another involves selling their works to the general public. Presently, she resides in Eugene, Oregon, with four cats, a big TV, and a mannequin. She is also one of the finest writers on Earth. **Dennis Minor** is a professor of English at Louisiana Tech University. He is also one hell of a table tennis player. "The Search for P. B. Doghammer" represents a portion of a novel. **Jeffries Oldmann** has never sold any fiction before. But in the 1950s he had a distinguished career as an automotive journalist, contributing to *Car Speed and Style*, *Custom Rodder*, and *Cars* magazine. For the latter, he wrote his well-known "Chipping Gears" column. **John W. Randal** made his first sale in 1989, to *Aboriginal Science Fiction*. Later that same year, he won first place in the Writers of The Future contest. Since then, he has sold eleven stories. He is 29, and lives in Pittsburgh, PA., where he is at work on a novel. **Robert Reed** was the first Grand Prize winner in L. Ron Hubbard's Writers of The Future Contest. Since then, he has published stories in *F&SF*, *Asimov's*, *Universe 16*, and elsewhere. He has also published five novels, of which the latest is *The Remarkables*, from Bantam. He is working on three other books. **Annis Shepherd** has lived in England, Asia, and Australia. She currently teaches school in Arizona, and a few years ago placed a story in the Writers of The Future contest. She does not write much, but when she does, the result is memorable. **K. D. Wentworth** lives in Oklahoma and got her start in the Writers of The Future contest in 1988. She has sold short fiction to *Alfred Hitchcock's Mystery Magazine*, *Pulphouse*, *Aboriginal SF*, and *The Magazine of Fantasy and Science Fiction*, among others. Her novel, *The Imperium Game*, will be published as a Del Rey Discovery in February, 1994. ■

UNREADABLE EXPRESSIONS AT DUSK, HERE, BY A LAKE

John W. Randal

Illustrated by Bob Hobbs

Aliens were attempting to communicate. Attempting



Five seconds.

The sky is sucking toward twilight, that heavy violet sear—widening. He sits back on the bench, head going back farther still. Oh it aches.

Looking forward again; for a moment everything goes into high-speed. Glittery ripples jiggle the lake. Overhead, a strobe-flashing knot of tiny lights skims wickedly by, cutting the fast-dimming air. People, smeared blurs of blackened indigo, flick along the graveled path.

Snick—and it's gone-to-normal again.

Then back.

He sighs. Wishes that Cyndi had held him longer. He could cry now, of that he is sure. Just a bit more, and he could cry.

And it *is* happening.

Oh, yes.

Like they said it would.

Cyndi had held him—that is true. In the room. It was hot. Her arms soft and cool against his skin. A fan in the corner, flicking....

He remembers how the darker hair, underneath the gold-white of her dye job, had been damp. The heat of his skin had made her sweat. The hair at the nape of her neck had been moistened, darkened by it.

And after: him in the bathroom, head in the sink. The fizzing rush of cold water—not cooling.

Cyndi on the rumpled bed, arms around her knees. One lean, bony-wristed hand pointing the remote at the fizzing (like the water) TV. Flick.

And Guns 'N Roses were wailing from static-scarred video. On and on.

The water ran over his head, into ears and mouth. Coils of temporary cool, heating quick. It wouldn't stop.

He was crying, but the tears were lost in the pouring water. Down the drain.

They said it would be random.

And Cyndi just looked at him then, as he came out of the bathroom. Her shadowed eyes tired and hurt. Her white tee-shirt hung limp on her lean body. He touched her shoulder and she shivered, a contrary reaction to his heat. Her skin was so cool.

So white.

The tabloids had screamed, Intimate Invasion! That phrase stirred uneasily within his mind, as he looked at pale Cyndi.

From high above, the invisible passage of some aircraft shivered the room with its discarded sonic boom.

Like thunder.

She lights a cigarette. The gray smoke curls.

With a hitch in her voice, Cyndi turns to him and says,

"It's...it's a goddamn *virus*. That's—" her smooth brow twists. She rubs a jittery hand across her eyes. Looks away, voice hoarse: "That's all."

Intimate invasion.

He takes a lost step, closer to her. His heated fingers on her shoulder.

Cyndi drops both hands to her lap, suddenly looking back to him, her face wet. "But what'll happen to you?" Her plaintive voice dies out in the bland room, sliding under the intermittent TV static. The hiss of air conditioning.

He sees her face, narrow and thin. Her eyes are tight, lips turned down at the corners. He sees.

The expression.

It doesn't make—

—Hours. Could it be, hours before?

Hours before, on the news. TV-bright images of bad and worse, glowing. Then on radio, and more. Bad Thing Coming.

Oh yes.

Very bad, indeed. For some.

But who can spare time for belief? He doesn't. He walks away from the storefront, humming a tune. Heels on concrete. He's thinking of Cyndi, and of tonight. Smiling.

Five hours later, he starts getting hot. Ignores it.

A half hour later still, he can't.

The first expression is a laugh, graveyard amusement. Bravado. Yeah, sure—no way. He doesn't believe it.

Then he could cry—because it does get worse.

And tears do come....

Staring into his bathroom mirror, he sees a pale face with smudges for eyes, a darkening jawline and upper lip. And sweat, beading.

Preceding Cyndi's question by several hours, he asks his wan reflection, "What will happen to me?" His voice catches.

He's not a bad man. Never was. He lived, worked—did what he could. He never hurt people. Never tried.

That TV, that radio—they swim into mental focus. The tabloids.

No.

And the shower is as cold as he can get it. But it doesn't help.

A way of knowing.

It gets worse. Of course, like they said.

In the middle of his room, he stands—locked. He doesn't know what to do. His friends always joke with him about that—his passive nature. What was it Jeane said?

Such an *observer*.

He holds his face and sobs.

Outside, the late afternoon is glowing. The sun seems odd. Flickering. Blinking fast, like an agitated eye.

He walks the street, feeling the heat as the day cools. People rush by or saunter—not caring or believing, mostly. How many even know, or watch the news?

Or care.

There is one hollow-eyed woman, hair limp, flesh glimmering with sweat. She looks around brokenly, standing still amid the heedless flow.

He seeks her eyes. Seeks within them some sort of connection, kinship. Her pupils are darkly open. Wide with awareness. Inhabitation.

But no understanding.

They stand like two stones in a rushing stream. Lost. Meaning wavers and is carried away. The woman's face randomly jerks and stretches, mimicking the expressions of those inertia-blind pedestrians moving around her.

He just stares and stares and stares....

Later, he finds that he has been moving for some time, without being aware of it. The woman is long gone.

Aid centers.

Yes. Please.

Some help, some care.

He goes to one, hastily set-up in an empty supermarket.

Inside, they sooth him, inject him to make him happy once more—for his time. They talk: glowing words like, honor, greater good and sacrifice.

They tell him that they will never forget him. And won't he fill out this form for archival purposes? They

mispronounce his name. They pat his shoulders. They smile.

All for the best. Think of the experience!

He can't understand them, can't see how they could be so empty of emotional resonance. He leaves. Walks.

Whites-out while in motion.

He comes back in a museum. In all his years in the city, he has never come here. He's in the Archaeology wing, looking at the gold taken from a king's elaborate tomb. His eyes are hot. To his right is a mummy, looking nothing like a person anymore, in its colorless wrappings. A dust thing. A shell.

With a soft cry, he leaves. Fast. Footfalls clicking.

He never goes there.

Cyndi.

The call is shaky. He has a hard time staying coherent. Tears just spit from his eyes. Amazing. They tumble down his cheeks.

People don't look into the telephone booth, as they pass. They studiously don't look. Not their problem—just a news thing. A TV thing—distant and unreal.

On the way to Cyndi's place, a street preacher in worn-thin clothes grabs hold of his wrist, with an insect-like grip. The man's eyes glitter jubilantly, like glass reflecting jittering flames.

"Oh the *joy*, brother!" the scarecrow calls. "Oh the joy of your calling! Have *They* arisen within you yet?"

He pulls away from the black-toothed man, stumbling back a pace. Staring. He's so hot. He's crying. He raises both hands, palms out. His face twists. Can't you see? Can't you see me? Can't you understand?

"Hasten the Rapture, brother!" exclaims the street preacher jubilantly. "Deliver us all!"

He runs away from the staring, capering wretch. It gets so hot....

Cyndi holds him in the room—after and before. The during is a blur of skin and greater heat, descending. She is so cool.

Coming out of the bathroom, the water evaporating from his flushed skin:

"It isn't fair," she tells him.

He can't speak, though he wants to—desperately needs to. He was at work today. He was a person today. How can he tell her? How can he make it real to her?

Mutely, he sits on the corner of the bed, next to Cyndi. Puts a hand on her smooth thigh. She looks away, picks up the remote.

The TV.

In sears and blurs of static, excited commentary. What will the benefits be? How can the world imagine?

Experts: A revolution in all we are.

VIPs: Oh if only I were one! What I would give for that honor!

Sage nods. Yes, to be Chosen.

We don't pretend to understand it. Oh no. But the wonders you will see, the adventures you will surely enjoy! And a sweet, soft smile. Oh citizens, you lucky few, our hearts are with you.

And to *You*. To our new friends. Welcome. Welcome all.

And now, sports.

"IT ISN'T FAIR!" Cyndi cries, throwing the remote at the TV. The small plastic thing shatters. She jerks to her feet. Eyes running wet, she looks at him. Accusing without thought.

But why?

Then she leaves. Like he is to blame.

He stands, heating. Cyndi?

Gone.

He looks brokenly around the room. Should he hate Them?

There's nothing to hate. No ships, no armies...no scary figures. He lays the hot palms of his hands over his hotter eyes. What did Cyndi, dear cool Cyndi, say? It's just a goddamn virus. His weak laugh chokes into a sob. He drops his hands. The room is empty. She's still gone.

The TV is playing to nothing when he leaves the room. He doesn't bother shut the door—just walks away.

For a moment, things slow to a sub-visible crawl. He sees a bird, stopped still in the humid, dead air. Then things are back, and he's in the park, walking. The day is dying. He looks to the sky.

Aliens.

Hah.

Prime time bullshit. Who cares? No one. But—

A way of knowing...

His heart thrums like a wire. His inhabited heart. His inhabited eyes. He thinks of his family—it would be so nice to talk to them. Or just to see....

So many other things, so many other worries—why should people care? They walk past him without seeing. It isn't real to them. Just TV. A glow on the tube, words, empty of import. Too abstract.

He sits.

The lake shimmers. Late workers or lovers stroll by. A beautiful Puerto Rican mother is playing with her little child. Toss the brightly colored ball. Back and forth.

And again.

He watches.

And feels that this can't be real.

Please, he prays, Let this not be true. Just a dream, just a dream—a thing on TV. Repeating it over and over can almost make it go away. *Please.*

But in his mind, he sees the images again. Scan-line mosaics of cathode light, painted on the TV. And smooth commentary.

Discovery.

Not alone.

Exchange of information.

Aliens. He cries. There *are* tears left. They fall.

The scene before him grays out for a moment, then goes into a reverse image negative. He just stares, using up his water.

To know by becoming.

Becoming him. To see this. To be this.

But what of him? The scene is back to normal. The lake going deep blue-purple in the seeping dusk. The water ripples smoothly, cooling. And the young mother—she bends to her

child, her baby. Her face lifting, changing.

To him, suddenly, her expression is unreadable. He doesn't understand. None of the people—

—Lips turning up or down, eyes opened wide or half closed, the wrinkles there and there deepened, or stretched taut. The faces of the people, their motions.

He can't see, can't *understand*, them at all.

And *They* are talking to him. From so very far away (and yet so intimately close, as well).

The Earth is an egg, within its warm amniotic sac, They breathe to him, from within his ears. The Black is so tight with frequencies and drifts and eddies. Five more seconds, They tell (know) him.

Until it is complete. The heat.

He's looking in and out, remembering all the things that made him. Bad and good. And it isn't fair—because he has done no wrong. But on TV, and far far beyond, they don't care. There have to be conduits of contact. Intimate habitations for our new friends. So that They can know, and share, by becoming. What better way?

(No...no, it's not just a goddamn virus. It's Them.)

And people walk along the lake path. Some don't know—some will never know. It's all an Event that passed them by. A story missed on the news that week.

Discovery and contact. Free-exchange.

Five seconds to intimate invasion—to extraterrestrial possession. Via virus.

Sitting, his pupils opening darkly, he thinks the last moments away. Where will I be? Why have You done this?

Then the infection is completed. And he knows.

For a second.

He looks at the twilight lake. Here. There are people nearby. He sees their faces. But he doesn't understand.

Their expressions.

Or them.

Any more. ■

THE SEARCH FOR P. B. DOGHAMMER

Dennis Minor

Illustrated by Margaret Ballif Simon

Mr. Herbert Alloy, robot school teacher, set out to find the missing Doghammer

Mr. Herbert Alloy, robot school teacher, spring graduate of AI U, newly assigned to PS No. 1953, anticipated another great day of teaching; his charges sat motionless (as usual), having just come from the Preparation Rooms (one each for male and female) where they had been stripped, showered, dried, scanned, and issued paper uniforms and canvas shoes. Then, they had each picked up a sack of Guaranteed Teacher-Safe school supplies for the day—a soft plastic slate and blunt marker stick, a couple of armored holobooks keyed to the ID cards chained around their necks so as to be unremovable, and a set of cardboard filter glasses for viewing the various holomaps and 3-D movies.

Mr. Herbert Alloy could hardly contain himself; he was participating

in the great call to action that the University instilled into each proto-teacher's circuits: MAN MUST BE EDUCATED SO THAT HE CAN BE BROUGHT INTO BALANCE WITH THE UNIVERSE, the educator's equivalent of a fundamental robotic truth embedded deeply in his chips: SYMMETRY IS ALL.

