



edited by Algis Budrys

# tomorrow

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YVES MEYNARD • DAVID LEE ANDERSON • ROBERT REED • MANY OTHERS



# tomorrow

SPECULATIVE FICTION

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## EDITORIAL



Well, one piece of news this issue is that the price is going up again, because the price of paper has gone up again. I hate it, and as soon as the price drops we will add pages. Why is the price of paper going up again? Because inordinate amounts are being purchased by Oriental buyers. They are building their own paper plants as fast as possible, because they don't like the point to where they've driven the price of U. S. and Canadian paper either. But it will be a while before those plants are up and running. Once they are, the U. S. and Canadian paper price will drop. Hold your breath.

I want you to understand something else; the overwhelming majority of readers love this magazine, and understand what I'm doing. If we had a letter column, we wouldn't have a letter column, because it would be filled overwhelmingly with praise. What I hope at this juncture is that you'll love it an extra 50 cents' worth. I think I'm right about that.

Another thing we're going to be doing is running serials steadily. That's the other piece of news. From Issue 21 on, the only reason why we won't have a three-part serial installment is that something has temporarily gone wrong. We will fix it. We don't claim to be perfect (God knows). We do claim to catch up to errors as fast as humanly possible. We haven't had an issue free of error yet, and we probably won't have, ever. But that's our goal, nevertheless.

The first serial will be Michael Shea's *In The Mines Of Behemoth*. It's a sequel to his Fantasy Award-winning *Niffit the Lean*, and it will—unless we are in error—be one of the signal events in SF magazine publishing this year. The serial after that isn't bad, either.

We are, unabashedly, very proud of this magazine. Kandis does a remarkable number of things with it, and I do the rest. That's it, gang—two people, three hours apart by highway, with my wife, Edna, as backup, and our printer, besides printing also seeing to the bulk of the shipping. But I flatter myself our product compares to the best of the pulp magazines, in any era. If that's true, it *is* something to be proud of.

Stay with us. The best is yet to be.

—Algis Budrys



# tomorrow

SPECULATIVE FICTION

April, 1996

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Cover by David Lee Anderson, © Copyright 1996, David Lee Anderson,  
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# THE COMPANY WE KEEP

Heather G. Wells

Illustrated by Margaret Ballif Simon

*He looked on in curiosity as she sliced into his skin.*

The woman opened her handbag, removing a stout knife and a bundle of plastic sandwich bags. From high above, Dennis watched her bend over his body, her own body shapeless under a faded green-print dress, her hair thick and frizzy and falling across his chest as she unbuttoned his shirt. He should stop her. Instead, he looked on in curiosity as she took up the knife and sliced into his skin.

The woman—a name, *Rosalyn*, floated into his consciousness—struggled with the knife and brushed her hair out of her face with the back of her hand. Dennis could tell by her quiet grunts that the job was more difficult than she'd expected.

He turned his eyes from her and took in the room around him. The polished mahogany desk, the towering bookshelves held a vague familiarity. He read his name on the official-looking certificates that hung, tastefully framed, on the walls. It took a minute before he realized that it was his.

*I'm a psychiatrist. This woman—what was her name?—was my patient.* He tried to hold on to that. *Had to work late, working on...a gun she had a gun she was going to shoot him have to say something stop her a gun.*

In the middle of the room, a woman leaned over a body. He watched her stuff something purple-crimson in a plastic bag. Then she turned back to the body and tugged at the fly of his trousers.

His attention wandered to the carpet, so many colors twisting in and out of each other without moving, so many patterns and he followed them, amazed.

Something drew him back. The woman closed her handbag and stood. She left the office without glancing back. He felt a tugging, something pulling at him and then he was in the reception area with her, then the deserted hall, the street.

The woman let herself into a small apartment—*what was his name? Name?*—as he watched on dreamily. He floated, like a crystalline bubble, leaping and falling through the air. He lost track of time, if there were such a thing, until he sensed the woman was doing something important, something for him to be concerned with.

At first he thought it was a man she was touching, caressing lovingly. It looked wrong, though, something odd about it. He looked first at her, then the man-thing, and he had to concentrate, but then it dawned on him. The woman was full of color—pink and brown and green—while the thing was a dull blue-gray. It stood motionless, letting her touch it just as the body in the *in the, in the where?* had let her touch it, without touching in return.

The woman emptied her handbag onto the metal TV stand that stood beside the gray man-thing. She pulled the plastic bag away from the knife, its blade dripping red, and used it to open the man-thing's chest.

He had expected blood, bone, tissue, like the *the what?* but the man-thing was solid inside, the same dull gray running all the way through it. *Clay* came to him and he grasped at the word, at some bit of understanding, before he could lose it. *Clay.*





Now the woman held up the purple-crimson thing that had come from another of the plastic bags. It oozed over her arm as she pushed it into the man-thing's chest. She wiped her arm on the man-thing, then pushed the clay over the hole, molding it to resemble again a chest. A strong, solid chest, he mused.

She was cutting the man-thing again, slicing deep into its testicles. *Anatomically correct* passed through his mind and he felt like giggling, though he didn't know why or how. So he watched instead, feeling like a light falling from the sun, fascinated by this woman and her man-thing.

She pushed the contents of the last bag into the hole she'd made and closed it up. She touched the clay penis, which was erect, then jerked her hand away and picked up her empty little bags. She crumpled them and tossed them into a can. She took the knife away, disappearing for a few minutes, and then coming back with something else. Sticks. She stood them up around the room, pulled the shades, and then stood looking at the man-thing in the darkened room.

"Now or never," she whispered. Light flared from her fingers. She touched it to the sticks and one by one, they pierced the darkness with bright, dancing light. He gaped at them, fascinated, hypnotized. He heard her muttering, moaning; the lights, the tiny lights, and the shadows, and her whippers gathered around him, swirling with the lights. Then he was being dragged down, down into a cool, hard prison. He fought to get away, to rise, and some part of him remembered a similar fight, hours before, where he had fought against floating, had fought to stay in a cold, hardening body.

He was in one now, filling it, becoming one with it, like the heart and the blood and the semen the woman had poured into it.

The woman stepped back, frowning. "Well. Do something."

Do. He thought about that hard and looked wistfully at the lights around him, still flickering and free. He reached for them.

"Oh my God," the woman whispered, her hands going to her mouth. "It worked."

"You'll be my first. My very first," she told him after pulling his hand away from the flame. "You should be happy," she said.

He had only her convictions to lead him, so he held his head high; he was happy.

"You have to have a name."

He worried. What if he didn't have one, couldn't get one?

"Jack. A strong name for a strong man. Hold me."

He didn't know what she wanted.

Jack. She took his arms and wrapped them around her. She rested her head on his chest and sighed. He—*Jack. I'm Jack*—held her tighter, ran his hands over her back. It felt right. Instinct told him what to do and he pressed his cool lips to her hair, cradled her in his arms. He lifted her face toward his. He knew what he wanted.

"Not here."

She took his hand and led him through a doorway into another room full of lights. She told him to sit on the bed; then led him there when he didn't know where it was. She turned her back on him and suddenly there was music, soft and slow. He tilted his head, listening, smiling. It was like the floating feeling. It flowed through his solid body, nudging his soul.

Then she was with him, naked next to him.

"You love me, don't you, Jack?" she murmured. He nodded. "And you always will."

She kissed his face. He pressed his lips against hers, ran his hand over her breast, squeezing, kneading. She tensed and he ignored her. He needed no direction now, no help from her. This was what he was made for.

He rolled her onto her back and covered her with his heavy clay body. He stopped thinking, wondering; he was feeling, doing.

She screamed as he entered her.

"Stop it! Stop it! Get off me!" She pounded on his chest, forced him off the bed. Then she was up too, grabbing her clothes off the floor and clutching them to her.

"It wasn't supposed to hurt." She rubbed tears off her cheeks with her fist. "In the magazine stories, in books, they never mention how

painful, how horrible—" She lost her words and fell to making noises that hurt his ears.

She ran from the room, ran from him. The slamming door jarred him. He leaned against a wall and slid to the floor, resting his heavy hands on his heavy knees. He felt sick.

After an eon, she returned with scissors. His heart jumped when she stepped into the room, although she avoided looking at him. He wanted her to look at him. To want him.

She knelt between his legs and took his genitals in her hand. A vibrant wave of pleasure filled him.

"Sometimes," she said, "a person takes herself into wanting something, just because everyone else wants it. And everyone else has it. And she thinks she's missing something."

The cold stainless steel blades touched his clay skin. There was something wrong with that, something wrong with the look in her eyes, and then the blades were slicing, slicing, and the pleasure seeped out of him through the cut she made.

"But then, when a person gets what she thought she wanted, she suddenly realizes it's not what she wanted at all."

She held up his anatomically correct parts, crushing them in her hand until the clay oozed through her fingers. She wrinkled her nose and tossed the clump on the floor.

Smoothing over the cut clay below his abdomen, she smiled. "Sex is horrible and dirty. We can get along without it, you and I. That's why you're so perfect."

She huddled close to him. "You still love me, don't you, Jack?" He nodded. "Stroke my hair, Jack."

He did and was content.

"I love you too. And tomorrow, I'll get you some clothes. It's not right, running around naked."

He was ashamed of his nakedness.

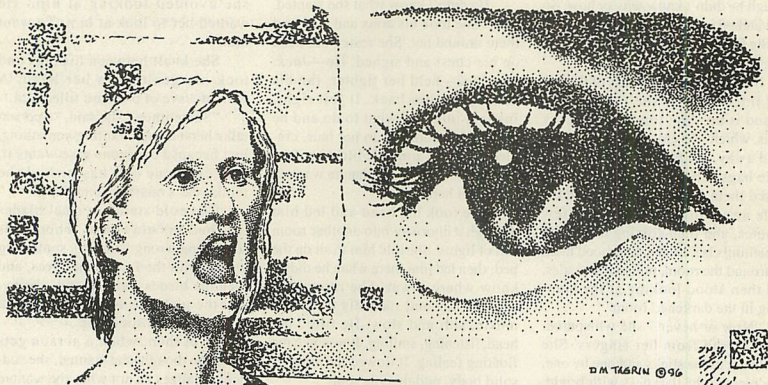
He held her next to him all night. Once, before the candles sputtered out, he looked at the piece of twisted clay at his feet and wondered what it had been. ■

# RETRIEVAL

John Park

Illustrated by Darla Tagrin

*He began the game of choosing his identity for the month*



Outside, they were playing cricket on Stockhausen Square. In his office on the second floor of the gutted museum, the man with the burned face pushed aside the battered electronic device he had been examining and turned to watch. The square was surfaced with gravel, except for a patch of earth in which a black, leafless poplar stood at deep midwicket. The man could remember the tree dying, long after everything had collapsed, its leaves streaming away in a morning gale.

He watched Durkheim, the epileptic, take three skipping strides and bowl. The far wicket was an empty drum of cleaning fluid. In front of it, Ramsay, the helicopter pilot, jabbed forward with part of a doorframe as a bat, but the tennis ball broke past his elbow, and was taken head-high behind the wicket. From the two dozen players there was not a

sound or a hint of excitement. The man told himself as usual that the fact that they were playing at all was a good sign.

He picked up the set of identity cards he had made, and began the game of choosing his identity for the month. C. L. Staples, the university lecturer? Larry D. Herbert, the painter? F. Edward Morgan, back from the East? Eliot T. Stearns, the ex-bank clerk. That would do. The game, begun when he had tried renaming the ruined streets and buildings, was losing its attraction. Today it reminded him of what was lost.

The device at his elbow seemed to pluck at his memory. It had been scavenged from the ruins the evening before, and he had not had time to do more than glance at it before he slept. But then a dream had woken him, and vanished, leaving a blurred memory of a man's face. He had lain in the

dark, afraid to move, thinking he was still in the hospital, with the pain about to return.

He opened an old coffee jar and took out the prosthetic skin he used to build up the ruin of his left cheek. As he worked, he examined his face in the driving mirror from a VW bus. Whatever name he attached to it, it remained a stranger's face with an unknown past. He wondered what it had looked like, what it had smiled at, when its smile had been more than a grimace.

He glued on his left eyebrow and pulled a black leather glove over his shrivelled left hand. Finally he scooped his leather overcoat from the back of the chair, checked the Beretta in the right pocket, and was ready.

Outside, at the foot of the fire-escape, he was met by a red-bearded man carrying a repeating shotgun. Stearns nodded to him. "All right,



Sammy," he said, and took one more look across the square. The sun broke through thin clouds, and the jagged shadow of an office tower fell across the players as they changed ends. "They look happy enough for the moment. You're sure Colin knows the water truck's due?"

Dumb Sammy grinned and nodded.

"Okay then, let's go." Stearns could see the cloud shadows on the gray hills beyond the city, and, closer, the fractured dome of the town hall gleaming in the sun. With Sammy at his shoulder he walked briskly, with only a slight limp, whistling Jagger and Richard's "Satisfaction."

They came to the public library. A battered Renault electric was parked in the lot, battery pack strapped to its rear bumper. "It looks as if Ernst is punctual for once," Stearns remarked. He glanced quickly along the empty street. "Okay, let's go in."

He pushed the front door open, and they walked past the looted shelves to the office. Ernst's equipment was there on the chipped wooden desk, between the armchairs, and the usual two Storage batteries were on the floor beside it; but the man waiting for him was new. Stearns let Sammy go ahead of him, and slipped his hand into his pocket. "Ernst," he said, "that's the best facial I've seen in years. A whole-body job, too? In these days? I'd never have known you without the toys."

The man came slowly to meet him. He was middle-aged and stocky, with gray hair and a clipped moustache. He wore a leather-patched green anorak that was frayed enough to show the bullet-proof Kevlar lining. "Ernst has been—discommode," the man said. "Nothing serious, but he asked me to take over for the time being." He held out part of a torn fifty-franc note. "You can call me Cavendish."

Stearns pulled out his wallet and compared his half of the banknote to Cavendish's. He nodded. "Okay, Sammy. Just wait outside and see we're not disturbed, please. Glad to

meet you," he said to Cavendish. "My name is Stearns. On this occasion."

"Ah," the man murmured, "old habits." Stearns frowned, but Cavendish was examining a list on a clipboard. "Now, you're the customer for the special, I understand."

Stearns nodded, and Cavendish took a green plastic thermos from a tool box behind the desk and handed it over. "Enough for two, right?"

The flask was filled with crushed ice, in which a screw-top phial was packed. Stearns picked up the phial in his fingertips, examined the serial number etched into the glass and the seal on the neck, then put it back in the ice. "Defrosted today? Okay. Now, what about the rest?"

"Ernst's quite a sick man, actually." Cavendish drew a fingertip along one of the gouges in the desk. His wrist quivered and the finger went white around the nail. "He had to go to a lot of trouble to get that for you."

Stearns put the thermos down. "Well, well, well. After all these years. Did Ernst mention to you that I've got twenty-six in permanent aftershock who need the stuff, that one's epileptic, and another three need heroin?"

"Actually, all he mentioned was that you needed the special rather badly."

Stearns frowned. "If Ernst is developing capitalist ambitions, I'm afraid he's either too early, or much too late."

"Whatever." Cavendish began tapping his fingers on the desk. "If you want the rest, I have a slightly different arrangement to offer."

Stearns sighed. "The good Ernst, for all his faults, is not one to welsh on a deal. But I'm not sure how he reacts to being cut out by his partners. Maybe you'd know that?"

"I know what I just told you."

"Then there's no problem, is there? Shall I call Sammy in to help you pack up? Maybe we'll meet again in more congenial circumstances."

Neither of them moved. "Interesting," Cavendish said at last. He reached down and put an egg carton containing a dozen ampules packed in blue foam plastic on the desk. "You're

quite committed to these people, aren't you? Have you been here all along?"

"Only as long as I can remember," Stearns said, and began checking the ampules. Finally he nodded. "Now we've finished our little courtship dance, perhaps we can get on with the main business." He dragged one of the armchairs back against the desk and sat down. He reached up and peeled back his hairpiece, revealing the metal insert in his scalp. "Perhaps you can help me here? I assume you've seen one of these before. It's just the housing and sensor guide for the memory packs. Bring the sensor head over here and position it—there, that's right. Now all you have to do is enter number eleven on the keyboard—"

"—And press the little red button."

Stearns closed his eyes; his right hand clenched, his jaw quivered. A minute passed. Then he sat back and smiled weakly. "There we are. I'm sure Ernst would want you to enter the check codes to make sure I haven't cheated you."

Cavendish worked at the keyboard. "That other deal I mentioned. I have a client interested in certain information that may pass your way. If you come across it, it could be to both our advantages."

Stearns raised his eyebrow.

"The code name was Viking," Cavendish went on. "I can give you a hexadecimal reference."

After Cavendish had read off the reference, Stearns closed his eyes, leaning forward with his arms stiff. "I may have something, a cross-reference. Maybe—I'm not sure—" He shook his head and sat up. "It's gone, if there was anything—" He broke off, and looked at Cavendish. "I've seen you before."

Cavendish peered at him, his eyes suddenly hard. "Have you now? I'm not sure I can say the same."

"I've changed," Stearns muttered. "Hm. Do you know where you've seen me?"

"No. It's gone now. Just a flash of something. A dream."

"Interesting. Do you get these flashes often?"

"No. I wish I did. It might mean my memory was coming back."

"You may be fortunate as you are. After the plagues, and some of the things that followed, not many illusions about human worth or dignity survived. But—we have to keep on going, don't we? So—keep an ear to the ground, and if you hear anything about Viking, let me know."

Stearns waited until Cavendish had loaded his equipment into the Renault and driven away before he came out to meet Sammy. He handed over the package of ampules. "Off you go, now. Get this back safe. Colin knows what to do."

Stearns walked north for a block, then stopped at the corner where the salvage crew was working. They were clearing rubble from the remains of an office building. The side walls and rear were smoke-blackened but intact; the front had collapsed into the street. The foreman was looking at the motor of a blue Ford that had been under the rubble.

"Afternoon, Carl," Stearns said. "What have we got?"

"Not much today, looks like. We'll tear the motor out and have a look, but the oil's been gone for a long time. We got the radio out, though. Pretty chewed up, but some of the boards still look good." He went over to a bundle of sacking and handed the radio to Stearns. "Werner started this find, when he picked up that other thing in the stairwell with his metal detector. Thought he'd tripped over another bloody Claymore at first."

Stearns handed the radio back. "Ship this back to my office and I'll check it out tonight. I haven't had time to look at the other one yet. If you can't see much else that's easy to get at, you'd better wrap it up; I'd like to put the team on clearing some of the warehouses by the bridge. We might have better luck there. I've got to be going now. I'll see Werner gets credit for the find."

He walked on, his left leg starting to drag, and came to a limestone-and-slate motor hotel, still largely intact in its concrete lot. At the lobby

entrance he saw a BMW electric cycle pushed among the yellow weeds by the door. He frowned, then clumped up the steps and went in. From the broken window, the usual splash of light fell across the registration desk; but the two chairs behind it were empty. As he hesitated, his hand slipping into his right pocket, a woman in black cycle leathers moved from the shadows in the far corner. She was of medium height with straight brown hair, and she carried a machine pistol easily at her side, its muzzle aimed a couple of meters in front of Stearns's feet.

"It's cold for April this year," he said, feeling ridiculous.

"And no lilacs are blooming," she completed, and clipped the gun to her belt. "Right you are, but I've learned to be careful with a new customer. What's the matter? Oh—you were expecting Adrienne. She's—not going to make it. Trouble last month. You know."

"I can imagine."

"Anyway, I've got the data you wanted, and as far as we're concerned, the deal's still on." She paused. "Did you know her well?"

"Well? I'm not sure." He swallowed. "I looked forward to when she came through here, but it's been so quiet here that you forget.... Today's full of surprises." The fingers of his right hand were gripping his gloved wrist. "She won't be back at all? That'll be hard to get used to."

She nodded. "It's still hard to lose someone, even now, after all this. I've got some medicinal alcohol on the bike. You want a slug?"

He shook his head and took out the thermos. "Won't mix with this."

"I've got a recorder with me. We could use that if you'd rather."

"No. No. Those things start to mash my brains if they're not perfectly tuned. Electric feet scuttering through my mind. Can we talk a bit first, though? I'm not ready yet."

They talked. Her name was Megan. She had a husky voice and rather coarse features, and she carried two gigabytes of RAM implanted in her head. Talking of fortified villages and

water-powered assembly lines in a ruined cathedral, she leaned forward, gesturing with stiff wrists and curved fingers. There was something wrong with her right hand. They compared stories of agricultural projects, outdated maps and new perimeter defenses. When she laughed, as she did finally, she was almost silent, falling back in her chair, open-mouthed, while her cheeks went red and her nose white.

"God," she said, sitting up and shaking her head. "Mass hysteria, just the two of us. The last few weeks were worse than I'd realized." She lay back in the chair again and looked at her hands. "The past keeps coming back, doesn't it. Someone I used to know... I'd assumed he was dead; I'd almost managed to forget he'd existed. Then just a couple of days ago, a new database came onto the circuit. It has an old security classification: secret projects and who was working on them. His name was there, and where he had been working; and when this job came up, I took it, even though I was due for a break, because it would take me here, and I could be where he'd lived."

She was somber again and went on quietly: "Memories. Some of them are more real than what's around me, but I can't trust them. Have you noticed there's always some leakage, some crosstalk between what's in the implants and your own memories? At least, I think that's the trouble. He once told me that was it; he said you could make use of it if you knew how. Memories change on me—it scares me, I don't want to say it—and I dream, or I remember, but I can't see him. Or I see him, but it's someone else. Sometimes he changes while I remember. That's what frightens me. Supposing he hadn't died, and I found him, and we didn't know each other?"

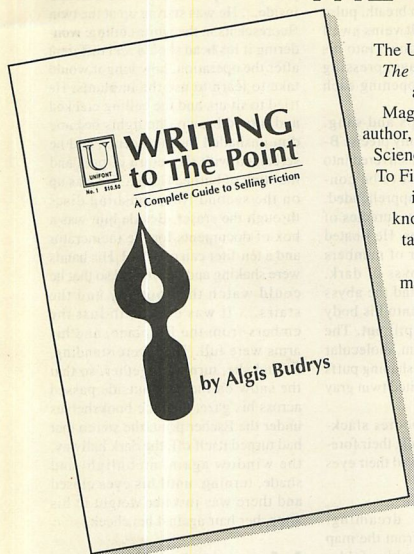
Stearns shook his head. "I can't believe people change that easily. I think you're worrying too much."

"I know, I know, I'm old enough to know better. But still...." She shrugged and then smiled. "You're a good listener. I've needed to talk. You ready now?"

He nodded. "There's a room through there. The light's about right, and there's even a bed."



# THE BOOK ON WRITING



The Unifont Company has brought out Algis Budrys's *Writing to The Point*, a 64-page book on writing. It contains all the writing articles that appeared over the first ten issues of **tomorrow** Magazine, re-edited and expanded. It has an introduction by the author, and an appendix containing three separate essays, "Writing Science Fiction and Fantasy," "Ideas, How They Work And How To Fix Them," and "What a Story Is." In this book you will find, in permanent form, everything an aspiring amateur needs to know in order to become a published author. Algis Budrys has taught hundreds of people at scores of workshops, and edited not only **tomorrow** Magazine but many books and other magazines. The methods he describes in *Writing to The Point* are methods that have worked repeatedly.

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*If you do not wish to mar your copy of this issue, simply use a clean sheet of paper*

She followed him. When she hung her jacket on the door handle, he saw that the right sleeve of her work shirt was worn through at the elbow, and her arm was prosthetic. The false skin had hardened and was flaking away at the joint. As they sat, his gloved hand brushed that elbow.

They sat facing each other on the bed. There was enough light to see her eyes clearly; the irises were gray. He opened the thermos, took out the phial and broke the seal. Loading the hypospray he shook his head. "I thought I wouldn't be able to get it this time. I thought I'd have to give it up for the neurovaccine."

"But you didn't have to. So it's all right."

Her hands moved down the front of his shirt, unfastening buttons. When her fingers reached his belt and began loosening it, he put the spray gun down and took her hand away.

"No use," he said softly, his eyes closed. "Burned." He picked up the hypo. "Just this now."

They injected each other at the base of the neck and waited, her left hand resting loosely on his right.

The first change was always visual, as details forced themselves into prominence: a gray hair at her temple, the crease at the corner of her mouth, two red veins in her eye. Then his hearing sharpened, so that their heartbeats and breathing filled the room

with muffled thunder. As he became aware of it, the syncopation smoothed away. Breath came with breath, pulse beat with pulse. He felt veins swell and relax. Air pushed down into his lungs, lifting the ribcage, pressing down the diaphragm, opening each alveolar sac like a bud.

She parted her lips and sang. Starting from an inhumanly precise B-flat, the sound broke and shivered into a hail of notes, too fast to be consciously controlled or apprehended. The sounds and the gray aureoles of her eyes filled his senses. He floated disembodied on a river of numbers that surged into an abyss of dark. When the song ended and the abyss was filled, he reached into his body and let his own song spill out. The river poured through him, molecular switches firing neurons, shaping puffs of air into sound. He orbited twin gray suns in a void that sang.

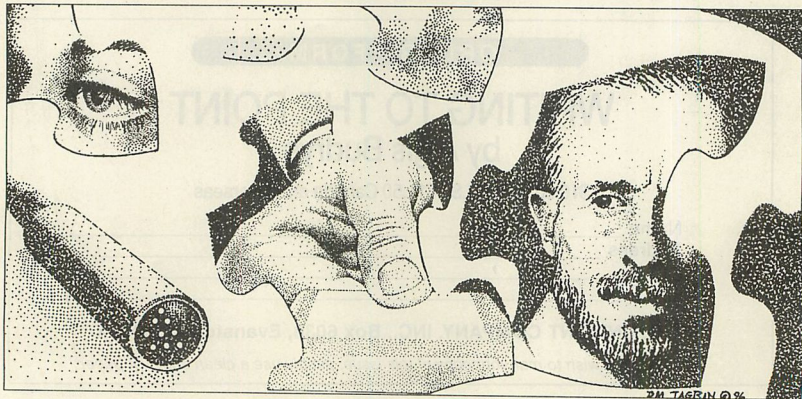
At the end, their bodies slackened, the world came back, their foreheads touched. They closed their eyes and slept.

He knew he was dreaming. Cavendish turned from the map on the wall and pushed a blue folder across the desk toward him.... An incandescent light bulb was reflected in the froth-ringed liquid in Stearns's beer mug. Beside him, a folded newspaper had been left between a beer

mat and the ashtray. Casually he picked it up, felt for the envelope inside.... He was staring up at the twin fluorescents in the white ceiling, wondering if his head should feel different after the operation, how long it would take to learn to use the implants. He tried to sit up, and the ceiling cracked and turned brown, the lights became dim unshaded incandescents, and he screamed with the return of pain and the stink of burned flesh.... He was up on the second floor, pushing discs through the eraser. Beside him was a box of documents for the incinerator and a ten-liter can of petrol. His hands were shaking and he worked so that he could watch the doorway and the stairs.... It was dark with just the embers from the fireplace, and his arms were full. They were standing, he and she, turning together, so that the snow on the cars outside passed across his gaze, then the bookshelves under the Escher print, the stereo that had turned itself off, the dark hallway, the window again, moonlight and shade, turning, until his eyes closed and there was just her weight in his arms, her hair against his cheek.

Megan's hands, the warm and the cold, shook him awake. It was late afternoon and his throat was stiff.

She took her hand from his shoulder. "You okay? I've got to be going soon."





"I was remembering things, perhaps. Some of them hurt." He swung his feet to the floor. "You're right, you know—how can you trust memories like that? Still...before you go, could you tell me the hex reference for that secret project of yours?"

She told him, and he nodded. "I think I expected that. I'd like to look at some of that database you mentioned. Could we arrange something?"

"I'm not sure. I'd have to ask when I get back."

"Yes, of course." He followed her to the door. "I'll make the usual arrangements when I know what we've got to offer."

"Fine," she said. "I'll see you then."

"Travel safely."

"Take care."

They started to shake hands, then moved closer and held each other stiffly for a few moments. She put on her jacket and walked out to the motorcycle. Stearns listened to her ride away, then turned and made his way back to see the end of the cricket match on Stockhausen Square.

That evening in his office in the museum, he turned to the device that the salvage team had found: a gray metal box with interface sockets and a small keyboard and display. It looked military. That meant triply-redundant software storage; and when he removed the cover plate, the circuitry looked intact. So there was a chance it would still work. With his storage batteries connected to the oscilloscope and pulse-tester, he worked by the light of two oil lamps, using the mirror from the VW to illuminate the device. He noted the serial number, traced the circuitry, then closed his eyes. A frown of concentration appeared on his face, his jaw slack, his lips slightly parted. After a moment, he nodded and bent to pull a catalogue from a box under his bench. He opened it at the page he wanted and checked the diagram there against the device in front of him. He inhaled sharply and nodded. "An easy-out. That's what we used to call them—"

He stopped breathing. Carefully he put the catalogue down. He closed

his eyes and clenched his teeth, then slowly repeated, "That's what we used to call them, when.... That's what we used to call them when—" He moistened his lips. There was sweat on his forehead. "That's what we...." He shuddered and shook his head, and sat for a few moments, breathing heavily. Then he sighed and bent over the work again.

He replaced the cover, brought out a length of optical cable and coupled the easy-out to his implants. He adjusted the voltage regulator in series with his batteries, connected it to the device and began entering commands through its keyboard. After a few minutes, he paused, frowning; then he nodded and continued.

A spasm went through him. He gasped, and his body twisted and arched in the chair. A scream started to force itself out through his teeth, and then his hand jerked the power cable free.

He slumped back in his seat and shivered. Outside the window, beyond his lamps, the last red was fading from the sky, and two stars were visible. He remembered gray eyes and data-song echoing through his mind. Two guards with shotguns walked across Stockhausen Square on their way to the bridge checkpoint. Their footsteps crunched across the gravel, slapped on concrete, and receded into their own echoes. Stearns reconnected the easy-out and began again.

In the library, Stearns examined the ampules Cavendish had brought. As he checked the serial numbers, he remarked, "I may be able to get something for you on that Viking project. But I'd want something special for it." "That's reasonable. It's a valuable property."

Stearns put the package down. "As we both know." He looked at Cavendish for a moment. "I found someone who remembers something about it, but the memory is associated with trauma. It's going to be difficult to recover. He was hurt while he was trying to destroy the research records, after the balloon started to go up. Someone was on his track and must have caught him at the last minute."

"I've no doubt several parties were quite anxious to get hold of information about it."

"And some of them are still in business?"

"No doubt," Cavendish said impassively. "Now, what is it you—or your associate—wants in exchange?"

"A security file," Stearns said, "with a list of personnel working on that project. I want to see the personal files. And—" he looked into Cavendish's eyes—"there must have been a counter-espionage file, with the identities of known agents, the ones likely to be looking for such information. I think it would be interesting for me to see that, too. Don't you?"

Cavendish linked his fingers together and looked down at the backs of his hands. "It might be interesting, if you are interested in the past for its own sake. It might also be more distressing than it's worth. The situation has changed somewhat, after all. People's motives change. Even though they may keep on performing the same little manipulations, what's inside them changes, erodes, wears itself out. You might be disappointed in what you find."

"Can you bring me the files next time, or not?"

"I won't pretend I can't get them." Cavendish closed his eyes and sighed. "Yes, it might be interesting to let you see them. I think we can arrange something on that basis."

Stearns was setting up a recorder in the lobby of the motel when Megan arrived. "We're a bit short of time today," he said. "I've arranged a meeting for both of us later this afternoon, and there's something I want to discuss with you, so I'd rather use this for one."

"Okay. I imagine you know what you're doing."

Stearns bent over the recorder, tuning it. "I looked in at the hospital last night," he remarked. "Roger Finlay stepped on a mine two days ago, and we've got him on antibiotics.... My first memories are there—the pain, and looking up at that ceiling. I was lying in that bed waiting for the universe to finish with me, and one



day, Charlotte asked me to help with the evening meal." He paused and abstractedly checked and rechecked a setting. "I hadn't thought I could walk that far, but I did it. And then I was fetching water, washing dishes—until one day I stumbled over some technical manuals and found we had enough information to start repairing things. Then I started to realize what could be done with just a bit of organization. I had just discovered I could still use the implants and store what I'd read, when old Ernst turned up, offering to trade.... That's all I know about myself for sure. That's all I am now."

He looked up from the recorder. "It's good to see you again," he said, and hesitated. "This man you were looking for—you know the project he was working on was military, it could still be used if the data became available?"

"I know people are still interested in finding it. How much do you know about it?"

"Not much more than that—at the moment." He hesitated again, then asked abruptly, "If you found this man alive, and you were sure it was him—you'd still know all about him, where he was born, who his friends were, what books he read—everything?"

"I have to believe that. Yes."

"What would you do if you found he'd been killed, or badly injured by someone?"

"I'd try to find out who did it."

Stearns nodded. "As I said, we have an appointment later." He moistened his lips. "And what if he'd lost his memory? If he was—disfigured."

She looked at him, then swallowed and closed her eyes. "I don't know," she whispered. "I'd have to be sure."

Stearns nodded and started connecting his implants to the recorder. "Right. Let's get this business out of the way, then."

They sat facing each other and made the data transfer. He disconnected from the recorder and waited for her to check her data and do the same. Then he reached down and put the easy-out on the table. "Will you help me with this? You've seen one of these before? It carries enough lock-

picks and brute-force probes to read practically anything you can store, if you know how to use it. I want you to use it on me. There's something in me that won't come out, something to do with that project, and I want you to keep this thing operating until we get it."

"Why can't you use it yourself?"

"I tried working it from the keyboard. The memories are I buried under some trauma. It hurts when I got near them. I lose I control of it then."

"All right," she said slowly. "You want me to hook into it directly?"

"Yes. I'll probably show some signs of discomfort. You'll have to ignore them."

She used the optical cable to interface with the control port, and he linked himself to the probe terminal. They began.

The first time he screamed, Sammy burst in with his shotgun levelled, and they had to stop so that Stearns could explain. Then they continued.

Finally she whispered, "I think that's the best I can do," and slumped in her chair. "Has it worked?"

He was sprawled across the table, panting. He levered himself up and dragged the cable from his scalp. His artificial cheek was livid against the pallor of the rest of his face. He pushed himself to his feet. "Come on," he muttered. "We're going to be late."

She followed as he picked up his coat and limped to the door. "Has it worked?"

"I don't know."

Sammy followed, and Stearns hurried them past the library to the building where the salvage crew had been working. The stairwell was almost clear of rubble, and Stearns scrambled up to the second floor. "It's safe enough. Come on." He turned through an empty door frame and began heaving at smoke-blackened masonry. "Help me with this, will you." Sammy joined him, and a slab of plasterboard cracked and slid out of the way.

Stearns looked down, gasping. "There." Just inside the door lay what might almost have been a pile of old sticks, brown and charred, and a broken ceramic bowl with fragments of metal. "There," he repeated. "That's all there is now. We can bury him. Let's go down."

Megan followed him without speaking, and the pressure of her silence made him start to explain. "He was destroying the documentation when I caught him. I must have been in a hurry, because I didn't have time to use a recorder. I'd immobilized him and was using the easy-out to feed straight into my implants. He'd hidden the data, the Viking data, behind layers of defenses. Some of the last ones were just sets of his own memories, including those of what he'd just been doing. Before I realized what I was getting, I broke through into the Viking files. I got some of the data, but the last defenses triggered. The easy-out almost shorted, but I didn't quite have my brain fried because most of the power surge must have been directed into his last defense, the one that blew the back of his skull away. I think there was a can of petrol open nearby...."

Megan did not look at him. "So now you know who you are."

"I know what I did. I know who I was working for.... Come on." He headed back toward the motel.

Cavendish met them on the way. "I've got the information you wanted." He looked from Stearns to Megan and back. "I don't think we've been introduced. But something tells me you've just made a discovery."

"We found a body, that's all," Stearns muttered. "I think you know whose it was better than I do." He looked quickly at Megan, but she was staring vacantly past his shoulder.

"So now you know the price of the past," Cavendish said. "Makes it harder to maintain self-sacrificial postures, doesn't it? If you'd known what happened in those years, you'd have known that there's no part of us we cherish so much that we can't be made to betray it."

"Right," Stearns said, and stepped close. He pinned Cavendish's



arm with his gloved hand, and with his right pressed the muzzle of the Beretta to the back of Cavendish's neck.

Cavendish inhaled sharply. His eyes flickered, then his face went blank, his shoulders sagged. "All right," he whispered. "It's time. Perhaps you should be the one."

Stearns's hand began to tighten. He saw Cavendish sprawled among the dusty weeds, his skull a broken chalice. He snarled and pushed Cavendish away. "Find yourself another henchman." He dragged air into his lungs, held it, and then breathed out heavily. "When you bring the next shipment, I want an extra stock of antibiotics. Twice the usual load. We've got a casualty here. Okay?"

Cavendish massaged the back of his neck. "I could tell you your name. I could find out where you were born."

"Leave this batch with Sammy. And remember the extra antibiotics. Next time."

Stearns watched Cavendish walk slowly back to the Renault, Sammy two paces behind. At his shoulder, Megan said, "I've got to go. The bike's still at the motel."

"Right." He did not look at her. "Will you be back?"

"Maybe. I don't know."

"All right."

When she had gone, he went back and looked at the burned building. Ghosts of flames pricked over his skin. Always, the body remembered what the mind could forget. *Body or brain*, he thought: *two of us died there*. He traced the join where his artificial cheek met his skin, and thought of metal sockets in a skull. He remembered arms, real and prosthetic, equally firm against his back, and moonlit snow, and red embers in the fireplace of a darkened room.... *And one of us lives*. He turned and began to walk back to the museum on Stockhausen Square. ■



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# SOUL OF THINE ENEMY

Charles D. Eckert

Illustrated by Kandis Elliot

*The animals, J. Edgar—the animals!*

J. Edgar Hoover achieved room temperature. Everyone assumed he was dead. So, they buried him.

Easy mistake to make.

God knows old John made enough of them himself. What's one more or less? Still, even the ACLU would admit (behind closed doors, of course, and how's *that* for courage?) Director Hoover wasn't alone in character flaws. Witness the proverbial breadth and scope of his infamous private files: 'Twelve drawers full' of antique manila folders literally stuffed-to-oozing with decades' worth of carefully concealed political sleaze—subterranean high crimes and misdemeanors of the powerful and/or popular, supposedly not for unclassified eyes; stark black and white studies in hypocrisy, interspersed with pathetic, embarrassing personal peccadilloes of the phony-respected and immoral-admired—contrasting future Washington has-

beens with then contemporary national wannabes.

Data hewed to a rather loose definition of "enemies." Result: the inclusion of surprising numbers of "friends." Over time, "in-depth" scrutiny accrued with commendable equity to *everything*—and everyone!—regardless of race, creed, color, gender, age, physical challenge, most certainly place of national origin and, last though never least, sexual orientation.

All of which prompted one satirical wag to quip: '...Know yourself; if you need help, call the FBI...!'

In fact, some of the ruinously raw files hinted—even proved?—that, here and there, utilizing the considerable resources of his Bureau, The Director located more than dirty laundry. J. Edgar uncovered something—so far outside any *known* science and beyond any sort of there-are-more-things-in-heaven-and-earth-Horatio

philosophy—that no hard-headed politico would ever acknowledge. Things nobody will see in any sanitized movie or TV show.

"So what?" they say. "Hoover's dead."

Yeah.

Unless he found a cure.

## 10 GUERRILLAS SLAY FOUR ENGINEERS

AYACUCHO, Peru — Masked gunmen disrupted a meeting in the provincial capital and killed four hydroelectric engineers, seriously wounding others, said police.

The Mao-inspired guerrillas, claiming distant affiliation with the movement readily known as Sendero Luminoso (Shining Path), stand accused of responsibility in the deaths of several dozen government-paid



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engineers as part of a concerted campaign of economic sabotage, to quote officials.

#### Engineers plan rural development

Cachi River project, as yet incomplete, will eventually irrigate thousands of acres of nearby farmland and provide many thousands of kilowatts of electricity to the region, government spokesmen said.

—From Wire Dispatches

**M**iguel Contreras calmly eavesdropped on the comrades.

In Russia, he thought, *tovarish*—"comrade"—was no longer in vogue. Most vestiges of false quality vanished along with accompanying ideology. The address was *Gospodin, Gospozha*—"Mister, Ms."—once again. Odd to hear the old term still in use. But the advisor was Cuban, after all.

That explained a great deal.

Seemingly adoring puppies at the fellow's feet listened to weird, curiously familiar tales: perverse, pornographic jokes presenting best friends J. Edgar Hoover and Clyde Tolson felating each other, both dressed in garter belts and bustiers. Old Miguel called to mind a few of his own more venerable instructors—how many years was it, now?—in those isolated, gone-long-ago Quonset huts. (—Did anyone *really* know if such rumors were true? Anyway, given the circumstances at the time, who would laugh? In whose presence? Response could easily have constituted some sort of test. Lesser "infractions," much less open "agreement," through whatever mocking merriment, could cost careers. Things had a way of happening. Again, who knew? Yet—) Even punchlines proved the same. Predictable laughter sounded as forced and feeble as had been his own. How does one account for a "grapevine" spanning not only decades and ideology, but continents and cultures, as well?

Strange, what you run into in a Peruvian jungle.

"More stew," said the Cuban.

Miguel ladled steaming meat and vegetables into a clean bowl, then slowly approached the advisor. Arthritis hampered the old man's progress, driving home dull pain along with other constant reminders of age. He could never decide which was worse: a healthy body with diminished mind, or clear, lucid faculties hindered by weakened flesh and diseased bone.

Who would chose either?

The 'Captain' took the proffered bowl. "The Revolution appreciates your cooperation."

"And the food," said Esteban, the smallest and youngest of the *cadre*.

Miguel Contreras smiled at the contrast. A Cuban officer: intelligent, well-trained, hard and experienced, an educated son of the affluent middle class. Esteban: quick but illiterate, a dirt-poor peasant of Inca blood—and fresh convert to the cause, as well—most recently freed from an altar boy's *personae*.

Consistent, if nothing else.

Invariably so.

**M**uch the same for Miguel.

His family had been very proud of their first, and his school's youngest, law graduate. Yet Europe and Asia stood engulfed by war in 1942, all futures uncertain. Only fools sought to ignore the obvious. Miguel, of course, saw intrigues awash in the streets of the cities. Most idealistic young people could not help being drawn toward the crisis. And the United States needed eyes and ears. The devil you know, etc. Opportunity presented itself; so, he took it.

Everything accelerates in war: science and technology, people and perspective.

Contreras swiftly learned—amid the necessary tradecraft—that "The Great Game," depending on definition of either term, was something other than merely an old one. Not simply a fluctuating conflict between shifting belligerents, but often fought between warriors on the *same* side.

The Federal Bureau of Investigation—meaning J. Edgar Hoover—had no love for what would become the Office of Strategic Services—mean-

ing "Wild Bill" Donovan. Hoover went so far in his resentment as to pull Presidential strings. OSS found itself barred from the continental United States, plus both Central and South America—the turf of the FBI—and "confined" to "the rest of the world." Officially, that is. A few OSS agents, trained under the Bureau's olfactories at Quantico (and elsewhere) were infiltrated down south in any event. Miguel Contreras, among them.

Trust is always in short supply.

**"D**e nada, jefe," said Miguel, acting with subservience honed by years, and retreated to his place by the fire.

The Cuban rattled on, ruminating on the efficacy of guerrilla warfare, as formulated by Mao Tse-tung during The Long March. Contreras had also studied theory and practice himself, years before. He clearly recognized well-thumbed and worn-out copies of Mao's "little red book" in several pairs of calloused hands.

*Plus ça change, plus c'est la même chose.*

A distinctly large crow perched nearby ruffled midnight feathers in reply.

Miguel tuned in to his own thoughts.

The final capture/conviction of Shining Path leader Abimael Guzmán Reynoso surprised no one. Nor had the Peruvian terrorist's true nature. Little different, naturally, from his predecessors. Sad that such frauds continue deceiving generations. Yet not unexpected. In this case, for example, typically few thought anything amiss: a former professor of philosophy needed only to repeatedly assert he spoke for "the masses," or "the working class," in order to be believed—if not, generally, by those same "masses"—at least by spoiled rich kids. From *before* Marx and Engels, onward, it has most often been the affluent intelligentsia—succumbing to sweeping theory, grand ideological blueprints for society's radical reconstruction—that is willing to see flesh-and-blood human beings not "merely" sacri-

ficed, but expended in staggering numbers, if only they might actually achieve the quivering beauty of their dystopian dreams. With *Sendero Luminoso's* victims already counted in the tens of thousands, Guzmán aspired to join the rarified ranks of Lenin, Stalin, Hitler, Mao, Ho Chi Minh, and Pol Pot of Cambodia. Quite a list. The more horrible, by the way, for its being incomplete.

And limited to the Twentieth Century.

Now, the slipshod disciples here gathered managed to straggle on. Not yet alone, by far, though semi-leaderless. Besides, what "Party" doesn't need a "Big Brother?" So, when one is unavailable—

—Noise startled Contreras.

As he glanced up, sharply, Miguel saw a magnificent owl perched in place of the crow, on precisely the same spot and branch. This would have been of but fleeting interest had not penetrating terror gripped him, talon-tight, with bone-freezing inexplicability. Black-disk eyes, framed by pale puffed-feather cheeks, bore a fierce, round, unsettling resemblance—

Laughter burst forth and the bird took flight. Wind from huge, beating wings brushed the old man's face, rustling wintry, straw-white hair in passing. The sizable, hooting predator disappeared into darkness and distant trees. The relief Contreras felt at the departure perplexed and disturbed him.

But not what followed.

"It's called an owl," the Cuban said.

Miguel nodded at the not-so-subtle mockery.

"But," the officer went on, quieting chuckles from the group, "take care. It could have been an evil spirit. Or even a *brujo*, some magician—a shapeshifter, perhaps—ever watchful, filled with most dreadful need, always hunting..."

A few murmurers grew decidedly uncomfortable.

You may take the boy out of the country, but—

Miguel crossed himself, hurriedly, in total character.

More laughter.

"You see, comrades?" said the smug advisor. "What did I tell you? Such superstition is, if anything, more solidly entrenched among these people than before. In spite of everything. Capitalism is *not* the only problem. Yet, 'all is not lost,' by any means. Fear has its uses."

Contreras lowered his eyes discretely.

Oh, yes, he thought, through residual shudders. *Fear has many uses, indeed.*

"...What if the party said that two plus two are five? How many fingers am I holding up, now, Winston...?"

There is *that* kind of fear. "Room 101." Room 18, in the "Hanoi Hilton." The Operacoa Bandirantes of San Paulo. In legendary recesses of Moscow's Lubyanka, a vast heritage of pain and revelation precedes the CHEKA, much less the NKVD, and most certainly KGB. Lurking places, in soul/soft shadows, quiet, literally stinking with urine-bright/fecal-dark burrowing fears, that somehow, under sufficient "persuasion"—yes, the word is *torture*—no one you have ever loved, nothing held sacred by you or yours, nor the finest, most "noble" idea(s) securely believed, scarcely anything at all considered precious to anyone, or remotely personal in value, ABSOLUTELY *NOTHING*, is beyond betrayal.

Your betrayal.

And everything accelerates in war.

Miguel's first experiences as a field operative, at least on paper in personnel files, smacked embarrassingly of semi-cheap novels. Nothing major, to be sure. The "real" action was in the Pacific Theatre and, of course, in Europe. Contreras lacked the overall seasoning his handlers desired. That would develop in time. Meanwhile, he could do no wrong, it seemed. Assignments flowed without incident. Cover never "blown." The missions—from simple "dead-drops," or retrievals, to complex surveillance—little challenged his charmed

capacity, the invariable successes. Denial of Axis supplies and raw materials, thwarting sabotage, tracing various clandestine associations—which proved invaluable *after* the war, tracking fleeing Nazis through what became known as the ODESSA organization—necessary work, undoubtedly. But dull. As only the young would find it. Ever more so to the maturing agent.

"...You grow up fast, or you don't grow up..."

Miguel's work drew notice from OSS superiors, as well as suspicious local FBI, ever conscious of Hoover's jealousy over credit and turf. Still, no proof. High stakes = high alert. So, Contreras's handlers sent him to a "non-existing" camp for more specialized training. Shame to waste so promising a prospect. Best to find out, now.

Not everyone is cut out for the dirty work.

But, like sulfa drugs—or, later, penicillin—a lot of lives could be spared by judicious use of the right medicine. Assassination, that is. Rare, to be sure, yet sometimes needed.

Look at Admiral Yamamoto.

So, Miguel was taught by excellent instructors: large bore rifle, small caliber handgun, stiletto, concealed ice-pick, garrote, even a stone or cueball wrapped in a strong woolen sock—of all things—various poisons, plus means of dispensing them, etc. As a joke, in fact, some of the rough practice dummies & targets had Hoover's face affixed to them. Only a joke, of course.

Yet disturbing, nonetheless; something about the eyes.

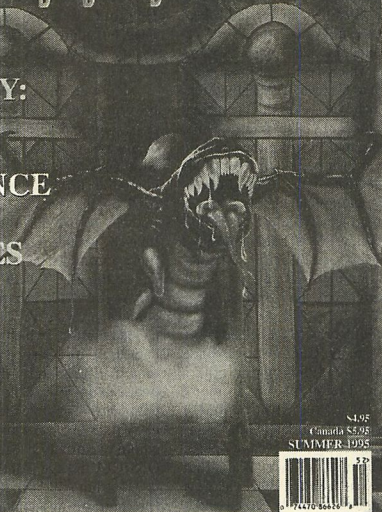
Anyway, The Manhattan Project's atom bomb ended the war in August 1945, before Contreras was put to more than one test: a sleazy little pimp and heroin trafficker, laundering money for the enemy, fingering Allied radio operators while he was at it. One of the "nicer" assignments available, they'd reckoned. The fellow posed no problem for Miguel. None whatsoever. Discreet letters of commendation all round, in fact. But something quite unexpected took Miguel Contreras completely by surprise.



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*A tiny piece of one's soul breaks off every time.*

No one told him that.

The old man woke with a weight on his chest.

A sign of age, he often thought.

But this proved *real*: with damp, matted fur, gripping claws, soured breath exhaling through a narrow muzzle filled with surgical needles. The over-sized ferret-type body of the animal felt far heavier than its long bulk indicated, muscles and sinew tense and taut. As the old-wive's-tale of cats sucking life from infants and young children, the nameless beast "fed" on *something* it needed. Miguel knew not what. Fear, if nothing else. For the creature's eyes chilled Contreras within his blankets like a frightened, now sleepless child.

*Everything is eyes! Why eyes?*

*And what is it about those eyes?*

The others were asleep. Or dead, for all that. Nothing else moved. An indescribable stench filled his lungs along with humid air. Miguel couldn't hold his breath, for some reason. Choking didn't help. So, he breathed in the foulness in spite of everything. As his reactions subsided, Contreras realized he was *hearing* something, as well. No experience had prepared him for:

*Thine enemy's soul  
is like your own:*

*A matter of the heart—  
The difference is merely  
in how it's grown  
And why it stands apart.*

Contreras's mind fought for sanity.

The beast's smile—if one could ever call it that—struck a deep, profoundly disquieting sense of memory.

As though Miguel had been chewing peyote buttons during a *brujo's* ritual, the old man felt like he was flying: through space, through time, through dreams, all together and at once. The "rush" seemed more than physical. It pulled at the center of his being. A true "spiritual" journey? And the creature acted, it seemed, as a horrid guide—

"Wild Bill" Donovan was dead and gone, along with OSS.

Central Intelligence Agency slowly developed in its place. CIA recruited many old OSS hands, formal and informal. Most "arrangements" left purposefully vague. Miguel recalled scenes he had not considered in decades. Some with a clarity beyond any satellite photo he had ever possessed clearance to view. Fast-forward, in some instances. In others, slow, lingering: an almost autopsy-like exhumation of the infamous Bay of Pigs, when his capture and subsequent betrayal by his "employers" (to be expected, i.e., the "plausible deniability," which didn't last long!) then segued into his own, personally astonishing, betrayal—expertly competent ministrations of Cuban interrogators, who delighted in bringing a certain *passion* to their work—of most of his fellow captives in the ill-fated operation. We learn much about ourselves through adversity, some of which, most often, we would rather not know.

*Forgive me, Father, Miguel thought, through welling tears. It has been many years since my last "confession."*

Through bribery and clandestine effort of many, Contreras was once again free—leaving behind others who would languish, oh, so many years—for a short stint in Berlin (Europe, at last!) working with a number of tunneling and escape operations. The now defunct "Wall" that split the surrounded city was new then, and predominately barbed-wired and checkpointed. A few successes, some failures. It became harder to tell the difference. Finally, "retirement." Back home. Legitimate business. Family and friends. Marriage, even, and a child as well. But there was always the redundancy of corrupt politicians. Increasing drug trade. General unrest. And the sudden appearance of a second round of "enemies," it seemed: guerrillas in our midst. This time the Big Boys played via surrogates. The "new breed" of terrorist—remarkably similar to the "old breed"—was sometimes a combination of loner and student "idealist." Often one and the same.

Urban warfare, they called it. Bombs could not distinguish warriors from civilians. Nor *should* they, went their theory, because in a rotten system how can any willing participant be "innocent"? Therefore, all are "guilty," and everyone is "fair game."

*Besides, fear has its uses.*

A car bomb killed Miguel's wife and son in a crowded marketplace. God knew who else. It was difficult to count bodies. Some pieces were never found.

Contreras called some contacts. He would be given a new "front," later, but additional training was necessary and would take a little time. Some things remained constant.

Hoover, for example, was still hovering over the FBI and seemed just as content to diddle behind the scenes as always. (Character note: old John would never forgive the congressional committee that had the gall to question his "courage" back in the '30s by asking why he had never made an arrest, himself, yet felt free to take credit for those accomplished by his agents. So, he had literally "set-up" the only field arrest the desk-bound bureaucrat would ever make: the famous "single-handed capture," which, in reality, was backed up by nearly a platoon of G-men. Unfortunately, this fooled the public and a few of the more gullible politicians it was intended to scam, but *not* those "in the know," many of whom eventually became part of the OSS/CIA linkage. And Hoover knew it. The truth still hurt, then and *now*.) Innumerable jokes made unending rounds, carrying on for years. Still being recounted, in fact, when Abby Hoffman and his compatriots attempted to "levitate" the Pentagon, with equal success in reality.

And in Southeast Asia: everything accelerates in war.

Great leaps in scientific research and development. Improved conventional weapons, such as laser-guided bombs, mingled with updated versions of supposedly obsolete ones: attaching an electric-motor drive worked wonders for a Gatling gun. Nuclear, chemical, and even biological weaponry saw dangerous, sophisticated revision.



Yet, there were *more* disturbing stories about incredible breakthroughs in areas few had ever considered. "Biological" now included much more than diseases generations better than anthrax, chemicals, or even nerve gas. Something called biogenetic engineering, the speculators rumbled, years if not decades ahead of *anyone*, much less those arrogant commercial clowns. Strange words: Recombinant DNA, cellular alteration, "junk gene" manipulation, etc. Ramifications were said to be nothing short of monumental. Not simply new "bugs" for weapons. It might be possible, eventually, to generate new "people," as well. Even "re-generate" old ones. Better soldiers, for one thing.

It was theoretically conceivable—so the rumors scampered—for complete, and even *repeated, metamorphosis* to be achieved. Of course, the price involved, both money and the human subject, would be something to contemplate. In more ways than one, you'd dare say. Off-budget, very black-box stuff.

MANHATTAN PROJECT-type priority.

Some joked about "re-cycling" desk jockeys for "useful" work.

Thus, spoke the whispers, spreading hard-won experience—*now*, however reluctantly—mainly due to problems on two fronts, as it were: One, the truly frightening fact that a whole generation of *originals*, warriors of "the old school," were nearing, some said were past, the now-mandatory retirement ages; their field experience could be adequately recorded on multiple media, true, yet be very difficult to pass on to others "at the gut level"; and Two, intelligence agencies were finding it tougher to recruit in the face of residual '60s mentality, i.e., all good little girls and boys were, by definition, too "good" (read: too *child-ish!*) to see what the "real world" was like—the "protected" have such blind spots!—and what was needed for the survival of all.

Can't depend on the so-called inevitable pendulum swings of general opinion. The outcome was much too uncertain and success too vital.

Besides, if we really tried—

*This*, Contreras thought, *is where I came in: fighting the Nazi idea of some sort of "Master Race," possible through "cleansing" the gene pool (ethnic or otherwise), then re-creating the human animal, the citizen, to whatever was eventually needed for the "greater good" of...what?*

Miguel was too old already, getting older still. Yet there was *something*, indeed, which had to be accomplished. He had done what he'd thought needful thus far. But there was *more*, or so the now less-frightening being/thing seemed to be saying—although Contreras could no longer feel any weight on his chest, or elsewhere—no one was "useless" who did not allow himself to become such. To never give up. Good and Bad will always blur through the shadings of reality. But there are still such things as *courage* (and just what did that word really mean? Does anyone know?) and "the good fight."

*After all, why are you here? Why do you keep coming back?*

The old man awoke, alone, aware of what he *had* done, and what he *now must* do.

Esteban snored gently at his post. That would constitute a capital offense during time of war, Miguel thought, in almost any military organization. A flagrant breach of discipline. What would "The Revolution" say? Much less Cuban advisors?

If all had gone well, of course, it hardly mattered.

Yet Contreras noted the particular model Kalashnikov draped across the young man's lap. Older than the boy who carried it, by far, and that showed. Just as obviously, a semi-auto version: the trigger had to be pulled each time a shot was fired in order to cycle another round into the weapon's chamber. A full-auto—the world-famous "AK-47 select-fire 'submachine gun'"—version, could empty a loaded clip with only a single squeeze of the trigger. Effective, yes, but extremely wasteful of scarce ammunition. It made sense then that the youngest not be allowed to squander precious rounds. So, Esteban had

been issued a semi-auto-only rifle. One made in Maadi, Egypt, for the civilian market, probably, and no doubt stolen as well. Miguel smiled. The Kalashnikov slowly rose from sleep-limp fingers.

Dawn.

Something heavy dropped, painfully.

Startled awake, Esteban noticed his weapon flopped oddly across folded knees. The young guerrilla saw the old man walking away, out of the camp. As guard, his duty was to act.

"Stop!"

Miguel ignored the order.

"Where do you think you are going?"

"Free people go where they please," the old man said.

Slide-click of a Tokarev pistol.

Contreras halted at the sound and turned slowly.

"Excellent work, Esteban," the Cuban said. "Most commendable."

Where had Miguel gone wrong?

The Cuban advisor should be dead, along with the rest of the *cadre*—with the purposeful exception of young Esteban. Contreras knew of many sophisticated poisons, as well as those naturally occurring in the Peruvian Amazon. In fact, his present "cover" was that of a visiting *brujo*, a magician, among the local population; someone who knew the ways of magic and mountain, of forests and river. As a native, and stranger, he could easily pass. His formal training had given him modern knowledge that combined very effectively with native medicines with which he'd been raised. The specific toxin chosen coated the interior surfaces of the serving bowls from which Miguel had fed the group. Heat from the stew itself and stirring motions of the spoons activated the "ingredients." Only Contreras and Esteban used uncontaminated utensils. Miguel's son would have neared the young guerrilla's age, had the boy lived. Sentimental reasons are always the worst, but there you are. The poison was slow-acting but efficacious. Time and sleep, of course, would do the job.



Naturally.

Others would not be rising from bedrolls. The *cadre's* "sleep of the dead" was quite real. Yet the Cuban was very much alive, and holding a weapon on Miguel. Again, what had gone wrong? Perhaps he had simply underestimated his foe. Wouldn't be the first time.

But, in *this* instance—

"My men are dead," the Cuban said. "How 'convenient' we three remain."

The officer shifted his stance.

"You were always more than you seemed, weren't you?" he said. "During my training we heard strange stories about the likes of you, old fellow: spies/agents/sleepers, left over from 'the bad old days.' I never believed. Not really. But the dead are proof, eh? Now. You had me fooled. Nearly. There was something about your eyes, a knowing, an intelligence being expertly concealed. You're good. I'll give you that. But we all become old. Don't we? Nothing is ever perfect. No person. And no scheme."

*No plan survives contact with the enemy.*

"At the first sign of illness," the Cuban continued, "—and I have always been quite sensitive to such things—my suspicions were alerted. It was a simple matter to ingest a general antidote, then to vomit when I went to relieve my bowels. Still feel a bit woozy. But I am here, and alive. To test my hypothesis, i.e., your guilt, I ordered more of your otherwise delicious concoction and just set it aside uneaten. There was little else to do but wait. And watch. Too bad about the others, of course, but budgets simply aren't what they used to be. Not enough medical supplies—or anything else, for that matter—to go around. Yet I had to be sure. Confirmation is confirmation. Besides, there is no shortage of fodder available. It is the *educated* personnel who are so difficult to replace. Policy dictates saving one's more valuable assets."

The Cuban let slip a sly, self-referential grin.

"How old *are* you, really?" the advisor said. "Never mind. It's of scant importance. I do regret, howev-

er, that there is no time for a truly in-depth interrogation. Techniques have greatly improved since your day, I shouldn't wonder. What tales *you* could tell, eh?"

Silence.

"You may shoot him, now, Esteban," the Cuban said.

The young man hesitated.

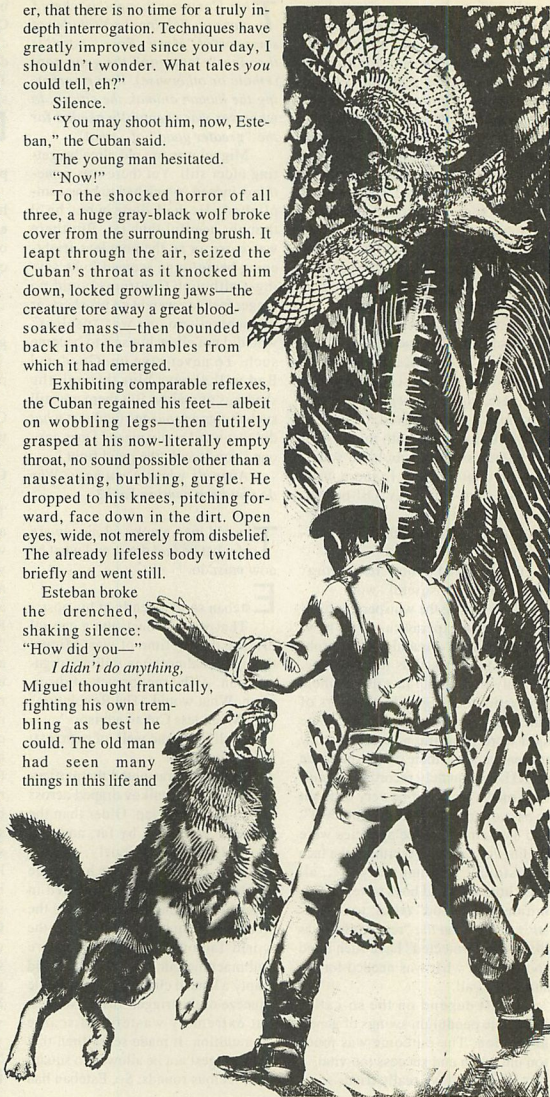
"Now!"

To the shocked horror of all three, a huge gray-black wolf broke cover from the surrounding brush. It leapt through the air, seized the Cuban's throat as it knocked him down, locked growling jaws—the creature tore away a great blood-soaked mass—then bounded back into the brambles from which it had emerged.

Exhibiting comparable reflexes, the Cuban regained his feet—albeit on wobbling legs—then futilely grasped at his now-literally empty throat, no sound possible other than a nauseating, burbling, gurgle. He dropped to his knees, pitching forward, face down in the dirt. Open eyes, wide, not merely from disbelief. The already lifeless body twitched briefly and went still.

Esteban broke the drenched, shaking silence: "How did you—"

*I didn't do anything,* Miguel thought frantically, fighting his own trembling as best he could. The old man had seen many things in this life and





world. Age supposedly brought wisdom, understanding, or at least perspective. But where did *this* fit? He didn't know what he felt. A more than uncomfortable gratitude towards the wolf(?), yes. Still, Contreras feared: the very existence of the beast, where it came from, why it attacked the Cuban, and whatever else about—

Yet, Esteban didn't know any of that.

"You are of the blood, young one," Miguel found himself saying, professionalism exerting control. "Feel it surge. Our ancestor's bones enriched the soil of this land. Let all three speak to your spirit. Why do you *not* listen?"

"Superstition!" Esteban said. "'Religion is the opium of the masses.'"

*In Peru, it is cocoa leaf, in fact, but no matter.*

"The gods of Machu Picchu knew better," said Contreras, "as well the ancient Incas themselves. And so do you. Mao followed the false, now collapsed, system of Marx and Lenin. After 70-plus years of failure, you still believe? ...Socialism can't be wrong; it just hasn't been tried by the right people...? I see. Those who would willingly deal with drug lords to finance their "revolution," and deny any contradictions, moral or otherwise? Those who, like the Vietnamese before them, would moor the fully manned vessels of their "allies" in the riskiest waters, firing anti-aircraft and gunboats, on the belief that U.S. planes would not chance hitting a "neutral" ship in an "enemy" harbor? Those who would ruthlessly place the lives of their "brothers" in harm's way? Now, here—right *here*, Esteban—the bodies of your *comrades*. Dead. Without aid or warning from their "leader." Just so another of the "fraternal socialist allies" could prove a point. More lives sacrificed for ideological purity. And *still* you'd believe? Such faith is touching. Indeed, faith is required in the acceptance and genuine practice of any 'religion.' So it was with Marx, so it remained with Mao—"

Esteban's features reflected their own "shining path" of conflicting emotions.

"—Reality is invariably inconvenient—"

"ENOUGH!"

The young man's face was unreadable. "You old bastard," said the guerrilla. "No more heresy." Esteban brought up the muzzle of his Kalashnikov.

"Never too late to 'follow orders?'"

"Anything to end such mocking arrogance! Spit on *my* ideological mother, will you?" Esteban squeezed the trigger as he had practiced.

CLICK—

*Misfire.*

He cycled another round.

Squeeze.

CLICK—

*Nothing.*

One more cycle.

Squeeze.

CLICK—

*NOTHING!*

The young man knelt swiftly, retrieving an expelled round. No sign or mark of firing on any part of the casing. It looked as it had when first removed from smuggled boxes and loaded into *this* magazine, which he now extracted from the AK's receiver. Those visible rounds remaining appeared no different. He dropped both weapon and magazine.

Dark eyes mirrored darker fear.

"Brujo!" Esteban spun where he knelt and fled.

Watching him disappear into the brush, Miguel opened his clenched right hand and looked down at the lone Kalashnikov firing pin in the middle of his rough palm. Contreras allowed himself a small, soft, sigh of satisfaction.

**R**ustling foliage, a quivering of air and wings.

"Excellent work," said an unknown voice. "Most commendable."

The old man shivered, aware of a heavy cloying presence at his back.

"The boy won't stop moving till he reaches Lima."

Miguel whirled at the near-giggle.

The voice emanated from an unidentified bird/bat/owl/rat creature that changed questionable shape

even as it spoke. Words and tone altered along with physical configuration of body and limbs. Elements of dog/wolf, then progressing through several species of big jungle cat, stuttered over Miguel's perception: a menagerie of flowing, melding traits, the cross-birthing of evolution and some madman's walking, waking, vivisected nightmare.

Culminating in a disappointing, rather anti-climactic, nondescript form of a man.

Transformation complete. "Who are you?" Contreras whispered in the cold quiet. Laughter clothed the stranger's steps into leaf-shadowed light.

**L**ater, Miguel remembered hearing a scream.

Terrified.

Total.

Far away.

Even during torture, Contreras had not been devoid of rational hope. But he honestly didn't expect to live through *this*. Particularly not such viciously vicious visions.

Nor the memory.

He knew that future sleep would be a problem dealt with doggedly, for the remainder of his life. Because the old man would forever dream a face. A face of infinite emptiness: with fattened jowls and bulging eyes—one consistently writhing, changing, shifting, with no solidity or constant features of its own—as if every random thought behind lizard-old skin played a new theme through flesh, bone, and cartilage. A face stretched over lethargic, maggot-like hordes, incessantly crawling, searching, re-grouping. In the end, a face cold, inhuman.

A final, frighteningly familiar face:

*J. Edgar Hoover.*

Miguel Contreras didn't stop moving till he reached Lima. ■



# PRINCIPLES OF ANIMAL EUGENETICS

Yves Meynard

Illustrated by Margaret Ballif Simon

*The dog was not what he seemed. The girl wasn't, either*

Kelly stood on the platform and watched the train pull out, gaining speed; a slow arrow of tarnished metal shot from a tired bow. Above his head, the sky was a strangely luminous gray; rags of clouds moved swiftly in front of a featureless haze.

The platform was of varnished red bricks; on the sides of the pit in which moved the trains, the earth had remained raw, and was now stained thoroughly by years of exhaust and grease. The tracks glimmered as if someone had been oiling them, polishing them, inch by inch, lovingly, with a chamois cloth. Kelly could almost imagine the little man—it would have to be a man, and he would have to be little—walking crabwise along the tracks, his ivory-colored cloth held high in one hand, coming down swift-

ly to buff a narrow section of the rails, then returning to its absurdly high position, waiting for the next defect to be spotted, to pounce upon it and erase it from the perfection of the track.

There was no one else on the quay. As an envoy from Centrality, Kelly had naturally been alone in his compartment aboard the train; in his wagon, he'd had a glimpse of an old man and a young woman travelling with her baby daughter, but otherwise it was empty. The train had come to a stop at this station; Kelly had gone out of his compartment, which was next to the exit, and climbed down without encountering anyone. Now he stood alone on the platform and it came to him he had not actually seen another human being since the beginning of his journey.

Kelly picked up his heavy suitcase—the handle was slicked with his own sweat, grown cool and greasy—and made his way to the stationmaster's office, passing along a gigantic poster of Sebastian Bloom. The poster was hardly new: it was flaking along the edges, and a corner of one sheet had peeled in the middle, opening a geometric gash in Bloom's face.

There was a sign, thin white letters on a black background, which was overlaid with a rust-red sheen in one corner:

OFFICE

The sign hung perpendicular to the wall, like a pub's. Underneath it was a wooden door with a rectangular pane, obscured by a pale yellow fabric. To the right of the door, a window opened into the wall. There was a rotating



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drum beneath—for the stationmaster to pass something to the clients without having to risk bodily contact? The room beyond the window was dark, although a tall narrow rectangle of light to the left indicated that at least one room of the house was lit, and presumably occupied.

Kelly pushed against the window a few times, but there was no reaction. He went to the door and knocked, setting down the heavy suitcase with a huff. After another wasted minute, he tried the knob. It turned.

The room was very small; to the right, a doorway led to the window booth; there was a closed door in the far wall, leading deeper into the house. In the room itself Kelly could see no furniture except a shelf, set high on the wall, holding a row of unidentifiable knickknacks. The floor was bare wood, shiny from varnish. In Centrality such a floor would have been called delightfully rustic, but here it was simply, and starkly, crude and inelegant.

Kelly risked a call to the stationmaster, unwilling to enter farther into the strange house. He heard a series of noises, and after a while the door opened and out came a dark-haired man, wearing a Railroad Collective uniform that was rumpled and buttoned crookedly down the front. The stationmaster passed a hand through

his hair, disarranging it further despite his best efforts.

"Pardon me there, didn't hear you, sir. Heard the 7:46 train going by, but it usually never stops...I'd forgotten about you were coming. Straight from Centrality, heh?"

"Yes," said Kelly. He waited, expecting the stationmaster to offer more in the way of an apology, but the man remained silent. Kelly noticed the stationmaster's hair was thin, the scalp very pink underneath it. From the man's flesh rose a smell reminiscent of cloves; for some reason Kelly found it disgusting.

"I haven't been met in the way I expected."

"Really, sir? Was there anything special you required? 'Cause I wasn't told."

Kelly sighed, but strove to contain his impatience. The people who lived here, so far from the hubs of organization, were not like the city-dwellers he had dealt with all his life. He must exercise diplomacy; learn to accept laziness and inefficiency as normal modes of life.

"I guess I thought someone would greet me at the platform—but no matter. At any rate, I need to be conveyed to town."

"Well, sir, everybody here walks, you know. It isn't far. Besides, the only car in town has been broke down

for two months now, and won't run again for a while."

Kelly started to sigh, then stopped himself. "Well then, is there someone to carry my suitcase?"

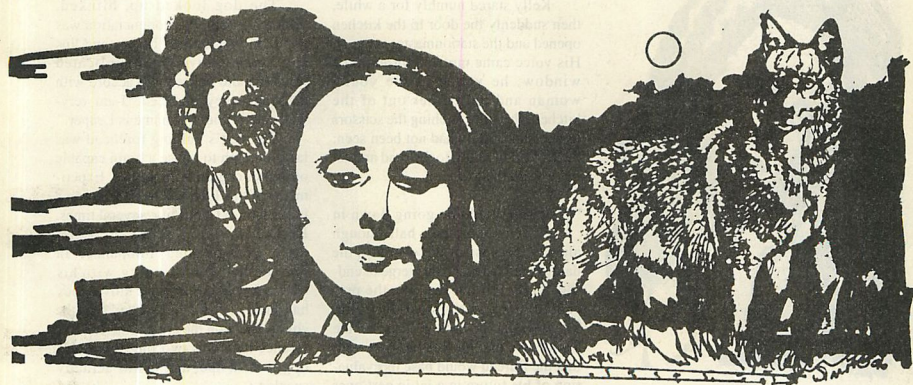
"No one here but me, sir. No one."

"Well, couldn't you...."

The stationmaster looked vastly astounded. "No sir, I will say I can't. My duties end at the instant of half past seven; and besides, it's much too heavy for me. Could have one of the boys move it in the morning, if you like."

Kelly restrained his anger. Provincials held scrupulously to their schedule when it suited them. After all, they had the excuse that these were orders, issued from Centrality. As a representative of the government, he could expect nothing more than meticulous adherence to the rules. He might have tried to invoke some higher regulation—a moment's reflection would bring to mind several such directives, useful to a man in his line of work—but he did not want to make an enemy of the stationmaster; this was something he could not afford at this early stage in the investigation. So he swallowed his humiliation and said, "Never mind. I'll carry it myself. It's not that heavy."

"As you say, sir." To Kelly's eyes, the stationmaster looked, not





smug, but relieved—at what Kelly could not guess. He took the handle of the suitcase and with a subliminal grunt lifted it up.