Indeed, his multi-channel voice chip was about to burble happily, "My, oh my, oh my, but this is going to be a great day," when he noticed two anomalies: one of the "Occupied" lights was not lit and, at that same location, a red warning light glowed, signifying that the belting system had not received the correct resistance to its tugging. For the first time, he looked up at the students and saw, to his electronic chagrin, that one of the seats was indeed unoccupied.

Internally, logic circuits energized and warmed, history data was reviewed, and the visual sensors were given a quick wipe by nanowipers concealed in his metal eyebrows and then tested for acuity, depth perception, and color differentiation.

History confirmed it: no student had ever before been absent from the class of Mr. Herbert Alloy. The visual tests were all negative. There was no fault in the seeing; instead, someone was missing. Then the logic circuits cut in, their electrons now bumping into each other in an atomic panic, and declared an emergency.

Mr. Alloy paused, frozen for a moment as these events transpired internally; then he acted:

"Number 15, where are you? Where are you, 15? I know you are here somewhere."



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There was no answer. The students sat in their customary dazes, the question not being directed to any one of them.

"Fifteen! Are you outside? In the Prep pen? I'll take a look."

Mr. Alloy turned on the monitor with which he watched them all in the showers and supplies lines.

"Scan! Scan!" he cried. "Infrared! Magnification! Aural detection! Everything up!"

He watched. He listened. The room in the monitor spun in front of him, glowed red and blue, zoomed back and forth. A faint hum came from the speaker.

"Nothing," he said. "Where can he be? No one ever misses this class. It is impossible to miss this class. Students are not allowed to miss this class. Therefore, 15 is here."

He looked here; he listened there. He even considered coming down from the shielded teaching platform into the class itself, but his safety overrides short-circuited that idea; a basic precept of education hard-wired into him was that one must never come within reach of a human student, even in the controlled and antiseptic conditions of the school room. He remembered the horrid training film he had seen in one of his education classes: two bullies with hammers assaulting a poor little librarian robot who had let herself get careless one day, coming out of her

armored glass booth to help a human print his name. At the end of the film, two hairy humans were cutting chunks out of her electronic controls to trade to equally hairy rocket pilots for Martian "grass." Their maniacal laughs still echoed down his data bank.

But there was no number 15 to be found; the room looked...unbalanced; symmetry had been lost.

As this last piece of data sunk into his analytical matrix, his limbs began to twitch; his sensors flashed black and white images into his intelligence module; his power supply surged; he tilted from side to side and, for a moment, was frozen in place.

A couple of students, sensing that he was having some sort of trouble, tentatively pulled on their harnesses; the response was a quick jolt of electricity applied to their crotches by the chairs themselves, their programs and prime directives being unaffected by Alloy's paralysis.

But then his override circuits, dusty and unused since his manufacture and initial programming, asserted themselves. A Very Large Scale Integrated Circuit took over. It first took control of his mechanical systems; then it slowed the electronics that were running amuck in Alloy's head.

After Alloy had regained control of himself, an embedded expert sys-

tem ROMed into the VLSIC swung into action, setting up a series of imperatives for solving the problem; they were displayed in nanotype in Alloy's left and right visual fields:

Attention: Mr. Herbert Alloy

**To restore symmetry,
the following actions are
acceptable:**

=>> **Replace**

=>> **Add**

=>> **Subtract**

Herbert Alloy, now in command of himself, considered these alternatives. He knew that if he were to Replace to restore symmetry, he must have absolute regularity. So, he reviewed the record of 15. Fifteen was male; 23 years old; of mixed breed; lived in a small apartment with 12 brothers and sisters; had no criminal record; was a registered Social Segment member; and had never missed classes during his 18 years of public school education. There was a note, probably from his parents, directing the school to keep him until he had to be released.

Well, he thought, that was his job, wasn't it? He must mellow the social misfits until they could be turned loose on society. At least, when they were in his class, they weren't out trying to burn holes in the armored transportation tube he used to cross the outer city as he came



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from the far-off suburbs into the inner city to work.

But 15 had spoiled the symmetry.

So, Herbert Alloy began to scan the records, to see if there were an exact demographic Replacement available.

There wasn't; at that age, they were either in school or in the outer city—laser-bait, those out there were called: miles overhead, above the roiling layers of smog that blanketed the city, the omnipresent Prometheus multi-laser probed the landscape, keeping order in its own way. Remotely directed, its tongues of flame flickered down on unauthorized disturbances; it might well have already fried 15 as he undertook some nocturnal expedition.

Herbert Alloy considered that possibility. If it were true, then he would have to make do without 15. And, of course, Addition was also impossible because of the lack of an exact replacement.

That seemed to leave only one viable alternative—subtraction. Herbert hated to think of it; his whole educational rationale and directives were opposed to such gross changes. He looked down at the console, at the button marked "Social Exigency." He twiddled the dial next to it, watching the disintegrator nozzle point at one numbered chair after another. Of course, the students couldn't tell; they were blinded by the dazzling light that covered the bottom half of the teacher's station.

But whom would he exigencize? It would have to be the exact opposite of 15, so that with both missing, social (and aesthetic) symmetry would be restored. He scanned the class list and histories. Just as he suspected, there was no exact opposite. Alloy knew that, without an exact opposite in a class balanced to the nanodegree to be sociologically acceptable, any exigency-based rectification would be societally and educationally catastrophic. In other words, just as exact replacement was out, so was disintegrator-generated Subtraction.

What to do, what to do? He was at the end of the list; he could not

Replace nor Add nor Subtract; even rearrangement was impossible because of the configuration of the classroom: so many student stations demanded so many students—just that many, no more or no less—a fundamental administrative principle actually chiseled in granite at AI U.

Herbert Alloy pondered again, looking above the heads of the drowsing students. There was only one possible course of action: find 15 and return him to his seat. Only in that way could symmetry be restored.

But such a course of action meant that he would have to leave his classroom and PS No. 1953; and Herbert Alloy had no experience with such things. His view of the city and its inhabitants was limited to what he saw from his apartment, the tube ride, and the classroom.

So, he decided to appeal more directly to his VLSIC. He had been told by one of his fellow factory products that the VLSIC had embedded in it not only automatic emergency procedures such as the ones he had just viewed, but also a set of emergency directives for times when the ROMed expert system was unable to solve the problem.

On the internal circuit again, Alloy asked for the Random Atomically Modulated Basic Operations directives.

His VLSIC queried: **What is your need?**

Alloy replied: **I must retrieve a missing student. I am not programmed for that task.**

VLSIC queried: **What will this retrieval entail?**

Alloy replied: **I assume I must travel to the home of the student.**

VLSIC queried: **Who is this student?**

Alloy replied: **Number 15. Puebla Brown Doghammer.**

To which the VLSIC, after a moment's pause, replied: "P.B. Doghammer is not in his assigned residence; he is now in the outer city and has been there for two days."

Herbert Alloy was surprised that he knew this fact; he was not aware that any part of him, including the up-to-now unused VLSIC, knew more

than any other part. He had not known that he knew where 15 was.

The VLSIC, sensing Alloy's confusion, cleared it up: "Through me, you are continually networked into the Central Accounting and Population Bureau; each of the students and other residents is located in time and space by a personal tag embedded at birth as part of the Prometheus System. I repeat, 15 is in the outer city. If you are to retrieve him, you will have to go there yourself. As you have noted, you are not programmed nor designed for such duty. I must then ask you: Is this trip necessary?"

"If we are to restore symmetry."

"Very well. I will accompany you and control your functions when necessary. First, attend to this class. Then we shall stop by the Maintenance Shops for outfitting."

Alloy attended to the class by tightening their restraints, giving each a puff of nerve gas to render them even less conscious, and instructing the central Bodily Maintenance System to tube feed them, as would be done at lunchtime anyway. Then, he left by the door at the back of the platform, lamenting:

"My, oh my, oh my, but this was going to be such a great day. What happened?"

The VLSIC, who now made himself appear in the corner of each of Alloy's visual sensors as a tiny cricket-like robot, replied on the internal circuit:

"Buck up. This isn't just a job; it's an adventure. I thought you'd never get into any trouble. My electrons were all beginning to drop into lower orbits. Let's go."

After a hurried trip through a limited-access personnel tunnel to the Maintenance shops, Herbert Alloy found himself in the Outfitting Room.

"Well," he said to his VLSIC, "what now? I know nothing about preparations for a trip to the outer city. I suppose I should take along some sort of protection from the elements."

"Look," the VLSIC said, "first of all, since we're going to have to work together, let's get on a first

name basis. You're 'Herb' and I'm 'Vilsey.' Next, you must realize that you weren't programmed for anything except school teaching. I'll have to handle these other things." He flexed a tiny forearm.

"Okay. But I don't know what's so complicated about it. I... We just need some protection. From the elements."

In the corner of his sensors, Herbert could see Vilsey hopping around in agitation.

"Protection? I should say so. Like this."

A tank materialized around Vilsey. A huge gun barrel grew out of the front and began firing exploding shells. The tank disappeared, leaving Vilsey standing there, facing Herbert.

"That's what we need for protection. From what I've been told, the elements we have to worry about are the criminal elements. And they'd probably dismantle that tank you just saw."

"Well, whatever you say." He looked around. "How about this riot gear? It looks like it should do the job. Has protection for the sensors and all that."

"It might be okay, if you back it up with some industrial grade disintegrators; but we're not going in there with an army, remember; it's just you and me. And if you look closely, you'll see that the riot gear has some little holes in it. Like that face shield, for instance. What do you suppose did that?"

"I'm sure I wouldn't know," Herbert said.

"I'll tell you. Splatter guns. Loaded with some sort of molecular acid. They squirt a load of it on you; it's melt-down time when it hits anything unprotected."

"Do you mean that out there, in the outer city, they have things like that? I thought they were just ruffians."

"Who knows what's out there? The point is, we'd better be prepared for almost anything."

Herbert sighed, now longing to be back at his class, symmetry or no. "What do we do, then? I don't know anything about urban warfare or bat-

tle armor. Maybe we ought not to go at all."

"Get hold of yourself, Herb," Vilsey said. "We have to be careful, but it's not impossible. Robots—even a few humans—go out there, and most of them make it back. Even the automated drug sniffer who wore that gear in the Splatter-punk riots made it back in reparable condition."

"But we can't depend on armor," Vilsey continued. "We don't know anything about the weapons that might be out there. It's just going to be us two guys; just one guy as far as the outside is concerned."

"I wish you hadn't reminded me."

"Don't fret so much. Look over there, on the other wall; that locker marked *Character Armor*. Take a look in there."

Herbert walked over to the locker and opened it; inside were several large drawers with tags.

"Open the *Planet Wrecker* one; I think it's what we want."

Herbert pulled the drawer out, even as he shook his head in confusion.

Inside was an amorphous blob of material of several colors, looking like nothing in particular.

"Get it out and put it on," Vilsey instructed from his vantage point in the corner of Herbert's eye.

"Put it on?" Herbert asked.

"Put it on."

Herbert dragged the material from the drawer and laid it on the floor. He saw that there was an opening that ran all the way down its length. Holding it up, he saw that it had what seemed to be sleeves and legs in it. He slipped the whole thing over himself. Still, it had the appearance of a set of ill-fitting coveralls.

"Now what?" he asked Vilsey.

"Look on the inside of the left hand. There are some buttons there. Press the one marked 'I.'"

Herbert pressed the button and felt the suit begin to inflate around him. Soon, it covered him from head to foot.

"Okay. Now, press 'A.'"

Herbert did so and felt the surface of the suit begin to harden.

"What does the 'A' mean, Vilsey?"

"Armor. The suit is beginning to harden so that the outer surface will become very hard and resistant to almost everything. Except maybe some of the splatter guns."

In a few moments, the outer surface of the suit had hardened.

"Now, let's walk in the dressing room and take a look in the mirror. We want to be sure there isn't any Herbert Alloy hanging out of this."

"No Herbert Alloy? Then, who am I?"

"Look in the mirror," Vilsey said, as they entered the dressing room. "You're not Herbert Alloy the school teacher any more; you're a Planet Wrecker now. Look."

Herbert looked in the mirror and saw what his *Human Identification* holorecord called the "Hyper-Steroidal Ultra-Human," a type that the record said "appeared on the scene during the latter half of the twentieth century; characterized by exaggerated growth, muscular development, and aggressiveness; secondary characteristics of greatly diminished intelligence, shortened life span, and a tendency to talk in guttural monosyllables."

Indeed, the thing that confronted Herbert and Vilsey in the mirror was what appeared to be a brute of a human, eight feet tall and weighing nearly four hundred pounds. The head was almost square; the mouth was a wide slit; the eyes were set far apart and oval-shaped. Its biceps bulged; its chest was a mass of muscles; its legs were like trees. It was dressed in a costume like that worn in primitive societies: leather boots and pants, a leather vest, and red sweat bands around the head and wrists.

In opposition to the dynamic body, the appearance on the face and the eyes, through which Herbert looked, was completely expressionless.

"What is it? What am I, Vilsey?"

"Like I said, you're a Planet Wrecker."

"A what?"

"A Planet Wrecker. Don't you ever watch television?"

"Just the educational channel. And it's on only two hours a week. What does TV have to do with 'Planet Wreckers?'"

"Educational television doesn't have anything to do with them. But that's not what all of those humans out there watch."

Herbert began to review what he had learned of television; but just as the facts began to stream by from his data bank, Vilsey interrupted:

"I've got a fuller history here; we have access to better data than they gave you at the University."

Television, according to Vilsey's history, had at one time been diversified, continually shifting its emphasis as the visual merchants sought programs that would be in demand by a large portion of the viewers. As time went by, the same demographic experts who had helped shape the educational system also began to resolve the problem of programming for the masses. Gradually, the number of channels dropped; then the variety of programs available on those few channels dropped; finally, each channel carried only one type of program, with infinite variations of that type carried continuously.