Kelly exited the office, closed the door. Just beyond the small brick building, a walkway extended at right angles from the track and gave upon a dusty road. The town was to his left, perhaps ten minutes' walk distant. Kelly followed the walkway, toward the road.

He could see a door and two small windows at the back of the stationmaster's house. Through one of the windows, Kelly saw something that made him pause and approach the house.

He was looking into the kitchen. A table with a red- and white-checked plastic tablecloth stood close to the window. At the table sat a young woman, dressed only in a large pale-blue sheet she had wrapped around herself; one breast hung nearly free. She was cutting her long hair with small blunt-ended scissors, without perceptible plan or pattern, just broad ragged swathes. The cut hair fell into a plate. Every few seconds the young woman reached for the plate with her free hand, picked up a thick lock of hair and crammed it into her mouth. She chewed mechanically, the strands of hair that protruded from her mouth grew shorter and shorter until they vanished, and then she swallowed.

Kelly stared numbly for a while, then suddenly the door to the kitchen opened and the stationmaster came in. His voice came muffled through the window; he yelled at the young woman and pulled her out of the kitchen, she still clutching the scissors in one hand. Kelly had not been seen; he decided to return to the road and set out toward the town.

The sun would be going down in about an hour and a half; though already, because of the overcast, the day seemed faded, on the verge of ending. Kelly felt unease, like the pre-echo of depression, steal over him. There was at the back of his mind the awareness that he was being tested; that the Bureau would base its evaluation of his future in a large part over

what happened here, during his first real mission. He did not like the assignment at all, but he had known better, when it had been offered him, than to refuse it.

He was about to reach the outskirts of the town when he met the dog. He could not tell what breed it was—he did not like and did not understand animals, and knew very little about them. He forced himself to note the features of the dog. It had a long muzzle, but a fairly stout body. It was neither large nor small; it was a dirty brown in color, with black pointed ears. Its forehead bulged out noticeably.

"Stranger," said the dog.

Kelly had been forewarned; the report he had been given to read had dwelled on this. Yet he had not truly believed the story, and now that he saw it had all been true, it came to him as a bad shock. He found that he had stopped dead in his tracks. Sweat ran down his forehead in rivulets, stinging his eyes.

The dog took two paces forward, sniffing. It did not look hostile, but to Kelly's eyes it definitely did not look friendly. Dogs could smell emotions, especially fear; this he knew. He forced himself to speak.

"My name is Kelly." Then, absurdly, but he felt he must add something and didn't know what to say, he added "How do you do?"

The dog looked up, blinked. "Kelly," it said. Its pronunciation was good, but not human. Its jaw and lips and tongue moved in complicated ways that did not seem to accord with the sounds they produced. "I-am-very-well-thank-you. My name is Leaper."

The dog's bulging forehead was large enough to house a brain capable of higher cognitive functions. Experiments of this kind had been performed in the labs of Centrality, several times. Kelly had viewed films of Mister Chee, an augmented chimpanzee. In one, he had been signing with his trainers, arguing about a movie they had just seen. Kelly recalled that the chimp had won the argument. The difference here was twofold: this was a dog, not an ape, and it was actually speaking.



"You belong to Doctor Jonas, yes?" said Kelly.

"Yes. I'm Leaper. You're Kelly. Why are you here?"

"I've come to see the doctor."

"He won't see you. He doesn't cure people anymore."

"No, I'm here to talk about his work."

"He won't see you."

"I'll call on him in the morning, anyway."

The dog snuffled; a canine shrug? Kelly found he could not resist asking it the question that was foremost in his mind.

"Tell me, how is it you can talk? Doctor Jonas gave you a big brain, but a dog's mouth isn't made for talking."

"Sugary," said the dog.

"Pardon?"

"Sugary."

Kelly thought there was annoyance in the tone. Suddenly understanding dawned on him. Without pause for reflection, he said, in what he realized a second too late was a condescending tone, "You mean *surgery*."

Leaper sneered, showing off its teeth, and emitted an unpleasant growl. Kelly grew alarmed, but the dog turned away, stalked off through the grasses at the side of the road, and vanished from sight.

*A fine beginning*, Kelly thought to himself. *You've already insulted one of the natives*. It came to him an instant later what it was he had thought, but he could not erase the idea from his mind. With something of a shiver he went on his way and entered the town.

It was quite a small place; three streets running roughly east-to-west, and two perpendicular intersecting avenues. Doctor Jonas's laboratories were situated a short distance from the town itself, in a shallow valley screened by a stand of trees. Despite having perused a map of the environs Kelly found he was having some trouble orienting himself.

Not far distant he saw the town's single inn, a tall building behind which stretched fields running up to a low hill. He strode over to it, pushed the door and entered. A bell rang as the

door swung open and once more as it closed. The lobby was carpeted in dark red, the walls were heavily varnished wood; the aroma of toast drifted in from what must be a kitchen beyond an open doorway screened with a flimsy plaid sheet. A fat woman officiated behind a counter.

"Good evening, madam; my name is Kelly. You have a reservation for me."

The woman sighed, opened a black ledger and, after much leafing through pages, found his reservation. She took a day's payment in advance, gave him a key attached to an enormous metal prop, like a small dumb-bell sawn in half.

His room looked to the back of the inn, over the fields and onto the hill. The bathroom was appallingly small and the toilet made a constant hissing sound. Kelly laid his suitcase on the bed, tapped out the code on the lock-pads, lifted the lid.

He took out his shaving kit and a bottle of shampoo, put them on the narrow edges of the sink. There were left inside the suitcase a pair of binoculars, several books, his gun, and the wireless equipment. It was the latter that accounted for most of the suitcase's weight. Kelly took out *Principles of Animal Eugenetics*, reclosed the suitcase, then put it underneath his bed. There were two brass false locks on the case, to discourage casual snoopers. More persistent ones would find that keys could not open the suitcase. The lock-pads were inconspicuous, and the coded sequence was twelve digits long. If a determined person tried to pry the suitcase open, he or she would set off the explosive charges embedded along the contours of the lid. The Bureau had strong feelings about private property, for all that this smacked of heterodoxy.

Kelly opened the book at the page he had marked with a torn-off magazine subscription coupon. For twenty minutes he read, stretched out on the bed. The words hovered teasingly beyond his comprehension; he could understand the gist of the arguments, but not the details; and some of the leaps of logic he could not justify. In the end he put the book on the night-

stand and rubbed his eyes. Theory might not be too much use. What he truly understood, anyway, was practice.

He had seen the ultimate results of the chimpanzee experiments. Theory failed to account for them, but they could not be rationalized away. He remembered the final film on Mister Chee: the camera making its way into the chimp's room, all the red on the walls, words written in blood, the script at first tiny and controlled, but growing larger and wilder as the lines went on.

*You're hurting me every day and every night. You're forcing me to be bad I don't want to be a bad person but you make me make me and you showed me God and he saw inside my mind and Yes YES IT HURTS THE LADY OUR GUIDE SEESE INTO MEE OH GOD!*

The last words were indecipherable, great looping letters fading into meaningless patterns, arabesques of blood splattered across the walls. The self-mutilated corpse lying on the bed, clothes all torn away except for the neatly tied striped cravat. The right nether hand clutching a shining knife blade; both upper wrists slashed open, tendons and bone exposed.

Doctor Jonas had gone much further than the scientists of Centrality. There had been rumors for a long time about his activities; reports had been accumulating in the Bureau offices in Centrality. If the rumors were correct, the augmented dogs had been functioning for more than a year, without any anomalies. And giving them speech! Whatever eugenetic method Jonas had discovered, it was invaluable.

Eventually, letters had begun to be sent to Dr. Jonas, inviting him to visit the capital and make a presentation of his work. He had never given any response. Now it was Kelly's task to get the information from him. Sending an enforcement squad would have been stupid: the doctor must not be scared off, and so a single agent had been sent to him. Bureau doctrine was clear and based upon long experience: scientists had to be coddled, otherwise they would not cooperate and became

worse than useless. Knowledge was a dangerous thing, and the wielders of knowledge dangerous persons.

Kelly felt hunger; he went down to the lobby, asked if it was possible to get some food. The fat woman morosely sat him at a table in a small dining-room decorated with old photographs, and served him a cold ham sandwich. Kelly was alone in the room.

"Are there many other guests?" he asked the woman as she returned, bringing a bottle of beer.

"Nah. Only you."

He could not get any more out of her. Munching the last of his sandwich, he examined the pictures. They seemed about twenty years old or so, were not labeled, and presented groups of people standing stiffly at attention, perhaps overwhelmed by the notion of posterity. Kelly's eye was caught by one face that seemed familiar; it was, in fact, the station-master, in the photograph a still-young man in his middle-to-late thirties. Standing next to him was the same young woman he had seen at the house wrapped in a sheet and eating her own hair.

Kelly swallowed and examined the photograph again. Of course, it could not be the same person. Yet he had kept a very clear mental picture of the young woman in the station house—he had earned high marks in Eidetics during his Bureau training—and he was positive the features were almost exactly the same. A daughter, probably. Still...uncanny.

Kelly finished his beer and went back up to his room. The sun had set. Kelly looked out the window onto the fields, now gray under a cobalt-blue sky. From far away came a howl, then a chorus of howls. There were animals on the top of the hill. Kelly opened his suitcase, got out the binoculars. The animals looked like dogs; it was growing dim and they could not be seen clearly, though the top of the hill was bare of trees. The howls came again, but they were articulated this time, and Kelly after some time was able to make out the words. "Sugary," they sang, "Sweet, sweet sugary."

In the morning Kelly went out of the inn, sauntered down into the valley, and presently arrived at the door of Doctor Jonas's house. He rang the bell and waited for the door to open.

Doctor Jonas looked like a banker. To be precise, he looked like the painting of a banker in a book Kelly had read when he was young, before the species had become extinct. Like that archetypal banker, Doctor Jonas was partially bald but kept a thick fringe of very dark hair; like the image, his ample jowls were closely



shaven and his eyes were blue. He wore the kind of jacket the upper-class had favored in the prerevolutionary days; in Centrality this would have been sufficient provocation to get him arrested. Here, in a town in the middle of nowhere, within the doctor's own house, it was no worse than a subtle insult, and probably not even that.

"Good morning, sir. I am sorry, but I no longer take in patients. I advise you to see Dr. Duckett, who is a fully qualified—"

"Actually, Doctor Jonas, I don't come as a patient. I wondered if I might have some words with you."

The doctor's bland face showed almost no trace of emotion. "Are you from a newspaper?"

"No, sir. My name is Kelly; I am an envoy from Centrality. I've just arrived, and I'm eager to speak with you."

"Well, in that case...please step inside."

The doctor led Kelly along a thickly-carpeted corridor into a sitting-room. The furnishings were massive, ostentatious; again this was the prerevolutionary bourgeois style, but it was offset by a large portrait of Sebastian Bloom that dominated the room.

"Please make yourself comfortable. Something to drink, Mister Kelly?"

"Thank you, no."

There was a soft pad along the carpet and an augmented dog entered the room. This one was pale in color, bigger but more lanky than Leaper had been. It had the same bulging forehead.

"Mister Kelly, this is one of my charges. Her name is Cotton. Say hello, Cotton."

"Hello, mister," said Cotton. Kelly nodded and mumbled a reply. Then the dog took a step closer to Kelly, sniffed loudly while pointing her nose toward his crotch and added, "You smell like you just had sex."

"Cotton! I've told you not to do that! Go away; bad dog!" Cotton hung her head and slunk away. Doctor Jonas's face had ever-so-faintly colored. "I apologize, Mister Kelly. That was Cotton's idea of a joke—her sense of humor is not exactly like ours. She likes to make rude comments and embarrass people, and I haven't quite been able to get it out of her."

"No matter." Kelly made a gracious gesture. He did not at all feel like laughing. He set out his first bait. "Doctor Jonas, I hope I need not tell you how much Centrality holds you in esteem. These dogs you have eugenetically altered are a splendid achievement. It was thought you might like to come and give a conference at the Academy of Sciences; if there is any time that is convenient to you..."

"Thank you, but no. I am not ready at this time to present my findings fully."

"If you'll allow me to ask, why not?" Kelly altered his intonation to put a subtle nuance of threat in the question.





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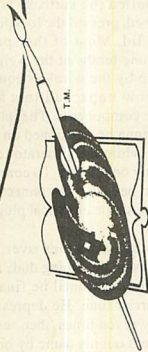
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"Such things are complicated to explain," said Doctor Jonas; his tone seemed to say that he was aware of the menace and considered it hollow. "I can tell you I will need many more months of work, perhaps as much as two or three years, before I am ready to give a conference."

"In that case, will you allow me to visit your laboratories?"

Doctor Jonas made a sour face, but got up and led the way without speaking. Kelly followed him through the corridors of the house, down into the basement. He kept careful note of their journey, paying particular attention to windows.

The doctor pushed open a heavy door and ushered Kelly in. "This room holds initial subjects." A strong animal reek dominated the room. There were about a dozen animals of various kinds held here, four rabbits in small wire cages, five dogs in larger enclosures of steel, three chickens and one parrot in birdcages hung from the ceiling.

A girl was hunched in a corner, making *tick-tick* noises with her tongue. The doctor called, "Lydia!" She rose from her crouch and turned to face the two men, smiling ingenuously. Behind her Kelly could see a glass box full of white mice.

"Hi, Daddy. I was looking at the mice." She spoke and carried herself as a little girl of seven or eight would, but she was at least twenty years old. The impression of youth was amplified by her clothes: a thin blouse and skirt, shoes of shiny leather; her legs were bare. Her right ankle was twisted out of shape and the flesh of the foot was cramped by the shoe.

"This is my daughter Lydia, Mister Kelly." Lydia dropped a wobbling curtsy. "Don't you have something to do, now, dear?"

"Can I go and play in the yard with Jeremiah?"

"Yes, dear." Lydia skipped out of the room. Doctor Jonas immediately made a show of his apparatus, opening drawers full of scalpels, cures and clamps, pointing to generalized anatomical charts pinned to the walls. There were thick ledgers full of breeding data, tables of reagents with scrawled notes in pencil. Kelly duti-

fully watched and noted. He knew, with the feeling of an important puzzle piece falling into place, that he had probably witnessed the main reason why the doctor had worked on augmenting animal intelligence: to compensate for his daughter's feeble-mindedness.

After a time he interrupted Doctor Jonas's patter and said, "Doctor, this is certainly interesting, but in fact it is merely the basics. I have some familiarity with eugenetics, and I'm aware that there is more—much more—to it than breeding charts, mutagenic chemicals and supplemental vivisection. I would very much like to see a work in progress, if I may."

The doctor's face pursed itself again, and with his full banker's assurance, he said "No, I'm afraid you may not. I do not show my 'works in progress.' I only show finished experiments. I regret that I cannot show you more than I have."

As he was being walked out to the door, Kelly assayed the second bait.

"I have been authorized by Centrality to make you an offer, Doctor Jonas. They are willing to give you large laboratories, fully equipped with the latest in technology, whatever you may want to work with. And a very respectable salary, and very good lodgings—for yourself and anyone else you need with you. How does that sound?"

Doctor Jonas showed him to the door. He spoke with overt contempt in his voice. "I regret that we do not understand one another, Mister Kelly. I have no wish to leave this town. My laboratories are amply sufficient to my purposes and I do not need the latest in technology. Good day."

Kelly bowed—a deliberate pre-revolutionary ritual, a pale attempt to keep face somehow—and left. He felt his face must be burning with shame. He had pressed too hard; Doctor Jonas had become utterly obdurate. Had he completely ruined his chances?

He returned to the inn, asked for his key, went up to his room. He sat down on the bed, unsure of the proper course of action. Should he communicate with the bureau now, or wait? To call now was to admit defeat: like a

child too stupid to understand anything about life. But not to call was to let the situation stagnate. In the end that was worse.

Kelly pulled the suitcase from beneath the bed, pressed the lockpads, opened the lid. Most of the space inside, and nine-tenths of the weight, was taken up by the wireless equipment. He now unpacked this and arranged the components. The quadrangular antenna he positioned on the night-stand, while the generator and receiver he lay on the bed. To connect the generator, he had to disconnect the lamp from the single electrical plug of the room.

He put the earphones over his head. He adjusted the tuning dials and rotated the antenna until he finally heard the carrier tone. He depressed the pulse-key seven times, then seven more, then sent out his name by binary code. Presently above the hum of the carrier tone came a thin, higher-pitched whine, in pulses brief and long. Kelly wrote down the dots and dashes, but he knew the code well enough to interpret directly.

#### KELLY REPORT

TALKING DOGS CONFIRMED, he replied. CONTACTED DR JONAS. REFUSED ALL OFFERS. HOSTILE. AVOID?

YOU MUST GAIN INFO. USE WHATEVER MEANS NEEDED. WE AWAIT RESULTS.

WILL COMPLY, he said, his finger heavy on the pulse-key.

The Bureau agent in the wireless office in Centrality, hundreds of miles away, did not reply. Kelly listened for a minute more to the blank carrier tone, then he shut down the wireless and put it back into the suitcase. *We await results.*

Kelly withdrew from the suitcase a small unmarked metal cylinder with a rubber valve on top. Squeezing the valve released a jet of narcotizing gas, effective on all forms of mammals. He slipped the cylinder inside his left jacket pocket and his lockpick's tools in the right-hand one. The Bureau wanted results, and Kelly would have to provide them or face demotion.



He opened the door of his room. He had turned off the lamp two hours ago, and prepared himself by the sparse moonlight that came into the room. Now he slid out of the room, drew the door shut behind him. He crept down the staircase, paused at the bottom of the landing, alert for the slightest noise. He felt a childish pang of guilt: guests were supposed to turn in their keys at the desk when they left.

Kelly made his way to the front door. There was a chain-bolt, but it hadn't been set. He unlocked the door and slipped out.

It was about half past one. The air was chill; Kelly's breath made two faint plumes of steam. He made his way out of the town, through the fields, past the stand of trees, down into the valley, to Doctor Jonas's house.

He felt sure at least one augmented dog would be on guard. He kept the canister of narcotizing gas in his left hand as he crept toward the house, making frequent pauses.

He almost lost his chance; the dog also had been silent, and Kelly was surprised when it rushed him, making a sound that was both bark and shout. The jet of gas struck the dog's muzzle off-center, but the effect was strong enough to slow down the animal; Kelly was able to dodge its jaws. The dog landed heavily on its feet, hesitated. Kelly got off another blast, squarely into its nostrils. The dog shuddered and collapsed. Its mouth worked, and disjointed words came out. "The lady," it said, and "cause the doctor—even if—bite, bit, bitten—no dog good dog..." Its breathing came regular and slow now; it would wake up after six or seven hours.

Kelly was about to leave it and move on, but something nagged at his mind. There was something wrong about the dog...then he figured it out. The dog's forehead did not bulge. It encased a brain no larger than normal. Things were getting stranger; but he could not stay here, next to the dog's body. He had to go on.

Kelly made his way to one of the rear windows without further problems. Working quickly, he got it to open and stepped inside the house.

There was a heavy silence. The corridor was in darkness but Kelly knew his way; he shone a pencil-light briefly around him to check, then set out for the laboratories downstairs.

Kelly had noted two doors next to the one Doctor Jonas had ushered him through that morning. These were most likely to give onto the interesting rooms. He sidled up to the first one, and set to work picking the lock.

After less than a minute he felt the last tumbler slide into position. He pulled open the door and entered the room. He shone his pencil-light onto the walls. There were anatomic charts and breeding tables here as in the room Jonas had shown him, but these appeared more complete. Somewhere there must be a journal, a diary of experiments, or maybe even a monograph. Kelly opened the doors of a large armoire and felt a row of leather spines under his fingers.

He grinned, and at that moment the lights came on.

Kelly whirled around, his hand reaching for the gas canister. Then he relaxed, tried to appear friendly. It was the doctor's simple daughter.

She was smiling at him; Kelly put his finger to his lips and went *sssh* comically. Lydia muffled a giggle and copied his gestures. Kelly went past her, closed the door and whispered in her ear, "What are you doing here, Lydia?"

She whispered back "I don't sleep much, I'm always up before Mister Sun is. What are you doing here? Your name's Kelly, right? Cotton told me."

"Yes, my name is Kelly. I'm playing a game, but it's a very serious game and you mustn't spoil it, okay?"

"I won't. What's the game?"

"Well, I bet myself I could get into the house and get out without your daddy finding out. I had to be very careful, and now if you tell him I was here I'll lose the game. You understand?"

"Yes. You're playing spy."

For a moment Kelly wondered if the imbecility was a careful act; but if it was, he had lost everything already, and it cost him nothing to go on with the charade.

"Yes. That's it. Spy. Now will you help the spy get back to his home so he can finish the game?"

"Only if you do something for me. And if you do that, I promise I won't tell anyone anything."

"All right. Whatever you want."

Lydia lay down on the floor, rumpled up her blue nightgown, pulled her underpants down to her knees. "Rub my cunt, please." Kelly hesitated, taken aback. "My wee-wee," she said, impatient. "Please. Like this."

Numbly Kelly kneeled at her side and began to masturbate her. Lydia shut her eyes and smiled. Soon she started to clutch at his left arm and to buck her hips.

Kelly felt soiled by the act; Lydia had a mature body, but still it felt like forcing a child. He turned his gaze away, accelerated the back-and-forth movement of his fingers along the girl's vaginal cleft, to bring her to climax as quickly as he could.

Lydia gripped his left arm fiercely; she began to moan through clenched teeth, then her whole body shook. And Kelly felt the girl's arm against his grow burning hot, and for a second or two it seemed that it had lengthened, like squeezed putty, and reached farther along his back than was physically possible.

Then she was coiling up on her side, panting, bringing his moist right hand to her mouth and kissing it.

"Are you happy, Lydia?" he made himself ask.

"Uh-huh."

"So you won't tell? I can go and finish my game?"

"I promise."

Kelly did not dare to continue his examination of the room. He went out, leaving Lydia still on her back, half-naked, scratching at her legs and smiling idiotically. He made his way back to the window he had eased open. He felt a knot in his abdomen, a vague nausea of shame.

He managed to return to the inn and back to his room. He went into the small bathroom with its hissing toilet, ran the water in the sink and scrubbed his hands, trying to wash the smell of Lydia's body off his fingers. Then he sat down on the toilet's closed lid.

He had failed, and must accept his failure. Depression seized him, a wave of gloom coloring all his thoughts. There was a flicker of impotent rage toward the Bureau. Doctor Jonas was too important an individual to warrant only an inexperienced agent! When he passed in front of the review board, come what may, he would make that complaint heard.

He was too good at Eidetics: once again, an image of Lydia rose unbidden in his mind. He saw again her half-naked body, his hand caressing the cleft between her legs. He had turned his head away. He had turned his body to the side, and his head even further, so that he was looking at her bare legs and feet. He felt a small shock, his training asserting itself. He summoned up the image of Lydia he had absorbed at their first meeting. He had noticed then she had a deformed foot; but tonight, he had seen that both her ankles and feet were perfectly normal.

It might be that he was confused, that tension and fear of failure had impaired his functioning. Somehow he thought not. Kelly shook off his inertia. His incursion into the house would probably have consequences; he could not trust Lydia to remain silent. He must return to Centrality at once, present a detailed report, convince the Bureau to send a full task force and salvage the mess. If he argued his case well he might still save his position.

Kelly pulled his suitcase from beneath the bed, unlocked it and once more arranged the wireless equipment. He sent out a message.

AGENT KELLY REPORTING. ACTIVITIES OF DR JONAS BEYOND WHAT WAS EXPECTED. INDICATIONS OF VERY ADVANCED EUGENETICS. ADVISE BUREAU SEND CLASS B TEAM TO INVESTIGATE. AM RETURNING TOMORROW MORNING TO PRESENT FULL REPORT.

At this late hour, there would be no reply from the Bureau officials. The technician on duty acknowledged reception of the message and Kelly signed off.

He repacked his equipment then, and went to bed. There would be a

train to Centrality at 10:28; he would be at the station by a quarter past ten.

In the morning he rose, ate a meager breakfast, and announced his departure. The proprietress grumbled, and demanded payment for the two days originally booked. Kelly paid her off, went to fetch his suitcase and set off for the station. She watched him leave, standing in the doorway, and Kelly got the impression she knew something. He told himself he was becoming paranoid.

He was at the station by ten past ten. He went to the stationmaster's office, stated that he must board the 10:28 train. The stationmaster threw a set of switches on a large board; panels swung out from signposts, requesting the train to stop when it reached the station.

"Tell me, sir," said Kelly. "I was lunching at the inn yesterday and noticed some photographs on the wall. You're in one of them, aren't you?"

"Yes, sir. Those were taken not long after the Revolution."

"There was a woman with you in the photograph; a brown-haired woman, dressed in a light suit. May I ask who she is?"

The stationmaster's face darkened. "That was the wife, sir; she's ten years dead."

"My condolences," said Kelly. "I didn't know."

"Yes, well, I have work to do now, sir, if you don't mind."

Kelly left the stationmaster at his duties and went to sit on a bench. His observations were starting to form a pattern, but it was not yet complete. Still, it reinforced his conviction that the situation was too much for an inexperienced agent.

The train seemed slow in coming. Again, the day was overcast, and the station was bathed in a weak gray light. Kelly stood up, walked back and forth, suitcase in hand.

He heard footsteps close to him and turned around. It was Doctor Jonas and Lydia, accompanied by a large dog. Kelly recognized the animal; it was the one he had anesthetized the previous night.

"Good morning, Mister Kelly."





"A pleasure, Doctor Jonas. Miss Jonas."

The doctor reached inside his bourgeois suit and brought out a handgun.

"Mister Kelly, I must ask you not to move."

Kelly felt the burn of adrenaline flooding his muscles. "I will remind you that I am an agent of Centrality. You are committing a serious crime even by threatening me." He noticed that Lydia was smiling delightedly, cocking her head to the side. The dog had pulled back its lips, showing off dark yellow teeth, and was tensing up.

"Spare me your revolutionary bluster, please," said Doctor Jonas.

"You will be seen, Doctor. The stationmaster or the other workers will see you. Put the gun away now, and I won't report this incident."

"The stationmaster and the others support me. No one will interfere."

Bloody prerevolutionary lumpen. Kelly wasn't really surprised. They'd have to revere whoever came closest to an aristocrat in their shitty excuse for a town. Kelly let the pulse of rage at his betrayal fade away. He did not have time for sentiments; he must consider his options. Doctor Jonas held the gun confidently; Kelly believed he would not hesitate to fire. At this range, there was hardly any possibility of missing. He must gain time. He might well use the arrival of the train as a diversion. In the meantime, if the others shifted their positions, it might be possible to grab hold of Lydia and use her as a shield. The dog, however, might be the most serious opponent.

"What is this about, Doctor?"

"It is about your visit of last night. Jeremiah didn't much like being gassed, and Lydia told me you'd read my experimental diaries. You have seen too much, Mister Kelly, and I can't have you making a report about it."

"So you'll kill me? The Bureau of Intelligence will send out people after me, and you will find yourself in grave trouble. I'm only a minor agent, but the Bureau cares for its own."

"Oh, I wouldn't simply kill you. I know your superiors expect you back in Centrality. And they will see you,

tonight; you will give them a confused, incompetent report, which will convince them I am not to be disturbed yet. I may be forced to vanish, but at least I will have time to do so."

Lydia had been staring at Kelly throughout the conversation. Now she nodded, as if finally satisfied. "I can do him, Daddy," she said.

"Go ahead, dear," said Doctor Jonas. Lydia started to undress. "Please take off your clothes, Mister Kelly."

"Why?"

"Just take them off."

The dog growled. "Nice dog, Jeremiah," said the girl as she pulled off her gown.

"Lydia," said Kelly. "We're friends. Tell me what's going on." He would have to do something desperate soon. Three of his fingers uncurled from the handle of his suitcase and made contact with the frame.

"I have to play you, Kelly. So that means I have to take your clothes. It's the first time I get to be a boy."

"Take your clothes off," repeated Doctor Jonas, waving the gun.

"If you shoot me," said Kelly, "you'll damage the clothes. You don't want that." His fingers were pushing the lock-pads unobtrusively, one at a time, very slowly.

Doctor Jonas hesitated; his forehead was beaded with sweat. Obviously, for all his determination, he had qualms about shooting a man in cold blood; Kelly's rationalization would only worsen his inertia.

Lydia was now completely naked. She frowned in concentration, then relaxed. She began to grow taller, her torso flattening, her shoulders bulking up. Her face altered as well, its planes shifting, hair sprouting over the cheeks and on the upper lip.

"I had guessed," said Kelly, surprised at the calmness of his voice, "but I couldn't be sure. I must admit she's the most impressive example of eugenetics I could imagine. Were you aiming for shape-changing abilities when you altered her? Or is this an unforeseen consequence of an attempt to increase her intelligence?"

"That doesn't concern you, mister Kelly."

"You intend to pass her off as myself. But she's too slow-witted to do it."

"She will be well advised. Jeremiah is the best of my dogs, and probably more intelligent than yourself. I have no fear." Doctor Jonas mopped his bald forehead.

Kelly thought he heard the noise of the train, still far off. Lydia had by now almost exactly copied his features. He had to keep talking, to gain the brief while he needed. He was afraid, but there was no other way out.

"You do know that she's been fucking the stationmaster?" Doctor Jonas flinched. Kelly went on. "He got your daughter to copy his dead wife. I saw her yesterday, as I arrived. She was cutting her own hair, and eating it. Reingesting her own cellular tissue, I suppose. Shapeshifting has to be subject to conservation of mass. Which means that Lydia can't copy me accurately." Kelly's fingers kept pressing the lock-pads. It wasn't the unlocking code he had been entering, but another one, designed for a slightly different purpose.

"She can do the face. Only the face matters." It was Jeremiah who had spoken. Doctor Jonas's eyes shifted back and forth from his daughter to Kelly.

Lydia's features had now firmed and matched Kelly's to near-perfection.

The moment had come. Kelly took a short step towards her, holding forth his right hand, palm forward, letting the suitcase swing toward the front of his body. "Lydia," he said, "don't do this. We're friends, aren't we? Remember how nice I was to you?"

Doctor Jonas, his face white, pointed his gun more sharply. "Don't move, Kelly!" As Kelly had expected and hoped, Jeremiah stepped forward, growling, to interpose itself between Kelly and his mirror image; and at that moment Kelly's middle finger pushed the last lock-pad, and the code set off the explosives embedded in the suitcase's lid.

The force of the blast threw him backwards, close to the edge of the quay; he spun sideways, slamming his

limbs into the concrete, almost glad, for a few seconds, to surrender to the energies of the bomb and let them do what they willed to his body.

His ears hurt, and all sounds were muted now. He felt nothing in his left arm; he risked a brief glance at it, saw a mangle of flesh that had been his hand and might yet be saved, if he could get medical attention. The blast had been directed outward, away from him; but the left side of his body was still badly burned.

Leaning on his right hand, he raised himself to his knees. He saw Jeremiah's body, nearly torn in two, lying on the ground. Next to the dead dog the metamorph lay writhing and screaming; her cries of pain seemed to come to him through thick cotton. Fragments of the suitcase and its contents had imbedded themselves into her. Kelly could see her burned flesh twist and flow like thick mud. It seemed to have lost all cohesion, to drape itself at random on her bones. The face, his face, was losing its definition, becoming a blank mask with two holes for the eyes and one for the screaming mouth.

Doctor Jonas had been mostly spared by the blast; he stood staring at the scene. Kelly got to his feet, rushed tottering to him and slammed his right fist in the doctor's face. The doctor reeled back; Kelly seized the gun in his hand and wrestled it free almost without effort. Doctor Jonas looked at him uncomprehending; Kelly raised the gun and shot him twice in the head.

Kelly looked around, but there was no one else on the quay. He strode over to Lydia; her flesh was still heaving and boiling, oozing blood and lymph. He emptied the gun into her, trying to hit the heart; her body convulsed after each shot. The last bullet seemed to hit a vital organ: the body grew suddenly rigid, then went limp; the flesh sagged.

Kelly strode down the quay, Sebastian Bloom's huge, peeling face gazed at him from the poster on the wall. He heard a tinny screech all around him, saw the train pull into the station, finally come to a stop.

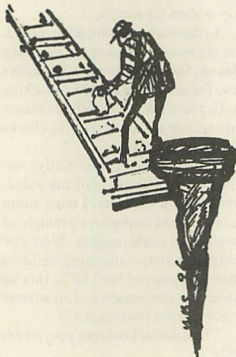
A cloud of steam rose from the engine. Kelly hobbled toward the

train, but now the pain had begun. His whole left side felt seared, and his arm, his arm, his hand! He faltered, almost fell, forced himself to go on. Surely the conductor must see him; there was no one on the quay, no one looking out of the empty train.

He called out, weakly: "I am an envoy from Centrality. In service to Sebastian Bloom. My name is Kelly. Help me. I'm wanted in Centrality. The Bureau...."

It seemed to him he had clawed his way into the train, was sitting in a compartment, tended by a worried steward who said, "We should call a doctor right now, sir." And Kelly was saying, "No. Not here. They want me dead here. The next stop. Or maybe wait to Centrality. Call ahead. You have wireless equipment? Call ahead. Call the Bureau of Intelligence...."

And it seemed to him, too, that he was still at the station, kneeling on the quay, his life running out of him, his arm a spike of burning pain, and the train was leaving the station, ignoring him, pulling ahead, faster and faster, and now he did see the little man walking along the tracks, holding a chamois cloth in one hand, buffing the rails, buffing the rails, erasing every least speck of tarnish from the gleaming metal, while the train sped off into the distance. The little man raised his head to smile at Kelly, and his face was Kelly's own. ■



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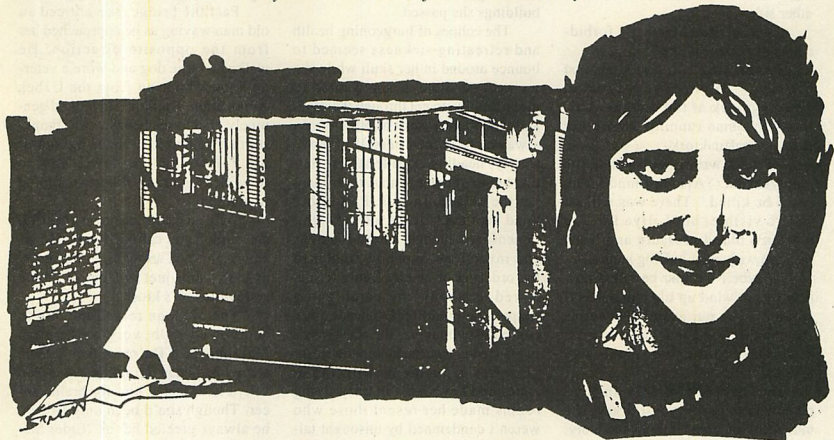


# IN TRANSIT

Angus MacDonald

Illustrated by Margaret Ballif Simon

*Liliya knew the heart of Moscow intimately*



The loudspeaker hissed, then spoke. "Careful, the doors are closing." The doors did close, of course, and the voice continued: "Next station—Petrogradskaya." The train jerked slightly as it started again.

Liliya wondered how often the station announcements were updated, or if they ever were. Her father had once remarked that the Metro had been speaking in the same voice since his boyhood, in Brezhnev's time. Must have been a tape loop back then, she thought as the train slowed. She rose from her seat automatically and slouched before the doors until they opened. As she stepped onto the platform, a lump of hunger burrowed from throat to belly; she'd forgotten to eat again that morning.

The two transit policewomen in the escalator control booth, prissy

made-up faces squinting from under blocky caps, looked up from their screens and stared at her as she reached the bottom step. They had always watched as if wanting to berate her for her appearance, the cultivated sullenness and bohemianism, only the sight of her badge stopping them. Of course, in the last few weeks their glares had gotten worse. It galled her that her regular passage was almost certainly adding years to their lives.

"That's the one." She heard the whisper as she was carried upward past the booth. "Glory to God that they're not all like her."

"I'm afraid of them all, as long as they let her keep—" The voice faded below her as the escalator rose.

During the long ride up to street level, she stared at the people coming

down on the other escalator. As usual, some averted their eyes from her, recognizing her face from news pictures. Ingrates, she thought. An acid burp rose out of her empty stomach; she swallowed spit to keep from gagging.

Out of the station, she stared at the spotless vending machines full of newspapers: yesterday's *Evening Petersburg*, the Russian edition of the *Asahi Shimbun*, and the right-wing *Leningradskaya Pravda*. A headline caught her eye: "Andreyeva: Cure Worse Than Disease?"

Still angry, she tried to think of what to do next. A faint greasy food smell reached her, and she spotted a piroshki cart next to another Metro exit across Kirov Avenue. Her belly churned as if anticipating consummation of an unpleasant love affair. It was still nearly four hours till the end

of her shift, and she had to keep moving, but a few moments eating something wouldn't hurt anyone.

I should have taken the other stairs out of the station, she thought. Knowing that the next surface crossing was a half kilometer up the avenue, she decided to jaywalk.

All Kirov's lanes were empty for blocks in both directions. She stepped off the curb and started toward the other side.

"*Dyevushka!* Miss! It's forbidden to cross here! Stop!"

The barking alto grated against her ears. "Bitch," she muttered, glancing back at the doughy, uniformed woman running toward her from the traffic kiosk.

"What's wrong with you?" the cop went on. "Are you mad? You could be killed." There was still no traffic visible, but Liliya felt the woman's blood pressure and heart rate rise with each huffing step.

"Maybe I'd rather be killed now than live to wind up like you, *grandmother*." She put as much sneer as she could into the nominal honorific as she turned the rest of the way around.

The cop flushed deeply. In obvious preparation for a full tirade, she took a breath, then let it out suddenly. Her eyes fixed on the word "Healer," large red letters outlined in gold, across the badge pinned to the modishly scuffed leather of Liliya's Karelian Army jacket. She closed her mouth and glared, then gestured curtly toward the opposite curb. "As you please," she said, and started back to her kiosk, grumbling. Short fingers punched a cancellation code into the terminal on her belt.

Liliya spat on the asphalt, then returned to the sidewalk anyway. At least the woman hadn't recognized her face; apparently she was among the many who now assumed most Healers were scoundrels in matters either vital or trivial.

Her hunger had gone for the moment, and she was supposed to take the long way around from the Petrograd Side to Vasilievsky Island, going on foot north before heading southwest again, probably by bus or

tramway. Though with the schedules reduced this year—fewer people had to travel about the city, with the information sieve finally linked in all the districts—it might be just as quick to walk the entire route. Of course, quickness was not the point. She started up Kirov, trying to calm down and think of the microscopic protocancers dying, the fat-plated arteries softening in the unseen rooms of the buildings she passed.

The echoes of burgeoning health and retreating sickness seemed to bounce around in her skull while she walked. As always, she wanted to move rapidly, to get through the day's assigned route as soon as possible. As always, she forced herself to move slowly, heading up side streets, letting her involuntary emanations blanket the neighborhoods. Part of her mind kept track of the mental eight-dimensional models whose rotations and inversions somehow tightened the ordering of nearby living tissue. Bored as always by cataloguing shapes she could feel, but not quite consciously imagine, she occasionally glanced in apartment windows. Her glimpses of residents working at slates and keyboards in cozy living rooms made her resent those who weren't condemned by unsought talent to wander across the city every day, leaving a wake of statistically verified health.

She felt vague guilt over her resentment, though it was long established that Healers' moods had negligible influence on their beneficial effects. Even so, the State Committee for Prevention and Recovery continually stressed the importance of maintaining a positive attitude to the work. Since her recruitment after routine tests at age ten, she had managed to stay as healthily cynical as any of the children in her training groups. Still, over a decade of indoctrination had left an inevitable mark on her psyche.

It could be a priest after that much catechism, she thought as she crossed the bridge onto Apothecary Island. I am a holy pilgrim, healing the masses as a vessel of Modern Mathemat-

ics' immortal power. She grimaced in embarrassment at the conventional rebelliousness of the idea. During adolescence, the trainees had voiced such inverted blasphemies almost daily. The instructors always laughed along with the class, not bothering to mouth even the mild reprimands given ordinary students. It paid to let the talented feel that they were privileged in thought as well as in comfort.

Past the bridge, she noticed an old man waving as he approached her from the opposite direction. He walked a large dog and wore a veteran's medal dating from the Uzbek Annexation. Kleikov. He looked genuinely glad to see her. She was thankful that he had long made a point of not following the news, and so remained ignorant of her worsening reputation.

With an effort to appear cheerful, she smiled and called "Fyodor Maksimovich! You are well, I presume?" as their paths met in front of a blue and white news kiosk.

The old man reined the dog in and bowed. "Oh, very well, Liliya Maksimovna." The name their fathers shared had been a running joke when Liliya had treated him for brain cancer. Though she'd been only fifteen, he always greeted her as "Elder Sister" when she arrived at the clinic for the sessions. He was her first major case, and the remembered triumph of his recovery warmed her as she looked at him now. The old enthusiasm rose to the surface of her mind: she retraced the focusing of perception, the dulling of his pain receptors, the coalescence of cloudy illness-feelings into specific awareness of cancerous masses she could smother with higher geometries and her trained will.

The memory contrasted sharply with how her work affected her now. She wondered if she'd always resent how rarely bona fide Healers were needed after decades of Healers' preventive wanderings.

"I have news that may interest you," the old man continued, pulling her attention back to the present. "My niece in New Jersey wrote me that her son has been recruited for training as



a Healer. The Red Bank Mutual indemnity firm has retained him."

Liliya suppressed a frown. The child—for recruitment always occurred before puberty—would face the same problems that made the work of other American Healers (at least the ones she'd met at conferences at resorts on the Red Sea and in the Bahamas) so difficult. The discovery and refinement of Healing abilities had made feeble weapons against the lack of preventive care in an uncaring, illiterate population.

Still, if the boy's talent was pronounced enough for an insurance company to take him on, he might not be so badly off. He would certainly live better than the children some countries drafted and raised in barracks.

Making herself smile at the old man, she said, "Wish him good fortune on my behalf, Fyodor Maksimovich. And treat yourself well."

"I will, I will," he answered, nodding. "Good wishes to you as well." He replaced his hat and tugged the dog's leash. "*Doh svidaniya*, Liliya Maksimovna."

"*Doh svidaniya*," she said as he walked past. She turned north again and her face sagged back into the habitual scowl. Three and a half hours left, and she still hadn't eaten.

A block or so up, she reached a small cafeteria she often patronized when her route took her up Kirov. When she stopped before the doors, however, they remained closed. She looked up at the heat sensor, then waved her hand in front of it. Nothing. She looked through the glass and saw several women in coveralls looking back at her and pointing to a sign hanging inside the door: "Under Repair." The old-fashioned phrase reminded her of her father; it turned up in several jokes from his youth. She peered in again at the women, who had resumed pulling up a worn carpet, and remembered her father stopping with her in front of another closed cafeteria, maybe twenty-five years before.

"Ha," he'd said as they turned away. "At least they're really fixing

things. When I was your age, they'd put the sign up half the time because they were short of food or of workers to serve it." He always went on like that, about how much easier it was now, how there used to be waiting lists for all cars, not just imports, and how nothing useful ever got done. In the old days.

Diesel fumes from a passing truck enveloped her. The smell both deepened her hungry nausea and brought to mind her father's old rebuilt Mercedes. She remembered the last time she'd ridden with him, when he'd come up to Petersburg for one of his occasional New Year's visits. The odors of the car's exhaust mixed with those of the worn leather seats and his cologne.

"You're lucky, Lilotchka," he said. "I'm lucky too; my research makes me happy, but you can know you're measurably helping society, helping everybody, with your job. My first post after University, I had no real function. We were supposed to prove that oil drawn from the privately run wells was of higher quality. It was a joke, of course: private crude was the same as State crude. We all sat in the lab every day and waited until the shift was over, until it was time to go home and drink."

He had paused, then laughed. "You would have been a clockwatcher, too. You were always impatient as a little girl." He could only remember her as a little girl; he'd hardly seen her after the recruiters had discovered her talent and taken her to the school on the Black Sea. Parents were routinely offered jobs and houses—not just nice, roomy flats, but houses!—nearby. He had chosen not to follow her, however, preferring to stay with his post at the Petroleum Institute, proceed with his research, and occasionally visit his wife's grave. Liliya felt a rush of resentment when they met or parted: Why hadn't he been there to see her grow up? But he said he was proud of her, happy for her. "Your generation has so much, not just Healers, but all of you. You know you can make a future, finally."

Did I make this future, Papa? she thought as she strode around a

blocked-off section of freshly poured sidewalk. Do I make the circular routes I travel through the city, the complacent faces that shun me?

She stepped off the curb, berating herself for wishful bitterness.

Her stomach knotted again as she crossed Chapugin Street, where the rusting television broadcast tower loomed over the empty sanitarium. On impulse, she cut left and raced across Kirov into the park, ignoring the grandmothers who called reprimands to her from benches as she swung over a low metal fence. She hunched in her jacket and strode along a path, hoping to get to the center of the open space, away from the apartment blocks full of bodies she couldn't help but heal.

She felt the determination behind the official voice before she heard it. "Miss! A moment please."

She halted and ground her teeth. Without turning, she glared over her shoulder at him, focusing first on his gray-blue cap, then his face. He had started his terminal printer; a rhythmic whine came from his belt as the citation emerged on paper. His eyes came up to meet hers and stayed. "A bit old for hooliganism, aren't you?" he asked.

The sneer in his voice gave her an object for her anger, and she began to visualize the life working inside his uniform. She saw, then heard, and finally felt his lungs absorbing and dissolving air, the crowds of cells in his glands sorting bitter toxins and sweet nutrients, his heart muscles pushing blood. It was the same focus she first had as a girl with Kleikov, and with so many patients and enemies since.

Her own breathing grew shallow, and her eyes stayed on his. The rest of the world, the green smells of the park and the bright clothes of the passersby who had stopped to watch the confrontation, fell back to the edge of her awareness. Her fists clenched and rough-bitten fingernails dug into her palms. She started to shake, both from rage and from the effort of keeping hold on his metabolism. It was harder to control another's flesh standing in



the open than lying on a soft bed in a clinic.

"I suppose I am," she whispered, then turned fully around so he could see her medal and her face. She slid her mind into his body, adjusting the chemical balances of several million muscle cells, and so stopped his heart.

His eyes widened and he began to sway. His fingers, still on the keypad, slowed and stopped. He turned his head slightly and looked into the small crowd. His eyes dilated and went out of alignment. His mouth opened very slowly.

She closed her eyes in agony and elation, fighting to stay inside him as long as she could stand it. It seemed somehow important to experience what she was doing. She saw an unfocused, doubled image of the crowd beneath a big black crescent: the bill of his cap. The pain in his chest burned through her, out along her arms, down past her belly. She felt her own blood rush to her face and loins as her breathing hastened. Finally a blurry blue sky swung down over everything as he fell, landing clumsily and hard on his back. The blue faded to gray, then to nothingness.

When she opened her eyes, she still couldn't see clearly. Where were the nurses, the orderlies? When would they change the bedding? After a moment she realized that her face was pressed into the bare dirt surrounding a tree. She lifted her head, blinking at the sunlight. It was very quiet. Several emergency vehicles were parked on the grass nearby. Some medics had already covered the body and were loading it into an ambulance. The crowd had gotten smaller, dispersed at the instructions of newly arrived police groups. Liliya rolled over and sat up, feeling their eyes and hatred on her. Her limbs felt relaxed and torpid; she leaned back against the tree. Most of the cops hung back by their cars and the remaining onlookers, but one was walking toward her with a pair of medics.

Three meters away, they stopped as if at a line drawn on the ground.

One medic spoke. "Healer, do you require medical aid?"

Liliya squinted at her and considered the question vacantly. After a moment, she remembered to run a quick self-examination. Her pulse and blood pressure were a bit low, her elbow was bruised from the fall, and she had bitten her tongue—the taste of blood was faint yet constant—but nothing major was wrong. She decided she might let the elbow heal by itself, rather than doing anything about it: she tended to make small, internal sacrifices after events like this.

She licked her lips and answered, "No. Nothing's wrong."

The medic nodded, then turned and walked away with her partner.

The cop, an older man with lieutenant's insignia, remained. She felt his heart race as he sweated in the heavy uniform. His expression, however, remained largely impassive, with only an occasional lip tremor betraying his fear and anger. She abstractly admired his self-control, and wondered whether he would blink more if his eyes were not shaded by the official cap. She also wondered if he had known the dead officer well, but pushed the question away from herself. She always pushed that question away from herself.

The lieutenant pressed a button on his belt, and a red light began blinking: he had started the recorder. He recited the date, the location, and the name of the dead man. Then he paused, and said "Healer, do you..."

She took a breath and cut him off. "Healer Liliya Maksimovna Andreyeva acknowledges the incident and accepts responsibility for the death." The words of the formula came easily. She went on, "I pledge to cooperate fully with any investigations conducted by the State, the local authorities, or other entities with legitimate concern or jurisdiction."

She knew there would be no further investigation; there was no question what had happened. And this time, there was no question what would happen. She thought for the

first time of the man's family and caught her breath, then looked up expectantly.

The lieutenant had turned off the recorder and walked away without speaking.

Most of the cars were gone. Only a few police and stragglers remained. She got unsteadily to her feet and brushed her clothes off. She realized her face must be smeared with dirt and saliva, then decided she didn't care. There were several small rips in her jacket. She remembered wondering, as a child, if she would ever have the chance to heal a heart.

As the ambulance pulled away, she saw that Kleikov had been standing on the other side of it. Not wanting to look him in the face, she stared at his dog. The animal was frightened, turning its head from side to side and trembling. Faint whimpers reached her ears.

Suddenly the dog moved as Kleikov tugged it away. Liliya realized that he must have seen her facing him.

She looked around for a public phone, spotted one across the park, and walked carefully over to it.

She dialed the Committee's local operations line. Before she could speak, the voice of her supervisor addressed her: "Andreyeva. So good of you to call." The receiver smelled of stale bread.

"I wish to report..." she began, but he interrupted.

"No need for that. *Excellent* work, Andreyeva." The sarcasm was unmistakable. "You've managed to cross the bottom line. You'll be, ah, promoted now. You are not surprised, of course. We warned you last time, before your probationary leave."

"I..."

"Quiet. Tomorrow you will come to the office and complete the application forms that will be prepared for you. We will send them to Moscow immediately. With my recommendation and those of your colleagues—whose eagerness to see you move up and out of their company, by the way, exceeds even my own—you will certainly be accepted. You will likely move to your new seacoast home by the end of the week."



He paused, probably to let Liliya remember the visit to the site they had made her take the month before. The house was luxurious, perched on a cliff above the frigid Pacific, fully automatic, and absolutely isolated. No one would ever come within range of her abilities—except other Healers, who could detect, and defend themselves against, any attacks she might make.

The voice continued. "I think you will have but little time to acclimate yourself, however, before you receive a visitor requiring the first performance of your new duties. Word is that the mass-murder trial up in Zelenogorsk will end within days. Sentencing should then follow in a week or so."

He stopped again. Liliya bit her lip hard, wanting to shout that they could use gas or doctors' needles as in the West, but remained silent. She knew that no one wanted her training wasted.

"Congratulations on your new post, Citizen Executioner."

Liliya found her voice. "I, ah...I could do the forms today? To get—"

"No, you could not," he snapped. The brief anger was replaced by his earlier irony as he continued. "You will finish your day's assigned course. We have no one to substitute."

She stared at the soccer graffiti scratched into the booth's plastic windows. *Dynamo shall win. Spartak is meat.*

"Besides," he went on, "you can use the rest of the shift to savor your accomplishments. Despite your youth, you've already made yourself a figure of legend, a hag from the fairy stories. Now you will be a more fearsome deterrent than the cold-hearted gallows could ever be." He fell silent, apparently waiting for her reply.

Finally she spoke. "I'm going to get something to eat first."

There was a click before the line went dead.

She left the booth and started walking. A few hundred meters along, she stopped to buy an ice cream from a cart, then kept going, her pace neither rapid nor slow. ■

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# SLIPPIN' THE BLUES

David Lee Anderson

Illustrated by David Lee Anderson

*He was running wetbacks and facing odds he didn't know about*

I ran immigrants and undocumented across the border in my only true love, the *Silver Sheena*. A concealed bay held four cryo-tubes, armored beneath and shielded on both sides by illegal Pratt & Whitney thrusters. *Sheena* was my quad-fan turbolift Porsche, modified for off-road use.

She outran the Tex-New Mex border blues who would hotfoot across the desert like ravenous coyotes. They'd get bonuses for confirmed runner kills. They wanted me real bad.

Federal death penalties ran off most of my competition. The money was too good for me to quit. Gold, not paper.

On my last run, a hot and dusty June, I stared into the white space of the Mexican desert, sunblinded until my pupil-activated shades slid into place. Their violet coolness denied my vision the true heat of the day.

I never saw my cargo. I didn't want to know their faces. They were frozen to ease handling, because of the time it took to get them a slot in the employment dragon in northern metroplexes like Chicago-Detroit.

The World Freedom counselor loaded me up with a young mother. He stacked her two young kids in a single tube.

I didn't like the sound of that deal. I argued my case; he said I could discuss it with José outside the warehouse, and I said no thanks. I didn't like his unyielding attitude. The other two cryo-tubes contained Russian craftsmen, coming in the only way possible now to reach the high-tech core of America.

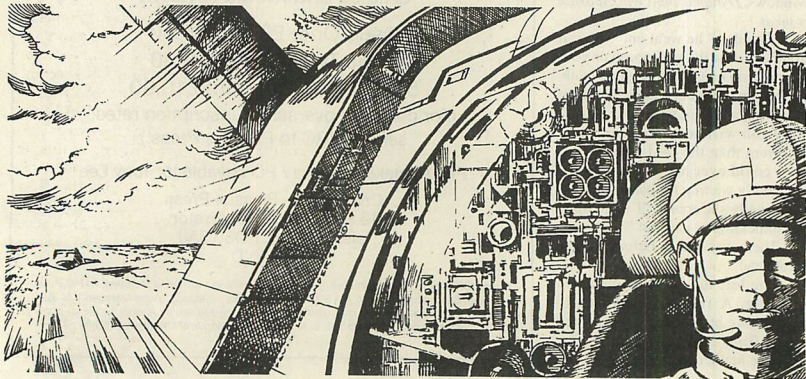
Heading north over the border, I cruised low over the flatlands at legal speed, 80 KPH. I shot through the arroyos, climbing the mesas a step at a time. *Sheena's* fans tattered the mesquite. Golden dust trailed into the long blue sky behind me.

I set *Sheena* at two meters above relative surface, half-power. The turbolift worked better at low altitude and was gyroscoped to remain stable, no matter how rough the terrain. I ran it up some, 130 KPH. *Sheena* purred, blowing silkwind.

Noon desert sent shimmering waves across the surface, distorting my distance view. I switched on the VASRAD. The comp digitals flashed red immediately. I tensed up. They never before came that quickly. From the west, I saw a dust trail. They were coming as fast as an evangelist smellin' money in the hands of unsaved souls.

I punched up the targeting screen. Aggravating seconds crept by, then a green silhouette flipped in on the readout.

Landshark, a border patrol sled. She shot over the tabletop at my port flank. I twisted *Sheena* starboard and touched fire to the burners. Alcohol



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fuel ignited for a rush away. The blues discovered they had been shammed.

Sandblasting the shark, I blew dust toward them, digging up a wall of tan clouds. They couldn't fire rockets at this proximity. I lost them for the moment, but they'd sure surprised the hell outta me. They appeared to be loners, no back-up. Blues ride in pairs most of the time. They came on so fast, they must have been waiting for me.

A voice came over my openband comm-unit. A woman.

"Hey, runner! Where you headed so fast?"

"Got a hot date, ma'am."

"Wiseass," she said, to her partner, probably the driver. "Pull it over, scumsucker!"

"You need to learn how to ask nicely, now," I answered.

"I ain't gonna ask nicely, faggot! Stop your vehicle or we'll blow you to hell!"

That proved she was a Texas native. I had a feeling she wasn't kidding.

I turned off my com-unit. No sense in getting her really mad.

Shoving the control glove forward, I jammed it to 170 KPH. *Sheena* put some space between us and the landshark, desert-hopping like a horny jackrabbit.

Normally, I traveled the barren land of the southwest without seeing a single soul. Most farms out here had dried up with the agrimarket failure, speculation based on the tenuous thread of the orbiting agri-stations producing more, when they could barely cope. The Sunbelt got hotter. The False Energy crisis of the last of the 90s caused lack of faith in paper trusts, and land-based markets collapsed. Most of the rural landowners moved to cities for jobs, and caused the borders to be sealed by xenophobic Moralite lawmakers. I disagreed with that policy; I felt everyone deserved to live where they chose to live.

And I carried a cargo of five people across the eastern part of New Mexico, Land of Enchantment, with a couple of armed homicidal maniacs tailing me. Some enchantment.

They dogged my moves all the way into the Texas panhandle. I headed for Amarillo, to see if I could get lost in traffic. Most city cops hated the border blues because of the high fatality rate in their pursuits. Rockets took out bystanders, buildings, bridges, etc.

Amarillo contained threads of linked concrete slabs ribboning the city. I encountered normal evening traffic, with glide vehicles like *Sheena* blending unevenly with older ground-friction cars. I felt trapped in the slow-moving concrete channels, waiting impatiently for going-home traffic to get off at their various exits. I scanned the readouts to check on my precious cargo, hoping the border blues were stuck far behind. I made it to the northbound interstate.

Some joker pulled up beside me in an off-road Volvo turbolift. He signed to me that he wanted to race. Just a kid, looking for some action. I shook my head, signing that I was working. He raised a high-fiver and took off.

I almost had a damn cardiac when a landshark whipped past me. They went after the racer. He burned his illegal thrusters, happy to have a chase. Both vehicles vanished into the evening gloom.

I felt better as darkness approached. I reached the flatlands in 35 minutes, good timing from the city's edge during rush hour. Things did not improve from then on.

I saw what I thought was an accident ahead of me. Skirting the scene, I scanned it with video cams on telephoto. I hopped onto the desert, then replayed the vid.

Gagging suddenly, I realized what had happened.

They'd thought it was me, making a run for it. On my screen, the mangled remains of the racer's rig gave silent evidence of an explosive rocket. Wreckage glowed with greenish fire. Bathed in floodlights, the crash had an eerie luminescence. Red and yellow strobes lanced through the smoke. I felt sick. My teeth ached from grinding them together.

I saw flashing lights again, behind me. They figured out that it

wasn't me they splattered, since the body count was too low. What made them do this? Protecting America?

Thinking of the people I had to save from this kind of justice, I lit the burners and didn't wait for them to catch up. The racer had bought me minutes, but only a few.

*Sheena* burned across the flatland. I keyed the targeting computer and armed the defensive spikers. I knew I was no longer dealing with nice guys.

People depended on me. A mother and kids. I couldn't think of them as cargo anymore.

Shutting down my headlights, I activated the infrared. The visor slid down over my eyes. I checked the target screen. They hadn't caught up with me yet.

*Sheena* headed toward the Oklahoma panhandle at such a clip that I couldn't look at the ground. I watched my screens, my fingers on the firing trigger.

I couldn't lose them. They had powered wings with jet assist. Their shadowshape rose high and slashed over the mesa at us. The screen registered two rockets fired simultaneously. I sent off two intercepting vipers. They exploded far behind us.

I accelerated to 250 KPH, trying to spread the distance between us. They paced me, but couldn't close the gap.

A fireball lifted my starboard nose. I hit the canopy with my helmet. I jerked the control glove to port. Lifting fast with a rush of fans, we rode over another explosion that sent rock shards dancing against the silver hull.

The landscape rushed by in a greenish blur. I saw the darker forms of purple thunderheads against the luminous green of my artificial vision. I chased the weather front, hoping to lose them in a storm.

Lightning sizzled above me. Booming thunder followed, weaving a pattern of mismatched light and sound. I hit a rain wall, jolting *Sheena* like an ocean wave. I leveled her and keyed the water exhaust system.

The rain slowed me down, but it did the same for the landshark. I

knew of no place to hide in the barren Oklahoma panhandle. They had me if I hesitated a moment. I scanned the maps, looking for some natural cover. No luck.

I headed into a long, low canyon and hugged the western wall. A red river of rain washed down the gully, looking like the bloody streams of hell. I stayed on a north-by-northeast heading. The mapscan showed a sudden drop in elevation, and a river, probably the Cimarron, 60 kilometers ahead. The terrain flattened out as I emerged from the ditch.

Nothing showed on the screens.

The rain let up some. It continued to splash the windshield canopy with uneven strokes.

The rain quit as I reached the plateau. Nothing for cover but barren grassland, scrubby trees and recently filled streams. We'd cross the border of Kansas in twenty minutes at the speed we were going. My fuel registered lower than anticipated because of the extended high-speed chase. I couldn't spot the landshark on the screen, so I made a visual scan. Damned bastards were flying above my surface radar less than a kilometer distant. I didn't know they could get that high, but these blues were desperate for my ass.

They dove at me with rapid-fire 8mm guns tattooing *Sheena's* armor plate. I almost grounded her, but snatched her back over some black treetops for another dive to the clay. Whistling slugs and sparks flew as she took fire. I moved too fast to worry about being hit.

I banked her hard to port. Right under their noses, where they least expected us to be.

They pulled away. I bounced their airflow, causing them to wobble. I caught them off-guard, but they stabilized. We were blown out of their way, aft of them.

I cut to starboard and ran straight north. The exhaust blew up steam-clouds from the wet prairie grass.

*Sheena* jammed a full-tilt boogie.

They had used heatseekers on the racer. I keyed the automatic

drones to draw them away. The landshark matched my speed, but couldn't gain. They needed to back off to fire the rockets. I matched their moves.

I shut off the infrared. The Moon rising ahead of me in the east lit the landscape with a cold blue light.

Zooming across flattened hills at 170 KPH, the blues crept up slowly on my port flank, silent as a granite grave marker. They were a kilometer distant, and paced me evenly.

They slowed suddenly. My screen showed the red trace of spikers released from their shrouds. I reached for the defensive drone switch.

I don't remember hitting it.

*Sheena* flew over a short bluff, smashed through some scraggly trees and pancaked into the Cimarron River. We submerged in two meters of water, bounced off the muddy bottom, and lid into a stretch of silt on the opposite bank. *Sheena's* stern lay in the cool red water, wrapped in moonlit steam clouds.

I watched the screen, the cabin webbing trapping me like a black widow's mate. The spikers had exploded beyond us, their target suddenly missing. My defense drones streaked toward the only target in range.

Their explosion lit up the dark southern sky like a second sunset.

I sat there, helpless, crying and shaking because a woman I never met burst into flame on the deserted prairie, and with her partner she was gone like red dust.

I got my cargo to Chicago-Detroit, alive, even went to see them when they came out of cold storage. One of my friends thanked me for making it back. He won a pool based on my expected demise. World Freedom had sold my flight plan to the border blues. Seems that I was carrying the Brazilian president and her children, who were escaping from the Neo-fascist regime. The Moralite lawmakers had an economic interest in her not making it

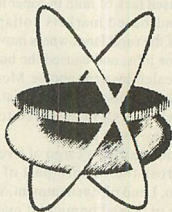
I think it's time for me to find a new employer. ■

## OUR ARTISTS

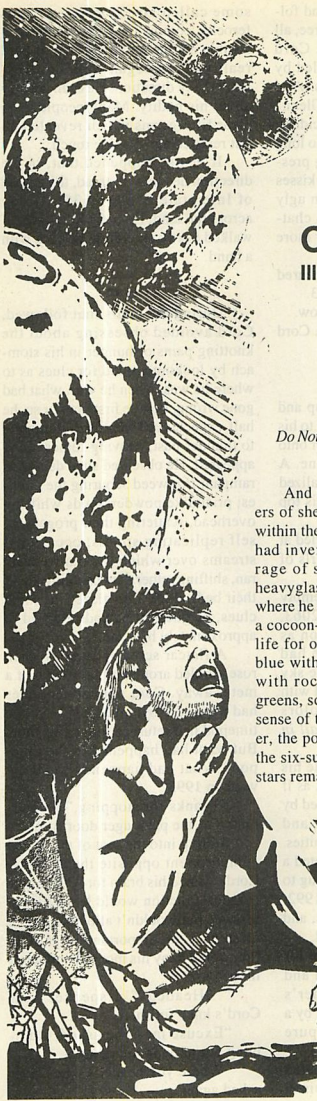
**David Lee Anderson**, our cover artist, also contributed the b&w illustrations for his story, "Slippin' the Blues." David is well known not only in his native Oklahoma City, but throughout the world of science fiction. We are pleased to find this rare occasion on which he both painted and wrote. He has illustrated many, many books and stories, including *L. Ron Hubbard Presents Writers of the Future*.

**Kandis Elliot** is a biological illustrator for the University of Wisconsin. Her art and stories may be found in *Asimov's*, *Science Fiction Age*, *Elery Queen*, and, of course, *Tomorrow*. **Kelly Faltermayer** was born Salvador Frank Bermúdez in El Salvador. He moved to the U.S. at the age of 15, and is a graduate of the High School for Performing and Visual Arts in Houston, TX. He first came to public notice in **David J. Grilla**, after an absence of some months, returns to our pages with some extraordinary work. **Bob Hobbs** lives in Rhode Island, where he is steadily advancing in his craft. We are very proud to publish his work. He, also, is a former winner of *L. Ron Hubbard's Illustrators of The Future* contest. **Judith Holman** lives in New Jersey. She has an MFA, but refuses to give details. She chucked all that to illustrate science fiction. Her many prestigious shows continue to add to her luster.

**Margaret Ballif Simon** has served two terms as president of the Small Press Writers/Artists Organization, and has won both the Best Artist and Best Writer /Comic Artist of the SPWAO Awards. **Darla Tagrin** has won SF illustration awards nationwide. Her B&W illustrations are found, among others, in the Carol Nelson Douglas books from Tor.







# THE RECURSIVE MAN

Christopher McKitterick

Illustrated by Kandis Elliot

*If at first you don't succeed, try, try again*

**R**age, rage  
against the dying  
of the light.

—Dylan Thomas

*Do Not Go Gentle Into That Good Night*

## UNHINGED

And time's barriers, its angry layers of shells, once more buffeted Cord within the timepod the woman he loved had invented. Again, he watched the rage of scenes flash past the small heavyglas porthole just above his face where he lay, dressed in a filtergarm, on a cocoon-like couch. Worlds flicked to life for only a moment, some purple-blue with streaks of white or chunked with rocky browns or choked with greens, some dull red. Cord made little sense of these planets. Mostly, however, the port showed starry black during the six-subjective-hour return trip. The stars remained still.

The approach-bell jingled. Time-buffeting increased to bone jarring levels. *Almost home*. A lopsided smile crinkled Cord's face; soon it became a grin that almost hurt. *Almost back with Glenn*. All the work, the mission that seemed the single most important thing in the universe only a month ago, faded before memories of the one woman in all the worlds of time able to soothe his irrepressible angry streak.

He remembered a day six months ago. He and Glenn had spent hours in her car, scouring the countryside in search of a pleasant spot to picnic. They parked near a stand of elm brush mixed with pine, ate lunch in the car, then pulled on their clearcaps and went outside. They spread out a blanket on the surgically bare ground and lay beside one another, listening to wind rattle the leaves and hush through the boughs. Cord remembered the soft feel of her lying long against him, her then-vivid eyes flashing unspoken words into his, her hands absently yet surely finding

and tracing his shape. Through the sparse branches, Cord watched clouds race across a rabid sky like emotion, hot and many-colored.

"I love..." she whispered, but her words were lost in the muffled rattling of an internal-combustion engine. The noise grew closer. Cord automatically tightened into a wad of anger. What kind of hateful criminal drove a burner those days? What kind of person would speed up The Fire? As every child learned in primary school, burning doesn't just pollute the air, it pollutes other people's lungs; a filtergarm's breather is not a perfect filter. This person was poisoning Glenn.

Cord's jaw clenched, fists balled. He sat up just as the motorcycle rattled into view, crashing from the brush a few meters away, trailing a whiff of smoke. An alcohol-burner, a few decades old. Its rider wore loose pants, black boots and no shirt, a fashion popular in about the same era as the burner. A freelifter.

Three or four fast steps and Cord would knock the rider from the machine, then kick the damned thing until it could burn no more. Cord's leg muscles tightened as he started to stand.

A cool, firm hand held his forearm. In that paused moment, Cord looked to see what was holding him back. Glenn. Her green eyes were so deep, so calm. They held a touch of humor, a sparkle of happiness, and something soft and soothing that relaxed every muscle wound up and ready to spring in Cord's body. Only she could do that. The edges of her lips rose almost into a smile, and the wafer-thin breathers at the sides of her mouth magnified the smile. She shook her head slightly. Her lips formed the word *No*.

Another motorcycle tore through the brush, then another. Three men, not just one. The last rider glanced to the side and saw Glenn and Cord. A faint smile touched red, blistered lips as he rode, then he faced away. Cord saw that their backs were also covered with boils. They would live only a few more months, if that long. Had it not been for Glenn, Cord would have

attacked. But then two more had followed. He would have faced three, all seemingly still quite strong. Cord would have gotten himself killed by men at the edge of their lives. And what would have happened to Glenn?

Now, remembering that incident, Cord knew a month had been too long to go without Glenn's calming presence, her cool hands and warm kisses and calming words. Beneath an ugly but joyful smile, Cord's teeth chattered as the pod trembled ever more ferociously.

As suddenly as he had appeared in 1992, he materialized in 2063.

But the timepod didn't follow.

Screaming and disoriented, Cord fell unhinged to Earth.

#### LOST

Upon locating a sense of up and down, Cord immediately sprang to his feet. He had fallen almost a meter onto his back. His clothes were gone. A sharp pain pierced him as he realized the photo of Glenn he had in his top pocket was also gone.

"What happened?" he howled at sparse, swaying pines and swirls of dust like parched tornadoes.

This was an open place, an empty place. A river ran nearby. In 2063, spots like this were as common as forests had once been, which had grown on the same ground. The sky was a familiar pale gray, riddled with sweeping clouds whose colors spanned the spectrum. *Did I fail in 1992?*

Frustration mounted. Inside his tall, thin frame, Cord's guts felt as if they were expanding, as if touched by acid. He shook, increasingly, and finally produced a string of obscenities. Failure, after so long and dedicated a process, after so much work trying to expand the minds of idiots in 1992, detailing their specific mistakes, and after believing he had succeeded...

A swirling soil storm swept his naked skin. The air was warm and thick and smelled like a welder's torch, torturing nostrils cleansed by a month in 1992's relatively pure atmosphere.

"What happened?" he repeated softly to the whistling slow poison

some called air. Storing away his ferocity, coming to grips with the irresistible and undeniable force of hard reality, Cord began walking. Anywhere, any direction. He didn't worry about his nudity. Many people wore clear filtergarms which revealed all but resisted any outside touch.

It just so happened that, in the direction he chose to tread, the corpse of Interstate Highway 35 still lay across the land. He hung his head and walked north, shielding his face with a hand.

#### CLUES

During the hours that followed, Cord avoided obsessing about the knotting pains of hunger in his stomach by looking around for clues as to where he was, when he was, what had gone wrong. For the first hour or so, he half-expected a TwenCen automobile to thunder past, heaving fumes; none appeared. He observed such details as rampant razzweed scouring the ditches; prismlike powderclouds whiffing overhead, scattering their progeny of self replicating spores; occasional streams over which the old freeway ran, shifting rather than babbling along their beds, thick with glaze...by these clues, he guessed he had returned to approximately his time.

A flatcar screamed past. It then rose, circled around and settled half a meter away. Cord noticed its plates had expired November 2063. So the timepod had returned him to his time. But what had happened to the timepod? What had happened to all his work in 1992?

"Thanks for stopping," he murmured as the passenger door rose.

Sliding into the seat of the sealed compartment opposite the driver's, Cord strained his brain for what law of paradox function would leave him in his time but wouldn't allow for a time machine. More important, what function would deny his month's influence in the past?

"...Headed?" a speaker near Cord's knee finished.

"Excuse me?" he asked, stumbling out of hypnotic thought.

"Where you headed?" the driver asked again.



"Minneapolis," Cord said. Through the double shells of transparent polymer separating them, Cord saw the driver was a young woman dressed in a contemporary red and green, form-fitting filtergarm; it slid into shiny plastic boots and gloves and fit smoothly into a clearcap that wrapped her hairless head in osmo rubber. The entire outfit allowed only oxygen in and organic byproduct gases out. Her skin was pocky and pale. She stared at him, at his unprotectedness, at his hairy, uncovered head.

"You a freelifter?" she asked. Without waiting for an answer, she added, "I didn't know there were any more freelifers." She turned her eyes forward, depressed a button that lowered Cord's door, then yanked the drive lever. The car lunged into the air with a piercing scream of electric motors and antigrav rotors.

#### CLOSER

"Thanks," he said, stepping out of the flatcar onto the roof of the University of Minnesota's Penrod Center.

"Vital day," the girl chirped. It was the first thing she had said since picking him up. The car door closed and she launched, once more so violently that Cord estimated she would tear her car apart within the month. But she probably knew that. Cord's insides tightened more. *So good to be home.*

He trudged to the airlock and punched his ID number on the worn keypad set into its slick outer wall. The first wave of excitement struck him when his ID was accepted, allowing him into the seal and then, when the outer door snapped shut, into the purified air of the building.

#### ENLIGHTENMENT I

"Pegado! Good," a man's voice called out from behind Cord in the dim, dusty hallway. "I was looking for you all afternoon." Cord turned and saw one of his colleagues, Doctor Grube. Grube did his best to ignore the nudity, looking at papers in his hand rather than at the bare man before him.

"I need your signature on the UPF grant, Pegado," Grube said. "Peterson says we actually have a chance this

year, pure up. Maybe I'll be able to repair that old...."

Cord's mind wandered: He had signed the '63 UPF grant papers in January—it was, of course, denied. January. He wasn't supposed to return until the following December.

"Damn it to dust!" Cord growled, staring at the papers now in his hands, barely restraining himself from crumpling them into a wad.

"What's wrong?" the Applied Physics Department's assistant chair asked, staring into Cord's eyes.

"Huh? Oh." Cord looked at the face of this familiar man and began to laugh, a harsh sound borne of endless frustration and painful insight.

"The damned thing doesn't exist yet!" he blabbered at an uncomprehending face. "Hah! I suppose it disintegrated in the paradox-field...." What he didn't continue to say was *...that was set up when Glenn began conceiving of the timepod....*

As fast as he could, Cord ran along the hall, down three flights of stairs and emerged on the level of Glenn's office.

#### PORTAL

At her door, he paused. The light was on inside. Although Cord and Glenn had once been lovers, they were still only acquaintances to her, now.