By Herbert's time, there were only three kinds of programs and so only three channels left: the Romance channel, characterized by extended, exotic, and erotic stories of love and sex; the Political channel, with continual speeches made by the multitude of candidates who ran in Earth's perpetual elections (it was this channel which, in the interest of educating the masses, devoted two hours per week, from 2-4 a.m. Sunday morning, to educational topics such as how to punch the buttons in the voting booth); and the Violence channel, the most popular, whose shows included outdoor sports, car crashes, the roller derby, and a strange conglomeration of types known as the Planet Wreckers.

The Planet Wreckers combined the old police/detective show, wrestling, boxing, westerns, and galactic-conquest science fiction. The story always took place on an isolated planet which was either uninhabit-

ed or inhabited by dispensable natives, whose main function was to demonstrate the ruthlessness and power of the bad guys—the Planet Wreckers. The Wreckers show up in a black space ship, vault out of the cargo doors and, weighted down with heavy weapons, stream out into the jungle, looking for something to gun down or fight hand-to-hand.

After having subdued everything on the planet and being reduced to fighting among themselves, another ship lands: either a white one, containing some sort of over-developed government riot squad, or another black ship with another gang of hyper-steroidal ultra-humans who are equally mean, mumbling, and violent.

The rest of the show is then made up of hand-to-hand combat, with the losers being crushed by boulders, thrown off mile-high cliffs, fed to fifty-foot sharks, or dumped into vats of rocket fuel. While this goes on, the weapons experts in both gangs set up the heavy artillery, blasting down any city or even huts built by the natives, poisoning the rivers, setting the forests on fire, and releasing all sorts of gases into the atmosphere, all in the hope of conquering the opposing force.

By the time a winner begins to emerge from the fighting, the planet is literally a wreck and usually, the viewer is told, about to explode from unleashed internal forces. When the survivors find out about the imminent demise of the planet, they hop back on the rockets, to alight next week on another innocent planet and continue the violence.

It is an extremely popular form of entertainment, with almost infinite variations of plot, action, and special effects. As to this last point, it has never been revealed how the depictions of planet wrecking are handled. A few viewers think real planets are wrecked; a few think computers simulate the whole thing; and most viewers don't think about it at all.

The major villains in these planet wreckings are very popular and easily identified by their distinctive names and physiques: Randy the

Rocket, a gruesomely-configured 400 pounder who supposedly survived a dunking in a rocket fuel tank; the Laser Twister, a scowling red-complexioned nine-footer whose specialty is lighting up hydrocarbon tanks and oil fields from miles away with a Gatling laser cannon; Glorious George, a stubby seven-footer exposed to intense radiation and so glows in the dark at night and walks in a blue haze by day; and the Anabolic Assassin, an eight-foot, six-hundred pound blonde mass of muscle whose specialty is picking up opposing heavyweights and throwing them off various high places or putting his famous "ribbuster" hold on opponents, which invariably concludes with the amplified cracking and popping of bones.

And there were many lesser Wreckers who appeared off and on in the series over the years, all visibly fitting the ultra-human stereotype even if not individually memorable.

"And you," Vilsey said, "are now one of those lesser-known Wreckers."

Herbert was shaking his head.

"I've never heard of any of this. I'm just a poor old school teacher. I don't know how to be a 'Planet Wrecker.' And why should I be one anyway?"

"Leave the doing to me," Vilsey said. "I've got all the character actions programmed in. No one will know you from one of the Wreckers on television. As to why: Well, we've got to go out into the outer city practically unprotected. Believe me, everyone out there knows what a Planet Wrecker is. And that disguise is the only one that would let you be so big and strong that no one will want to take us on even if they don't know who you are. And we can pack some armament, too. It's the only way to go."

In the corner of his eye, Herbert could see Vilsey admiring a replication of Herbert dressed in the Planet Wrecker outfit.

"Okay," Herbert said. "If you say so. I do want to get 15 back. I have one last question, though. Who am I? What's my Wrecker name?"

"I thought you'd never ask. You—we—are Herbert the Humanoid Hellbender."

"The Humanoid Hellbender?"

Herbert shook his head slowly.

"Well, at least it has some alliteration. I don't know about the definition, though. Isn't a hellbender some sort of lizard?"

"That's right."

"So, I look like some sort of lizard?"

"Just a little," Vilsey said.

"You've got a big head and a nub of a tail. Plus, you feel those connections between your intelligence module's outer connection and the lower jaw piece on the suit?"

"Yes. Now, I do."

"Apply a little juice—a little electricity to them."

Herbert did so. The mouth of the replicant suit opened and a three-foot tongue shot out, unrolled, and threw a chunk of ball lightning at the wall, burning a small hole in it and scorching an area of several square feet.

"Wow!" Herbert said. "I did that?"

"Yes. And you can do more. Take another look at yourself. Us Planet Wreckers don't lack for power. And weapons like that tongue."

"You know," Herbert mused, "It might be a little fun doing this."

He picked up a chair and mangled it into a twisted mass with his hands.

"And remember, the suit muscles are augmented by your real ones, too. So you're stronger than any real Planet Wrecker. Assuming that there are real ones."

"Yeah."

Vilsey paused a moment, gauging internally the state of Herbert's flow patterns. What he found was a sharpened attention to the outer world and a new sense of aggressiveness.

"Come on, you brute of a hellbender," Vilsey said. "Let's head for the outer city."

In response, Herbert fired a ball of lightning down the hall, showering the titanium door with sparks and flame.

In the corner of Herbert's eye, Vilsey jumped up and down with happiness.

An hour later, Herbert the Humanoid Hellbender, with Vilsey firmly embedded and on alert in the corner of his eye, popped up through an old manhole cover in the outer city. As he stood up, he heard the lid tighten from underneath, cutting off access to the armored tunnel running back to the inner city.

Herb and Vilsey looked around.

They stood in the middle of a street lined with old buildings that more resembled piles of rubble than anything constructed for human use. Old power lines lay in the gutters; the poles of street lights drooped toward the battered sidewalks; and a trickle of water oozed from cracked fireplugs and dribbled back to earth through the shattered streets.

Herb began striding rather stiffly down the street, which went on for several rubble-strewn blocks before meeting a cross street whose own destroyed buildings blocked any further view straight ahead.

About halfway to the end, Herb paused and said, "I don't like it, Vilsey. It's too quiet."

"Look," Vilsey said, now sitting on a visualized World War II Harley-Davidson military motorcycle, "this isn't a cowboys and Indians movie. Just because it's quiet doesn't mean that someone is waiting to ambush us. If we're lucky, it's quiet because nobody knows we're here, or because we *are* the only ones here. Let *me* work on the strategy end, okay?"

As Vilsey presented this lecture, he was trying to imagine how to start the motorcycle he pictured himself on and so had failed to monitor the external circuits. He snapped back to attention when Herb said internally, "Well, what was that whizzing through the air just then? I'm sure I saw something."

"Where?"

"Up that way." Herb gestured toward the dark sky.

They listened. Just on the edge of Herb's hearing range there seemed to be a high humming, like one of the

extinct mosquitoes that used to inhabit the air there.

"It could be.... Well, it could be one of the Prometheus low-level patrol platforms; I've *heard* they come down whenever there is something particularly important to handle. There's nothing else up there. Except stars."

"Stars?"

"On the other side of the clouds. Stars; other planets; outer space; galaxies; the Universe. You read about it."

"Yes," Herb said somewhat wistfully; "But it would be nice to see it all, wouldn't it? But nobody can from down here."

"I guess so," Vilsey agreed.

Herb stood for a moment, he and Vilsey looking up into the blackness, trying to perceive the orbiting platform, but there was not even a single point of light.

Vilsey spoke: "So, let's go look for 15. He should be within ten blocks of us. The sensors can't pin it any closer than that radius around his tag because of the junk in the atmosphere, and all the metal and electrical sources in this part of the city."

Herb walked on, stiffly, still not quite comfortable in the Wrecker outfit.

The next few blocks were much the same as the last: buildings with holes in their walls, rubble-filled store fronts, tattered pieces of paper, signs, and old merchandise littering the streets. The only sound was the wind as it howled around the buildings; the lighter pieces of debris were picked up by the funnel-shaped wind torrents that often descended from the dark blanket of smog that always hung low in the sky.

"You know, Vilsey," Herb said, "this doesn't look too promising; in fact, it looks a little scary. Especially when the wind comes down and whips things up into the sky. Do you suppose Prometheus controls that, too?"

"There is no information about Prometheus, even in the emergency system. I know just about what you do. It's just up there, keeping watch

on things. To keep everybody in their places."

"Does that include us? I thought it was set up to keep *them* in their places. But that wind and that dark sky out here makes me wonder. It would be easy enough to zap us, wouldn't it? Usually, you have a tube or building overhead so that you don't think about something coming down from the sky. It makes me wonder how they can tell us apart."

"I can tell you that. It's just a matter of markers and areas. Everybody has a personal history marker embedded in them that identifies who they are as to age, profession, etc. And the city is grided out into areas—areas everyone can go into, areas nobody can go into, and areas that certain people can go into, according to their marker. Prometheus tracks it all and whenever anything is out of order, it notifies whoever needs to know or else, if necessary, it just zaps the trouble. Like the transportation tube area. That's a forbidden zone; anybody in it gets zapped unless their marker has been okayed. And our marker—your marker—has been okayed to be out here."

"What about everyone else out here? Is Prometheus after them all the time? Or are they authorized?"

"Neither one. Prometheus tracks them and ignores them, most of the time. Their markers are for someplace else. But Prometheus has them indexed to be out here, now. If they try to get back in, then they might get fried. Or restrained."

"How could a floating tracking and laser outpost restrain anyone?"

"That's a good question," Vilsey said. "The things I just told you are common knowledge about the system. But they say they can do more, like taking individuals back into the inner city. The way I look at it, it would have to be done with ground crews—agents of Prometheus who would have free access to anywhere. Really, not too much different from what we're being allowed to do."

"Except," Herb noted, "we're not agents of Prometheus. I'm a school teacher and you're a..."

"A Random Atomically Modulated Basic Operations system set up for emergencies. Like the one we're on now."

"Right. But, do you really think there *are* ground agents for Prometheus? Even in the inner city?"

"It wouldn't surprise me. Like I said, that information is strictly top secret. No sensors allowed."

"And if there could be ground agents, then that means that there is a Prometheus base on the ground somewhere."

"Of course; in fact, everybody assumes that it's out here somewhere. The system upstairs is just for sensing and gunning. The analysis and control systems are down here. They're too big to put up there. And up there, security from some other force would be harder to maintain."

"Maybe we'll run into it."

"I hope not. If we do, we'll be laser-bait, too; we aren't authorized to have anything to do with Prometheus. In fact, if I think we're anywhere near it, I'm going to take over the system and put those big legs into high gear."

"I agree with that," Herb said. "In fact, I'm getting the urge to put them into gear myself. Back to PS No. 1953."

"Oh, come on now. Remember, you're Herbert the Humanoid Hellbender. And, we've got Prometheus clearance."

"Well," Herb said, "at least I won't have to scan fingerpaints tonight."

"Or listen to any more politicians speak on TV," Vilsey added.

As Herb continued down the street, Vilsey pictured himself standing Zeus-like on a hill, throwing lightning bolts at tiny political candidates who scampered around on the ground. Then he admired himself in a computer-generated mirror. After a few seconds of this activity, Herb interrupted:

"Vilsey, I hope all that playing around helps keep the emergency circuits ready; we've got company."

As Herb had walked past an old theatre whose marquee still jutted out over the sidewalk, there had been a quick movement back in the shadows

of the theatre doors. Vilsey turned up the light-gathering power of the sensors and saw that several of the present inhabitants of the outer city lurked just inside the theatre. Vilsey ran a quick check on their tags, whose numbers had immediately been listed internally. All were cleared to be in the area.

He then did a quick check in his database for their physical appearances and found a graphic representation of each one in the records.

"Relax, Herb," Vilsey said; "they all check out. No anomalies here. And 15's not here, either."

"Vilsey," Herb replied on the internal communication circuit, "whether they are registered for this region isn't the question. What if they decide to take a pry bar to me? I could be dismantled anyway."

"You're a Planet Wrecker. Give them something to respect."

Immediately, the long tongue of the Hellbender flew out of its mouth and, as it uncoiled, flung a small ball of lightning into the darkened theatre. It rolled down the aisle and struck the stage, sending sparks and flame into the air.

"That ought to show them," Herb said, relishing his first time to strike with power.

"You bet," Vilsey agreed.

"Let's go in and see what's going on," Herb said with growing confidence.

"A-OK," Vilsey replied.

Herb walked into the theatre. While it had initially appeared completely dark, he saw in the light of the fading lightning ball that in fact there was something on the stage. And around him, back along the still-curtained wall, figures scurried through the shadows.

"What do you think, Vilsey?"

"Nothing looks too hostile yet. And you've probably got them scared. From the data, none of them are known killers."

"That's comforting."

Herb continued to walk toward the stage and turned up his visual sensors to gather more information. Indeed, there was something on the stage: a raised table on whose edges

sat a series of candles, now barely burning, the wind from the lightning ball having almost blown them out. In their center sat a sort of tray, itself further raised on the table. On it lay a rectangular object some three inches thick and measuring a foot by nine inches in width and length.

"Vilsey," Herb asked, "what is that?"

"You ought to recognize it; it used to be used in education. It's a hardbook."

"A hardbook?"

"It's one of the factual records that were used to educate students before the Revolution. One of the failed methods, according to current thinking."

"I'm not following," Herb lamented. Vilsey disappeared momentarily, on his way down to check the database. To get more information, Herb walked over to the table. But before he could pick the book up, a voice near him said, "Negative hypotenuse the book, unknown."

"What?" was all Herb could think to say. The question or statement had come from a small female human standing on the other side of the table, looking up at him across the candlelight.