Cord remembered the first time he had asked Glenn out, two months from now. Cord had stood before her door, like this, holding a real cut flower in his hands behind his back. He had knocked, and when Glenn told him to enter, he had slid inside with a tight grin and stood awkwardly as feelings boiled inside, until finally he had simply fallen to one knee, extended the daisy and asked Glenn to dinner. She had smiled back, and her eyes had told him *Yes* before her lips moved. The relationship had grown ever since, tying their work and personal lives as he helped her with her project, until the day he left for 1992.

Though she had seen him unclothed many times, now he felt more naked than ever; nudity in 2063 was judged more by lack of protection than revealed flesh. And they were still just colleagues.

Cord's arms trembled to throw open the door and seize Glenn, to wrap her in the deferred passion of a month gone by. His heart pounded and adrenal glands pumped. His palms grew sweaty; skin began to tingle. He no longer noticed hunger nor thirst. All he thought of was how to approach the woman he loved with the power of a 30-year-life forged in anger, betrayal, loneliness and scholarship—a power she had wrapped in a chrysalis of love, from which he had emerged refreshed and redirected....

How would he approach a stranger for whom he felt such deep and abiding love and longing? How would he make sure that he didn't accidentally scare her away or draw her into an unstable union?

And how would he tell her that the project they were about to embark upon, that the single most important project undertaken by the race, had been a failure?

Gritting his teeth, shaking himself as free of desire as possible, Cord rapped thrice on the door.

"Come in," Glenn called from within. Cord wiped a hand across beads of sweat on his forehead. He entered.

"Nice outfit, Cord," she said, looking over the frametops of a set of interactive LCD monitors. Her eyes, encircled by reading glasses, were green, hair stubbly brown, skin healthy pink, face smooth and oval. She wore no clearcap in the relatively pure air inside the building. Her right hand held a stylus and her lips wore a familiar yet painfully distant smile. "You need a haircut."

"Hello, Glenn," Cord stammered. His stomach writhed in embarrassment at the adolescent chemistry twisting him up inside.

"What can I do for you?" she asked. Cord's mind ran wild with responses to that question. He stemmed a memory of the two of them, together, on that very stool....

"Ah, I just wanted to see how you're coming along on your chronolog project." Her eyes opened to their fullest, a reaction reserved only for when her intellect was most stimulated.



"I didn't know you were aware of that," she said. Her brows drew together, lovely dark arches. "Did I tell you, or was it Peterson?"

"Peterson," Cord improvised, covering his misstatement. Glenn's face relaxed. She set down the stylus, removed the glasses and stretched.

"It's just as well, you know, I guess. I could use another good mind to help me get past a couple stumbling-blocks."

"Hungry?" Cord asked, noting the fatigue in her posture and the emptiness in his own body. How long had it been since last he ate? Drank? Glenn's eyebrows rose a bit, as did the edges of her lips.

"Sure," she answered. "I missed lunch today. I haven't gotten anywhere on my work since this morning, anyway. Law of diminishing returns." Cord's chuckle sounded more easy than he expected. Then he felt cold inside.

"Ah, I just need to drop by my office first," he said, pierced by a stab of realization: This was January 2063. He already lived in January 2063 before he returned. If the paradox-field set up by his return destroyed the timepod, what did it do to him, or the him who was already here?

He barely heard her agree to meet at the Departmental office in ten minutes—"If you get dressed"—as he ran to his office.

#### THE SEARCH FOR ANOTHER CORD

The door was open, light on. Nothing unusual in that. Thankfully, a second Cord Pegado did not greet him. Computer and interactives were powered up. Not terribly unusual. Exam chips lay haphazardly across the desk. Not smart—but also, he admitted, not the first time he had left tests lying out for anyone to grab and copy—though, to his knowledge, none of his students had ever done so. A not-fully-clean filtergarm lay across his chair.

Now that was unusual. Not the fact that it was dirty, but that it was there at all, and how it was arranged: There is an order to donning a filtergarm. First, the top is pulled tight over the body and arms, expanding it from infant-size to one-size-fits all; next, the

bottoms are pulled up and sealed over the top; finally, gloves and boots and clearcap are sealed over the main body. Each seal is a ridge-groove that snaps together when properly aligned. The unit allows its wearer's skin to breathe and sweat through a protective exoskeleton, like an insect's, while a pair of low-density osmo-rubber breathers filter enough air for its wearer to jog for brief periods. The whole unit is washable.

Not only was it highly unlikely that someone would go through all the trouble of laying out his filtergarm in such a fashion, sealing all the joints perfectly, but even if he remained at the University overnight, as he often did, he always kept his clothes at home.

Still unsatisfied, he donned the abandoned filtergarm and headed to the Departmental office. Glenn hadn't arrived yet.

"Have I been in here during the past ten minutes?" he asked one of the secretaries. The young man looked up, a grin teasing painted lips. His skin was very pale. *Anemia? Clackets? Lungrot?* Cord remembered wondering the same things about this boy time and again.

"I don't know, Doctor Pegado; have you been in here in the past ten minutes?"

"Brian, I'm not kidding around," Cord pushed, frustrated. "Just answer me." The youth shrugged thin shoulders.

"All I know is that you're supposed to be in lecture right now." Cord snapped his attention to the wall clock, saw it was 3:27 p.m., and ran to the classroom where the current Cord Pegado was supposed to be lecturing. Upon opening the door, he half-expected to see his other self attempting to convey polyphysical concepts of gravity-wells to a sickly bunch of graduate students beneath flickering fluorescent lights.

Instead, he saw a class in chaos. The First Law of Graduate Student Motion states that, even if a teacher is 27 minutes late for lecture, the student body remains in unstable but unassailable stasis. Six pair of vacant eyes turned his way.

"My secretary was supposed to tell you class is dismissed today," Cord said. The students began gathering notebooks and rising slowly. As he headed back for his rendezvous with Glenn, his insides relaxed with the conviction that he wouldn't be running into a second copy of himself.

#### LOST LUNCH

Glenn was a few minutes late meeting Cord, for which he was grateful since he'd been late as well. They talked on innocuous subjects as they strolled downstairs toward the cafeteria: various doctoral candidates' potentials, the unweather forecast for the next few days, famine challenges in the newly-formed African country of Begierig....

He offered to buy lunch but was refused; in 2063, one does not buy food for others except relatives or close friends. So they ate in awkward silence for a few minutes until Glenn asked Cord what he knew about her project.

"Ah," he began, trying to remember only the beginnings of her work. "You're attempting to set up a powerfield that will physically measure such small increments of time that it'll actually be able to measure backward through timeshells."

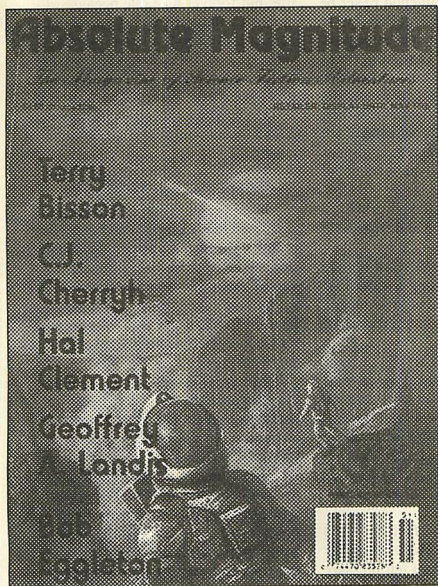
She looked away from him, blinking a few times. How Cord longed to reach out and caress that healthy skin.

"Timeshells," she mused. "I like that." She withdrew a notepad from her carryall, scribbled a few notes, saved them into the pad's microchip and put it back. "Shells," she repeated, her eyebrows arched, staring at something invisible just beyond the cafeteria ceiling. Again, she withdrew the notepad and wrote, this time for much longer.

Cord calmed his need for conversation with her, sure in the knowledge that the key word he had used would send her closer to building the timepod, sure that the inspiration he had offered would make him more attractive to her. The most important thing she had ever done, the thing toward which she had worked for years, was the chronolog, and he



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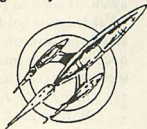
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wasn't about to steal the fire from her process of discovery by telling too much. Neither would he try to stop her when she felt she was mounting an important step toward epiphany.

He finished chewing a plateful of alien-tasting food, seasoned so heavily as to taste foul—a necessity when most foods are the bland products of vat farms. And he watched the workings of the mind of the woman who moved him.

Finally, she looked up.

"I'm sorry, Cord," she said, "but I have to get up to my office and use my interactives; this pad can't run the programs I need. Thanks." She smiled. "You've set me on a new direction. I owe you. Maybe I will let you buy me lunch sometime." She stood to leave.

"Wait," Cord snapped, tortured by the so-closeness of her and the almostness of this encounter, "don't go yet." He pushed himself to his feet. "I, ah, we—"

"Cord," Glenn interrupted, stern, "I really have to go. When inspiration hits, you have to go with it or you lose. You know better. We'll do this again when—"

"But, Glenn," he said, neck straining with each word, "you don't understand. I need to tell you about something." She glanced sideways at a colleague watching this little drama, then sighed.

"What is it?" she relented. "Please make it quick."

Cord's mind ran the corridors of possibility, nearly drawing open a file drawer of their relationship, or of their research together, or of his experience in 1992. Each document of memory seemed too intimate or too fantastic to believe in the current context. But he needed something to keep her near, something to bring her close to him so they would be united again, as soon as possible. He needed at least to hold her in his arms, smell the warmth of her neck, talk once more late into the nights about their dreams. He had no idea what to say. *Oh my God, I need you, Glenn.*

"Never mind," he mumbled. "I'm sorry."

"Maybe it wasn't such a good idea to do this," were her crushing words. Cord's world—if this could be called his, if he wasn't an alien among familiar faces—twirled and shuddered. Had he twisted things around so badly that he would never hold her again? Would the timepod never be created? Would their collaborative project tumble before it even began?

Could it be that this very moment of stupidity and impatience had cost 2063 and all its preceding years to remain on the path to their present, ill state? Had he, indeed, not only failed to convince the politicians in 1992, but was also the very root of the problem?

Had he destroyed the world?

His head whirled and froze with fear.

"Think gravity wells!" he blurted incoherently, reaching for the first thing that came to mind, that integral step in her full conceptualization of the chronolog.

"What?" Glenn asked, her face confused. Her head shook side to side slightly. "Cord, I'm working on time—not gravity—measurement," she stated coolly, her embarrassed eyes ducking curious glances from around the room. "Gravity's *your* field, remember?"

Cord flushed.

"Vital day," she finished, and then walked away. Beneath stares from other tables, Cord felt pressure build within him. He realized he was a fool.

#### VOLCANO

Time passed away. No other Cord Pegado interfered in this one's life. He tried not to imagine what had happened to the other *him* in this rerun of 2063. The only explanation he could come up with was that he was the same man, and since he had returned early, he had also vanished early.

Cord shaved his head, not so much for appearance's sake but for practicality: One cannot wear a clearcap over a head of hair.

So he strove to correct the horrible wrong he had performed against the purity and beauty of the relation-

ship he and Glenn should have had by striving to correct the horrible wrong he had performed against the world. He attempted to reproduce independently the work they had done together. His energy was concerted, directed more powerfully than ever in his life, but forever unstable because of mounting impatience. Why couldn't he just build the damned thing himself? He could then fix whatever he had done wrong in 1992, and come back at precisely the same time in 2063 to fix the wrongs he had done to Glenn. Why couldn't it all be done now?

He ran formulae through his interactives, animated field models, re-ran and re-animated. He tinkered with the kinds of boards and generators they had used to build the timepod. He used extra time on the University mainframe, setting its powerful theoretical engineer on the problem, feeding it all the details he could remember. His TAs regularly filled in for his lectures.

But it wasn't his idea he was working on. He hadn't been the one to conceive of the timepod, or its predecessor the chronolog. He was only the assistant, the inspiration. It was Glenn who held the key to saving not only the world, but their relationship-to-be. But if she was uninterested in a seemingly fumbling, frustrated, pushy addle-brain, she would never invent the timepod, and they could never save the world. And it would be his fault.

One day, under coercion from the chair, Cord finally went to lecture. He was particularly impatient, his anger restrained by a hair-trigger. With a distant, blindly striving mind, he asked the class a simple question, the answer to which he had essentially given only minutes prior.

No one responded. His attention returned to the present, to the situation at hand. He waited. No hands rose, though a few students coughed, one quite lung-wrackingly. Cord glanced at the clock. He waited ten seconds. Tick, tick...each passing second mounted like magma beneath a mountain about to erupt. Ten full seconds, no response.



"Answer me!" Only shocked looks. The coughing stopped. Silence. Were these the people Cord cared for so much that he had risked travelling back to 1992 to repair the wrongs perpetrated there? Were these the people he wanted to save? They didn't even seem alive. *Zombies*.

"What's wrong with you?" he raged, finally venting the pent-up time within him. "Don't you dare tell me you have addle-brain." He laughed once, hard. "You weak-gened, poor substitutes for graduate students! We give you the healthiest living conditions in the state, feed you the best food, offer the cleanest water. What do you do with it? How do you show your appreciation for these opportunities we present?" Words, devastating and slanderous words, hovered at his trembling lips. The students simply blinked at him, mouths hanging loosely on the hinges of jaws.

"When I was fourteen, my mother died of lungrot and my father had to enroll me in public school. I'd bet a month's salary that not a single one of you went to public school! But I fought my way through that filthy, stagnant mess; I lived for four years in a public dorm, and look at me! Put myself through nine years of college, published fifteen papers in the *UPF Review*, graduated cum laude. Do you think I pretended to addle-brain during boring lectures? No! I'm as healthy as you'll find, as clear-headed as a TwenCen." Finally, he let himself go. The volcano exploded.

"Here you are, empty-eyed and silent, gagging on your hollow chests. Wake up! Do something with yourselves! If you want to continue in this class, if you want the honor of continuing as grad students in this department at all, you'll offer me some worthwhile ideas." His hands shook at his sides. A few of the students glanced at their fellows wide-eyed.

"Now get out of here, all of you! And don't come back until you discover your purpose." They remained seated, caught between obeying this red-faced stranger that they only now truly noticed, running for their lives, or remaining seated out of terror.

"Get out!" Cord repeated. "Out!" He lowered his head onto his arms on the podium and allowed himself to melt into the emotional acuity borne of lucid sadness for the first time since that mind-opening night in Glenn's arms, which wouldn't happen as it should two months hence.

#### A KNOCK AT THE DOOR

Of the nine in that class, three never returned, one of whom was never seen on campus again. An official reprimand was placed in Cord's file.

But two by two, the rest of Cord's students came to his office and outlined research ideas of varying imagination, libations to appease an angry god. He quietly approved them all, embarrassed and strangely emptied of something vital that had not only caused him so much grief over the years, but had also spurred his work beyond the levels of mediocrity he would have attained otherwise.

A knock at his office door one late evening.

"What did you mean by gravity wells?" It was Glenn.

"Huh?" Cord breathed, stunned by her very appearance, a seraph wrapped in buzzing fluorescent light. She had come to him. All was not lost. His heart swelled, rattled against his ribs. A thousand answers came to him, but this time he would be cautious.

"Oh, ah...you can't have time travel without taking into consideration gravity wells."

"But I'm not working on time travel," Glenn said, her brows closing toward one another in irritation. Then they relaxed and rose. "Well, I guess I am, aren't I?"

"Sure you are," Cord said. A smile crept onto his face. "That's essentially what measuring time is all about—trapping moments in another moment." He stopped himself; that bait might almost be too big for her to swallow so soon. It took her three months, last time, before she told him that.

"But where does gravity come into play?" she asked. Cord's smile stretched wide—a display Duke Hitterton declared ugly back in 1992—creasing the skin around his mouth.

So he explained how timewaves and gravwaves are both elements of something larger, how one cannot function without the other. But he was careful to not go far beyond the research done to date; that is, to Glenn's present date.

Once more she walked away, eyes scanning the ceiling, fingers moving a tiny stylus across a notepad.

Cord's smile faded only slightly as she left him without another word.

#### A BRIEF TRIP

As the weeks wore down toward summer break, Glenn came to him more and more often. Always cautious, professionally pumping more information about gravity out of him, each question more and more specific and leading. Cord attempted to imagine what path she was following, tried to re-create the evolution of her idea. He recorded and saved every question she asked and every answer he supplied, studying these to simulate her thought process.

Gradually, several of his students fell ill or dropped out of school for unspecified reasons, as was to be expected. He gained more time to work on this private project.

Once in a while, Cord asked Glenn questions in an attempt to verify one theoretical direction or another. She answered, but warned only slightly. By this time last time he lived in 2063, they were lovers, racing through the countryside in her Chevy flatcar in search of still-beautiful places, occasionally finding one perhaps hundreds of miles distant, and enjoying a picnic beneath thin pine or oak branches. They were igniting one another's minds with the power of nearly-unfathomable concepts and occasional insights that blossomed to life in both their minds like roses in a desert. She was helping him learn how to control and utilize the anger that had grown to a living thing within him over the years, something almost more alive than himself. But, this time in 2063, none of this happened.

He ached. That vital and dangerous thing inside him began to breathe again. His mind grew alternately blurred with frustration and lucid



with insight. No matter how ferociously he tried, he could not reproduce the work Glenn had done. Yet he had helped build the thing! This time, he would study the parts she designed.

Glenn's smile warmed his office's entryway one afternoon in June. Cord nearly knocked his interactivities over as he jumped out of his chair to follow her.

"I thought I'd show you this since you helped create it," she said, facing forward, away from him as they entered a basement lab. It was one of the last working high-energy labs in Penrod Center, built in 2039 with a grant from Earl Penrod, inventor of the antigrav rotor, to promote top-plane physics research. Two young research assistants stood near a wiring table, whispering to one another. The room was perfumed in solder and warm copper.

"Chronolog," Cord reverently whispered, staring down at the pancake-sized mass of electronics mounted atop a gravwave mirror. A pair of machined aluminum rings encircled the device, each etched with fine markings over which a herd of needlegauges rode. Three tiny, digital clocks were linked to the needlegauges and to the heart of the chronolog, and each was wired up to a different oscilloscope. These in turn measured the output of a single rad-box and printed their data on three sets of slowly-unfolding stacks of paper. The whole system was linked to the room's atomic clock via heavy cables. When Cord's attention returned to Glenn, he saw perplexity on her face that soon passed without comment.

"Right," she said. "Now watch. Notice, each of the 'scopes bears the exact same reading, which is gradually increasing in frequency. Here," she pointed to a microchip near each of the tiny clocks, "is an electronic recording of the data coming in from the 'scopes, with each microsecond labeled side-by-side with the data. I can access this information through here." She indicated a parallel port below the main mass of the chronolog.

"Now, not only is the event tracked through time with the onboard clocks, but it is also tracked by the big clock. The chips store the readings, plus the time as tracked by clocks both internal and external to the machine."

Cord's face twisted in an attempt to synthesize everything she had just said so quickly with what he knew about the chronolog from before.

"Just watch," Glenn said, adjusting a pair of camcorders nearby. Her right hand flicked a switch wired beside the output port.

The chronolog was suddenly on the other side of the table, a meter away, skittering sideways and losing parts as it bounced a few centimeters to the tabletop, its antigrav rotor whining down through the pitches toward silence. All links to the oscilloscopes, printers and atomic clock were cleanly severed at a point roughly one centimeter beyond the outer aluminum ring. Those wires fell limply to the gray tile floor.

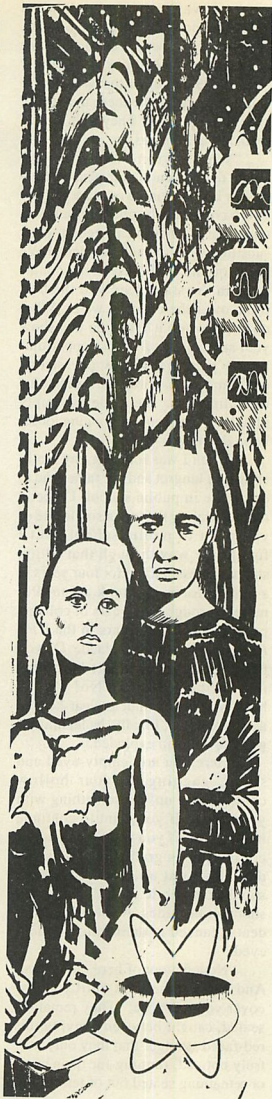
"It returned!" Cord said, filled with joy and enlightenment. *So maybe I have reason to hope! Maybe next time my trip will be successful!*

Glenn spun on one heel to face Cord, her cheeks glowing and brows arched high above her eyes. She smiled broadly and waited for Cord's reaction. He was truly more excited than when he had watched this performance last time: Cord's whole world now depended upon Glenn's progress. He smiled his ugliest, happiest smile. They held each other's eyes for a moment. Something powerful and urgent stirred within him. Glenn looked away, at the chronolog that the graduate assistants were already plugging into a computer.

"We set the control rings to measure a roughly two-second time-differential," Glenn stated, her voice wavering excitedly. "Let's watch the results."

All four witnesses gathered around an old photon-ray monitor, watching columns of numbers roll faster than the eye could read. Cord had no idea what he was seeing. Glenn interpreted:

"There it is." She pointed, and one of the assistants tapped at an





input-pad. "That's initiation." The numbers stopped rolling, reversed, then stopped again at a point when the long rows of decimals leapt from one smooth progression to another.

"See?" Glenn said. "Right there, the onboard clock readings indicate a 2.04 second time-differential as compared to the atomic clock readings. And if we move 2.04 seconds along the graph," she fingered the pad, "there, we see this column of time readings cut off." She turned a flushed face back toward Cord, only an arm's reach away.

"That's when the chronolog cut itself free from external links," she finished, more quietly, taking a step back and composing herself.

"Amazing," Cord breathed, in awe. "I can't even begin to imagine the applications." The last was intended as a spur.

"Hank, Erin," Glenn said to the assistants, "repair the device and reset everything. Don't forget to file the new data along with the tapes, separate from the last trials."

She faced Cord again, the model of a researcher: calm, confident. Did she seem a bit tired, pale? Cord flushed that idea from his mind. *Not yet, please not yet.*

"Applications, yes," she mused, eyes inspecting the smudged ceiling. "We'll need to do a lot of testing first, then—"

"And I suppose you'll need to build a timepod," Cord prompted, grinning ferociously inside but only mildly outside.

"Timepod?" she repeated. "Exactly, a device to carry more instruments. Perhaps...."

Closer. They were closer to solving some problems. Cord was closer to returning to the Glenn he loved, who loved him back.

### THE FIRE GROWS

More time passed. Too much time, Cord thought. Already August, and Glenn was still testing miniature timepods. The rats weren't harmed after their trips. There was only one failure, when the power supply unit failed to join an intermediate-model timepod into the past, which timepod

was never seen again; perplexingly for Glenn, only its rat returned/remaining. Cord noted that the power supply of his timepod would need backup.

Incidentally, a cough developed in Cord's chest. He dared not venture outside the building's walls during the sizzling days, even in a fresh filter-garm; the skies had begun to degrade faster. Cord raged at his weakness, although it was quite normal for a man his age to grow sick. Few lived beyond 40 in the year 2063. Nevertheless, it agitated an already volatile man. He had now gone three-quarters of a year without a single touch from Glenn, without a single romantic word. Worse, she was already beginning to fade, to sink toward that paleness from which no one recovers, and he, too, was already succumbing to the inescapable legacy of the Nineteenth and Twentieth Centuries. It nearly drove him mad.

Luckily, the new chair who replaced the ailing Peterson ordered Cord to take a sabbatical; no one had signed up for his classes at preregistration. On a night so windy he could hear sand scouring the wall outside his office, on the night of the day that the world was notified of just how close it was to curtain's close, Cord went to see Glenn.

She was in the basement lab again. One of her assistants stood with her, a different boy. They were fiddling with a metal cage, soldering wires from it onto a larger version of the first chronolog.

"Hello, Glenn," Cord said. "How are things coming?" She looked up at him. *My God, is it already that late?* Her eyes were sunken in gray pockets. Yet she smiled.

"Fine, I guess. We're going to send another—"

"Did you read the paper today?" Cord asked. Glenn blinked. Even the assistant looked up. "The Fire is growing exponentially rather than algebraically."

The young assistant fell into a fit of coughing. Glenn's smile sagged. It hurt, oh how it hurt, but Cord had to drop this key, had to alert her that time was running out. And the next key he would drop would be one that focused

her toward using her lung in the hope that they could actually do something.

"The Fire," Glenn repeated, absently. Her eyes rolled toward the ceiling. The pain expressed in those fading green eyes swallowed him whole, stoked the flames in his guts. He joined the boy in lung-fits for a handful of seconds, only cutting them short by force of will, holding his breath until his face burned. During those blurry, red seconds, he imagined the swelling reaction-cloud that had first engulfed the one pure place left in the world, Antarctica, then had greedily begun to slow-burn its way north. Today, The Fire had reached the first population centers in Australia and South America. Though it had taken decades for it to reach that far, the newspaper declared in big, bold letters that The Fire would reach the U.S. and Europe by New Year's, gulping up all available oxygen and replacing it with reaction byproducts like ammonia, methane, acetylene, until Earth's atmosphere became a poor imitation of a gas giant's.

Glenn's eyes fell back to Cord. She looked weak, helpless. She didn't even smell the same; now his sweet Glenn had the sour reek of a dying old lady. He couldn't resist what he did next.

In a sweeping gesture, his face full of the cleansing pain of love and loss, Cord wrapped his arms around her. He pulled her close, oh so close, and held her against him until she put her arms around him, as well. This response tightened his arms around her until he felt he would burst into tears of boundless joy, and then she pulled back.

Terrified, Cord stood motionless. His face froze. His insides gurgled. The assistant left the room, gasping shallow breaths, leaning against whatever was nearest—monitor, atomic clock, wall, computer bank. Glenn's words finally came loose:

"Well, then, we'd better get serious." Cord raised his eyes to hers, hoping to find a mirror, but saw only the calm professional again.

*Who stole my Glenn?* a voice screamed in Cord's skull. He couldn't



accept the creeping knowledge that it was he who had.

#### THE WORLD GONE MAD

Three weeks later, in early September, they began constructing a full-scale timepod at Cord's irrepressible insistence. It wasn't so much that Glenn agreed it must be built that they struck forward, and especially not because she held great love for him, but because he maintained the spark of life while hers ebbed.

There were no more graduate assistants to be had. Half the Department, and graduate school in general, fled in a gradual wave toward *carpe diem* existence. In the ever-expanding newspaper, Cord read countless tales about accidents, looting, robberies, murders; but also about acts of mindless heroism: An old man gives his life digging a trapped boy out from under a toppled storefront, a young woman gives her life pulling a drowning man out of a river.... It sickened and horrified him as it had last time; doubly so. He grew ever more ill.

By late October Glenn could no longer work. Though she refused to go to a clinic and recuperate, Cord was able to keep her resting by luring the one remaining building janitor into service, like last time. His name was Gary, and he thought it infinitely better to fill his last days with productivity rather than "damn idiocy," as he characterized the general population's behavior. Glenn managed things from a bed in the lab while Cord and Gary finished assembling, soldering and welding the timepod.

Painfully, the timepod failed on its first trial, just as the prototype had in the other 2063; it returned in several thousand pieces. They had to rebuild it, updating the fuse system according to detailed specifications Glenn laid out on a flowchart. Cord memorized her charts and began to understand.

More weeks passed. It warmed toward late November. The world went mad. The lab operated on power provided by a solar array sixteen stories above and generators spun by incessant, hot wind. Glenn grew so sick she was no longer of any help, no

longer even coherent—*Just like last time, damn God!* But she refused to be taken away to someplace more comfortable when Gary offered. Soon, reading the paper that was becoming more of an irregular newsletter, Gary agreed it was best none of them leave the concrete and steel security of Penrod Center. The only way Cord could concentrate was by ignoring the insanity outside and imagining a healthier Glenn inside.

*And she will be healthy!* he declared again and again, fuming and sometimes shouting it out loud at empty halls and echoes of himself. His anger multiplied whenever his own illness reared strong.

By December, the food stores in the cafeteria had nearly run out, Glenn was in an endless drowse, and Gary's cough grew ever more irritating. Just like last time, Cord's mind began to scatter incoherent for long stretches of time, maddening him still further. If only she weren't so ill, if only the ragged trip weren't so likely to kill her, Cord would have built a timepod for two. But what if he took her along, and she died, and he returned to a 2063 where Glenn did not exist? He didn't dare, though he entertained the fantasy often enough, once going so far as to sketch the design.

Cord and Gary worked for days until they sweated in the heat and felt chilled by their illness, then fell to their cots that were now nearby in the lab.

And then it was completed.

#### 2063:2063

"Is it safe?" Gary asked Cord, who merely smiled inwardly at the near-serpentine of these last weeks. If Cord carefully spoke exactly the same things, if he behaved exactly as before, it was like acting in a well-rehearsed play. Sometimes, when depression threatened to tear him apart, Cord reveled in the play-acting, allowing himself to race through empty, dusty halls exactly as before, screaming with the full force of his lungs until they gave way to waves of coughing. Then he would collapse on the warm floor of some unlit anonymous hall and weep until he slept and

woke again, then return to the lab where Glenn lay dying as time stretched closer to its end.

This was the day he had left last time. He was going to duplicate that departure, though things had progressed differently, wrongly, until the very end. Would the timepod leave him out of phase amid omnipotent timewaves? Would it return him to 2063 as a mass of fractured cells?

*Of course not,* he declared to himself. This timepod, armed with dual power sources, had functioned perfectly twice, once on a one-year trip and once on a decade trip. Both times the rats aboard returned, confused but unharmed. But, unbearably, those were the same results as before.

"I have to go, Gary," Cord answered. "Don't argue with me. Someone has to." Gary shook his head, grinning. He had bad teeth and oddly-placed patches of brown hair on his scalp.

Cord crossed the room to where Glenn lay, allowed himself to bend down and press his chest delicately against hers, kissed her cheek, then returned to the timepod. Gary eyed him questioningly but said nothing.

Cord donned a fresh filtergarm. The two men nodded silently to one another. Cord climbed inside, sealing himself in layers of foam. Gary closed the lid and Cord locked it from inside, then adjusted a series of settings on the improvised dashboard. He watched Gary step back, waiting for the machine to reappear microseconds later a meter to one side, as it had the previous two tests. Last, Cord depressed an unmarked trigger that knocked the world out from under him, that unlocked the worlds.

#### GRAND ENTRANCE

Time's angry layers of shells once more buffeted Cord within the timepod the woman he loved had invented. Again, he watched the rage of scenes flash past the small heavy-glass porthole just above his face where he lay in a clean filtergarm on a cocoon-like couch. Worlds flicked to life only for a moment outside; unguessable alien planets or various versions of Earth, he still didn't know.



The timepod shuddered and twisted its way through timewaves even more unmanageably than when a tugboat remains afloat during a deep ocean storm, waves rising high above and crashing down upon the hull. Cord wondered often but briefly whether or not this timepod was as sound as the last, considering it was conceived of and designed under slightly different conditions. During the thousands of seconds that passed during transition, he wondered not infrequently whether Glenn was still alive—*would be* still alive when he returned. He imagined her lying on her cot in that filthy, spartan lab, dying slowly while the whole world outside destroyed itself rampagingly fast.

And his rage grew. It became a palpable thing, struggling to get out. All this suffering, all 2063's and Glenn's and his suffering, was set into motion by the very people he would be visiting in only a few moments.

And then the timepod fell onto a great discussion table surrounded by dozens of dignitaries and hordes of reporters from all around the 1992 world.

He arrived not generally in 1992, but in 1992's South America—as before. By measuring the position of Earth in its gravitationally produced timewave at any particular moment, Glenn's computer had been able to program the pod to arrive at virtually any spot on the past Earth simply by allowing for the planet's rotation and

orbital motion. The most visual location, and the most powerful moment for their message, was the World Environmental Conference in Rio de Janeiro, Brazil, South America, 1992.

Once again, the pod crashed rather spectacularly onto the table, smashed it and fell through. The anti-grav rotor spun hysterically for nearly a minute, about as long as it took Cord to escape from the confines of the machine.

He watched the standing crowd watch him, then fired a hint of a smile at them: Some stood stoically, some ran terrifiedly from the room, some expressed interest. *Duke Hitherton*, was one; the reporter from Miami was one of the interested group.

Cord unsealed and removed his clearcap, then took a deep draw of pure air. Naturally, he collapsed into a fit of coughing.

## 1992

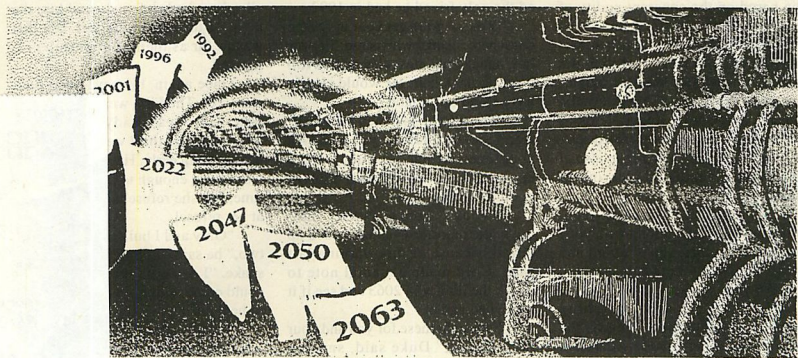
With such a loud and blatant arrival, there was very little controversy as to his being a visitor from another place. Debates raged on shows like *Donahue* and *Rush Limbaugh* as to whether he was from outer space, or the future as he claimed, or was merely a high-tech prankster. Cord had a few things in his favor:

First, the timepod itself. He explained that its main motive force was based around the anti-grav rotor. By demonstrating its somewhat stilt-

ed flying abilities, he established the authority of high technology. When pressed to allow researchers to disassemble and examine the coffin-shaped machine, Cord denied them, saying he would give them the plans necessary to invent the device just before he left—though he planned only to sketch the drive and not the chronolog. He explained that a hyper-charge drive uses electricity to power its rotor much more efficiently than an internal-combustion engine uses fuel. "So relax," he told a group of reporters at a press conference, "I promise to tell you how to build one before I leave if you give me your full attention."

This was a new tack. A risky one, but he had to try something different this time to make sure things changed before he returned. And this way would be safer. Last time, he had barely escaped into the future before a dark-suited team, sent by an indignant U.S.A., had nearly stolen the timepod. He never went anywhere without it, and U.N. forces maintained a full measure of security around him and his miraculous machine at all times.

The second thing in his favor was the onboard computer's data about 2063 and the specific factors that created *The Fire*, among other unnatural disasters. Glenn had downloaded historical, biological, chemical and physical data from the University's mainframe, choosing only those which led directly to the ecosystem's death, and





which she imagined to be irrefutable to the scientists of 1992. He revealed such avoidable, blatant nightmares as the Mideast Conflict of January 1992. And how Third World countries eventually struck the gold of Industrialization and modeled themselves after the early, ravenous, exploding America.

But he also diagrammed cumulative disasters such as the chain reaction which one day became The Fire, set off in the troposphere by excessive carbon monoxide, ground-level ozone and radionuclides excited and combined by excessive solar radiation burning through the stratospheric ozone layer.... And he showed formulae that chemists and atmospheric scientists of the Twenty-First Century had drawn, detailing the reaction.

There were digital images of various disasters, as well as stock shots. He even showed them the photo he carried of Glenn, sick but smiling on the cot in the lab beneath Penrod Center. If every detail were presented clearly and in precise progression, they could not deny the reality of the message or the messenger.

So Cord thought. But, even—or especially—in 1992, people were resistant.

Two weeks later, during a lecture at MIT, Cord exploded. Last time, he had not. Some imbecile from Boston asked what kinds of movies were made in 2063—if pornography had become mainstreamed, a question based on the apparent nudity of people depicted in stock photos of 2063 Minneapolis. Cord felt something inside him melt, and then the magma of frustration burst through.

"You filthy sluts! You burners, consumers!" Cord's finger shook as he pointed at the capacity crowd seated before him. He drew a response of blank faces, a muffled clearing of throats.

"You thieves!" he continued. "What in The Fire's wrong with you? I come with a message of doom and information that should help us avoid it, and what do you ask? 'Do we twiddle our privates watching porno?'" He coughed. Already, the illness was fading. He praised absent

gods that the sickness 2063 had given him was not a communicable one like clackets. It was just lungrot, a side effect of years of poisoning.

"Let me tell you something. Seventy-one years from now, the woman I love is dying because of what you're doing to her right now. If you don't act *immediately*, you'll kill her. And everyone else who might've lived after the year 2063. And, by God, if you don't take me seriously *immediately*, I'll come back earlier...maybe I'll kill James Watt for inventing the damned filthy steam engine! Maybe I'll bring a plague from the future just out of spite!"

He raged on for a few more minutes before stalking off the stage. A reporter from Miami by name of Duke Hitherton followed.

#### IT BEGINS AGAIN

Once again, Duke became Cord's disciple. He followed Cord everywhere, asking questions, taking notes, filing stories with the Associated Press that immediately appeared in papers all over the world. Nineteen-ninety-two began to take Cord Pega-do seriously. They began to pass strict environmental bills and then laws. A little sooner than last time.

A week later, there was a knock on the coffin lid of the timepod where Cord slept. He opened his eyes and saw Duke's face peering into the porthole. *Already?* he wondered. Cord cracked open the lid and greeted the only friend he had in 1992.

"You've gotta get your ugly face outta here," Duke whispered. He was tall, handsome, muscular, with a full head of black hair. He would clearly have stood out in 2063.