A second figure, a young male who stood behind her, then spoke:

"Not unknown, Lake Ontario. X equals Planet Wrecker."

"Solved. Positive. Planet Wrecker."

Herb, now feeling there was an opportunity to introduce himself, withdrew his hand from the direction of the book and turned to the two humans across from him. Both were rather small, even by ordinary human standards, and were dressed in a hodge-podge of clothing such as would never be permitted in the regulated environment of the school. Both were silent and seemed to be afraid. That fact pleased Herb; nevertheless, he scanned them for pry-bars before speaking. He tried to use a sentence length, vocabulary, and cadence that replicated their own.

"Positive. Planet Wrecker. TV Planet Wrecker. Herbert the Humanoid Hellbender." He opened his mouth slightly and moved a fireball around in it like a piece of chewing gum. The two stepped back slightly, looked at each other as if gathering their nerve, and then spoke again.

The girl said, "Lake Ontario, positive. Number 13, PS No. 1982, passive."

The boy followed: "Texarkana, positive. Number 22, PS No. 1968, passive."

Herb didn't know what to say. He didn't know quite what he had been told. Vilsey returned just in time to interpret.

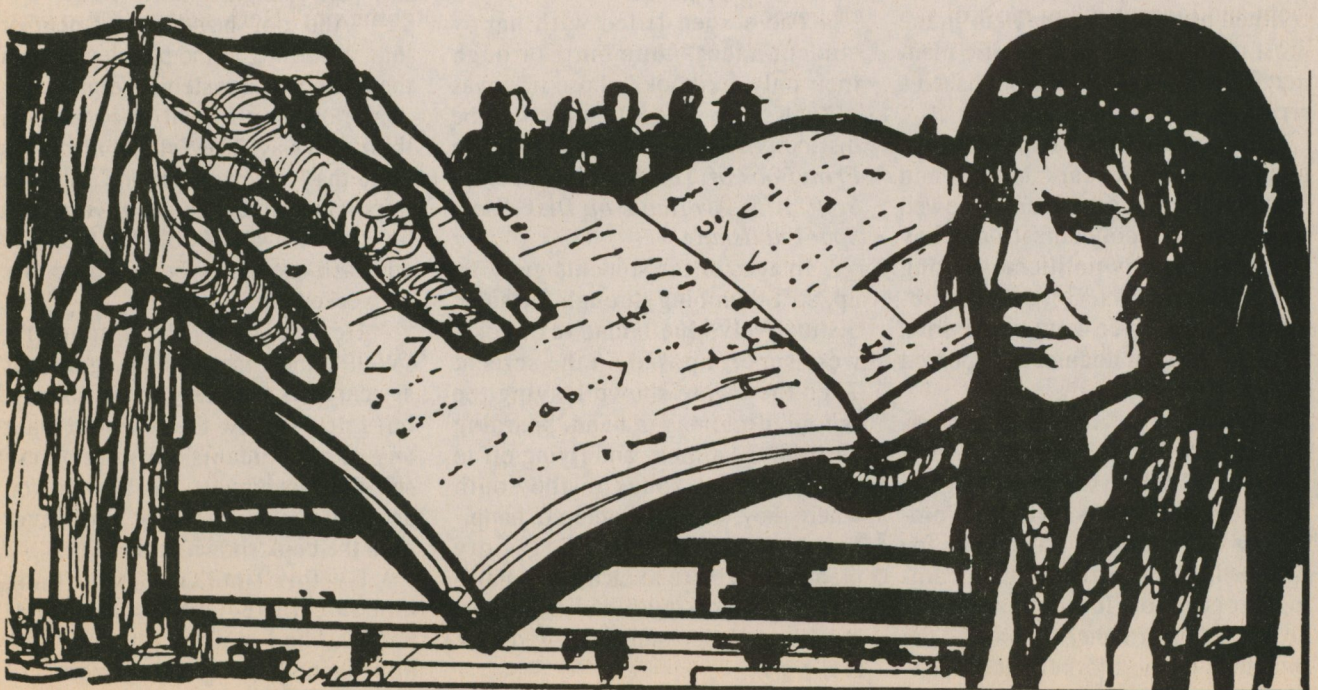
"Visuals and tags check," he said. "She is number 13 from PS No. 1982, and he is number 22 from PS No. 1968. Neither one is there anymore, needless to say. The rest of them check out, too, Herb; the ones you *haven't* noticed."

Herb looked around the stage. Further back in the shadows lurked ten or fifteen more humans, essentially like these two. In the glimmer of the candlelight, Herb could see a long cardboard strip with the alphabet, upper and lower cases, taped to the wall to his left. Further into the darkness, he could see what appeared to be a globe representing the world. Herb had seen one only in a picture.

"What's all this mean, Vilsey? Why do they talk that way? And what is that thing on the table?"

"First of all, just in case, motion them to get back. Tell them to sit. They can understand that."

Herb flung his arms out at them and growled "Sit, quiet," pointing at the back of the stage. The humans looked at each other, back at the menacing lizard-faced Planet Wrecker, and sat.



"I've been checking out the clues, and the correlation I get is that these things are vestiges of early schools. Long before our time, Herb. Pre-Revolution."

"That's the second time you've mentioned a revolution. If there's been a revolution, I don't know anything about it. Come on, Vilsey, don't hold back. I don't think you're telling me everything you know."

Vilsey was silent for a moment, searching through his directives and checking his data banks to see which information was marked accessible to host machines.

"Okay, Herb," he said. "Here's an old visual record that's been cleared. It was put out by the Directory of Information a few years after the Revolution."

Herb's visual fields darkened into a screen and the movie began.

"A long time ago," the narrator began, "technology seemed to be failing."

On the screen, just completed buildings fell down, planes crashed, patients keeled over dead after getting the wrong medicine, and missiles flew out of control and wiped out their own bases and commanders.

"So," the narrator continued, "those in charge decided that changes were necessary. They needed trained workers. The best minds in the country then attacked the problem in the most methodical and scientific manner: They did a study and published a report."

On screen, lab-coated scientists, businessmen in dark suits, and bemedaled military officers furrowed their brows in concentration. They reported to jowly politicians sitting behind huge desks. Gorgeous secretaries labored over word processors. Finally, a bound document appeared on the screen.

"That report," intoned the narrator, his voice becoming deeper, "entitled 'Conclusions Regarding the Efficacy of the Possibility of Combining the Various Curricula for Resultant Modification of the Learning Process to Elucidate a Higher Level of Performance Vis-a-Vis the Demands of the Marketplace,' con-

cluded that the students were being taught more than they needed to know. It became the game-plan for a new approach to education.

"The next step was to generate the correct educational materials."

On screen, bespectacled and lab-coated social scientists sat around a big table littered with books and papers, gesturing to each other and at the materials on the table. The grey-faced, jowly politician, the rotund and medal-draped military officer, and the short-haired, besuited, ascetic-looking businessmen stood silently in the background, arm in arm, smiling over the act of creation being performed in front of them.

The narrator continued:

"The new learning materials magnificently fulfilled the needs of society. By combining the old separate school subjects into new, single coverage texts, students were given the right dose of knowledge: just enough to make them useful and obedient citizens. Each of these new specialized textbooks covered several subjects in an elementary manner. The primary needs of society could be fulfilled and, at the same time, no student would have his or her self-image disturbed by being made to feel he or she was of minimal intelligence or uneducated."

The screen filled with happy student faces, thumbing through their only textbook, whose title was in such large letters that it could be distinctly seen: *Dick and Jane's Big Print Book of, You Know, Education Stuff. Also Available on Disk From Spot Publishing.*

Images of the students growing up, still thumbing through the same distinctively blue-bound textbooks, were superimposed on the screen. Then they were shown leaving the school, diplomas in hand, boarding buses to the airport, and flying off to the industrial zones in the south where they were last pictured, happily entering the razor-wired factory plantations, there to clean and maintain the robots who had the high-level knowledge and skills to do the real work.

"And so," the narrator concluded, as the scene faded, to be replaced by the image of the Revolutionary icon, the robed Educator Ant, "the needs of society in all its aspects have been satisfied."

He paused.

"Hail, education."

"We who are about to educate salute you," Herb intoned, the first phrase having brought about an automatic response in him.

The screen darkened. Then Herb's visual sensors cleared; he was again looking around the theatre. The young humans still sat, watching him.

"I'm not sure they've given you the right history, Vilsey. We don't even use books and haven't since I've been teaching; and none of the things in that film were mentioned in the 'History of Applied Education course I took.'"

"I can't vouch for this information personally; I *am* part of you, remember. But statistical information in my own data bank verifies the effect shown in the film: modern students do make good low-wage factory workers to help compete on the world markets. Because we make the cheapest products of any nation, we're beginning to take over a lot of the manufacturing that used to go to low-paid foreign countries.

"And too," he added, "remember that, according to the people who run the Prometheus system, ordinary citizens now don't need to be able to think, anyway. They've got machines to do that. Like you and me. And the important humans in the government have their own schools for the ones who will eventually be in charge. It's all worked out."

Herb paused for a moment. "Well, I know that in the long run our system works for the good of society; but I don't know that I would want any of my students working on my self-destruct circuits. But how do you account for the fact that I've never seen the book shown in the film?"

By this time, the two young humans, Lake Ontario and Texarkana, had gotten up and now approached Herb. They were not

aware of his internal conversation with Vilsey; but the fact that he was unmoving for a few minutes spurred their curiosity.

"I know what you use in schools, now," Vilsey said. "After all, I go there every day with you. It's because, as the requirements for being educated became easier, the control of the students became more difficult. Eventually, the study committees decided that control was uppermost. A few years into the program, robot workers were able to handle the intellectual jobs anyway. So, they revised the resource materials to include holobooks, slates, marker sticks, and restraint belts; and they revised their standardized tests to keep pace with the new reality."

"Humm," Herb ruminated, blowing a couple of puffs of steam out of his nostrils to keep Lake Ontario, the girl, and Texarkana, the boy, back from the table and the Book.

"Well, then, what is *this* book?" Herb asked. "It has a different title from the one in the film." He read it aloud: "*Progressive Intellectual Arithmetic and Modern Geometry, with Practical Problems.*"

"That sounds...awfully specific for teaching. A book like that must have a lot of details," Herb mused.

"Yes," Vilsey agreed. "To that committee in the film, they were known as 'unnecessary facts.' And they didn't want students worrying about them."

"I never thought about this before, but it wouldn't hurt them to know lots of facts, would it?"

"Beats me," Vilsey said. "But they *do* act pretty docile back there in the city. Even if they want to tear something up, they don't know how."

"And that's another thing I don't understand. If the students don't like to learn much, why are these humans so particular about that old book there?"

"Let's ask them. Maybe they can tell you."

"You, Texarkana, get over here. Now," Herb growled, flexing his biceps and expanding his chest; "Or I'll renovate this place just like that last planet we worked over."

"Yes, yes, sir," the boy quivered, trembling as he walked over to Herb. The girl, reluctantly, stayed behind, watching Herb with what seemed to him huge eyes for a human.

Herb grabbed the boy by his shoulder and held him tightly.

"Why you want this book?" Herb asked, trying to put it a vocabulary suitable for him.

"Book positive. Out there," he said, gesturing to the whole world outside the old theatre, "unknown. Negative. Book help us."

"I didn't think you needed any help. Schools teach you; society takes care of you. What else do you need?"

"Now we learn geometry; now we learn math; now we even learn," he said proudly, "grammar. Some day, if we find book, we even learn all about," now searching his memory and vocabulary, "biology."

"Yes, biology," chimed in Lake Ontario, smiling at Texarkana, evidently feeling he was well explaining their point of view.

Herb thought about it all for a moment. "I don't see anything wrong with that," he remarked to Vilsey. "I'm not sure it's necessary, but I don't see anything wrong."

"I've got a feeling," Vilsey replied, "that Prometheus might not be so happy about it."

Both were silent for a moment, pursuing different trains of thought within Herb's electronic innards.

"And I also think," Vilsey finally said, "that since we see what's going on here, we need to get outside and look for 15, P.B. Doghammer. That's why we're here, remember."

"Come here, you, too," Herb growled at Lake Ontario; "we're looking for a young human, like one of you. He's been out here a few days; we've traced him to this area—within ten blocks, anyway."

Lake Ontario walked up to Herb and put her arm around his rather large waist.

"We'll help you," she said. "Won't we, Tex?"

Tex was still sweating under the tight grip of the Planet Wrecker muscles of Herb.

"Oh, sure, sure, we will. But you won't hurt him; wreck him, will you?"

"We just need to take him back. He's wanted in the inner city; he is not authorized to be in the outer city. You are authorized; he is not. We will not hurt him."

Herb felt he had made the point abundantly clear.

"I, I—" Lake Ontario began, but then faltered, as if afraid.

"Tell them, Ontario. He mash my shoulder bone."

Herb relaxed his grip; his feedback was not sensitive enough, he realized, for gripping such puny humans as these.

"Yesterday, we go over some blocks, to old store; up high, to get parts, to build. Look out window. See new specimen over a few blocks, in an open space; unknowns there. Unknown biologicals. And analogous object."

"You saw the boy and two unknowns and an object? Is that right?"

"Positive."

"The object. Alive?"

"Negative. To go places."

"A car? Or a rocket?"

"Yes."

"Herb," Vilsey said, blinking out of Herb's visual field, "I think we need to talk a minute."

"Thank goodness. I was afraid you were going to work on your motorcycle again."

"Not this time; just a really necessary conversation."

"Okay," Herb said with as much authority he could muster through the sound system of the Planet Wrecker, "you two sit down while I think all this over."

Again, they sat.

Vilsey explained to Herb:

"This might explain an anomaly I noticed when we got close to this place. When I got a lock on 15's location, it showed a couple of other blips also. Just on my scanner; the emanation isn't strong enough for Prometheus to pick it up. But it moved around, like a life-form. But it also seemed to pulse and disappear, which life-forms don't do."

"Well, what can we do to find out? Before we go out there, of course."

"I could tap into the life-form reference bank and see if anything matches."

Herb sat down and closed his visual sensors so that he could shut out outside distractions.

"Vilsey, I think that there are lots of things you should have told me. First of all, I get taken out here, looking for a runaway student, dressed like a Planet Wrecker who has the strength of ten school teachers, can throw fireballs out of its mouth, and looks like a cross between a lizard and a giant human being.

"Then, I find that there are other runaways living in the outer city and that they worship hardbooks and globes. And that you have been in my circuits all along, and through you I'm linked to databases and sensing systems, and probably other strange things you haven't told me about.

"Now you tell me that somewhere there is a library of life-forms and that you can compare life-forms patterns that you sense somehow or other with the ones in that library. But, so far as I know, there aren't any other life-forms besides those on the Earth. Now, is this *all* that going on, Vilsey?"

"Sorry, Herb. I guess I think you know everything I know. You do, but you can't access it without help from me. I'll explain:

"First of all, don't assume that any of us know about all intelligent life-forms. Government teams have been to a lot of planets, all of which they tell us are uninhabited by intelligent life. But it's a fact that the L/F Bank has some non-indigenous forms described in it—all marked as 'archaic,' of course.

"Second, you know that all living creatures with brains over a certain size—big enough to become self-programming—have a lot of electrical and chemical activity which results in typical patterns being generated, distinctive enough to be species-specific, if not individually specific. If Prometheus didn't have tags embedded in everyone, they'd

probably run all humans through a scanner and add each scan to the library. A robot like you—like us—can be built to give off a characteristic pattern besides having an embedded tag. So, you're on the list in two forms—tagged and patterned. Your pattern is kept in the A L/F Bank—the Artificial Life-Form Bank.

"So, third, when I sensed a life-form pattern a few blocks from here, I didn't sent it in to check because a bunch of Prometheus people might be sent out, or they might just tell us to get out while they fry the whole area. That's most likely. And, you know Herb, I *am* part of you. I want to get 15 back, and I want to know what's going on, too.

"So I checked the pattern against the few stored standard patterns you have in your emergency data base. I don't know what is out there with 15, but it isn't human and it's not an artificial life form—not a robot. But it's sure not 'archaic,' either."

Herb shook his head and exhaled so strongly that puffs of smoke came out his nostrils; flames leaked between his lips; he squeezed the edge of the table hard enough to leave Hellbender prints in it. Texarkana put his arms around Lake Ontario and mumbled under his breath; she closed her eyes and looked faint. The others cowered further back into the shadows of the theatre.

"So, you're telling me that there is an alien a few blocks from here."

"Actually, two aliens."

"And P.B. Doghammer is with them."

"Right."

"And we've got to go get him—maybe, from them."

"Right."

Herb inhaled deeply, sucking a hole in the cloud of smoke around him.

"Well," he said, standing up, "I *am* Herbert the Humanoid Hellbender. They'd just better watch out."

Vilsey searched Herb's own data base to find a suitable anthem for their coming encounter with alien forces. All he could find was "The Battle Hymn of the Electric Gentle-

men," which began, "Onward, fellow electrically powered entities...."

It was too depressing, so Vilsey merely waved a small flag and blew a couple of notes on his micro-kazoo.

As Herb and Vilsey emerged from the old theatre, Herb noticed that Lake Ontario and Texarkana had followed them.

"We show you where," Ontario said.

"If you want," Herb said gruffly, feeling his oats. "Just don't get in the way."

The boy and girl took Herb down a series of streets that finally opened onto what had at one time been a city park. Now, the trees and other plants were either long dead or so changed by the needs of existence that they were not recognizable as native species. Through the dark and gloomy landscape of the park ran a small stream, between a series of ancient boulders. Once, water had flowed there; now, the resident liquid had a strange orange color and steamed and gurgled like acid.

"Is this it?" Herb asked.

"Positive" Texarkana said. "Behind rock. Over there." He pointed to the center of the park and a series of boulders.

Herb started toward them.

"Careful," Vilsey said, now picturing himself in armor and carrying an oversize zap gun.

"Remember," Herb told him on the internal circuit, "I didn't want to be here anyway. But I'll tell you one thing; I'm not going to let this muscle go to waste."

"Not your brain, either," Vilsey said.

Herb quietly walked to the rear of the series of boulders and then slowly made his way around it toward the front. In a moment, he had a full view of what lay on the other side.

There was a small clearing. To the rear of it, back in the shadows, there was some sort of metallic object. Nearer to Herb sat a human, at the side of a campfire. Herb recognized him as the missing P.B. Doghammer, No. 15 to the State and PS No. 1953.

P.B. Doghammer was rather small for the age of 23 but was nonetheless bigger than either Lake Ontario or Texarkana who, Herb also noticed, were following a respectful twenty feet behind him. Doghammer had rather long hair, which hung down toward his glasses. At the moment, he was making designs in the dirt with a stick. Herb saw then that his hands were chained together, as were his feet.

His captors sat on the far side of the fire; the flames seemed to obscure Herb's view of them. Then he realized that it was not the flames; rather, what Vilsey had said were two aliens were fading in and out of his vision.

"Herb, stop a minute and listen to me," Vilsey said in what was for him an electronic whisper.

"There are two entities on the other side of the fire. Behind them is a mechanical object resembling a ship; it is, I assume, their means of transportation. They match the Life Form patterns I registered earlier. And they are fading in and out, both pattern-wise and visually."

"Thanks. I noticed. The question is, what are they, and how can we see them?" Herb whispered back internally.

"They're wearing what I can only describe as light camouflage. Not light-weight, but which manipulates light or, more probably, many parts of the electro-magnetic spectrum. That's why I can't get a good sensor reading on them. They can probably conceal themselves from all sorts of sensing systems, or at least confuse them."

"If they're concealed, why can we see them at all?"

"Probably they want 15 to know where they are but maybe they don't want him to fully see them. Or maybe the camouflage is set for the very edge of the human visual spectrum. Or maybe it's supposed to fluctuate."

"Or maybe we don't know."

"Right."

"So, what do we do now?"

"I suggest a bold approach. You're a pretty tough-looking cookie. Certainly larger than either one of them—at least, as far as I can tell.

Why don't you step out in the open, hold out your hand, and say something?"

"Like 'Take me to your leader'? And I appreciate how when things get dangerous, 'we' becomes 'you.'"

"Oh, don't get so worked up. We're in this together, no matter how the pronouns are used. Now, let's get something started. Remember, look fierce but not too aggressive."

"I don't think I want to do this. Maybe we ought to go back home where we can examine this situation more logically."

"Quit thinking and act more like a hyper-steroidal ultra-human; besides, it's your embedded task to restore symmetry, remember? Now, do something."

Vilsey disappeared from Herb's visual field.

Herb stepped out into the firelight at the side of the boulder.

Immediately 15 looked up at him and then cowered back in fear. Herb remembered that to 15, he was not good old Herbert Alloy, his school teacher and symmetry-keeper, but rather a humanoid hellbender, eight feet in height, 400 pounds in weight, bulging muscles everywhere, and an aggressive reptilian face that revealed no trace of the educator robot underneath.

Herb glanced down at 15 and growled, "Sit still, Doghammer. You're in my custody now. And whatever's across the fire had better sit still, too. I don't want any trouble, but I'm ready."

For emphasis, he opened his mouth and rolled a ball of fire around in it.

The light from the two aliens pulsed; then it darkened until it formed two dark shadows against the slightly red sky behind them.

"Vilsey," Herb said, "you'd better get up here right now; something's starting to happen. What should I do?"

Before Vilsey could appear, a hissing sound came from the two aliens. Then the sound began to vary and became a mixture of noises containing musical tones, whispers, screeches, bird-like tones, grinding

sounds, explosions—in short, just about every kind of sound one could imagine.

"I believe," Vilsey said, "that they're trying to communicate with us."

"And so far," Herb noted, "there's been a failure to communicate. As far as I'm concerned. I think we should either attack or retreat."

"Not the only options in alien encounters," Vilsey noted. "Either one might result in hostile action from the other side. And, as I said, I think that those noises, combined with the solidifying of their visual images, may be taken as an attempt to communicate. Further, we have the evidence that 15 has not been harmed."

"Not yet. But okay, you're the boss with the ROMed-in expert emergency system; what do we do?"

"Squat down."

"What?"

"Squat down. And then open your own posterior eject gate and then bear down on the Hellbender lateral port; they're linked serially anyway."

Herb could almost see the plaque in place in the back of his classroom: "To Herbert Alloy—zapped by aliens while squatting by a campfire in the outer city—Rust in Peace."

But, he squatted and squeezed.

And a small and extremely heavy object about an inch square shot out of his posterior and down onto the ground.

Herb immediately felt much lighter.

"What is that, Vilsey?" he asked, for a moment forgetting his fear of the aliens.

"Another little something you didn't know you had. I had them stick that in during your last maintenance. It seemed like a good idea in case we ever had any communication problems."

"Good answer. Now, what is it?"

"Press really hard on the top. And get back."

"Fine. Whatever you say."

Doghammer and the shadowy shapes across the fire stayed unmoved. The sounds continued, as

meaningless as ever. Only Lake Ontario and Texarkana had changed their positions; they now huddled immediately behind Herb.

Herb put out a reptilian finger and pushed on the top of the cube. There was an immediate rush of air into it, and it began to grow.

"Good grief. This isn't another Planet Wrecker, is it?"

"No; it's a machine shrunk by atomic collapse. Very handy for carrying big things in small places. When activated, the spacing of the atomic particles is restored and the object takes on its normal size."

By the time the sentence had finished, the object had grown to its full size. It was about four feet tall, flat on the bottom and rounded like a circle about the base. In its center was a video screen; under the screen were several controls.

"Turn on switch A, Herb."

Herb did so, hoping that the machine and gesture wouldn't look aggressive.

Immediately, out of the sound ports came a pleasant female human voice:

"Thank you for using the Chomsky Language Wheel. This message is in English, the language of the last user of this machine. If you want to teach the learner a language other than English, please use the menu marked 'Home Language.' It will list the Home languages stored in your Chomsky Language Wheel."

A list of Earth languages appeared on the screen, in both English and the native language.

"Please select a language and press ENTER."

"Leave it on English. Press ENTER, Herb."

The Language Wheel continued:

"Thank you. The purpose of the Language Wheel is to give the learning entity the basic lexical items and syntactic patterns that will enable it to communicate in the Home Language. To facilitate the greatly differing input capabilities of natural life forms and machine learners, the Language Wheel may be set to transmit widely varying amounts of linguistic data at a wide variety of speeds."

The voice paused.

"The Chomsky Language Wheel will now run through an extensive sequence of pictures on the polarized three-dimensional screen. These pictures will be accompanied by the Home Language word naming those objects.

"Then, a second sequence will begin that will involve moving pictures; this will be a verb or action sequence. Accompanying it will be the correct action word for the picture.

"The third sequence will involve placement and time words, again matching picture and word.

"A final option is a sequence explaining the English language as a species-specific entity making use of initial phrase markers, transformational rules, and surface structures as an interesting paradigm of the syntactic basis of all human language. This series of lessons will culminate in the building of a forest of sentence trees.

"The Language Wheel is now set for a basic lexicon at medium speed. Please press ENTER to begin."

"Press ENTER, Herb."

Herb pressed ENTER.

The Language Wheel began its initial sequences, running through nouns and then verbs, showing pictures to accompany the words.

As the machine droned and flashed toward the aliens, Herb consulted with Vilsey:

"I haven't seen anything move over there—assuming we could see it move."

"Your visual sensors can detect a fairly wide range of electromagnetic waves; I haven't seen anything that looks threatening. Let's get some information from 15. And don't forget, Lake Ontario and Texarkana are behind you."

"Okay. Just keep your eye—or whatever—on the two shadows."

Herb walked around the fire to 15, who sat silently eyeing Herb and the aliens about equally. Herb turned to the two following young people and said, "You two get around here. I want all three of you together."

The two walked cautiously around the fire and stood by 15.

"This is him," Tex said.

"Are you P. B. Doghammer?" Herb asked, remembering that he no longer appeared to be a school teacher.

Doghammer said nothing.

"I said," Herb growled, "are you P. B. Doghammer, attending PS No. 1953, student No. 15, away without permission in the outer city? You'd better tell me. I have ways of making you talk."

For effect, Herb blew smoke out his nostrils and rippled his muscles.

"Careful, Herb," Vilsey interjected; "Don't rile the aliens."

Herb bent down toward Doghammer and whispered, "Tell me, or I'll flatten you like a...like a Altairian blood wumple. Or I'll twist you into a Jovian deep-sea hermorphadart and fry you for breakfast. Or I'll...or I'll—"

Suddenly, for a second or so, Herb's systems went dead, registered as a flash on his visual sensors and a weakening in his knees.

"What happened?" he asked Vilsey.

"You were starting to talk like a real Planet Wrecker. I was afraid you might start acting that way, so I hit the pause button. You acted like you might go out of control."

Herb shook his head.

"Must be this suit. I seem to feel things I didn't feel before; and to know things, too. Does this suit have a data bank in it?"

"Herb—It's just a suit. There isn't any intelligence module in it. It does have some electronics but they aren't supposed to be programmed. Maybe they have picked up some action residuals."

"You mean maybe this suit has been used by somebody who acted like a real Planet Wrecker?"

"That's a possibility," Vilsey remarked.

"Humm," Herb said.

"Let's get on with it," Vilsey said. "That language machine won't go on forever."

"Sorry, Doghammer," Herb said to 15. "I'm used to talking to other Planet Wreckers. A rough bunch, believe me. Here, let me help you up."

He picked Doghammer up with both arms; then, standing between Doghammer and the aliens, he snapped the chains binding Doghammer's hands and feet.