"The CIA dispatched a specialized team to 'protect' you and take your time machine for study," Duke explained. "I understand. You've gotta get going, *now*."

"I know," Cord answered, smiling at the reporter who had ended up in jail because of this warning last time. Cord made a mental note to check the library in 2063 and see if it happened again.

"I brought these for you and your lady-friend," Duke said, smiling

back. Two fresh oranges. Even though the fruit might be lost somewhere in the ocean of time, the gesture touched Cord. Again.

"Here," Cord said, changing the scene slightly from rehearsal. He handed Duke the photo of Glenn on her cot. "This might not make it back, so I thought I'd let you have it. *Make a change*," he finished. Then he pulled on the clearcap, sealed it shut with a snipping sound, closed the timepod, and powered it up.

Back into the storm.

#### AGAIN

"No! not again!" But again it was. He picked himself up off the hard, dry ground.

"*What did I forget to do?*" he howled at sparse, hissing pines and swirls of dust like parched tornadoes. Then he let out a long howl, a sound animal in quality but human in emotion, and fell forward onto his bare knees.

Cord dreamed of Glenn's touch, her deep, soothing eyes. He dreamed everything was as it once had been.

Finally, gagging on a mouthful of bitter dust, he rose to his feet. He felt empty, more than ever before. He walked toward the highway, knowing full well what stood before him.

He ran through the next ten months at a smoother and faster pace. This time, he tried to keep from seeming too intense to Glenn, but again she drew away. This time, they actually shared a brief, awkward kiss the night of the chronolog test. But that was as far as their relationship progressed.

Once again, his world was consumed by The Fire, went to hell. This time, Cord was ready to begin the mission in the third week of November, a month early. He assumed Glenn was strong enough to come along this time, but she refused. Cord trembled at her refusal.

"Gary and I built the timepod for two," he said, forcing his body not to shake. "I designed it this way so you could come with me and get a chance to heal during our stay in 1992."

"I can't leave," she said quietly, avoiding his eyes.



"Why? God damn us all, why?"  
"What if you fail?" she argued.  
"What if the pod fails? My health is not nearly as important as the whole world's..." She fell into a fit of sighing hacks, then continued. "If you don't return, I'll have Gary build a new pod. We have enough parts." Cord felt his eyelids open wide, straining the muscles. His jaw fell lax. He understood.

"Gary," Cord began, keeping his voice low to avoid exploding, "have the two of you discussed this?"

"Sure," the janitor replied, the man Cord had thought of as a loyal friend. "If you don't come back, I'll put together a new time machine and go back myself. We talked it all over."

Cord felt his hands ball into fists. This, he told himself in sudden clarity, is the man who stole my Glenn. I didn't come back in the right time, so she sent Gary. But it was Gary who made my pod fail! Gary changed something in the past, and it set up a paradox-wave. I've got to stop him.

Cord glanced around the room, searching for a suitable weapon. Gary was bigger than he, healthier. But the janitor wouldn't expect a sudden attack. Cord's eye rested on a length of titanium bracing, perhaps a meter long: it would fit perfectly in a clenched fist, would descend quickly upon the other's skull. Cord stepped toward it.

"What's a matter, Cord?" Gary asked. "We thought you'd've agreed this was a good idea. Insurance. You know."

Cord grasped the warm length of titanium, sensing its lightness, its murderous hardness. Then he looked up, across the room at Gary. And the whole plan crumbled.

He liked this man. This man liked him. This man was willing to venture into the dark void that would swallow Cord, and sacrifice himself to a dream-god. But what if Gary not only destroyed Cord's pod, but also ruined his work? What if he arrived a minute earlier, a second earlier, or layered over Cord's arrival....

The speculation was too complex, especially for a desperate man.

But Cord knew, even while he considered it, that he could not murder Gary. There had to be a different way.

"You'll come with me, Gary," he declared. It began falling into place. "I didn't tell you this before, but everything's different anyway. We failed last time. Actually, this will be the third time I go back. Something went wrong, well, and maybe you..." Frustration threatened to shred Cord into useless, blazing fragments. He calmed himself with a deep, shuddering breath.

"Never mind all that," he finished. "You have to come with me." Two faces of incomprehension stared at him.

"Listen," he said, almost condescendingly, and told them the whole story. He did, however, leave out all aspects of romance; he felt he left out the heart of the story. Glenn nodded slightly on her cot, turned her eyes to the ceiling, and Gary shrugged.

"I 'spose I was ready to go anyway," Gary finally said.

"All right," Cord barked. "Let's go. Just follow my lead. You'll be my bodyguard." The two men climbed inside and pulled the oversize lid shut.

A new timepod fought its way back against the current to the 1992 World Environmental Conference, just before U.S. President Bush vetoed the plan that had been worked out there, just before things began to race wildly out of control.

With Gary's help, acceptance came faster and word permeated deeper into the fabric of the world. This man, who was/would be a janitor, relished the attention he was given and the seriousness with which people listened to his words. Actually, Cord received fewer invitations to speak than Gary.

They left, having accomplished more in a shorter time, and once again Cord gave Duke Glenn's photo, and once again he closed the lid of the timepod and fought against time into 2063.

#### AND AGAIN

And again, he—with Gary—fell sans timepod to a barren clearing. This time, he almost didn't demand of

forces infinitely greater and larger and more dimensional than himself: *What happened?*

This time, he not only had to battle his own urge to scream, but also had to explain much to Gary. He hypothesized that, even though the timepod was headed to the lab eleven months later, the journey had always terminated early, at this point, dropping him from a height because of planetary rotation, revolution around the sun, and other astronomical factors. Unless and until he could finally alter the past, he would be forever stopped in timespace at the moment the chronopod began to come together in Glenn's mind.

Mostly, however, the janitor-turned-world-savior had deep concern over the issue of his other self's disappearance. Not schooled in the laws of paradox and timewaves, all he knew was that a version of himself had vanished upon his arrival. Did he kill himself? What did that mean? Gary often appeared near Cord's office, usually late at night, his strong, healthy shape framed in the metal and concrete doorway. He asked Cord over and again what had happened and why.

Cord grew less patient, until one day he shouted, "Leave me alone! I'm trying to design my own timepod so I can return without Glenn's knowing, and fix everything before it happens. She must have somehow changed things. Do you understand? Damn you! Of course not. You'll help me rebuild it, and you'll come with me again, and we'll do everything right."

"I'm not goin' with you," Gary replied. For the second time, Cord saw Gary through a red haze. His fists trembled.

"What?"

"I'm not goin'. It's just not right."

"God damn you to The Fire!" Cord raged, bolting upright, toppling a lapdesk. "If you—"

"D-don't you worry, Doctor Pegado," Gary interrupted, "I won't tell Glenn nothin', promise. I understand that much. I'll even help you build another time machine. But I won't go."

Cord remained standing, allowing himself to quake until he loosed, then sat back down.

"Fine," Cord said, staring at his shaking hands as they hovered above an input pad. He could not stand these hands, and the things he had imagined their doing.

Soon, those same hands constructed yet another timepod in his personal lab and tested it twice with equally useless, perfect results. He made sure no one knew about his preparations because he couldn't take the risk that anyone would interfere in a way that could trap him again in the amber of time. Even Gary, who had helped him build the machine, did not know which day he would depart. If all worked properly, no one would know he had gone.

He returned to 1992, then to 2063.

#### AND AGAIN

Again, Cord tumbled onto parched Earth.

Walking toward the highway like an automaton, powered only by a superhuman force of will, Cord saw a glimmer of the truth:

*I am a linear man.* A flat man, existing only on an almost two-dimensional line between eleven months in 2063 and one in 1992.

*I am a man without a time, or a place, or a life.* An alien, traversing dimensions but not belonging to them, trapped in a tiny sliver of them all, a coffin-sized wedge of time, a mote in amber. His feet rose and fell ever more slowly.

A flatcar whirred to the mostly-unused highway, alighting beside him. He accepted the ride from this well-known stranger, again thanked her as he stepped out onto the roof, and reentered a life he pretended was his. This time, he walked straight to the faculty restroom's barber-alcove and sat on the stool, facing a mirror image of himself.

He was beginning to age. He then looked in the rear-view mirror at the reflection of the back of his head. He looked at the reflection of the reflection of himself, at the reflection of the reflection of the reflection of the reflection....

And began to laugh. He picked up an electric razor, flicked the power switch, listened to the even hum, began to shave off the hair grown in 1992. His laugh rose to a roar. A professor whose name Cord couldn't remember leaned his head into the small alcove in the white-tiled restroom and smiled lopsidedly at Cord, at this insanely laughing madman. Cord shaved himself bald, his laughter reaching a crescendo

that sounded more like full-throated weeping, and he realized:

*No, not a linear man. A recursive man.* His cheeks warmed with tears of laughter. He laughed at all the Cords trapped in the infinitely reflected series, and each laughed back, each lost in his own separate world....

Which was the first Cord? he wondered. Which the one who held Glenn? Which the one who was bumped out of Glenn's arms to save Earth the first time? The second time? The third time?

His laughter grew too strong and he choked on it for a few moments, gasping for breath. He inhaled a razorful of shaved hair, coughed. The humor fled as he spat out the clippings. He had half-heartedly decided he would go back to an earlier time, change something else. Except that might exempt his very existence, maybe Glenn's.... He had to go back to the same time in 1992 with the same message. He had to save the world.

*One of these times, I'll live with the fruits of my labor. I'll live in a pure world.* With help from the mirrors, he visualized his sliver of time as infinitely long but bounded by one month on one end and eleven on the other.

*One of these times, I'll shatter that sliver. One of these times, I'll win back my Glenn. And then....* ■

## PITFCS

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

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

—Algis Budrys



# WATER COLORS

Robert Reed

Illustrated by Kelly Faltermayer

*A few months later, Mars vanishes*

A cavernous and overheated lecture hall half-filled with students. Freshman Cosmology, Day One. The professor rises, smiles and speaks. "In the universe," she begins, "we find two broad categories of energy. Energy of mass, and energy of motion." No introductions. No vacuous greetings. Just that statement, then she asks, "What if we cancel one energy with the other? Bodies in space are streaking apart. Suppose we strap engines on every world, sun, and mote of dust, then burn mass to stop everything. What runs dry first? Can you guess?"

The bulk of the class believes the question is silly. But Freddy Able is intrigued, leaning forward in his seat, trying to pick apart the puzzle. Motion, or mass?

The professor notices him, winks and confesses, "It's a trick question. Assuming that our revised inflationary model is correct, both run dry at the

same instant." An amused pause, then: "Isn't it amazing? Motion and mass in balance. Thus the universe has a net energy of zero. Zip. Nada."

At least one student shivers.

"All of us," she continues, "are part of an elaborate illusion. A book-keeper's fancy. Like it or not, Creation is a tangle of glorious nonexistence."

For an instant, Able sees the face of God.

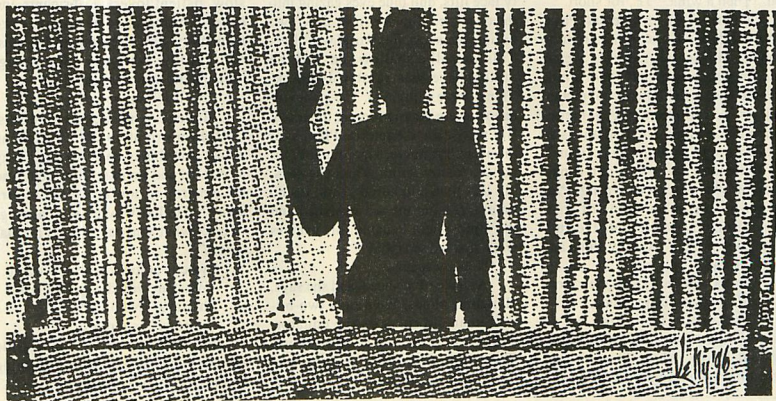
Able dies while trying to save a drowning child. He is crawling on his belly, crossing weak ice, and the ice opens and the lake takes him. As it happens, the child is plucked from danger just minutes later. But the young man is immersed for two hours, his limp body found by robots and flown to the nearest trauma center. Once identified, a computer search is begun. Fredrick Able is found to meet the minimum fifteen of twenty-one cri-

teria employed by the Agency. Intelligence. Education. Creativity. Absence of family. Lack of religious taboos. And with that a team of physicians set to work, confident that someone is paying for their efforts.

TEs don't see God when they die. Or rather, they never remember their deaths. Hallucinations of God, Heaven and a great white light are lost to them. Perhaps it's due to the trauma, though some people take it as a sign that TEs have no souls. They are robots, in essence. Animated corpses. Resurrected meats that only sound and act like their dear departed. And TEs, speaking honestly, can't come down in one camp or the other.

They feel as if they're alive, but who's to say?

Able's blood is replaced with a cool red facsimile, and he is





injected with an armada of micron-class robots, his mind revived once the initial repairs are complete. But there has been damage. Simple tests show a slight decline in mental functions. Too much time without oxygen, most likely. Able won't meet the basic IQ standards now. There is talk of letting him die again, and calls are made. But as it happens, someone made a video of his graceless crawl across the ice, and every news network is showing it, on the half hour. In death, Freddy Able has become an authentic hero. Decent and fearless, and eminently useful.

The Agency, in a rare moment of sentiment, decides that a hero might enhance its public image.

A warm damp hand wakes Able for the first time.

"Congratulations," says a masked surgeon. "You're on your way to space, young man."

"Zombies," the tabloids call them. And the Agency is little better, using the bloodless label, "Adapted humans."

TE is their own designation. It comes from an old joke. One of the first beneficiaries of the new technology was being interviewed, and a nervous reporter used the Z word. But the once-dead woman merely shrugged, smiled weakly and said, "I prefer the term thanatologically enhanced, thank you." Then a wink. "TE, for short."

On Earth, TEs are helpless. Physically weak; slow reactions; prone to illness and infections. But in sterile space environments they have ample strength and speed. Their cool metabolisms keep food and oxygen consumption to a minimum. Radiations do less damage to slow-growing tissues, and their internal robots can repair much of what else goes wrong. Plus there is a general flattening of emotions. TEs rarely quarrel, and they tolerate being packed into tiny ships and sent far away.

Always, always TEs do their work with a slow, rigorous patience.

The Agency has given up on warm-blooded astronauts, particularly beyond Earth orbit. They're too demanding, too fragile. And too easi-

ly missed should something go even a little wrong.

Able is trained in orbit, then posted to Mars.

Alien artifacts have been found in abundance, he learns. And his nine hours of college archaeology make him seem qualified. With a dozen other TEs, he is put onboard a ship designed for four warm-bloods. Elbow-to-elbow with strangers, Able nonetheless feels at ease. Not happy exactly, but contented. Glad for his prospects and looking forward to walking on the red planet.

Had he known he was TE material, he thinks idly, he might have drowned himself long ago.

"The artifacts look boring," warns their team leader. "Here's one, in fact." She kicks a random boulder, no sound made in the cold near-vacuum. "Almost indistinguishable from native rock. In composition, it's native rock. But it exhibits a mild vibration, plus a slight heat signature. We keep assuming that it and the rest of them are doing some kind of work, but what kind and why are beyond us."

Her name is Sweetie.

Why, thinks Able, do we give smart women silly nicknames? So that men won't be intimidated by them?

"Each one is as old as its surroundings," Sweetie admits. Her pretty face lifts, dull blue eyes gazing into the distance. "But we know this. Two billion years ago, this world was alive. This was all a shallow sea, and the atmosphere was relatively thick. Things were chilly, yes. The giant volcanoes were getting long in the tooth. But this sea had bacteria. Photosynthesizers. Primitive, vigorous life." A pause. A slow blink. Then she says, "In less than a hundred years, for no natural reason, the sea vanished and the atmosphere became this useless whiff that we see today."

Nobody speaks.

A shake of the head, and she says, "I assume aliens. We've got two-billion-year-old ruins on the equator. Other teams are working on them. They think that someone came and built skyhooks, then sucked Mars dry,

Dry enough that it died prematurely. That's what all of us pretty much believe, I'll warn you."

Able watches her face and smiles. She sees him, perhaps for the first time. "Who are you?"

He identifies himself.

"Mr. Able," Sweetie growls, "what is so funny?"

"I think I'm in love with you," he confesses. "I'm going to marry you someday, if you'll have me."

It takes a lot to rattle a TE's cage.

Sweetie is astonished. Mute. False blood reddens her cheeks, and a dazed dreamy look softens the blue eyes.

Their team identifies every artifact in a hundred-kilometer radius, mapping them and learning their general patterns. There is a mathematical sense to their placement. No location lacks its vibrating rock. Fresh impact craters have theirs, as do young lava flows. And even stranger is the way each artifact heals itself. Chips removed for study are replaced in a year or two, atoms drawn from the surrounding regolith and laid down in order. It is a perfect camouflage, Sweetie and Able agree. But what's being hidden?

What aren't they seeing? Because there must be something there.

They talk of little else. Two years into his posting, and after endless prodding, Able has gotten himself invited into Sweetie's home. TEs are slow, patient lovers. Lubricants and special homemade appliances are mandatory. One evening, in the midst of foreplay, Able says in passing, "Maybe the artifacts aren't."

"Aren't?" she responds.

"I mean, what we see are rocks. Collections of atoms. But what's an atom?" He thinks he is joking, lifting a cool fist and saying, "A proton. And the electron is how many kilometers away?" He halfway laughs, adding, "Think what you can hide in all that space."

Sweetie stops what she is doing.

"What are you doing?" he asks.

She says, "Nothing."

"I know," he replies.

But she sets the appliance aside just the same, sitting up and grinning as she begins to concentrate.



Exotic equipment is brought up from the Earth, and Sweetie's team solves the day's greatest puzzle. The mysterious artifacts aren't built from ordinary matter, it appears. Instead they're sophisticated machines woven from dark matter. "Which makes a kind of sense," Sweetie tells him. And herself. "Ninety-nine percent of the universe is dark matter. We haven't identified more than a fraction of the species. By definition, it's practically invisible. Yet it does react with baryonic matter. Which includes us, of course."

The rocks are camouflage. The true artifacts are spheres, each one with a single extrusion. Move its rock, and the sphere remains in place. It hovers. They can visualize it by passing charged particles through it, then measuring the very slight bends in their motions. Details are few, but the extrusions seem obvious enough to Sweetie. "They look like every light switch that I've ever seen."

Somewhat. Able notices the similarity.

"What if we flip one?" she asks herself. "Suppose we can."

More equipment is imported, then assembled when the equipment comes to life. Hearts pound at eleven beats to the minute. An intense beam of transuranium nuclei are being applied to the switch; and it feels the pressure; and after a long interval, the switch is flipped.

For an instant, nothing happens.

They blink. Simultaneously.

And the light has changed. Suddenly they're standing at the bottom of a shallow sea, blue skies over blue water, and jellyfish swim against the blueness. Giant pulsating jellyfish, delicate membranes and forests of dangling tendrils. A scene from two billion years ago? Except Mars had nothing fancier than protozoans then. Able is puzzled, awestruck. There is a beauty and a powerful sense of reality, the effect magnified when a sleek manta ray appears, eclipsing the sun for an instant. The jellyfish scatter. The manta ray twists its winglike fins, beginning to dive. And Sweetie whispers, "It sees us," just as the shark-like mouth tries to bite Able in two.

But it's just an illusion, and fails.

Though for a moment, in a dreamy way, Able can feel the teeth slicing, his bones cut apart and his organs strewn into the warm salty water. In his imagination, of course. Nothing dangerous here. But the image is unsettling, lingering long after the moment.

They marry.

Sweetie is happy with the world and Able, and she might agree to anything. They perform a ceremony of their own design, a favorite artifact serving as an altar. With the switch turned on, naturally. TEs and jellyfish all in attendance.

But there's no honeymoon; too much work to do. Sweetie has come up with a bizarre hypothesis. "These artifacts are computers. They were put here by the aliens who killed the planet, and they were programmed to simulate its biosphere. Its lifeforms. All of the parameters." She pauses, her face managing an expansive smile. "Life evolves. And since everything is a simulation, the Martian weather remains favorable. Benign. Protozoans evolve over time, the biosphere becoming more and more complex."

"A synthetic biosphere," says Able, shaking his head.

"These are exceptional computers, love. And the creatures being simulated aren't exactly sophisticated, are they?"

The illusions are localized, vanishing within a few hundred meters. But distinctive fish have been seen at different artifacts, at different times. They can move from point to point. If *move* is the right word, that is.

"They're dark matter," Sweetie decides. She points at a giant jellyfish, saying, "That's the verdict of the physicists, at least. The dark matter serves as a kind of paint. It creates images that others can come see and enjoy. You don't even need to know how the machinery works, it's so simple to use."

Able thinks of water colors, then asks, "But why?"

"Why?"

"Go to this trouble," he says. "What's the motivation?"

"Guilt?" she offers. "To honor the dead Mars?" She pauses, then says, "Water is scarce in the universe. Dark matter is cheap. Maybe there's an environmental code to the galaxy. You can destroy a doomed biosphere if you replace it with a durable synthetic one."

But do the aliens ever return to walk in this bizarre garden? he wonders. Or was it built for whomever evolved on Earth?

"Lover," whispers his wife, "are you thinking what I'm thinking?"

Almost never, he has learned.

"What about Venus? When did Venus lose her oceans?"

Before Mars, wasn't it?

The smiling face seems serene. In the midst of life. Sweetie had died during a suicide attempt, and she still has a tendency towards melancholy. But for the moment she seems radiant, saying, "Maybe it's time we go to Venus and see. What do you think, darling?"

Yet the work is difficult, slow and frustrating. The Agency fights them, their own experts convinced that nothing will be found. It takes several years to pry a suitable ship and lab out of their grip, and it's more years of wrestling with Venus itself. But eventually their homemade robots find spheres of the wonderstuff. They are scarce, but they're undeniably real; and Sweetie's reaction is a shrug of her shoulders and a muttered, "Of course we found them. Of course." Then she abruptly withdraws from everyone, Able included. Feigning work, but mostly gazing out at the stars.

Able goes to see her, pestering until she responds to his presence. "What's the matter with you?" he asks. "Years of hard work and dead ends, and this is how you respond?"

"Three billion years ago," Sweetie guesses, showing him the geologic data. "That's when the oceans were stolen, and the artifacts are simpler too. The synthetic biosphere is a lot simpler. Primitive high-temp microbial communities—"

"Darling?"

"—that probably haven't changed in three thousand million years." She pauses, one hand combing her thin

blonde hair. "I know. I shouldn't be this worked up, and I'm sorry."

He doesn't know what to say.

"But ever since we hammered down a date, I've been thinking. One billion years later, and someone did the same thing to Mars. Took its water and built a synthetic biosphere, and they did it a hundred times better." She sighs deeply again, looking weak from all the oxygen. "I can't help but wonder if maybe, just maybe, the same aliens returned in another billion years. If they had improved the technologies another hundredfold, and if the Earth was still in its Precambrian—"

"Stop," he warns.

"—and if they decided that we were nice and ripe for the taking, why not? Why not replace our water and organics with cheap dark matter constructions?"

"That's nuts," he says.

"Much more sophisticated, sure. Small portions of the dark matter possessing the power to leave the Earth behind, acting with what looks like independent action—"

"Stop it!"

"—and of course we're not real. Not at all." She pauses, smiling in a false, mocking way. "What if we do find artifacts on the Earth? What will you say then?"

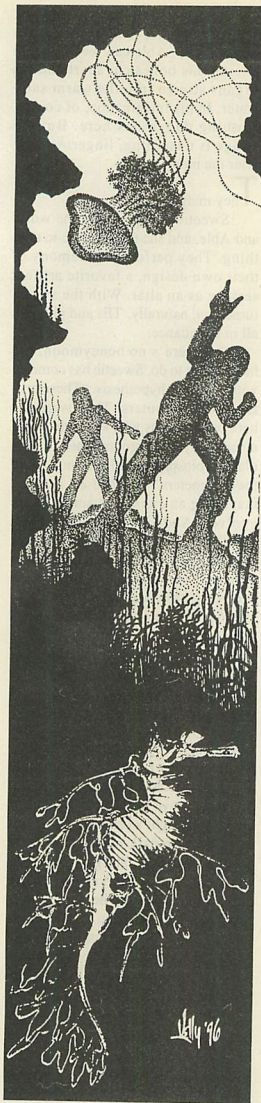
"We won't," he promises.

Yet she hears the words in a way not intended.

"Oh, Freddy," she says, "the dumbest guppy knows where its fish bowl begins."

The Agency denies them permission to orbit, then threatens action and vague punishments. But between threats and deeds, Sweetie has time enough to drop into the Pacific, embarking inside a crude submersible that they built during their voyage.

The gravity is crushing; the water is black and chill. But she has two worlds of experience, plus a measure of luck. A lava pillow is vibrating. Inside it is a large artifact, the same but for the switch that seems to be set in the ON position. And with a stream of dense nuclei, she manages to flip it to OFF, holding it there for a little less than thirty seconds.



Thirty seconds is ample.

There's nothing else to learn here, she decides; and she starts back for her shuttle, the false Pacific reforming around her, scarcely noticed again.

The Agency sends soldiers. Armored shuttles. And bureaucrats.

Sweetie is captured on the Earth's surface, then brought back to the ship. A warm pink bureaucrat takes her to the others, then proceeds to lay down the proverbial law. "You will board a new ship that we will supply you," he tells the TEs. "All records of all research will be given to us. No delays. No room for compromise. And you are never to discuss your work with anyone. Not even your fellow adaptees."

Perhaps the Agency understands what Sweetie has found. More likely, it doesn't believe the verdict and is laboring to keep the possibility a secret nonetheless. News of it might generate a panic. Or perhaps they fear that worse things could happen. For instance, they might lose their hold on the TEs if they can't show control over them.

Regardless of the reasons, the team is sent home. Crammed elbow-to-elbow in a tiny ship, they discover that its antennae are disabled. Probably to keep them quiet a little while longer. And Sweetie laughs in a bleak way, saying, "Isn't it ironic? Dead people discover that everyone is dead. Or more properly, that none of us have ever truly existed."

"We exist," Able counters.

She glances at him, showing a chilly rage.

"I know I exist," he adds, wondering if he sounds sincere.

"Do you know what the Earth is? Really is? A slick dead ball of airless rock, Freddy. Polished. Worthless. Gnawed clean by some enormous predator, judging by its looks."

He wishes he could doubt her, and he can't.

Instead he reposes an old question. "Why would a predator bother itself by inventing us? Why?"

"Think of us," she responds. "We kill a bug, by accident, and feel sorry



for doing it. Or closer to home, we die and people we don't even know spend time and energy resurrecting us again." A sweeping wave of a hand. "Intelligence seems keyed to this concept of mortality. Maybe as life evolves, it always becomes incapable of truly killing. It needs a resource, but it finds some way to mollify its sense of right and eat its fill, too."

Able watches his wife.

"Call it guilt," she says. "Call it reverence."

"I prefer reverence," Able tells her. "And so what? Does it make that much difference one way or the other? We're water and proteins, or we're exotic materials of equal beauty. What exactly is the difference, love?"

She starts to speak—

—and he interrupts, anticipating her. "Are you going to talk all the way to Mars? Is that your plan?"

"No," she replies, shaking her head. "I won't. I promise." And she shuts her mouth with a certain ceremony, the blue eyes betraying nothing at all.

**S**he kills herself.

That night, while people sleep, Sweetie steps into the hard vacuum. Able suits up and goes after her body. In space he sees that no amount of medicine can help someone this dead. Exploded capillaries leave her flesh a ridiculous red, and it occurs to him that this isn't his wife, that this is just so much meat, and why should he weep at all?

He improvises a funeral, then sends the body on its way.

Returning to the ship, Able notices an oddity. A wrong-shaped bump. Set against the hull is a tiny explosive charge. In another three days and four hours, it would have detonated, and the Agency would have rid itself of a potential embarrassment.

Anger, learns Able, is easier to summon than grief.

For the last weeks of the voyage, he speaks to no one, lost in thought, imagining long odd dialogues with his melancholy wife.

In that thin sense, she lives on.

**M**ars is crowded with settlers. TEs everywhere.

In the last decades, as the TE technologies have grown cheaper and more widely available, some of the old biases have diminished. The Agency doesn't have exclusive control over emigration, and the red planet is considered the perfect substitute for the Earth. A comfortable gravity. A frontier feel. More than a few citizens have proposed renaming it Heaven, or something to that effect.

Able takes his team's notes—every shred of data that they slipped past the Agency—and gives them to scientists at the premier Martian university. "I just want one thing," he warns them. "Come tell me. If you find what I think you will, I want you to tell me first."

"And what will that be?" asks a white-haired Nobel laureate. "What are we going to find?"

"More than guppies would," he replies. The tone mysterious. Bemused. "At least I hope so."

**A** decade later. Scientists drive a convoy-fashion to Able's simple house, finding it set beside one of the seafloor artifacts. The man looks only marginally older; cold metabolisms have their way of extending lifespans. Jellyfish dangle in the air, partly obscured by billowing dusts. Everyone stands in the open, and Able asks, "Did you find it? Or is this a parade?"

"We did," they say. "And it's not even that difficult to do. We just need to augment the existing system, putting us into phase with them. Just a few adjustments, that's all."

Everyone looks skyward, and as if on a signal, one of the giant black manta rays passes overhead.

It must see them, but it does nothing.

"Poor thing," Able laughs. "All these years, and it's finally learned that we can't be eaten. Do you think it'll take as long for it to realize that we're pretty damned tasty after all?"

**M**ars turns blue overnight.

An astonished Earth sends queries, then assembles a small invasion force. But before any consensus is reached, a handsome male TE appears in a multiband transmission. Smiling, standing in a plain shirt and shorts beside a calm blue ocean, he says, "Leave us alone. If we can do this to our world, think what we might do to yours."

Possibilities chill everyone watching.

Then the face softens, smiles in that half-dead way that TEs smile. "The fact of the matter is," he says, "we won't be around much longer. Doing what we've done here has opened up some fresh perspectives. For instance, did you realize that our sun is missing? That something or someone consumed it, perhaps millions of years ago, and what we see is a fiction? A bright beautiful fiction?"

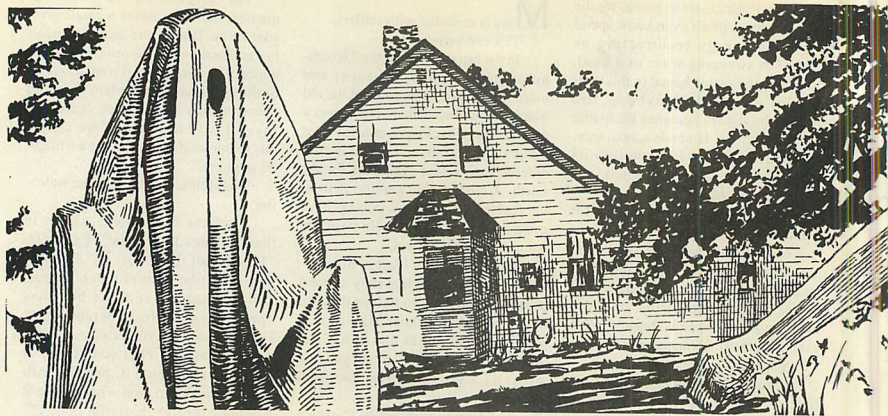
The man is insane. That much is obvious.

"But everything is," he says cheerfully. "It's all fiction. Which isn't completely bad news, and don't be ashamed. Don't grieve. Shame and grief are a waste of time. Because do you know what's good about being someone's fiction? There are loopholes. Discrepancies. Which is to say, many wondrous things are easy if you can learn the rules."

He is a raving madman, surely.

Yet people continue to watch him. They watch Able strip until naked, then wade out into the weak surf. And he begins to swim, patient long strokes carrying him away from shore, out of sight and the world still staring after him.

**A** few months later, with no overt warnings, Mars vanishes. In an instant. Without fuss. And afterwards nobody remembers that there was a Mars in the first place. No history book shows a reddish planet. No people are listed as living on it. No Agency was formed to explore and exploit it. And the top old dogs of the vanquished Agency discover themselves living as gravediggers, without exception. Noble work done entirely by hand, and they are a happy caste. Vengeance can be many things besides cruel. ■



# THE DINK TRANSCENDENT

Max Burbank

Illustrated by David J. Grilla

*At seven years old if you'd found out you could fly, you'd have done it*

**A**t seven years old if you'd found out you could fly, you'd have done it, right? No questions asked.

My brother Stevey'd been dreaming about it, almost every night for a couple of weeks. Everybody has dreams about flying, though. Everyone he'd asked. Dad. Me. Other kids. Sure, not every night, but often enough. It didn't mean you could do it.

Of course, Stevey'd always been better at just about everything than everybody else. He could read in kindergarten. He never really understood why everybody made such a fuss over it. Two other kids could read, and that was just in his class! Maybe not as well, but so what?

So he could do math. So he was good enough to play in the sixth grad-

er's softball games (games I usually got put in left field for). In the book on child prodigies he'd taken out from the library, it was quite clear that while his performance was far above average, it was not outside historic precedent; not at all. Anyway, none of that meant a kid could fly!

But of course, he could. It was easy, really. He just tried and it was happening. It wasn't so much a question of flying, really, as it was not falling. That's what he told me, anyway.

He was lucky nobody saw him. He hadn't planned it, really. I mean, how do you plan to fly, exactly? He just gave it a try, halfway home from school one day in early November, and up he went. No one had been looking, so no one saw it.

It was a lot easier landing without being seen.

He didn't tell anyone about it. Not then. Would you have?

It was pretty great, and he did it a lot of times before he noticed the way it was changing him.

**H**e'd been using 'The Power' since the day he was born, but until he'd been flying a few months, he didn't even realize it. It was instinctive, he guessed. And if it changed him, well, the changes were just new things he'd learned. That was growth, wasn't it? That was natural.

Actually, after abandoning a few childish fantasies about being fathered by an angel, he knew there was a problem. Lots of kinds of growth are natural. Unless you're a bird, a bat or an





insect, flying isn't one of them. It just stood to reason there were going to be consequences.

The proof came in mid January. He was cruising around the neighborhood about three a.m., high enough so he thought nobody would see him in the dark, low enough so he didn't need to worry about airplanes. He'd worn his snow suit but he hadn't needed to. He could've taken it off any time. He wasn't cold at all. Fourteen degrees, average speed a hundred sixty miles an hour or so, wind chill would take that down to about, what, six billion below zero? When he'd jumped out the window, he was freezing. He'd been thinking about how much more fun flying would have been if he weren't so frigging cold. And then he wasn't.

At the time, all I knew was The Dink was acting damn strange. Boy. Not by half, huh?

There's a grape vine in every sixth grade. Kids pretty much know everything that's going down about a week before the grownups think they do. Most of the time, it's kind of fun to watch the adults squirming around with something they know but don't want to tell us. Who's folks are getting divorced, what kid's gonna get left

back, that kind of thing. I mean, we're kids, but we're not kids.

It's not so much fun finding out what's going on when it's your own brother. Generally, second grade was a little bit out of my range. I mean, why should I have cared about a bunch of babies? But this baby came home from school with me every day.

Overnight, The Dink had become the scourge of the entire lower school. He was carving his initials in desks, wising off in class, hitting other kids, hogging the blocks during rainy-day recess. What he wasn't doing was his homework.

You have to understand, here. The Dink was the family superstar. My cousin's grandmother bragged to her friends about The Dink instead of her own grand kids! Everybody loved him. I mean, this is the kind of behavioral change you saw on after-school specials! People don't do that. Besides, if there was a crisis in my family, I couldn't understand how I'd missed it. Actually, that's pretty easy to figure out, now. Back then I paid as little attention to The Dink as I possibly could.

I found him after school, on the way home. He hadn't waited for me, but then, he hadn't been waiting for me a lot lately. That was fine by me. I

didn't need the other kids seeing me walking with Mister All Time Teacher's Weenie of the Entire Second Grade. Now I was supposed to believe in about two weeks the kid had become Satan Jr.? Sure, I was concerned, but I also wanted to get a look at the kid who'd fallen so far from grace.

He was crouching behind a tree, smoking!

I mean, can I remind you, this kid was only seven?

"Stevey, what the hell are you doing?" I yelled as I came around the tree. He jumped pretty good. I could still make him do that back then.

"Jeez, Zack! You scared the crap out of me! Get out of here and leave me alone, okay?" he whined.

"Gimme that!" I said and grabbed the lit cigarette out of his lips.

"I don't have to stay here and take it from you," he said. He didn't either. He could have flown off any time. I couldn't have stopped him. He stayed put, though. He must have really wanted to hide it. I'd have split, no question.

"What's going on? Do you know the whole school is talking about you? Do you know what Mom and Dad are going to do?" I shouted. "If it was me, they'd just yell at me and feel bad, but

you, they're gonna have you committed! They're gonna think you're having a nervous breakdown or something!"

"No way." He pouted.

"With your record of family fits? Yes way."

"What's it all mean, anyway? School. I mean, what's the point? Doesn't anybody care about what I want?" He strode from the tree, swinging his arms out like he'd been crucified or something.

"You're in second grade, you weenie!" I screamed, clutching the sides of my head. He whipped around with his little eyes narrowed down to slits. That look, man. I think he'd have beat the shit out of me right then if he could've. With the light the way it was, his eyes looked like they were all red.

"Yeah, well, I'm not like other second graders." He turned his back on me and walked off toward home through the woods, which we were specifically *not* allowed to do. I didn't follow him. I didn't tackle him and rub his face around in the dirt, which is what I'd usually have done in a situation like that. I'd have dropped dead if anybody had known it, but I was scared of The Dink right then. Hell if I wasn't.