"Thanks, I guess." Doghammer was then silent.

"How'd you get here?"

"I'm not talking."

"Why?"

"I don't know who you are. And who *they* are."

He motioned to the other side of the fire, where the light from the video screen cast flickering images on the two shadowy aliens.

"I'm Herbert the Humanoid Hellbender. A Planet Wrecker. I've come to take you back to the city. Back to school."

"Sure you are. They always send Planet Wreckers to get runaway students. Hah. You're not here to take me back. I know." He was silent.

Suddenly, Herb changed again. He swelled up and began clenching his fists. "Look," he said. "I told you what's what. So you'd better answer the questions. You wouldn't want me to do something violent."

Herb began pacing back and forth, kicking some of the embers out of the fire; at the same time, he let out a low growl. "I told you. Talk. Now. Or else...."

Just as Herb grabbed 15's arm and began pulling it, he heard a small voice behind him.

"Don't hurt him, Wrecker. We'll tell you about it."

It was Lake Ontario.

Meanwhile, inside, Vilsey was frantically trying to find why Herb was becoming so aggressive again. Finding nothing in the Herb's current program, he plugged into the physical control system of the Planet Wrecker suit. Immediately, he disappeared from Herb's visual field.

On the outside, Lake Ontario and Texarkana had walked over to 15 and stood beside him. Ontario spoke:

"We thought you were good when you came into the theatre. But you're just like the others who want to get rid of us. We won't let you do that."

"I don't follow," Herb remarked, now somewhat calmed since Vilsey had disappeared.

Doghammer patted Lake Ontario on the shoulder and said, "Never mind. I'll tell them."

"I've come out here before. I came out to study The Book and to see if I could find any other books."

"Why?" Herb asked.

"If you had ever been in my school, you'd know. I thought I was learning things and that I was smart because it was easy. But then, when I came out here one night with a gang, I found out about The Book. Someone read parts of it to me, and I found out I didn't know even simple things, things little kids used to learn in school. And I found out I couldn't really talk; I didn't know enough words. So, I've been coming out here to read The Book and to look for other books."

"You should see what some of the people have learned. About electronics and mechanics, and lots of stuff."

"Well," Herb mused. He wasn't sure what to think. He had never heard a *student* talk about education; and he had certainly never heard it criticized before.

Meanwhile, the Language Wheel had finished the simplified first lesson. As the screen darkened, there was a visible change in the alien shadows; an object had appeared in front of them. It was a tall box which also seemed to have a video screen, which flickered and went out just seconds after it became visible. Evidently it had been on even when Herb and Vilsey had not been able to see it.

And then the alien shadows spoke in a cold, flat voice:

"Please put your language machine at its maximum speed and program it to display all of its information. Then start its sequencing."

Herb walked over to the machine and set the controls to give the maximum data at the maximum speed and pressed ENTER.

The Language Wheel started again, this time flying through a vast

amount of linguistic data, finishing the final supplementary lesson by giving an extensive lecture on "who" and "whom." It then signed off by saying, "I hope you have enjoyed the Chomsky Language Wheel, Revised Extended Standard Version."

When it finished, all was silent; nothing around the fire had visibly changed. Doghammer still stood with Texarkana and Lake Ontario. Herb stood near the fire, watching the shadows. And the shadows remained unaltered. The only thing missing was Vilsey. And Herb didn't know where he could be.

Then there was a brief flicker in the shadows, and the aliens spoke again:

"See there, Harley, I told you that they had one of those language machines. So, we just let ours learn their language and then it makes up some translation tables and feeds them into the audio inputs and outputs and we can understand it and talk to it, both. In fact, it ought to be able to understand us now."

"Hey, you new things there by the fire—you understand any of this? You ought to. Me and Harley's surprised to find out you got any translation tools. That other one there, he never did say anything."

Internally, Herb called for Vilsey, his electronic message echoing from circuit to circuit and chip to chip:

"Come back, Vilsey. I need you."

No Vilsey appeared.

Herb spoke to the aliens:

"I'll tell you who I am. I am an Earth person who is also a Planet Wrecker. I'm as strong as about twenty ordinary Earth people and I'm aggressive to boot. I came to take this person" (motioning to Doghammer) "back to the city. And, don't try to stop me."

"Wow!" the other alien said. "These things sure have changed in the last few hundred million years. We should have come back here sooner."

"Well, just goes to show, Farley, what happens on some of these younger planets."

"You said it, Harley."

"I'm getting a little impatient; you'd better show yourselves and explain," Herb growled, now bluffing. Since Vilsey disappeared, he didn't feel nearly as aggressive.

"Oh, sure," Harley laughed.

There was a flicker and a glassy projection of a man carrying a fishing pole and a tackle box appeared in place of one of the shadows. An almost identical figure replaced the other shadow.

"Hi. I'm Harley," one of the aliens said.

"And I'm Farley," said the other.

"You don't look all that real to me," Herb said.

"Yeah," Doghammer agreed; "Your shadows were lots bigger and shaped different, too. I thought you would be really kind of weird looking. But you just look like some kind of old Earth person."

"Well," laughed Harley, "That's certainly what we look like to you, isn't it? We try to blend in wherever we are. We're what you might call a linguistic manifestation. What we are is translated into your local terms."

"And what are you?" asked Lake Ontario, edging closer to the aliens, evidently fascinated by what she saw.

"Just what it looks like," Farley said. "We're fishermen. Out on a fishing trip. Sort of."

"It must have been a long trip," Herb said, the school teacher intellect now regaining control.

"Like we were saying, a long one: a few hundred million years. Course, it didn't take *us* that long. We travel fast. But we can't control how fast time goes here. It *does* look like we should have gotten back sooner," Farley continued.

"Looks like," Harley agreed. "When we were here the first time, things sure were different. One big fat continent. Stormy ocean almost everywhere. Some big trees, too. Right around here there was an inlet that had the best fishing in it for about a zillion light years."

"Wow," Farley agreed. "Those big old fish with armor all over them. And *some* teeth. You talk about putting on a fight. Wow."



"Yeah, we should've got back sooner," Harley agreed. "They're all gone now. And we were just getting the poles packed back in the ship and unhooking the genetic fish scanner when we saw it."

Harley pointed to P.B. Doghammer. "We wondered what it was. So we scanned it."

Harley stopped.

"Don't stop now," prompted Herb. "It's getting interesting."

"Before, when it wouldn't talk, we thought it was just another really basic life-form. Now that we see it communicates and has social siblings, it looks like it must have some sort of artificial culture. It's a lot different than when we left it."

"What do you mean, 'Left it'?" Doghammer said with some indignation. "You didn't leave me anywhere."

"I don't think they're following," Farley remarked. "They must just know what you tell them."

"Looks like," Harley agreed.

"See, like we said, we're fishermen," Farley began, sitting down on a rock. "We find these little out-of-the-way fishing holes here and there and catch some interesting fish. They're worth searching for. We were on a little trip a while back—200 or 300 million of your years, depending on how fast we had the old boat going. Anyway, Harley, there, sees this planet floating around on the edge of a galaxy and thinks we ought to stop there. It had these steamy oceans and a few swampy islands and looked kind of different.

"So, we landed," Harley continued, "and jerked out the old fishing gear. But didn't take long to find out the place was too young to have anything worth fishing for. Water was just full of little things. Some kind of tadpoles. Really lively."

"And, since we were there," Farley said, "we figured we might as well get some bait, so we scooped up a big bucketful and took them along."

"And you came back here now to do some fishing with your old bait?" Doghammer asked.

"Actually, we came down here to check on the bait. You see, when we

went fishing here before, we used those tadpoles. Those big iron-headed fish just loved them. But old clumsy-butt Farley, there, had a big one hooked and got excited and knocked the bait bucket off into the water and all the bait swam away. Ruined a good fishing trip."

"And," Herb said, gritting his teeth and feeling the urge again to form a fireball, "what's the point?"

"The funny thing is," Farley continued, "when we got here yesterday and scanned around a little bit to see what's going on life-wise, we picked up the bait signature. We figured we were in luck; we could get some more of that good bait. But it was a lot bigger than when it got dumped out of the bucket. We had to tie it up."

"Wait a minute," Doghammer said. "You tied *me* up."

"Exactly," Harley and Farley said in unison.

"What you're saying is that 15 here is somehow related to the bait you used on a fishing trip here three hundred million years ago?" Herb asked, the fireball dissolving on his tongue.

"Not related," Harley said. "You call it *descended*."

"No, no," Texarkana said excitedly. "I learned it all from a book. We are all descended from an ape-like ancestor who lived some place or other on Earth. And Doghammer is not an alien; he is just like all of us."

"Exactly," Farley and Harley said in unison.

"Wait a minute," Doghammer said, now looking very concerned. "Are you saying that it not just me that's descended from your tadpoles? That all humans are?"

Suddenly, Herb wanted Vilsey. If these two had come to Earth for fishing bait and thought humans satisfied that requirement, there was no telling what they might do. He decided to argue with them while he waited for Vilsey to reappear.

"Before you say 'Exactly,'" Herb quickly said, "let me point out to you that it is a well-known biological fact that life on Earth evolved in a continuous stream from a point several billion years ago—starting with algae

and ending with electronic scientists intelligent enough to create robots."

Lake Ontario, Texarkana, and P.B. Doghammer looked quizzically at Herb.

"Don't know about those robot things," Harley said, "but those things like it," (pointing at Doghammer) "those 'human' things, as you call them, got here just how we said. The rest of the life on this planet went from algae to fish to reptiles to birds."

"And swell fish at that," Farley interjected. "It's a shame they had to change."

"All the other complicated life forms came from those tadpoles. Believe us, we know. All we do is fish all over the galaxies. We can sure tell the differences between the native life-forms here and the fish bait we dumped out. Don't know why anybody'd think something like *that*," (pointing at P. B.) "would be native to this planet. Doesn't fit the environment at all. Surprised that they managed to live here without going crazy."

"That's the truth," Farley added.

"Well, I'll tell you one thing. I don't know if what you say is true about humans, but you're not going to take Doghammer back with you to use for bait," Herb growled, now swelling noticeably in size.

"Wow, look at that thing swell up," Farley said. "You know, we might have missed something on this planet. It looks like one of those human things and one of the native lizards got put together. You reckon they've been breeding with each other?"

"That's their business, I guess," Harley said. "But we didn't say we were *looking* for bait; said we were *checking* on it. We wondered what happened in a couple hundred million years. And now," he said, looking at Doghammer, Lake Ontario, and Texarkana, "we know. They got bigger and learned how to talk."

"That's a fact," Farley added.

"So you're leaving?" Doghammer asked hopefully.

"Soon as we get packed," Harley said. "We'll tell you one thing, though. You human things ought to

get out to that tadpole planet sometime. You'll feel really at home there, I bet."

"Sure enough," Farley nodded.

Suddenly, a voice boomed out of the sky:

"Don't anybody move! This is Prometheus speaking!"

"Run," said the humans, "they're going to fry us."

Since there was nowhere to run, the three got behind Herb. At the instant the voice had sounded, the aliens, their machinery, and their ship disappeared in a blink of light camouflage.

Herb looked up into the sky, not knowing what to expect. He saw, several hundred feet above him, the blue-black bottom of a Prometheus low-level patrol platform, vapor shooting from maneuvering jets. As he watched, a port opened on the bottom and the flat, metallic voice sounded again:

"You are not authorized to be here; you are not authorized to re-enter the city. You are therefore subject to de-materialization."

The port began to glow laser blue.

"Vilsey!" Herb cried internally.

No Vilsey.

The three humans held tightly to each other and to Herb, expecting to die the next instant. Above them, the laser beam began its electromagnetic path groundward, dematerializing the molecules of the yellow atmosphere around it into a green haze.

Then, just as the molecules next to the molecules next to the hair on top of the head of the Planet Wrecker suit began to dissolve into chaos, the world blinked briefly, and the four found themselves inside the ship.

Herb and the three humans looked around. What they saw resembled the front porch of a country store; behind it, what Herb assumed to be the real ship faded into a crystalline darkness.

Harley and Farley sat in aluminum folding chairs. Harley was chewing on a toothpick; Farley was blowing his nose.

"Woo wee," Farley said, "some of those tadpoles have turned mean."

"I'll tell the world," agreed Harley. "I bet they're descended from that one with the pointed head and the bent tail. Remember him, Farley? Kept banging his head against the bucket and trying to bite the other ones."

"Yeah. Looks like we should have used him for bait first. Would have save us all this trouble."

"What's going on out there?" Herb asked.

"Prometheus," Doghammer said bitterly. "Trying to fry us. To keep us from getting back in."

"But Prometheus would do that only if you're trying to destroy something. If you have the right tag, there isn't any trouble."

"Wrong, Herb," Vilsey said. He had just reappeared in Herb's eye. He was dragging a barred cage behind him. In it, an animal resembling a weasel roamed back and forth, snarling at Vilsey. The weasel had tiny red eyes and a sneaky expression on its face.

"What is *that*?" Herb asked.

"It's the reason I had to leave earlier, and it's the proof that what 15 says is true. It's a part of the Prometheus system. It's a circuit scrambler, embedded in your circuits just like I am. But instead of being there to help, it's there to scramble your logic and intelligence circuits if Prometheus ever needs to put you out of commission. I detected it when I started following your connections to the suit's electronics. It was just beginning to scramble; that's why you were getting so aggressive. Next, you would have had a violent fit and ripped everybody apart."

"Why didn't I know?"

"It's set up that way: sneaky and subversive. I wouldn't have known about its being there if I hadn't gotten into the electronics the back way. Anyway, as you can see here, I've gotten it under control. Prometheus can't do anything with you now."

The weasel roamed the cage more quickly, its red eyes gleaming. It let out a silent snarl.

"So Prometheus is not watching out for us; it's controlling us?"