The folks went ballistic. I'm sorry, I've never seen anything like it. They went through a crash course in every parenting fad I'd ever heard of in the next few weeks. Heartfelt talks, tough love, no TV, man-to-mans with my dad. They even tried grounding him, for Christ's sake! Have you ever heard of a second grader needing to be grounded? Not like it worked. How the hell do you ground a kid who can open the window and fly out?

When The Dink got suspended for plagiarism, we went into family counseling. Now that was a blast. Can I tell you, nobody even *asked* me what I thought? Not once. I felt like furniture.

They never caught what he'd plagiarized or anything. They didn't even try. It's just that when a kid turns in a paper called "Sexuality in Mann's *Death in Venice*" for his "What I read over winter break" assignment, people

just naturally assume he's cheating somehow.

Me, I'd have been impressed he could copy the whole thing out in his own hand. It was about 30 pages. I guess they weren't thinking about it from that angle.

Meanwhile, The Dink was hardly talking at all and flying as soon as the rest of us were in bed. By Valentine's Day he was only sleeping two hours a night. The Dink clued me in on the whole mess one day in early March.

March in New England sucks the big one. Don't let anyone give you any crap about it coming in like a lion and going out like a lamb. It comes in like a lion and goes out like a different, more pissed-off lion that's soaking wet and could decide to drop another foot of snow on you just to be a jerk. I'll tell you the truth, I like snow, but by March if it doesn't close school, I don't see the point.

I was working on my treehouse and it was going pretty good. I may not be The Dink, but I can do a lot of stuff. The floor was about as level as I was going to get it, and I had one real glass window I'd scavenged from a dumpster behind a house that was getting renovated. I was thinking about a book I'd seen in the school library that showed how you could wire up a tree house for electricity. That's when I heard The Dink calling me. I looked down through the trap door, and there he was at the foot of the ladder. He looked like any old kid brother, I guess. Anyway, he did at that point.

Now in general, my treehouse rule is: NO DINK, plain and simple. He'd been so weird lately, though, I wasn't sure my rule still applied. I mean, he looked the same and all, but he sure didn't seem like The Dink in any other way. Mostly he talked like kids my age, and when he got going he acted like a teacher, except even more angry. It's a pretty painful thing not knowing how to deal with your own little brother.

"What do you want, Bung-hole?" I asked, instead of just telling him to scram.

"I gotta talk to you." Real serious. He didn't even call me anything.

"Uh...okay...climb up," I told him. I didn't think of it then, but when I broke the treehouse rule, I broke every rule between us. I never got them back, either. Not one of them.

"I got a better way." Stevey said. And then he flew.

I can't really tell you how I felt about that. I mean, I knew something was going on with Stevey, but I sorta figured he was going nuts. That was real unpleasant and all, and I knew it was gonna be hell for the family and I'd probably be emotionally scarred and stuff, but it could be handled. My best friend Jason's parents got divorced and when his dad was moving out, they found all this really weird rubber shit in his closet, and Jason's okay, so I figured what the hell, right? It was normal.

Like both of us figured, flying is *not* normal.

At first, I couldn't even see it. I mean, I was seeing it, but I couldn't make it fit. You know how in *Aliens* you had to see the movie and then rent it like three times before you could really *see* everything that was happening, cause it was just too weird for your eye to put together? This was like that. He drifted down through the part of the ceiling I hadn't finished before I even put it together that he'd flown and not just *jumped* real well. I didn't even think to get scared till he'd been sitting there staring at me for about ten seconds. Then I got really angry, I have no idea why. I guess I turned all red and stuff, cause The Dink started laughing at me.

"Jeez, Zack!" he giggled. "You should see your face, man. You got any smokes up here?" I did. I gave him one. I had them stashed in an old lunch box along with some matches and two dirty magazines I found in the trash behind the liquor store. We sat up there and smoked. Hey, what are you gonna do? See some eight-year-old fly like a bird and then tell him, 'Y'know, you're too young to smoke, kid?' I don't think so.

Everything changed between me and The Dink that day. I don't mean I liked him all of a sudden. In fact, I liked him less. It feels shitty



enough to know your kid brother has a better position than you on your own softball team, he doesn't have to rub it in by flying. What changed was my power over him. I could feel it slipping away while he talked, the only thing I'd ever had on him, and I wanted to punch his face for it, or give him a wicked Indian burn like I did the time we broke that vase. He just kept talking though, and he smoked all my butts.

Every time he used a power, he could feel a new one growing. That's what he told me. The flying gave him the ability to resist the cold. He'd done that without even thinking about it. Who wants to be cold? But now there was a new power growing. And if he used it, there'd be a new one after that just waiting in the wings.

"Like what?" I asked him. I'd only had one cigarette, but all his smoke was starting to turn me green. I wanted to pee real bad, but I just sat there listening to him. He'd taken off his jacket. He was only wearing a T-shirt underneath. I was freezing and my butt had pins and needles from sitting on plywood for so long.

"I don't know yet," he said, taking a long drag. The little punk blew a flawless smoke ring, and then another which he pushed right through it with a perfect little puff of air. "I won't know until it's right there. This one's coming faster though. A lot faster. And if I use it, I'll start to grow another."

"Why don't you, then?" Frigging little show-off. He looked down, rubbed a little dirt off his sneakers.

"Every time I use a new one, I change." He said, real soft.

"No shit, Sherlock. How many other flying kids you seen in the neighborhood. Or do all you dinks fly these days?"

"Stop being such a jerk, Zack!" His lower lip was starting to quiver the way it always did before I made him cry. Usually I liked that. That day I wasn't getting any pleasure out of anything. "Okay, flying's cool, controlling my body temperature is cool, but it's getting out of hand! I can hide some of it, but sooner or later I'm going to get caught! I don't want to change any-

more. Zack, this is different enough, okay?"

"Okay, okay!" I said. "Take it easy!"

"What am I going to do, Zack? I'm in real trouble here, I'm a freak, right? You know how everybody rags on Bruce Fenwick?"

"Fenwick's a Gaybo, Dink. You're a weenie, but everybody knows you're the best at everything. Shit, now you're even better."

"I'm different, Zack. People hate what's different. I guess I'm the most different person in the whole world right now. Zack, if people find out, they'll kill me or something."

I hated the little bastard for laying it on me like that. I wanted to push his skinny ass right through the trap door, but that would have been fairly pointless, considering.

He'd never asked me for anything, you know what I mean? He hadn't needed to. I read stories to him like twice before he figured out how to do it on his own. He never asked to tag along with me and my friends. Know why? My friends asked *him*, because he was so cool for a little guy. So I made new friends, friends who wore jeans jackets and smoked and got in trouble. Pretty soon since I hung out with the bad kids, I was a bad kid, right? Now he was asking me for help? What the hell for? If I jumped out of the tree house, I'd break my frigging neck!

The Dink was my brother, though. I pretended he wasn't a lot of the time, but he was. I think I hated him for that most of all.

"Okay," I said. "First of all, stop talking the way you're talking. Talk like a seven year old. Listen to Billy."

"Billy's a weenie," whined The Dink, lighting up my very last cigarette. It didn't matter. I quit smoking that day anyway.

"Yeah, well, Billy was your best friend until you started flying. If you want everything to stay cool, you'll make damn sure he's your best friend again. As far as school goes, go back to being a suck up, and do just as well as you used to, no better. No more thirty page papers, jerk! I mean, think a little, can you?"

"I'm not gonna quit flying, Zack. I don't think I could live without it, now," he said.

"I don't think you have to." I told him, just like I knew what I was talking about. "Just don't use the new power, whatever it turns out to be. Just let it alone. I mean, I think you have enough, okay?"

He was quiet for a long time. When he shut up and stopped smoking you could believe he was just a seven-year-old. I mean, who's going to believe anything else unless they have to?

"Okay," he said.

"Let's go in. Put your jacket on first. And Dink? Use the ladder, okay?"

"My name's not Dink," he said. He used the ladder, though.

My strategy was pretty good, and it worked okay. For a while.

I was never much good at softball. I don't like it, and I've developed a fairly solid history of sucking at anything I don't like. In my town, though, when you were a kid, you played softball. You did it at school and on Sundays, and all summer long you played pick-up games with neighborhood kids at the local playground. Only extreme fags like Bruce Fenwick didn't play softball, and if you didn't want the label and the beatings that went with it, you played.

It was okay that I sucked. Nobody gave me that hard a time about it, so long as you played. The hard part was getting chosen last and after that I could hang out in right field and think about sex. Mercifully, my lack of skill spared me the purgatory of Little League.

I know it's where they send the losers, but if you want to know the truth, I liked right field. Softball is a very high-pressure game. When you're at bat, everyone is looking at you. When you're in the field and the ball comes your way, everyone is looking at you. If you screw up, there's nobody that doesn't know it. Football, soccer, basketball you can fudge it a little, blame someone else, or the ref. Softball may be a team sport, but it's made up of very individual moments.

In sixth grade, right field is about the most anonymous place you can get. The ball comes your way once a summer, maybe.

Can I tell you something? The summer I'm talking about, my luck was piss poor.

I mean, it was already bad enough having The Dink on the team. Everyone thought it was so cool. 'Hey man, he's only seven and he plays ball as good as us.' Yeah. As good as us and way better than me. I suppose I should have been grateful he didn't soar up into the sky to catch that fly ball with my name on it. Nobody knew what really happened. Nobody but me. I could've killed the little bastard.

I was thinking about Sally Baldrick, and man, it was so real I can't begin to tell you. It hardly ever works that way now, but back then, every once in a while the fantasies were so real they were virtually happening. Adolescence has a potent power all its own that we tend to forget as we grow older, and that day my power was working for me very well. That's why I didn't hear the other kids yelling at me until the ball was already over my head.

I mean, it's true we only needed one more out to win the game. It's true the bases were loaded. In a situation like that, I should've had my mind on

the game. I don't like softball. Sally Baldrick held a lot more interest. Sue me.

All that changed in a second as I spun and started to run. I couldn't see the ball, but I'd never have had a chance at it going backwards. A fly ball takes a while to get to right field. My teammates had called it, I should have had all the time in the world to wander back and catch the long, lazy fly. When I blew this I was going to get it hard and fast for a week at least. So I ran like a bastard even though it was hopeless. I could at least look like I made a sincere effort at the end.

The ball was coming down in front of me. I could see it now, but it was too damn far! I flung myself out flat, hoping like hell I'd get a concussion and divert attention away from what a loser I was.

I'm sure I was the only one who saw the ball stop a foot above the ground and zip backward into my glove.

I know I was the only one who felt an invisible force gently grab me, right me, jam my feet under me and yank my glove in the air to show I'd caught the ball and won the game.

For a second I thought it was a miracle. Then I caught the little bastard's eye and I knew it was The Dink.

I was going to kill that grease bag

first chance I got. First I had to get carried around on my teams shoulders and smile like I was a hero instead of a prop.

An hour later I was slamming The Dink up against the wall of our garage. His body made a satisfying thunk when it hit the wall. It had been a while since I'd used The Dink to make a sound like that, and I have to say, it felt good.

"What the hell are you doing?" he shrieked. I should've known by the sound of his voice I hadn't hurt him at all. I guess I was too mad.

"What do you think, you little punk?" I put my face real close to his. I knew he hated that.

"You should be thanking me! I just wanted you to catch the ball!" he yelled.

"Oh yeah. Right. I forgot." I said. "I should be thanking you for how I'll get picked first next time. Maybe they'll put me on base. Will you be there to magic the ball into my glove, Dink? What about the game after that? Are you planning on being there every game I play from now on, all the way through the Red Sox winning the frigging World Series?"

"I just wanted you to make a play for once, you spaz!" I felt a little bit of his spit hit me on the cheek. It was hot. Spaz. He said I was a spaz.





I slammed him up against the wall again, very hard this time, far harder than I'd ever done it before. The next thing I knew I was flying across the air over our driveway. The Dink had never laid a hand on me.

I touched down pretty hard. Hard enough to tear up my shirt and get a first class case of road rash all up my back.

I wasn't going to cry. All I knew was I wasn't going to cry. When my eyes focused, The Dink was staring at me in horror.

"I'm sorry, Zack," he mumbled. "I just wanted you to stop, I only made you catch the ball 'cause I thought... I thought you'd... I didn't mean to hurt you, I just wanted you to stop..."

"You used the power, you dipstick! I thought you didn't want to, you asked me to help you! You used it to win a stupid softball game!" I yelled, my back stinging, my lower lip trembling just the way The Dink's did.

"I didn't do it to win, suckbag!" he yelled, and now I did see it, his eyes did go red and suddenly the pain in my back didn't seem like so much at all.

"Look what's happening to you, Stevey," I said. "Look what you can do. You gotta stop, man."

"I like it, though," he whispered, and then he was crying. "I really like it."

The Dink tried real hard most of that long summer. Sometimes I could see him struggling with it. I don't think he flew once in May, and he looked sick and hollow all that time. Mom took him to the doctor and the night before we sat up for hours with our flashlights, wondering if old Doc Sims would be able to tell somehow.

"They'll take me away, Zack. They'll cut out my brain to see what makes me this way," he said. I told him he was still a wicked Dink and he should shut up, but I was scared.

It was wasted effort. Doc Sims couldn't tell anything and at the end of the check up he gave him a lollipop, which Stevey then gave to me. He'd stopped liking sweet stuff.

That night he sneaked Dad's Road Atlas and flew all the way to Canada and back. The next morning at break-

fast he looked so healthy I could have puked. I think I knew then that none of this was going to work. Then came Halloween, and I knew for sure.

I'd made myself a superhero costume. Well, Mom made the mask; I couldn't figure that part out. I had black leather gloves, black tights, black boots. The mask was red, and I wore a red turtle neck with a black vest over it. I'd made up a symbol, too. A red disk with a stylized black hawk's head in the center. I thought it was really cool.

The Dink was being weird, real distant as if everything he saw was happening on TV. He didn't want to go out for Halloween. He didn't want the candy. He said the whole thing was babyish, and something about it being a 'bizarre pagan holdover.' I told him people would notice if a second grader didn't get excited over Halloween.

An hour before dark, he was ready. He'd cut two eye holes in a sheet. That was it.

"Look," he said, his voice totally flat. "I'm a ghost."

Most Halloweens, I'd gone out with my friends, but this one I begged off. Maybe I had a premonition. The fact is, I'd been spending so much time with The Dink lately, I'd fallen out of touch with my gang. They gave me weird looks at my locker, but tough guys don't ask personal questions. The older ones weren't even going trick-or-treating this year. They were more into filling mail boxes with shaving cream, chucking eggs at houses, that kind of shit.

It's hard to remember now that Halloween was once my favorite holiday. Better than Christmas. That superhero costume was the last one I ever made. I hadn't figured out a name for the character I was playing, but I was going to. I thought I might even try my own comic book. The way things turned out, I didn't end up wanting to do it.

We'd had a good New England Indian Summer that week, but Halloween night turned cold and crisp, with just a hint of winter in it. Everything you'd want. The first couple of houses went well. The Battles and the

Quirks. Good stuff, full-sized candy bars, none of that miniature bullshit, and no popcorn balls. We skipped Old Man Jenkins' place; he always made you bob for apples, and that cut into your time and made your face cold for the rest of the trip. Then The Dink started talking, and I got cold anyway.

"This blows, Zack. Why don't any of these people give out something halfway healthy, fruit or something?" he asked.

"'Cause fruit's not a treat. Duh. Don't ruin this, Dink, okay?" I told him. He looked at me, his head tilted at a funny angle, wrinkling the sheet. I wished he'd worn something that would let me see his face. He was giving me the creeps.

"I could do that, you know." He said.

"Do what?"

"Be a superhero. I thought about it, too. I read all your comics. Every single one. For a while I thought that's what I might do. I mean, I can fly. I'm very strong, and I can hurt people without even touching them. I'm practically bullet proof. I will be, soon," he said casually. "But all that hero junk is just for babies."

"Wait a second, wait a second," I said, stopping. "What do you mean, you're bullet proof?"

"I mean, if anybody ever did any of that stuff, everybody'd know who they were sooner or later. It wouldn't be so hard to find out. I know who you are. The mask doesn't hide it at all. Then the enemies you'd made would come and kill your family while you were out, and the government would send the army after you so they could figure out what made you tick and make soldiers tick the same way. That's ludicrous, or course. I'm unique." He was walking away from me, and I had to jog after him.

"When did you get bulletproof, Dink?" I hollered at him, not even thinking who might hear me.

"How many times do I have to tell you not to call me that?" he said, his voice as hard and cold as a blackboard. Then he sighed. "I've been using the power for about a month, Zack. I didn't want you to know. I'm sorry. I know you tried to help me and all. I

have to use it, though. The power isn't something I have. It's what I am."

"Don't talk like you're older than me, Dink! I'm the oldest, I'm going into Middle School next year and you're nothing but a dink, so shut up!" I was really mad. It was all falling apart, I'd wasted my whole summer babysitting this freak, I'd never get that summer back and he was throwing it all away! They'd come for him and with my luck they'd take me, too. I wanted to smack him around some, but I knew he could take me, and that was making me sick. I don't know how things might have gone if Todd Perry and his gang of weasels hadn't showed up.

Todd was dressed as a football player, which must have been a lot of work, considering he was on the football team. He was the king Jock of our school. I was on the fringe of what are called the Burnouts. If you're a Jock you don't want to get caught alone by a bunch of Burnouts. The same thing goes double in reverse.

"Hey, Pansy Boy," he said. "What are you supposed to be? A fag?" His friends laughed. I didn't say anything. "You a fag? You sure look like one. Those your mother's gloves?"

In fact, they were. It suddenly dawned on me how effeminate my costume was. The fact that all superhero's costumes are a little on the queer side didn't help.

When you're a kid, there are times when you know you're going to get it, no matter what you do. This was one of them. Todd's friends were already taking up position to block my flight. I tried to press down my fear. It wasn't going to hurt so bad. The humiliation would be worse than the pain. He wouldn't kill me, he probably wouldn't even send me to the hospital, a few stitches at the very worst. I started shaking anyway, and hated myself for it.

Why didn't I see it coming? Why didn't I even think about The Dink? There I was, standing next to the most powerful seven-year-old on Earth, and I was almost wetting myself. Look, he'd been The Dink for almost my whole life. I expected he'd stand there

crying and run for it the first chance he got. I wasn't thinking.

"What's the matter, Zackery? Can't gaybo's talk anymore? Is that some new queerboy rule, that you're not allowed to talk? Or are you just a chicken shit, too?"

I didn't say anything. I mean, come on, what was I going to say?

"Look guys!" Todd sang out, the street lamp glinting off his stupid football helmet, "Zackery's all dressed up for trick or treats as a Total Gay Fag Chicken Shit!" He took two steps toward me, hooked an ankle behind mine and shoved me savagely. My butt struck the sidewalk and a sharp jolt of pain rushed up my spine. My teeth clicked and I bit my tongue. I tasted copper and electricity.

"Stop it," said The Dink.

"Huh?" said Todd Perry. Then it was quiet. I heard the wind moving dead leaves, and, far away, the sound of a truck on the highway. I looked up.

The circle of Jocks was frozen. I had time to see the costumes, note the faces. A Hobo. A Pirate. A Hockey player. All guys I knew. All frozen in place, except for their eyes.

Their eyes raced back and forth, like they were reading something as fast as they could. I looked at The Dink. He was just a little white ghost, standing there. Rick Parker whined like a dog and I saw tears starting to run down his cheeks. Tim Banks was crying too, making his hobo make-up run. They just stood there.

"Stevey, what are you doing?" I asked. He didn't say anything. Now they were all making dog noises, real quiet. Todd started to cry too, and his body was shaking. My tongue was starting to swell, and my teeth hurt. "What are you doing to them?" I yelled, and the sound slammed my head like a fist.

"Making them think," he said, quite calmly. "And feel." I couldn't believe he was the source of this. He hadn't even moved. He should at least be holding a hand out toward them, like Dr. Strange always did. It didn't seem right that he was just standing there like that. "For every time they've done something like this, I'm making them feel just what it was like for the

other kid. All those times. All at once. They've done it a lot. Enough so, this could make them crazy. I don't know for sure."

The tortured whining of the Jocks spiraled up into the night. Their tensed bodies shook. I thought of all the times I'd dreamed of something as good as this happening to them. The reality turned out to suck a lot more than I would have guessed. It was way too real.

"Stop it," I said.

"Why? I'm not done."

"Cause it's sick. 'Cause I'm telling you to."

"All right," he said after a moment. "For old time's sake." Todd Perry and his gang screamed loud then, and it scared the shit out of me, but a second later, they were running. Doors started opening, grownups came out onto their porches to see what all the ruckus was.

"Come on," said The Dink, and then we were somewhere else—a mile or so away, at the far point of our Halloween route. I almost puked, and the next thing I knew The Dink was hovering over me, a concerned little spook. I noticed for the first time he'd made his costume out of a fitted sheet. It was going to trip him up for sure, the jerk.

"You okay, Zack?" he asked me.

"Yeah. I guess so. You been using the power a lot, huh?" He just nodded.

"Zack, I have to do this quick before someone comes along," he told me. He sounded like our Dad.

"Do what?"

"I have to go. I should have gone a long time ago."

"What the hell are you talking about?" I asked him. "Why?"

"Well, for one thing, I can't make my eyes go back." He was right. I couldn't hardly tell in the darkness, but his eyes were all red again, and they were staying that way. "I could make people believe my eyes were normal, but that would be a hell of a strain, and I'd just develop new powers quicker. I'm going to grow soon, too. In about a week, I'll be your size. Two weeks and I'll be full grown. Then it stops. I think. Shit, I hope, anyway. I can't keep it under control, so I have to go."



He pulled the sheet off his head. His hair stood up straight with static electricity and he looked stupid. "You know, sometimes when I'm flying, I think about how much less you guys are than me. All the other kids. You. Dad and Mom even. So I know I better go, before it gets worse. Sometimes I wanna smash you, Zack. Totally. I know you tried really hard and all, even though you don't like me. But it would be so easy to just crush you. So I'd better go."

"Oh, great, just split and leave me with the bag!" I shouted at him. I was crying, too. I tried to believe it was from biting my tongue, from the shock of being teleported half way across town, but that would have been a big lie. "What am I supposed to tell the folks? Sorry, but while we were out trick or treating Stevey turned into a god, so he's not coming home?"

"I thought about that," he said, and then he put the story in my head. It was so real, I almost believed in it. I saw the blue Buick, and the two guys in it. I saw them pull in front of us and grab Stevey. I felt my left eye swell shut from where one of them hit me when I tried to stop them. I could smell the guys' aftershave and I knew he smoked. There were empty beer cans on the floor of the car.

Only the black eye was real, and it hurt like hell. "Sorry, Zack," he said. "It has to look real. Don't try to tell the folks the truth. You'll only end up in the nuthouse. Well...goodbye. Thanks for trying."

"Don't go!" I blubbered, really crying now.

"Why?"

"You're my brother, you stupid Dink! Don't leave me alone with this." It was more than that. I knew it was. I couldn't say it, though. I couldn't find any words. I guess The Dink couldn't either.

Without another word, he rose up into the dark October sky and flew away. It was a long time before I saw him again.

There's no other way to say this; the next few years sucked. Big time. The folks went nuts. The police and then the FBI took over our house, the

whole town turned out to search. Our phones had tape recorders and stony faced agents attached to them around the clock. And I lied and lied and lied.

Thank God the story he'd put in my mind was flawless. It came easily to my mind, it never varied. It was impossibly full of detail for something that never happened.

For a long, long time, everything seemed like a constant gray nightmare. I didn't eat much, didn't watch TV or read. I didn't do anything, really, and I don't know where the time went; it just passed. My folks were worse. It was like they'd had all the life sucked out of them. Our house became one long Night of the Living Dead, except we never did anything as exciting as kill and eat somebody.

Todd and his Jocks never came forward. I don't know if they even fully remembered what had happen, but their spirits were entirely broken, that was for sure. They were no longer a force to be reckoned with at school, and for a while the Burnouts reigned supreme until a new crop of Jocks rose in the ranks to balance them.

Weeks passed, and then months. The FBI moved out. The case never got closed, it just stopped being a hot issue. No one thought The Dink was alive anymore, let alone coming home. My Mom stopped talking about him and Dad got addicted to those reality based TV shows.

With The Dink out of my life, my grades went up. Once I got over the initial shock, I didn't do much except study. I didn't want to hang out with my old friends anymore, and I didn't make any new ones, either. Honestly, I'd never liked them all that much, and without Dink there was no point in proving how bad I was. By the time I finished middle school, I was almost top of the class. That, combined with my lousy home situation, made the boys' boarding school about 40 miles north of my hometown a natural choice.

I could go on and on about that period of my life. I'm sorry to say I remember it real well. I'm trying to tell you about The Dink, though, and while those years may have been his fault, he doesn't really figure into

them. Except that I thought about him constantly, and hated him, and missed him something fierce. By the time he showed up again, I'd almost started to believe the kidnapping story he'd put in my head. Almost.

I wasn't making any more friends at boarding school than I had at home, but I didn't really think about it. I spent a lot of time at the library, a lot of time in my room. I went out for sports because I had to. In the spring they played baseball and I stayed as far away from that field as I could. The teachers tried their best to like me and I tried my best to alienate them. I was an uptight, high-strung kid. Once when the dorm got a pizza order together and I missed it, I wept for almost a straight hour. The strange part is, I thought that was pretty normal behavior. I had a real hard time keeping things in proportion.

I took a lot of long walks around the lake, and I'd end most every one of them in the chapel. I wasn't looking for God or anything. I just liked the quiet, and the subtle wooden smell of the place.

One January night, I signed myself out to the library and went walking instead. If I'd been caught I'd have been in trouble, but I didn't get caught much and I knew what trouble was. It didn't scare me. Being alone in the dark down by the lake didn't scare me either, nor did walking up the icy, wind-scoured hill to the chapel. It was other people that made me crazy.

The heat of the chapel seemed almost tropical compared to the bitter chill outside. The carpet sucked the snowmelt off my boots and absorbed the sound of my footsteps. I don't know what kept me from screaming when I saw The Dink floating upside down in front of the cross. Maybe it was the fact he was naked except for a pair of black speedo bathing trunks.

"Yo, Zacky boy," he said, and I almost wet myself. The Dink giggled.

His hair was long and unwashed. He looked to be about fifteen, not all that much older than he should have been by rights. His eyes were still red, but now they glowed. It was The Dink, though. Unless some other flying kid knew my name. I tried to say some-

thing, anything, but my throat felt like a wad of sandpaper.

"Isn't this curious?" he said, bobbing slightly in the air. "Here you are in school, a itty-bitty pwep school. All boy, I might add. And all the time you've been here, I've been in school, too. In a manner of speaking." The Dink executed a slow and perfect 180 degree turn, righting himself. He began to drift toward me, and I could feel every individual hair on the back of my neck.

"What are you doing here?" I croaked.

"Well, golly, Zack, maybe it's my spring break or something. I don't know. I just felt like a visit, and after all, only one person on the planet even knows I'm alive, so my options were limited. Besides, I've learned so much lately, I just thought it might be fun to share." He floated closer still and the heat radiating from him was like an open oven. His eyes looked like pits of molten stone sunk in his sallow face. Somehow, though, he was still my little brother. And he was still a punk. Where the hell did he get off laying a guilt trip on me? I wasn't the one who left *him* holding the bag, that was for sure. Even with this monster floating in front of me, I felt the old sibling anger wake and rise.

"Yeah, well, thanks a lot for stopping by," I shouted "But I think you've shared just about enough with me to last a lifetime, Di—"

"DON'T CALL ME DINK, YOU STUPID FEM!"

I was lifted off the ground like a feather in a hurricane, yanked back till I hung four feet above the front door and then rocketed directly toward the supporting crossbeam in front of the altar. I didn't have time to scream or even be afraid. I just shut my eyes and waited.

It took too long, so I opened them again. I was hovering so close to the beam I had to cross my eyes to see the grain. I inhaled dust off it and sneezed. Slowly I lowered until I was eye to eye with the...with my brother.

"Okay," he asked.

"Yeah," I said. "Sure, fine, Stevey, anything."

"Zack, you shouldn't ever call me a dink. Because that's what *you* are. Really. You and the whole rest of your species. What would you say if I told you that you humans are only one of five sentient life forms on the planet? Did you know that ants are only one step away from whipping your butts off the face of the Earth? Once they have their industrial revolution, you all don't stand a chance. Of course, I could intervene. Maybe I already have.

"Dolphins, on the other hand, are no great threat. Deciphering their speech was one of the great disappointments of my life. All they talk about is water temperature and screwing."

"What are the other two?" I asked, reaching for bravado. I felt like Stevey's body heat was giving me a first class sunburn.

"Don't be flip. I'd like to tell you, but there's no way I could put it into terms you'd understand. I could *make* you understand, but I think that would damage your brain permanently. I'll give it a shot, if you're that curious."

"No thanks," I told him.

"It doesn't really matter, anyway. This whole universe is contained in a single bead of sweat on the brow of a vast, moronic Giant. When the sun dries that sweat...*fwosh*. That's all she wrote. So who really cares what happens here? Or what I make happen. I guess I'm free to do what I want."

He was nuts. That was quite clear. His power had driven him totally whacko.

"Oh, do you think so?" he shrieked. I should have guessed the little freak could read minds. As it turns out, he could also write on them.

It was a little like when he'd put the kidnapping story into me, but only a little. This was far more sophisticated. He gave me a taste...just a tiny, little taste, really, of what it was to be him. For a second there was euphoria. The world spread out before me, all golden. Then horror. Knowledge, awareness rushing in, the constant agony of the world, the decay that sets in the very instant something is born. The infinity of things larger, the infinity of things smaller, and me. The Dink, caught in the very middle like a bug on a needle.

I spent a year squatting in the body of a mountain goat. I lived at the bottom of a crack in the ocean floor. I tried to stop a plague that was killing harbor seals and found its complexity beyond me. Beaten by a tiny frigging microbe!

In Tibet I found a wise man, and when I discovered that he was only a man and nothing more, I tore him to pieces. I waited and waited for him to scream, but he never did. I savaged his mind for the answer, but I never found it.

I flew at gravity's leash until the air burned my skin raw, but I couldn't break it and I fell back into the sea.

I tried to understand what I was, but I couldn't.

And then he let me go. I was lying on the carpet runner in the aisle of the chapel, a sodden mass of sweat soaked weeping.

"Why, Dink?" I finally managed. I don't think he noticed what I'd called him.

"I'm thinking of taking over the world," he said. "There are things I can't do yet, but it would be easy enough. All I have to do is figure out how to survive a nuclear detonation. After that, I think I'm in the clear. Or I might just destroy the place. If I wait long enough, I think I could figure out how to put it back together again. And if I don't, so what, right? Either I beat your ass, or the ants do."

"Why are you telling me this, Stevey? Why are you here?" I sobbed.

He was quiet for a long time.

"Someone has to know I'm alive," he said, finally. "Someone has to know I'm still here." When I looked up, he was gone. I wish I was the kind of guy who could think I'd imagined the whole scene. I really do.

For a while I read the papers, watched CNN, kept my radio on the all news stations and waited. Waited for the first sign of my brother The Beast, a Dink Apocalypse. It never came. I guess he changed his mind. I stopped having nightmares, started shaving and bathing again, and about six months after that they even let me stop seeing the school shrink.

I didn't see my brother again until I was in college.



It was the tail end of my senior year. Spring in Oregon is a very lovely thing if the rain stops. The whole world goes green and it seems like everything blooms, even the slugs. It was just coming clear to me that I was indeed going to get finished on time, that I really would graduate with my class. I was carrying a massive hang-over from some celebration I can no longer recall, but I was up at sunrise to slide a last-second paper under the door of my terrifying anthropology professor.

I was crossing the bridge over a stream that was grandly called "The Canyon." The clouds were clearing off fast and mist rose up from the water. Everything was still damp and sun turned it all golden. Despite the throbbing in my head, it was a perfect moment. I stopped in the middle to stare at a spider web hung with a million tiny bulbs of molten dew, a miniature sun too bright to stare at contained in every one, and I knew The Dink was coming.

He'd put the thought into my head. I felt a sudden, mechanical calm come over me, and I suspected he was responsible for that, too. I would have been pissed me off if I could have managed it. He blew my headache apart like the cloud cover.

The mist rolled up over the railing, swirled, coalesced and became The Dink. He was stark naked. His body was as white as snow and it shimmered in the early light like satin. His hair floated and bobbed around him as if he was underwater. His eyes were clear now, clear of any color at all.

"Hello, Zack," he said. "Long time no see."

"Hey, Dink," I said.

He laughed. "Don't worry," he said. "No one will come along." I didn't doubt it.

"So what are you here for this time?" I asked him. "Is our bead of sweat about to dry up?"

"What? Oh! That," he said, and then he blushed. He turned his eyes down and blushed! "I...uh...I guess I overreacted to that, that business about our universe being a...I mean, it is...sort of. That's one way of looking



at it, but it doesn't make any difference, I mean, not to us...."

"Us?" I asked.

"Yeah. Us," said The Dink. "I might as well say 'us.' There's only one of me, and I'm only beginning to guess what I am."

"And what is that?"

"Mom and Dad...their genetic mix...would it help if I told you the chances against there being a me are so astronomical as to be unworthy of consideration? It happened though."

"So...what, you're, like, where we're going? The next step in human evolution?"

"No." He laughed. "I don't think so. I'm a fluke. I don't think there's any real significance to be read into me. Not unless I reproduce, and I don't even know if I can anymore. I wouldn't do that to anyone anyway."

"Oh," I said. "Uh...sorry."

"Yeah," said The Dink. "Me, too." We stood there quietly, staring at each other. Christ only knows what *he* saw. I was looking at a god.

"So," I tried, "you seem a lot better than the last time we...."

"Yeah. I am. Listen, Zack, I'm really sorry about that. I was using the power way too fast back then. It messed me up pretty bad. I'm taking it slower now. I've been just like this for almost two years now."

"Will you stay that way?"

"No," he said. "I won't. I can't. And every change, I get farther and farther away. You may not believe me, Zack, but the last time I saw you, we weren't that different. Not really. Now... No, I'm going to keep changing. It's my nature. I'm just holding it back a little bit for a while. Like you tried to show me."

"I just did that 'cause I hated your guts." I told him.

"Do you still?"

"What's the matter with you, Dink? What do you care? Look at you!" I yelled at him.

"Who else is going to yell at me now, Zack?" he asked. "Can you think of anyone? You're my brother. I don't have anything else. I'm lonely. I'm scared." All of a sudden I was looking down at him from the tree house. Stupid little Dink with his lip trembling.

## OUR AUTHORS

**David Lee Anderson** writes rarely, whereas he illustrates a great deal. He says: "I somehow feel like I snuck under the fence into the prison camp, much to my delight, to be recognized as a writer and proud of it. 'Take me,' I said, 'put me in solitary confinement like Steve McQueen in *The Great Escape*, and I will continue to tell you that, yes, I wanted to be a writer, against my better judgement!" **Kent Brewster** (k.brewster@genie.com) lives and works in Silicon Valley. He writes odd little stories and publishes *Speculations*, the leading magazine for writers who wish to break into or increase their presence within the sf, fantasy, horror, or "other" speculative fiction genres. **Max Burbank** is a playwright, and "The Dink Transcendent" is his first story sale. He now has a wonderful daughter, Theodora. He found out his wife was pregnant the day after he got our letter accepting the story. **Charles D. Eckert** has sold fiction to *Analog*, *Weird Tales*, *Amazing Stories*, *Writers of the Future Volume Six*, *Tomorrow*, *Worlds of Fantasy and Horror*, *Visions SF*, and *Dead of Night*, among others. Rumor has it that he is also a folk singer. **Angus Macdonald** was born on Janis Joplin's sixteenth birthday (E. A. Poe's 150th) in San Francisco; since his family was actually living in the East Bay then, he's been a commuter since birth. **Marc Matz** came to our attention in *The Writers of the Future* Contest. He has also sold to *F&SF* and *Pulphouse*. He finished a novel last November and sent it off to Del Rey. He now lives in San Diego, but formerly lived in Los Angeles, where he supervised the production of beauty products. There's something interesting in the fact that his mother's family are Brazilian Jews, and two of his closest friends are doctors. **Christopher McKitterick** got his MA in writing from the University of Kansas, where he studied under James Gunn. He has had fiction and an essay published in *Analog*. He expects a contract for his first novel any day now. He gave up running a copy machine in Kansas to hit the keyboard in Seattle, where he lives with the world's prettiest SF author (and genius), Kij Johnson. **Yves Meynard** is finishing a Ph.D. in computer science. He is well known in SF circles in Canada, and is rapidly becoming known everywhere. He has won all the top Canadian awards for his stories.

(Continued on page 87)

Stupid little bastard. I wanted to think he'd put that image in my mind, but he didn't. I don't think he did.

"What do you want?" I asked, finally.

"I'd like to visit you, once in a while. Touch base. If I don't have someone, I could get real weird. I need your help, Zack," he said.

"And if I don't you'll go nuts again and destroy the human race, right?" I shot at him.

"No," he said sheepishly. "It's not blackmail. I'm asking."

"Okay," I said. "Okay, Dink."

"Could you not call me that, Zack? Jeez," he said. He was smiling, though. Before he left, he reminded me to hand in my paper.