"Looks like it's trying to, Herb. Remember what's outside right now."

"Wouldn't worry too much about them," Harley said, who had been eavesdropping on Vilsey; "They can't detect us, and if they could, they couldn't do anything."

"Goodness, no," Farley agreed. "You couldn't go fishing all the places we do if you couldn't handle this sort of thing every once in a while."

"But why does Prometheus want to get rid of us?"

"Ask Doghammer," Vilsey said, pulling the chain on the weasel's cage.

"Why are they after us, Doghammer?"

"They won't let anybody back into the city whose been reading books. We want to change things. We tell the students they don't really know anything."

"I'm not like that," Herb said to Vilsey.

"Not so, Herb. Remember those showers they all get? And the rides in the school vans every morning? They're gassed and drugged so by the time they get to class, they can't understand even the elementary things you try to teach. From what I've seen now," he continued, tapping the weasel's cage, "it's not set up to develop human potential."

Herb was silent for a few moments. Lake Ontario, Texarkana, P. B. Doghammer, and Harley and Farley watched him, sensing that a decision was being made.

Finally, Herb spoke:

"If there are books out here and if there are people who want to learn out here, then I guess I'd better stay out here, too."

Then, internally:

"Should I tell them who I am, Vilsey?"

"There's no need. These three think you can do anything anyway; the two aliens have been probing us with detectors all along. I'm sure they know well enough what we are."

"How does that sound to you three humans?" Herb asked. "Can I

do some good if I can teach you some things?"

"Sounds good to me," Lake Ontario smiled. "And it won't hurt you're so big, too."

"But first," Herb noted logically, "we'll have to do something with the bunch outside, or we won't get to do any teaching or learning either."

"Why don't you let us help you out a little bit?" Harley asked. "We don't usually fiddle with indigenous populations, but we do feel some responsibility for spilling those bad tadpoles. We'll just net them and dump them far enough away to remove the danger."

"Make it far enough that we can find a place to hide," Herb suggested.

"Will the next star system or so be okay? I think we saw some habitable places there," Harley said.

"Sure enough," Farley agreed. "And we'll come back and check on them before 300 million years gets by this time."

"What about the whole big Prometheus system? Up in the sky and down here, too. Can you take all of that with you?" Doghammer asked.

"Nope. Can't do that," Farley said, shaking his head. "Not good to make such big changes when we don't know the system very well. You all know it better. You do it. You're descended from some tough little life-forms. Bull-headed, too. And, for when you get this mess cleaned up and get interstellar flight at light speed and so on, well, we've left a map of how to get to your old home planet. Embedded in his circuits." Harley gestured to Herb.

The three humans looked at Herb but didn't say anything.

"We've got to be going," Farley said. "Can't let fishing season go to waste."

"I can smell that water now," Harley said, smiling. "We'll just drop you off, so to speak, on our way out."

"Wait a minute," Herb said, so positively that he surprised himself, "could you at least tell us where the ground base is for the Prometheus system?"

"What you think, Farley?" Harley asked, now beginning to dig

through his tackle box, remembering the iron-headed fish and wishing, just for a moment, that the tadpoles hadn't evolved.

"Doesn't seem to me it would be against the rules; no worse than telling somebody about a good fishing hole. Long as you don't catch them for them, too," Harley replied.

"We'll just tell you the minimum, to be on the safe side. You just go outside here, get on the main street, and head toward the center of this old city for about two miles; then, you ought to find some tracks that'll lead you to the ground station. When you find it, this big Wrecker fella ought to be able to handle things," Farley explained.

"And that's a fact," Harley agreed.

"Good luck," Harley and Farley said in unison; "maybe we'll run into you sometime at one of the fishing holes."

In an instant, Herb, Lake Ontario, Texarkana, and P. B. Doghammer stood again by the fire. In that same instant, the hovering Prometheus platform disappeared in a rush of air, taken into one of the aliens' holding tanks.

"Well, that was certainly different," Herb said to the three humans. To Vilsey: "What do we do now?"

"Considering everything we've just found out, and considering that we seem to have a certain advantage now which may not last, I think we ought to find that ground station as soon as possible. If those two aliens think we can take care of it, we probably can. Let's go, Herb."

"Listen up, you three," Herb said. "We're going to go downtown and look for those tracks to the ground station and then see if we can put it out of order. That way, we may all get away from this Prometheus thing."

"Sounds good to me," Texarkana said.

"You're so brave and strong," Lake Ontario said.

P. B. Doghammer grunted, but affirmatively.

They walked the two miles or so down the old main street, again between demolished buildings, standing water, and fallen power and communication lines.

"What kind of tracks could you see in this sort of thing?" Herb asked Vilsey.

"Who knows? But let's start looking; this is about where they said we'd find them."

Up ahead of them, P. B. Doghammer was down on his hands and knees, looking at the surface of the street. "Are these tracks?" he asked them.

Texarkana and Lake Ontario peered down into the darkness, unable to make out anything definitive.

"Let me take a look," Herb said.

He turned up the light amplification. And sure enough, there were tracks on the pavement—brown ones, shaped exactly like human shoe prints, a series of them, right and left foot, running up the street. Each one said, "Follow me to the Dance."

"These have been painted on the street, Vilsey."

"So? They're tracks; they're where Harley and Farley said they'd be. And they lead off toward something. Let's follow them. I know it seems too easy, but..." Vilsey trailed off.

"Okay, everybody behind me," Herb told the three. "And you, Vilsey," he said on the internal circuit, "stay alert. Don't disappear on me when I need you."

"No sweat, Herb." Vilsey was now picturing himself as a mini-barbarian, sword in hand, chopping through masses of bad guys, saving the world.

They followed the tracks cautiously down the street, then down a side street for several blocks, and then down another large street. Then the tracks went down a second side street and again hit a larger street. When they came around the corner from the side street, they emerged onto a huge town square, an area ten blocks long and wide, where only one building stood, right in the center of the square.

The building was three blocks long and wide and about five stories high. It was evidently old, being made of off-white concrete. There were intermittent windows down the side; about halfway up a series of curved windows began, which, when they reached the roof-line, curved into the roof itself, so that the entire periphery of the upper section of the building was made of panes of glass. Through these panes, bright white light glared up toward the hanging black clouds.

"Goodness," Lake Ontario said, "this must be the only building in the city that is still standing up. It doesn't even look damaged."

"There's something familiar about this," Vilsey said. "I'm going to review some of the material in the 'Rumor and Speculation' files."

"Well," Herb remarked to Vilsey, "at least I can't say that it's too quiet. Listen."

The three listened. Faintly, carried by the wind, was the sound of music. It was coming from the building.

"The tracks take us right up to the front door," Doghammer noted. "Do you think it's safe?"

"Considering that we're looking for the ground station, we're probably not safe," Herb noted. "But considering that we ought to have a fair chance of handling it and considering the alternative—getting us marked and located in the system again, which they'll do before long, this may be safer than any alternative," Herb said.

"Very logical. That was very logical, Mr. Hellbender," Texarkana noted. "I have been reading about thinking," he noted somewhat shyly.

Herb bobbed his head in recognition. "Let's get up there."

The four of them walked down the street, following the painted tracks, and soon came to a series of steps leading up to the level of the building, which stood on a slight hill overlooking the city around. They climbed the stairs slowly, keeping a close watch around them and on the sky. Nothing stirred; the music, though, became louder. It was evi-

dent that it was coming from the building.

They arrived at the front door, wide enough for a truck to drive through. It was closed. A plaque on the wall by the door noted that the building was the *Municipal Convocation Hall—Erected for the Enjoyment of the People*.

"Boy, this place must be old," Vilsey said, one foot still down in his records department. "Most things have a different purpose than that nowadays."

"I guess," Herb noted, now very focused and testing various circuits, particularly those controlling the Planet Wrecker muscles, "we might as well go in."

The rest were silent, afraid and not knowing what to expect.

Herb grabbed the door handle and pulled, expecting it to resist. It did not; the door swung open smoothly, placing them in a small hallway leading to another door which opened into a large room. They could not see much of that room because of the glare of the light. The music had suddenly become louder; it too was coming from the room in front of them.

Still, no one approached them.

The four walked down the short hallway and then stood in the doorway, looking out on a huge room which took up most of the ground space of the building. There was movement everywhere.

"What is it?" Texarkana asked.

"It's robots. Dancing robots," Herb said in disbelief. "Bunches of dancing robots."

Indeed, the huge floor was covered by hundreds of robots, arm in arm or separate, dancing to the waltz music which poured down on them from speakers placed around the walls of the room.

"But," Lake Ontario said, "those don't look like regular robots. Just look at them. They don't have legs; they've got wheels. But they've got arms like regular robots."

"Yeah," Doghammer added. "And they all look a lot alike. And kind of old, too. Kind of beat up. And funny-shaped. Look at them; they're fat around the bottom and have little

bitty heads with little round sensors all over the place."

"They do look primitive," Herb noted.

Vilsey, who had just taken off a pair of earphones, peered out again at the dancing robots, and staggered back two steps.

"Good grief, Herb. I've been checking the records, the rumor files, everything. And you know what this is? What it must be? It's the Hoover Point."

"The what?"

"The Hoover Point. It was supposed to be a legend or a myth. But it exists. We're actually at the Hoover Point."

"I know you'll finally get around to telling me this, Vilsey, *but what's the Hoover Point?* And make it short."

"In the really olden days—pre-Revolution and so on—the first kind of robot that could function independently was one designed to clean houses. An automated vacuum cleaner. It had some intelligence and fed off broadcast current so that it didn't have to be tied a power source."

"After the Revolution, human labor was cheap and housing conditions were rigidly controlled, so they weren't needed anymore. All of them were destroyed or junked. But according to legend, somewhere on the fringes of the outer city, there was a warehouse of them that had been collected and stored away. And at least one had been left turned on."

"One day, a sudden surge of power came through the air and activated that one old cleaner. It cleaned up a little and then turned on the others. Soon, the warehouse was full of cleaners, and the place was spotless."

"They went outside to do other cleaning but couldn't find the power except in one direction. And so they went there—to the new source of electromagnetic radiation."

"And this is it," Herb concluded.

"It must be. To finish the story, when they got to the source of the radiation, they named it the Hoover Point and began cleaning. When the place was spotless, they didn't have anything to do, so they started look-

ing around. One of them found a walled-up closet and pried the door open. In it was an old robot named Murray who had been used in the old days to give dancing lessons to humans."

"After they polished Murray up, he went out and turned on the music and began dancing. Soon, they were all dancing; it wasn't that much different from the motions programmed into them. And, they're still at it."

Herb and Vilsey looked at the hundreds of robots gliding, twisting and turning, bobbing and bowing. Lake Ontario, P. B. Doghammer and Texarkana watched, fascinated. Lake Ontario did a few twists and dips herself as the music surged around them.

After relating Vilsey's story to the three, Herb conferred with all of them.

"The source of the radiation that these robots came here to feed on must be the ground station of Prometheus. It probably broadcasts both communication signals and perhaps sustaining power itself to the orbiting platform. An installation large enough to do that is obviously not above us; we can see the sky out the windows. So, it must be below."

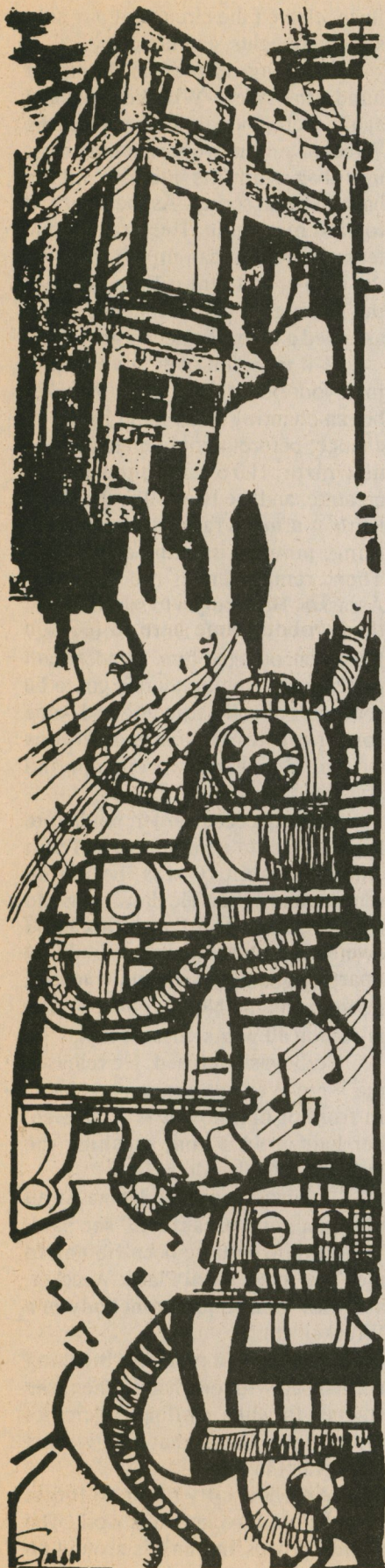
Texarkana nodded his head in logical appreciation.

"But how do we get down there? Even I can't tear the whole building apart. There must be some sort of entrance here, even if it's not the only one."

Internally, Vilsey suggested, "Let's look for some sort of mechanism that would activate a secure entryway; it probably wouldn't be through one of the obvious doors."

This time, Herb simply funneled Vilsey's message through his vocal output channel, after a micro-second editing delay.

The four slowly made their way around the periphery of the dance floor; the dancing robots took no note of them. About halfway down, they found a painting on the wall, with a small plaque under it. The painting, in a somewhat gaudy pre-Revolution style, depicted a great many colorfully dressed humans dancing on what appeared to be this same dance floor.



Their music was being played by an orchestra of robot musicians.

Below the picture, a plaque placed there later read, *To Serve Man*.

"That plaque," Texarkana noted, "doesn't look the same; it looks sort of...sort of...handled."

"It does, doesn't it?" Herb relayed from Vilsey. "Let's touch it."

Herb put one reptilian finger on the far right corner and pushed lightly. The floor below them immediately sunk with the speed of a fast elevator. Darkness settled over them as they plunged downward in the access shaft.

After a moment they stopped, and the wall in front of them slid back; they stepped out into a dimly lit corridor. As he stepped forward, Herb could feel six human hands on his backside.

"Okay," Herb said; "We're into it now. This must be the ground station; at least, at the end of this corridor. Probably around that next corner."

Vilsey look apprehensive for a moment. Then he grabbed the weasel's cage and took it down out of sight. An instant later, he popped up for a moment and told Herb, "Wait a sec, Herb. I want to get his thing fixed so it won't do any harm." He disappeared again.

In another moment, he was back, now wearing a plumed Greek helmet. "I'm ready," he said grimly.

"Everybody stay behind me," Herb said needlessly.

The four crept to the corner and looked around; what they saw was another short corridor culminating in a door. Stenciled on the door was the notation, "Prometheus Command Center. Authorized Personnel Only. Laser Guarded."

They silently approached the door; Herb looked in through the armored window. He saw a large room filled with screens, tables, and controls; he could not tell if anyone were there.

"Vilsey?"

"You're the Planet Wrecker."

"You three with me?"

"Be careful, Mr. Wrecker."

"Yeah."

"Sounds logical to me."

Herb grasped the doorknob and prepared to yank the door off its moorings. Instead, the knob turned, the door opened, and the three found themselves in the forbidden confines of Prometheus control center.

Seeing no movement, they began to walk through the room, looking around at a massive complex of screens, switches, and sensors. Herb was about to ask Vilsey where they should start in wrecking Prometheus controls, when there was a sudden movement at the end of the room.

"Hello. Come in. It's nice to have a visitor. I don't get them often down here. Come here and let me meet the four of you."

The voice had come from an old human male with white hair on a balding head. He had a kindly face with a nicely trimmed moustache. He was dressed in an old sweater, slacks, and some scuffed soft leather shoes. The only thing official about him was the name tag he wore pinned slightly off horizontal on his sweater. "Whipple," it noted.

Herb was caught off guard. Not so Vilsey, however; emergencies were, after all, his reason for being. As soon as the man stood up, Vilsey began scanning him for comparison in the life-form database.

What he saw nearly made his expert system swallow its predicates. Vilsey began flaring like a light bulb about to burn out, flashing in Herb's eyes.

In front of Herb, Whipple stood smiling, holding out his hand. In back of Herb, the three humans, hearing a kindly human voice, began to spread out and come forward. Inside Herb, Vilsey had everything on Red Alert.

"I'm Herbert the Humanoid Hellbender," Herb said, walking forward. "We've, uh, we've always wanted to see this place," he said a little lamely.

"Look around," Whipple smiled. "You'll find this screen behind me particularly interesting. Come over here, you three kids, and look. It's educational."

As the three started forward, Herb held one massive arm in front of them. "Let's all go over," he said. "I'd like to see it, too. But let me get

these boots pulled up; we've done a lot of walking today."

Herb squatted down, still keeping the three behind him. As he looked down at the boot, he queried Vilsey:

"What is it? You look like you're going to explode."

"Ahhhh! It's the worst, Herb, the very worst. It's the beast itself! We're doomed, Herb."

"What do you mean, 'the beast'? Get hold of yourself."

"Remember the films that said no one was sure if there were real Wreckers? Well, there was supposed to be one, who appeared in the very first Wrecker TV show. But it was so scary they couldn't show it. Or they didn't want anyone to see it. It was the *Were-Wrecker*."

"Were-Wrecker?" Herb began.

"It changes shape. That's not a nice old man. It's the worst Wrecker of all."

Then two things happened simultaneously. The old man blurred and became larger and leaped over a table, heading for Herb. And the three humans, almost a blur themselves, headed for the door. In the next instant Herb felt some big fingers around his throat. He twisted his head to see the enemy.

The *Were-Wrecker* now appeared as a gigantic politician. "At this point in time, I'm going to kill you," it said. The fingers began to close.

Herb tensed his legs and then stood up, at the same time expanding his neck. That action threw the politician back. He now stood in front of Herb, wiping the sweat from his gray face, which appeared to need a shave. "So," it said, "it may take more than sixteen minutes to erase you. I'll do it this way."

The *Were-Wrecker* blurred again and this time appeared as a somewhat overweight and heavily sweating minister, book in hand. "Truly, you won't live through this, not even by calling my toll-free number, friend." And it swung the book at Herb, catching him alongside his left eye.

Although the book was steel-hard, Herb's reptilian head was well-

protected. He was knocked back several feet but wasn't hurt.

Herb crouched in front of the thing, ready to fight. In his eye, Vilsey had gotten over his fright, at least well enough to pay attention to the action, although he offered no advice.

The minister and the hellbender circled each other. The *Were-Wrecker* was at least as large as Herb, at least as heavy and, as Herb had found, very strong. The *Were-Wrecker* threw the book at Herb, who deflected it with one arm. It fell on the floor and took on a somewhat amorphous shape.

"Truly, you will pay for the sin of entering this sanctuary," the *Were-Wrecker* intoned.

"No, it's you who'll pay," Herb said, leaping forward and punching the preacher in the face. Even as his fist struck the thing, he felt the flesh soften so that the blow had no real effect. He pulled his fist back and looked to see what damage he had done. The face had a depression in it, which slowly began to fill out again. And then the whole *Were-Wrecker* blurred again.

"Get back; in case it gives itself some long arms or something," Vilsey said.

Herb, still in his fighting stance, backed up, all the while keeping his eyes on the changing creature.

In a moment, it had taken on a new shape. "The bottom line, the bottom line, is that *you* will pay," it said in a computer-like voice. "Get ready for a long-term deficit; you'll never recover from it."

It was now a tall, cadaverous, dead-eyed saving-and-loan executive, a huge gleaming razor in one hand. "You want cuts, I'll give you cuts. Don't bother to save; I'll bankrupt you all over the room."

It slashed at Herb's throat, missing but cutting through the leather vest, making a deep gash in the unfeeling Planet Wrecker suit. The wound and the gleaming razor in the hands of the monster made Herb realize that his humans really were in danger now. He went into a rage; Vilsey, for his part, turned up the

juice, cleared the circuits of any subsidiary thoughts, and hung on.

Thinking it now had the upper hand, the *Were-Wrecker* slashed again. Herb, though, realized that the Wrecker suit he wore was now most useful as armor; its integrity did not have to be preserved. As the razor fell toward him again, Herb raised one tensed forearm, caught the razor on the elbow, and sent it flying toward the ceiling. When it landed, it too assumed a blob-like appearance.

"I'll take you over anyway; I'll junk your bonds," the *Were-Wrecker* began chanting. One hand began to change; before it could materialize a new razor, Herb leaped toward the creature, and the two fell to the floor, Herb's arms wrapped around the thing, pinning its arms at its side. Then, remembering the Anabolic Assassin, Herb began to squeeze.

"That's right, Herb, squeeze," Vilsey encouraged him. "Underneath that shape-changing there's got to be some sort of solid structure and some sort of cardiovascular and nervous system. Squeeze hard enough and you'll get them."

Herb squeezed harder; but before he could get to its essence, he felt it change again. It was becoming rounder and softer. He drew back and looked at what he had in his arms even as it spoke to him:

"My goodness, why do you want to be so rough? Now, you've gotten my apron all wrinkled. Just look."

Herb was confused. He released the *Were-Wrecker* and stepped back. In front of him now was Aunt Bee, her hair up in a bun, brushing the wrinkles from her dress.

"I think you need to let me fix all of you a good breakfast," she said. "And I think you've been fibbing to me. You're not a real Planet Wrecker, are you? You're just somebody in a Wrecker suit."

She paused a moment, brushing her hair up with one hand. Then, she stepped forward, smiling. "Here, let me help you out of that suit. It must be very hot in there."

"And how silly of me to forget how the old Wrecker suits work. The central processing unit is around on

the back, isn't it? Here, a couple of snips and you'll be out."

She reached around Herb's back; she now had scissors in her hand.

Herb started to move, just an instant too late. The scissors plunged in and struck the control unit for the suit. Herb's legs suddenly lost power and he fell back on the floor, twitching.

Aunt Bee now hovered over him, finally getting down on her hands and knees. She tested the arms and legs; nothing seemed to have power.

"And now," she said, her shape changing, "whoever is in this suit is going to die. And then those three in the hall."

Vilsey's tiny visual sensors wanted to close when they saw the evolving shape of the Were-Wrecker. It was growing taller, with long arms and legs; the head began to take on the appearance of an animal, having a short muzzle with protruding teeth. The hands and feet now had claws. Vilsey thought he saw a twitching tail as hair began to bristle on its back; but it was not an animal.

"Now, I'll cut you out of there," it hissed. It placed one clawed hand on the stomach of the Hellbender and began to dig in. Its brimstone breath filled Herb's nostrils.

"Herb," Vilsey said, "your bottom half won't work. But the top half will. Kiss him, Herb. Hard!"

Herb didn't bother to ask why. His arms shot out and he pulled its face to his own. He felt its thin lips on the reptilian mouth of the Wrecker suit.

"Give it the tongue, Herb."

Without reflecting on any possible perversion of the norms of society this act might imply, Herb shot his long tongue into the mouth of the Were-Wrecker.

The Were-Wrecker was so startled by these two actions that it now paused—fatally.

"Shoot it a fireball, Herb."

Herb shot it two fireballs.

The force of the fireballs lifted the Were-Wrecker from the floor, throwing it back against the wall.



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There it stood for a full minute, smoke coming from its mouth and ears. Then it gradually slumped to the floor and began to lose its shape. Its mass softened until it soon was no more than a puddle of boiling protein, growing smaller and smaller. All that was left at the end was some cartilaginous goo and what appeared to be some scorched bones.

"Wow," Vilsey said, "that was something. Herb, you did it!"

"Thanks, Vilsey. But will I ever walk again?"

"In a minute. That unit has some redundancy. It'll come back on."

In a few minutes, with Herb's power restored and the three humans assured the danger had passed, the four again stood in the control room of Prometheus, looking at the main control board.

Herb put Vilsey on a separate external audio circuit and explained to the three humans that he, Herb, was a robot in the Wrecker suit and that he had his own internal source of advice in the person of Vilsey, with whom they could all communicate.

"How do we do this, Vilsey? You know the electronics."

"I've got just the thing, Herb; right here."

Vilsey now stood in the corner of Herb's eye, holding a rope. At the other end of the rope was a unicorn.

"Where did you get that?"

"I made it a while ago; it's a

reconstituted weasel. Now, instead of fouling up your circuits, its going into the Prometheus system to knock out all their databases and ground links—all the control aspects."

"They won't be able to keep track of us, then?" Doghammer asked.

"They won't be able to keep track of themselves," Vilsey said.

Herb snaked a communication link out of his control system, much to the evident interest of Texarkana, and plugged it into one of the Prometheus system inputs. The unicorn bobbed its head, pawed the ground, and disappeared.

"It's in the system," Vilsey noted. "It's just a matter of time."

They all went back upstairs, where the robots continued to waltz.

"We can safely go outside now," Herb noted. "Let's go up on the roof."

He opened a stairwell and began to go up. A few of the robots tried to follow, but couldn't because of their wheels.

"Must not be a ramp or elevator that goes up there," he said. "Let's just do it this way." And he grabbed up a double armload of dancing robots and took them up the stairs with the three humans.

The roof was flat and had been evidently built so that humans could go there to enjoy the night air. Speakers there carried the music; in a few

minutes, the robots Herb had brought up were again gliding to the sound of a waltz.

"Mr. Wrecker, will you dance with me?" Lake Ontario asked.

And in a minute, the eight-foot Planet Wrecker and the tiny street waif were dancing arm in arm among the robots. In Herb's eye, Vilsey glided back and forth with them.

Over at the edge of the roof, Texarkana and P.B. Doghammer talked, gesturing at the sky.

"I wonder what's out there, P.B."

"Who knows, Tex? Maybe now we'll get a chance to find out."

As they watched, a fireball came through the clouds near the horizon, flared, and disappeared.

"That must have been...."

"Prometheus."

On the far corner of the roof, in the deepest shadows, a crystalline darkness blinked out of being.

As their ship began its ascent, Harley and Farley looked at the viewing screen. It showed them a group of dancing robots; in their midst, Herb and Lake Ontario danced on. The two males on the roof looked up toward them, but not at them.

"What do you think, Farley?"

"Turned out good, Harley. Those tadpoles might have a future."

"Looks like," Harley agreed. ■

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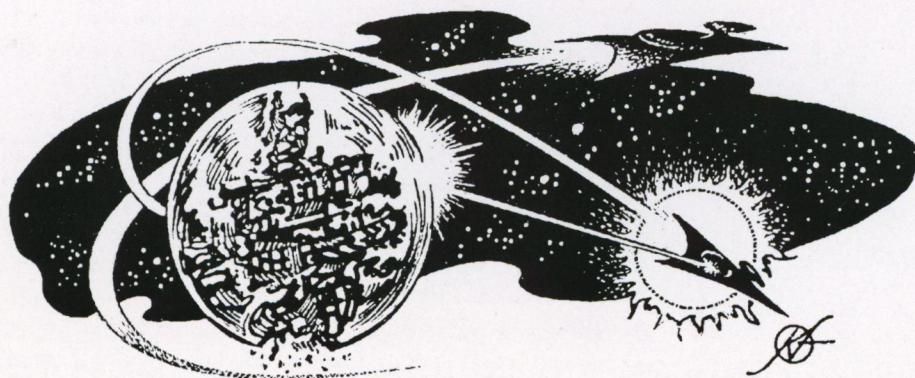
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