After that, I saw him two or three times a year. Sometimes the same, sometimes a little changed. He was quiet and polite. Mostly we just talked. Sometimes about the old days. I filled him in on what Mom and Dad had been doing since the divorce. He wanted to know about neighborhood kids, and he seemed disappointed I didn't know what had happened to any of them. He never told me anything about himself unless I asked, and then he had a hard time putting it into words I could comprehend. He gave me feelings instead until I told him to stop.

One winter night he took me flying. He said it gave him a feeling of nostalgia, and told me there was no such thing as motion. Man, it was something. He could have kept the cold from me, but I told him not to. I wanted to feel what it had been like for him, those first few times. Maybe I got it. Who knows?

He started coming less and less.

I got a job teaching theater for a little acting school in Boston. A whole year went by, no Dink. I did a radio voice over, and then a few more. I made ends meet. Two years. I found a place in Salem, not too big, but with a nice back yard. Late one night, I knew The Dink was out there. I didn't wake my wife.

He was standing underneath one of the big pines, and as I walked closer I saw the Moon shining through

him. He looked like he was made of smoke and light. For the first time in a long time, I was scared of him.

"Hello, Zack," he spoke into my mind.

"Hey, Stevey," I said.

"Why don't you call me Steve?" he asked, his voice infinitely patient. "I'm...twenty-seven now, you know."

"Jesus," I said. "So where you been? I haven't seen you in, what, almost three years?"

"Has it been that long? I'm sorry."

I waited. He didn't say anything else. He just stood there, barely substantial, looking in my general direction.

"Steve, what's wrong, man? You seem...uh...distant."

"I am," he said. "I'm in Rome. I'm in the Himalayas praying for a man I killed. I'm on the Moon. I found a golf ball there. Do you want it?"

"No," I told him. "Should I have taken it? I don't know."

"I've come to say goodbye. I have to go. Again," he said.

"Yeah. I figured," I was starting to cry. I didn't care.

"I can't stay anymore. I want to leave while all of you still mean more to me than other things," he said. "It's all starting to be the same for me, Zack. All phenomena are the same thing, just one thing. I wanted to say goodbye while I could still find you."

"I'm sorry, Steve," I said.

"Oh," he said, and then, after a while, "should I be?"

"I don't know," I told him. I could see the lawn through him now. I could feel the night air blowing through him to me. I remembered all the heat he cast off once.

"Oh," he said, and then a long time later, "I have to go now. I wanted to say...thank you."

"You're welcome, Dink," I said. I waited for him to tell me. I waited for a long time, but he was gone, and the sun was coming up. I went inside and lay down with my wife. She was warm and in her sleep she pulled me close. Smelling the gentle fragrance of her hair, I slept. ■



# THE RUST FROM HIS HEART

Della Van Hise

Illustrated by Judith Holman

*"It's the robot's heart," the cybersurgeon grunted. "He's old."*

"It's his heart," the cybersurgeon grunted. "He's old."

Nika Redsands stood next to the exam table, gazing down at the robot and trying not to let her anger reach her lips, trying not to let her apprehension reach her at all. At her sides, her small hands clenched to fists.

"You can fix him, of course." It wasn't a question.

The cybersurgeon—an old man by the name of David Drycreek—laughed. "Fix him?" he repeated, incredulous. "Nika, parts like that haven't been made in over two hundred years!"

Nika wasn't interested in excuses. "I thought you were a surgeon. Josie Twomoons said you're the best there is. If you can't replace Marco's biogenerator, can you just fix the old one—repair it?"

The old man was staring down into the robot's open chest while, outside the window, a sandstorm raged red against an ochre sky.

"There's only so much I can do for *any* machine, Nika," he said, trying to sound sympathetic. "You can call him Marco or Jason or Hey-you, but he's *still* a device—just like a toaster, a stim-node or an air-hopper. He's worn out. Get a new one."

Nika wanted to explode into rage, yet she'd done that with two cybersurgeons already and it had gotten her nowhere. Marco was still dying.

"He's more than a machine, Doctor Drycreek," she managed through taut lips. "He belonged to my great-grandmother—before our family came to Mars."

"Ah, sentimental attachment," Drycreek presumed. He eyed her cynically. "You get over it—quicker than you might think."

Nika didn't want to get over it. "Are you saying you can't help him?"

Drycreek thumped the softly-humming biogenerator inside the robot's open chest cavity. "There's not a cybersurgeon alive who could help him, Nika," he pronounced with finality. "The technology that went into making him died with the company when it went out of business—it's that simple. And besides, what difference

does it make? You can always have a new one made to look just like this one. It'd cost a bit, but you'd probably like one of those new hustler models better anyway. That was what this one was originally made for, you know. Yours has been upgraded over the years, but he was mainly a bed-warmer."

"I know," Nika said stiffly. She didn't want to debate morality with Drycreek. Her mind flew, scheming. "What if I could find a used biogenerator? Back on Earth, they used to dump worn-out robots in cyberyards. What if—?"

Drycreek waved her frantic questions aside, then began closing up the robot's plastiskin chest. "Nika, give it up. Your friend here has had it. I'm sure *he* doesn't care, so why should you? Besides, don't you think it's a little strange for you to be sharing body and bed with your great-grandmother's robot? If you ask me, it's not

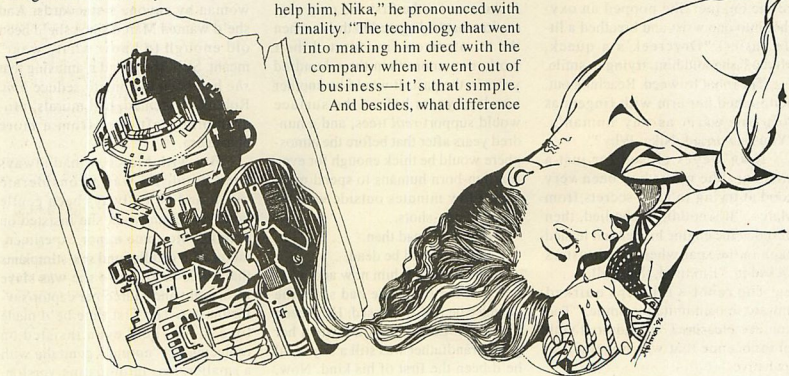


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normal. Get a new one," he repeated nonchalantly. Then, looking up, he had the audacity to ask, "You want me to shut this one down for you before his awareness sensors kick back in? Not much point in a long goodbye, you know. I can scrap the hull and have the rest recycled into—"

"Wake him up," Nika commanded, her voice barely a whisper.

Drycreek gave a soft sigh and an almost imperceptible shrug. "Suit yourself. You can drag him around to every cybersurgeon on Mars if you want, but they're all going to tell you the same thing. In another two weeks at the outside, you're going to be stuck with an electronic scrap heap."

"Just wake him up," Nika repeated. The pain in her throat wouldn't let her say more.

Fifteen minutes later, she left David Drycreek's office with Marco at her side. It occurred to her that the robot was unusually quiet, preoccupied with staring at the red ground as they walked together to the air-hopper.

"I am sorry my self-diagnostic mechanism appears to be malfunctioning, Nika," he said in his soft-spoken voice that reminded her of wind through melodic pipes. "Was Doctor Drycreek able to isolate the problem?"

Nika swallowed hard and kept her eyes straight ahead as she strapped into the pilot's seat and started the engine. She popped an oxy-shot into one wrist and breathed a little easier. "Drycreek's a quack, Marco," she told him, trying to smile.

The robot frowned. Reaching out, he touched her arm with fingers as soft and warm as any human's. "You're worried, Nika. Why?"

Nika's eyes closed for just a moment. She never had been very good at trying to keep secrets from Marco. "It's nothing," she lied, then throttled the engine higher and leaned back in the seat when the thrusters kicked in. "I'm tired, that's all."

The robot's thin lips quirked upward into an imitation smile. "Too tired for pleasure?" he inquired with an innocence that was nonetheless seductive.

As the air-hopper skimmed above the arid Martian desert, Nika Red-sands drew a ragged breath and looked out the window. "We'll see, Marco," she whispered, squeezing his hand.

He didn't know he was dying. He didn't even know he *could*.

"Mars sucks," Mona Rustriver proclaimed, lounging on the sofa in Nika's living room and gazing out toward the horizon. The sun had set a few minutes before; now the firmament bled black and orange, jack-o-lantern colors smearing the sky. "Sometimes I think of just running. You know, like the crazy ones do. Running out into the desert and never looking back. No oxy-shots, no nothing. I just want to run—the way we used to run back on Earth."

Nika rolled her eyes. "You've never been to Earth, Mona," she reminded. Neither of them had.

The other woman shrugged, pale white hair cascading over her shoulders. "I have in my dreams, Nika. Which is more than you can say." She took to pouting.

Nika glanced at her best friend, then allowed her gaze to wander toward the kitchen window. Outside, Marco was tending the newly planted cactus, watering the Joshua trees that stood like sentinels over the desert. She found it ironic that the only things on Mars older than Marco were the Joshua trees—the first and only vegetation that had agreed to thrive when the terraformers first started their work, now more than three hundred years in the past. It would be another hundred years before the surface would support *real* trees, and a hundred years after that before the atmosphere would be thick enough for even Martian-born humans to spend more than a few minutes outside without popping oxy-shots.

She'd be dead then.

Marco would be dead.

She looked at him now and wondered at the things he had seen, the changes he had witnessed. He'd been "born" on Earth, in a time when her great grandfather was still a boy. And he'd been the first of his kind. Now,

another irony whispered that he was the last. Soon, like the blue whale and the white tiger, he would vanish from existence altogether.

It was hard to believe as she looked at him through the window. With hair black as night and long enough to reach the tops of his buttocks, he looked younger and infinitely more alive than his pasty-faced human counterparts. Marco was a *man*, Nika thought. The perfect man. His muscles glistened in the artificial light surrounding the house, and though he limped from time to time—a condition brought on by deterioration of one of the cyberjoints in his left hip—it didn't make Nika think of him as old, obsolete. Instead, it gave him character.

She tried to see him objectively, though she wasn't sure she could. For as long as she could remember, his right arm had been darker than his left. She had a vague memory of her mother telling her that the replacement part—when they were still available—had been made by a different company, and that the "tanning" process on the new plasti-skin was different. After awhile, she didn't notice anymore. Marco was just Marco—friend, protector, brother, entertainer, lover.

Suppressing a wistful smile, she gazed at the robot and remembered the first time they'd made love. She'd been barely fourteen, but more than a woman by anyone's standards. And she'd wanted Marco since she'd been old enough to know what "want" meant. Still, she found it amusing that *she* had been the one to seduce *him*. Robots, it seemed, had morals, programming left over from a more chaste era.

But with Marco, it had always been good. He was a considerate lover, and he'd always been gentle with her, even when she insisted on delving into some minor experimentation with paddles and sex-stimulants that made her believe she was slave for a night and Marco her captor/savior/master. The first time he'd made love to her, he'd even insisted on replacing his "normal" genitalia with a smaller, less intimidating version.



At the time, Nika hadn't understood how he went about this, but she was touched by the fact that he *did* care about her pleasure. She couldn't have said the same for most humans.

Now, Marco's genitalia had been replaced or repaired so many times that he had a tendency to get an erection for no apparent reason—usually in a crowded public place when his circuitry was overworked with multitudinous tasks. It could have been embarrassing, Nika thought, though she found it endearing. It made Marco human.

"He's dying, Mona," she said quietly. "Marco's dying."

The other woman turned toward her with a wide-eyed brown stare. "He's a robot, Nika. How can he die?"

Nika shrugged. She tried to explain about the biogenerator and spare parts and planned obsolescence and defunct companies. In the end, she just repeated, "He's dying."

Mona was silent for a long time, her gaze fixed on the lights of Canal City Station glistening in the distance. "You should try Kylan sometime." She looked over her shoulder, to the far side of the room, where the handsome young hustler sat in a chair, facing the north window. A smile grazed Mona's lips and she winked at Nika. "Go ahead—take him upstairs for awhile. I don't mind."

Nika released a heavy breath and refused to look at Kylan or Mona. "It's not like that," she muttered. "Marco's more than a dildo on legs, Mona. He's *different*."

The other young woman gave a dramatic sigh. "For the love of Mars, Nika, he's not *human*! You sound like one of those religious fanatics we learned about in school!"

The fact that Nika had entertained the same thought herself only left her more depressed. "Maybe."

In the mid-21st century, when the first self-programming humanoid robots were conceived utilizing cybernetic chips implanted into cloned human brains, the fundamentalists had had a field day. It had taken more than fifty years to battle it all out in court, and in the end, the decision had come down in favor of abolishing

organized religion and allowing robot production to continue. (After all, robots were more profitable, and even judges could be bought off by the Sweet Sophie model, reputed to be able to suck the chrome off an air-hopper's throttle. Now, rumor had it that witnesses were sworn in on the current issue of *Robotics Magazine* rather than the traditional religious texts).

Impulsively, Nika glanced at Kylan. He remained oblivious to their presence, staring off into space without an apparent care in all the scattered worlds. "Do you love him?"

Mona blinked when Nika turned to look at her. Then she snickered. "I certainly love *parts* of him, but—"

"No!" Nika protested, her gaze drawn to the window where Marco was tending the garden beyond. "I mean, do you *love* Kylan? The way you'd love a man."

Mona squirmed, clearly uncomfortable. "Of course not. Do you love your compudriver?"

It wasn't a fair comparison. Nika watched Marco as he took a beavertail cactus, newly arrived from Earth, and began digging a suitable hole in the unforgiving Martian soil. Carefully, he removed the beavertail from its transport carton, slipped its roots into the ground, and patted the dirt down around it.

"Marco reads me poetry sometimes. And he tells me stories—about the way things used to be," Nika said.

Mona was grimacing dramatically. "You mean about when men and women used to live together?"

"That—and about Earth." Nika paused, wondering if she dared tell even her best friend what she was thinking. She had little to lose. "I'm going to take him home, Mona."

The other woman's eyes widened. "To Earth?"

Nika nodded grimly. "He's never liked Mars anyway."

"And I suppose he told you that?"

It was Nika's turn to squirm. "Not exactly. Robots never complain. You know that. But I can tell."

"How?"

"Little things," Nika said, feeling her throat tighten with emotion. "At

night, he spends a lot of time staring at the stars. He says he's scanning for incoming transports, but I know he's looking at Earth. He's homesick."

Shaking her head, Mona released a heavy breath. "You're a real dreamer, Nika," she decided. Abruptly, she tilted her head to one side. "You ever been with a man? A human, I mean."

Nika's stomach flipped nervously. She looked away. "Once."

"And?"

Nika didn't want to talk about it. Fantasies with a robot were one thing. Real rape was another. "I prefer Marco."

"You know what the law says, Nika," Mona warned. "By the time you're 25, you're expected to contribute to the baby pond. If you don't, they can take away your stim-node—and your robots."

Nika didn't care about the law. Her back teeth clenched. "So I'll donate an egg next year. But I'm *not* whelping out some bawling calf. Let the surrogates populate the future."

Mona snickered again, covering her little mouth with a tiny hand. In only a few generations, the majority of Martian-born humans were tiny. Mona was simply smaller than most. "You've got it bad, don't you? You're in love with a machine and you're willing to risk your life to go looking for some antique biogenerator? Did it ever occur to you that you can't live on Earth? The air's poison."

Nika wasn't so sure. Man had once said the same thing about Mars. She was watching Marco again as he watered the new cactus. She thought she heard him whistling, but passed it off as the windchimes underneath the eaves. Sometimes she envied him. The thin air didn't slow him down. He didn't have to take oxy-shots and he could walk in the desert indefinitely if need be. She was a prisoner and he was her freedom. He had been to Olympus Mons, and the wasteland that lay beyond the Tharsis Mountains. He had seen the so-called pyramids with his own eyes—the mysterious "face" towering above the red landscape that was, in reality, nothing more than a peculiar formation of crumbling rock.

He had stories to tell. So many stories....

She couldn't imagine his lips still, his voice forever silenced. She couldn't imagine sleeping with one of the hollow-eyed hustlers or trying to teach them how to tend the gardens or how to care for a newborn kitten abandoned by its mother. She couldn't imagine Kylen reading John Donne without tripping over words with more than a single syllable.

"I'm going, Mona," she said, making the decision final by voicing it aloud. "The cybersurgeons can't help Marco—or *won't*. I owe it to him."

Mona remained skeptical. "You owe him *what*, Nika? Damn, girl, it's not like he's *alive*! And if you're all silly-sentimental about taking him back to Earth to *die*, you'd better think twice! It's not like he has a soul, you know. It's not like he has anywhere to go. They just shut down and that's that. Nighty-night and the big white light don't mean a thing to a robot!"

Nika wasn't listening.

Marco was reluctant to leave Mars. It was only when Nika insisted that the doctors had certified her fit-for-travel that he relented and stopped the mother-hen behavior she remembered from her childhood. She didn't like lying to him, and just as he always knew when she was worried or depressed or anxious or horny, he could undoubtedly tell when she was being untruthful. In reality, she hadn't gone to the doctors at all. She knew what they'd say and she hadn't wanted to hear it.

Martians were elitist snobs who didn't like other Martians going to Earth, even for short visits. Somehow, they viewed it as defeat—like a new bride running home to her mother when things didn't work out.

It was during the second day of the four-day journey that Marco started asking questions. For the first forty-eight hours, he'd been content to remain in the g-bunk with Nika, telling her stories about the Year of the Dark Sun, speaking fondly of his memories of her great-grandmother,

making love to her during ship's night. She never tired of him, knew she never would, even if they both lived to be a thousand.

But on that third morning, while she was sipping green Martian coffee in bed and choking down a stale cinnamon roll, Marco sat up on one end of the g-bunk and tilted his head to one side. A river of black hair flowed over his bare chest and his naked body shimmered like refined bronze under the bare light bulb flickering overhead. The expression on his face was all too human, all too melancholy.

"Nika," he murmured, his voice wind-soft and melodic, "what is it you haven't told me? Why are we really going to Earth?"

Nika couldn't look at his eyes just then, so she stared at the wall where a child's red crayon had drawn a dragon's head. She thought of lying. She thought of the truth. Neither was pleasant.

"Marco," she began, not trusting herself to speak, "there's something you should know...." It sounded too cold, too final. She couldn't go on.

The dark head lowered. Soft breath pressed through robot lips. "I am dying, Nika. That's what you're trying to tell me, isn't it?"

Nika's head jerked up, her eyes blinded. "No!" she protested, grasping both his hands and squeezing them tight. Then, more quietly, she said again, "No...you're just...you need a new biogenerator." She thought she felt Marco trembling, though she knew it was only herself projecting human reactions onto him. "We have time," she stammered when the robot didn't speak. "We'll find one—somewhere. Or we'll find a cybersurgeon on Earth who can fix the one you have. That's all there is to it. I—I love..." *you*. She'd never said it before. Marco wouldn't let her. Now, when it meant everything, she *couldn't* say it at all.

When Marco finally looked up, his eyes were soft, his lips trying to smile. "Can it be, sweet Nika, that you've finally broken my heart?" he asked, always the joker, always trying to place her feelings above his own mechanical ones. "It would be an

ironic way for a robot to die, don't you think?"

Nika tried not to think at all. She spent the rest of the day on the lower levels of the ship, drinking saki with the crew and trying not to listen to the sounds of shattering glass that seemed to emanate from deep in her own chest.

Earth wasn't what she'd thought it would be. It was brown where it should have been red. It was hot and humid when it should have been cold, dry. Her body felt heavy and feverish, sick. When the transport finally set down in Angeles Crater, her head was pounding, threatening to explode. Her chest ached.

It took a while to get through customs, and by the time she finally caught up to Marco—who had been unceremoniously processed through the cargo department—she was simply grateful that the supercilious customs agent hadn't confiscated the stim-shots she'd concealed in the sole of his boots. After popping one into her wrist, she felt a little better, though her stomach was queasy and her legs threatened to dump her with every step she took.

The air was poison. She could taste it on her tongue, in the back of her throat. It burned her lungs like viscous acid. Only after two additional stim-shots was she finally able to breathe normally, though she knew it wouldn't last.

"You should not have come here, Nika," Marco said as they left the spacecraft and boarded a large commercial air-hopper, which would take them to the outskirts of the city and the abandoned kiberyards beyond. He spoke close to her ear, hovering protectively when a gang of plasti-clad youths pressed close, snickering. One of the young men spat on the floor. Another was masturbating himself through the fluttery black plastijense. His hand rustled, rattling cellophane. Nika tensed.

She hated humans. She hated Martians. Unconsciously, she moved closer to Marco.

"I'm fine," she assured him, trying to portray an air of nonchalance



she was far from feeling. "I've got enough stims to last a week. We'll be out of here by then."

"Stims?" one of the nearby hoodlums repeated, grinning to reveal remarkably perfect teeth, some gold-capped in a fashion that hadn't been seen in centuries. He injected himself closer, trying to get between her and Marco. "You got stims, lady?"

Nika stared him down despite the fact that he was a foot taller. On Mars, she could have dropped him with her pocket stunner and been within her rights. On Earth, the law wasn't so lenient. It still favored the male animal. She shot Marco a warning glance, calling him off with a look he'd learned to recognize over the years. The last thing she needed was to have him confiscated and thrown in a holding cell. They didn't have time for that. Marco didn't have time.

Her eyes hardened as she gazed at her would-be attacker and the gang of six standing behind him. "Martian stims," she said with a soft but dangerous smile. "I'd be glad to give you one, but they're not meant for Earthers. Your blood can't take it."

The young tough laughed, tossing his head back. An instant later, however, his amusement faded and he leaned closer, baring his teeth. "Hand 'em over, red-baby," he demanded, sticking out one filthy hand. The forefinger was missing, severed at the knuckle. "We'll see who can't handle Martian stims!"

Nika felt Marco stiffen at her shoulder, threatening to lunge at the use of the term 'red-baby.' This was the type of man who had once called black men 'niggers', the type of man who referred to women as 'beavers' or 'snatch.'

She held the youth's ominous gaze, discovering abruptly that she wasn't afraid of him. The worst he could do was kill her and, when she thought of life without Marco, she wondered if he'd be doing her a favor. Impulsively, she jerked her head toward the robot.

"He's the carrier," she said easily. "You want the stims, you take them from him."

The hoodlum glowered at Marco, eyes narrowing suspiciously. "You

got that old 'bot carrying stims?" he asked cautiously. He looked Marco up and down, thick brows twitching. "No way—they won't do it."

Nika only shrugged. "Suit yourself," she muttered. On Earth, robots *wouldn't* carry illegal drugs. Their programming wouldn't allow them to break the fragile law or aid and abet their human counterparts in the commission of crimes. On Mars, things were a little different. Marco was a little different.

The grimy youth stared at Nika for a very long time. Behind him, the other gangsters shifted weight from one foot to the other, a nervous hive-mind held captive by their leader's uncertainty. Nika held her hands out in a gesture of openness, a gesture of surrender.

"You want to search me, be my guest," she offered, hoping he *would* touch her. Then, not even the Earth-er's law would protect him. She felt Marco press closer, his body like silk-over-steel against her back.

A hand snaked toward her throat, stopped in mid-air. When Nika didn't flinch, didn't even blink, the youth glanced at the robot and the hand with its missing finger fell back to his side. His lips curled up into a grin, and the other six gangsters seemed to laugh in tense unison. He looked Nika's tiny body up and down, shaking his head with a sigh.

"You got balls, lady," he said with a foul-breathed laugh. "They may be Martian balls, but they're still balls. I like that." He extended his maimed hand. "I'm Viper."

Nika didn't look away. She glanced at the gangsters and found an odd mixture of fear, loathing and challenge written in their eyes. In some ways, it was a refreshing change to the men she'd known on Mars. These were Earth's survivors. They were the armpit of society, the assassins, the riffraff. She didn't have to like them to admire them.

Knowing they could profit from one another, hoping she wouldn't regret her abrupt decision, she extended her hand in return. "I'm Nika Red-sands, and I'll make you a deal," she offered, squeezing his hand hard. It

was calloused and rough—not at all like Marco's.

Viper grinned, gold teeth glistening. "What kind of deal?"

Nika inclined her head toward the air-hopper's window and the demolished landscape beyond. As they approached the edge of the city, all that remained were ruined buildings, rotting graveyards that held the burned out corpses of automobiles, and campfires dotting the land to mark the territory of human scavengers.

"I need a biogenerator," Nika said quietly, warning Marco into silence when she felt the automatic protest surge through his chest. "You help me find one that's compatible with a CBU-9 like this one, and I'll get you all the stims you can handle."

Viper's grin spread, manifesting on the faces of his off-beat followers. And even though she knew Marco didn't like it one bit, that was the deal Nika struck during her first hour on Earth.

Nika sat gazing into the fire, watching the sparks chase one another high into the night sky. Mars hung red and cold on the horizon, a speck against the darkness, another insignificant spark. She, Marco and Viper had made camp near the edge of the wasteland, at the border of the gang's territory. The boys had gone toward the city cyberrays just before sunset, well aware that Marco was running out of time. They seemed to enjoy the search, Nika thought. At the very least, it gave them something to do other than battle rival gangs, and once she got to know them, she discovered a growing respect for their uncivilized behavior and their rag-tag appearance. What surprised her was learning that Viper himself had once been a medical student at a prominent university. But when his father died and the estate was seized by the government—a common practice since the collapse of democracy—there was no money to finish school, and only the streets to call home.

She could almost feel sorry for him. She could almost envy him. He spent his days prowling the city, look-



ing for drugs and moonshine to sell to the vagrants; and he spent his nights on the borderlands, gathering other of society's rejects with the promise that one day they would topple the corrupt state government and return the land to the people. He spoke to the boys at length about farms and families, about growing crops and raising children. And when he spoke, his dead eyes came to life; his voice became a song; and his passion for living obliterated the dirt and grime and the ugliness that had attached themselves to him over the years.

Viper still had his dreams, though Nika wondered what had happened to her own.

It had been three days, and even with Viper and the boys scouring the closest and largest cyberyards, they'd had no luck finding a suitable biogenerator. Robot hearts were rare, it seemed, and the few they found were tainted with rust, soot, and sand.

What troubled Nika most that day Marco was visibly deteriorating. With the biogenerator failing, his movements were no longer as quick and fluid as they had once been. His legs seemed stiff, and his oldest arm barely functioned at all. The one cybersurgeon they'd found who even recognized the CBU-9 model had been more discouraging than the doctors on Mars. He'd wanted to take Marco and put him in a museum somewhere—a relic of days gone by. It was his contention that he wouldn't last another 72 hours.

It had been two days since then, and Nika couldn't even cry anymore. Her eyes didn't know how to make tears in this primordial Terran air. The stims were drying out her lungs, her bones, even her eyes, it seemed. Her head ached constantly, and her muscles were cramped from the demanding gravity. For the first time in her life, she longed for Mars.

For a while she watched Viper pacing back and forth on the far side of the 'camp.' A few old sheds and tattered tents made up his 'city,' and he patrolled the perimeter like a wary guard protecting the nothingness. At the very least, it gave her time to be alone with Marco, time to think.

She leaned against his smooth chest, closing her eyes and taking a deep breath. It was comforting to feel Marco's arms around her, and had it not been for the fact that he was clearly laboring to function at all, she could have convinced herself it was just like all the times before. Times when they'd sat together in front of the fireplace in the living room. Times when Marco had held her and read to her from tattered books of poetry before taking her upstairs to make love.

"I don't want to lose you, Marco," she said impulsively, speaking her innermost thoughts aloud without intending to.

The robot's one good arm tightened protectively around her. "I will always be with you, Nika," he promised, resting his head on her shoulder. "As long as you remember me, I will be alive in your thoughts, in your heart."

Nika's eyes closed painfully. "My heart," she muttered miserably, feeling it labor inside her chest. Her lower lip trembled. "I'd give it to you if I could, Marco."

The robot chuckled softly, shaking his dark head. "A romantic notion, but hardly practical," he pointed out reasonably. He was silent for a time, rubbing his chin against her neck. Finally, in a deep whisper, he asked, "Will you return to Mars when I am gone, Nika?"

Nika's throat tightened. She could barely breathe. Without Marco, there was no future. "You're not going to die. The boys'll find the biogenerator tonight. I know they will." She wanted to believe it, though faith was the only thing more scarce than an old robot's heart.

But Marco sighed softly. "There are no miracles left in this world, Nika," he reminded gently. "And even if there were, I am not sure I would wish for one. It is time for you to find your own life. And it is time for me to go. Just as Mars is beginning to nurture life while Earth is dying. Just as old stars quietly burn out, new ones are being born. It is the way of things."

Nika blinked back dry tears, her chest heaving. "Don't say that,

Marco," she snapped, her hand tightening on his arm. "You've always been with me. I don't want it any other way."

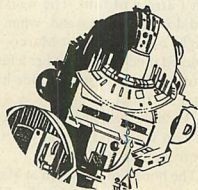
The robot was silent, contemplative. He was all too still, and for a moment, Nika thought it was over. She jerked her head around to face him, drawing a sharp breath when his eyes widened with a moment of apparent surprise. So human—more human than human. More human than she was herself. He even managed to smile—though it was the saddest smile she had ever seen.

He stretched out on the ground, pulling her down to lie at his side and encouraging her to rest her head on his shoulder. He petted her hair, as he had done when she was a little girl afraid of the dark. Nika held on tight, not knowing what else to do, never wanting to let go. Exhaustion made her want to sleep. Knowledge told her she didn't dare. Intuitively, she understood that Marco would never see another sunrise. Eyes that had seen the fall of Earth and the birth of Mars would never witness the sun again. She wept bitterly, silently. Her fists tightened until her palms were streaked with blood.

"Dammit, Marco," she barely whispered, her voice sandpaper rough and filled with pain, "don't leave me! Don't you dare leave me! I—dammit, I love you!"

To her surprise, he didn't try to remind her that he was a machine and love a luxury meant for humans alone. Instead, he merely held her close and left a soft kiss on her lips. "If I could love, Nika, I would love you," he told her. And she knew he meant it.

There, in a field of dead grass, he made love to her for the last time. ■





# WEED SEED

Kent Brewster

Illustrated by David J. Grilla

*She lived in a hole in the wine cellar, and was strange*

"Her little friends call her Morticia," said her stepmother, exhaling the words within a cloud of stinking blue smoke. She dropped the butt into the dregs of her Chivas Regal. Then she signed the check, tore it loose from the book, set it neatly on top of the commitment papers, and extended the pile to me with a snap of her bony wrist.

I took the sheaf of flimsies by a corner, avoiding contact with her liver-spotted hand. "Where is she?"

"Downstairs. In the wine cellar." She set her sweaty glass down on the marble-topped bar, squarely atop an unmounted eight-by-ten portrait of a little redheaded girl wearing a huge pair of very dark sunglasses. "She's dug herself her own little hole." With the precise motions of a mantis biting the head off its mate, she lit another Virginia Slim.

"Would you mind if I took these?" I asked, removing the glass and wiping the cold wet ring from the photo. Pictures from kindergarten through eighth grade littered the table, always a formal portrait of the same girl, always in dark glasses. Each year came with the full, expensive package: group shots of each class, plus numerous sheets of five-by-seven, three-by-five, and wallet-sized photos.

None of the sheets were cut. Not one of the wallet shots had ever made it into a wallet.

She stared at me, her face blank, her mind tallying up all the options and calculating the best possible move. My research had shown that she was forty-eight; she looked at least sixty. Her hair was a lacquered helmet of a flamed color not found in nature. Her face was a tightly stretched mask of lifted, peeled, collagen-injected technology,

booth-tanned to pigskin brown and painted with European placenta-enhanced makeup.

Her teeth were a brown-stained horror.

"No. Not at all. Now, if you'll excuse me, I have other business to attend to. Marta will see you out." And she vanished in a swirl of Chanel and smoke.

"I may need to sedate her...." My voice trailed off as I realized I was speaking to the air.

Marta, thin, scared and most probably illegal, gathered up the pile of photos and report cards and vaccination records. She handed it to me and I shoved it all into an empty compartment of my instrument case.

"This way, please," she said in a liquid Bolivian accent, her skittish stare all over me but never quite meeting my eyes. I followed her down a long gray-carpeted hall, past ice-cold Nagel prints and an ebony baby grand, past picture windows with a spectacular view of the valley, and down a set of narrow steps that followed the contour of the hill.

Car-shaped bulges under snug but dusty dropcloths filled the garage. Teasing hints of fat tires on alloy rims whispered *money* into my ear once more.

Loose black landscaper's plastic guarded one wall, the kind they lay over the ground to seal the seeds of weeds away from the light of the sun. Marta's wounded gaze crawled over me once more as she raised a corner of the tarp.

Beneath the plastic sheet waited a raw, unfinished hole in the wall, patient and mouthlike.

I raised my eyebrows at Marta and she shook her head with sudden vehemence.





mence. No. She would not be going any farther. Her free hand crept up the front of her starched gray uniform to touch something tiny and gold on a chain around her neck.

A second black tarp guarded the other side of the thick foundation wall, heavy with condensation. Wine cellar was an overstatement; it looked like someone had rented a concrete saw for an hour, cut out a square opening, and dug a narrow tunnel along the other side of the wall, under the floor of the living room. Shoddy engineering, that—undermining the retaining wall was a terrible idea, especially on the side of a hill.

Someone else had put in a few upgrades since then. The rich, spoiled smell of spilled wine rolled out in a thick wave, carrying something else, something earthier and musky. Flattened cardboard wine cases covered the lumpy dirt floor on the other side of the opening.

"Thank you. I can find my way from here." I clambered through the hole and sat down on the dirty cardboard, setting my case down in front of me. She lowered the tarp behind me, murmuring something that might have been *vaya con dios*.

Darkness closed its cool, damp hands around me.

"Jessica?" Something in the dark absorbed the sound of my voice. It felt like screaming into a pillow. I crawled forward, feeling my way along.

A third curtain of black plastic barred my way. I pulled it aside. "Jessica?"

"Don't call me that," she whispered, in a voice like dead leaves blowing over concrete. On her knees in the dirt, she crouched over a book. The inner chamber of her sanctuary was lit by the thinnest possible trickle of light from the other end, filtered through what looked to be a dark green garbage bag. The oval shape of her face, dyed a sick cheesy color by the light, floated in the dim black cloud of her hair. "You're here to take me away." It wasn't a question. Before I could answer, she reached back and did something. The tunnel went completely, utterly black.

I sighed. "You're not making this any easier." I listened. She moved towards me, quiet as a stalking cat. "Your mother just signed papers on you, Jessica—"

"*Stop calling me that!*" Something heavy and many-toothed—a baseball bat with nails driven through it, perhaps—screamed past my face. Combat reflexes took over. I thrust the heavy instrument case straight out in front of me with a quick two-handed popping motion and dove after it. The case and I both struck her at the same time. The spiked club missed, hit an earthen wall, and went flying.

Suddenly I was wrestling an angry wildcat.

She had done something to her nails that made them claw-sharp and blade-strong. Her teeth snapped like a rat trap in my ear. Her breath smelled of spoiled meat.

In spite of myself, I became... excited.

We flailed like lovers in the dark, digging into the loose dirt, sending empty bottles crashing in every direction. Young and strong, she was phenomenally fast, faster than I ever was.

But I was stronger, and far more experienced, and at least double her weight. She tired quickly. I wound up sitting on top of her with her wrists grinding bone-to-bone in one hand. The other was tangled in a fistful of filthy, matted hair. I swallowed grit, panting, and tried to speak. "Morticia, then? That's what your mother recommended." She bucked under me again, every muscle turning to wire in my grasp.

"She's not my mother." She twisted again, the tension jumping around inside her like a rabbit still alive after being swallowed by a snake.

"I know." She relaxed, just a bit. "I'm going to let go of you and show you something. Can you be a good girl for just a second?" She nodded, trembling like a wild bird beneath me. A side pocket of the instrument case contained my contact lens carrier. I removed it, snapped it open one-handed, and set it down on a fairly level spot somewhere in the dark. Then I reached up and removed my right lens.

Cool gray light, like bright starlight, flooded one half of my vision. I dropped the lens into the carrier and removed the other one. Then I replaced the carrier and shut the case once more, preventing her from looking inside.

"Ah. Much better. I can see you now." I released her wrists and looked around. The floor joists were barely a foot over my head. The place was filthy, choked with rubbish, mostly empty soup cans, milk cartons, and wine bottles. Hundreds of wine bottles, lined up in ragged ranks against the rough-dug walls.

Textural intolerance, I noted. A classical symptom among the visually impaired; left untreated, many of us would go our entire lives unable to stomach anything more solid than yogurt.

Most telling, she had books. The books made it more than just another feral's den. There were books everywhere, lurid horror paperbacks, gloss-black and shiny silver covers, dripping with blood and talons and sharp-edged letters. Vampire books. "This isn't so bad. A little wallpaper, maybe some futons—"

"What do you mean, you can see me now? Nobody can see down here, nobody but me...." Her voice trailed off. Her eyes flicked down to my hands. They were long, slender and very strong, just like hers. I found a trio of dry bottles that had once held a Gewurztraminer of overinflated reputation. I held them, two in one hand and one in the other. Then I started to juggle, a simple three-club shower.

Her mouth dropped open, revealing broken horror.

It looked like someone had taken a file to her teeth, leaving a ragged mess of her front incisors, upper and lower. Only her canines—offset forward, as were mine—were left whole, long and shiny and white against the brown dead stumps. I lost my concentration at the sight, dropping one of the bottles with a thud. She caught me staring and closed her mouth. Her jaw muscles flexed and bulged and I heard a low grinding sound.

Involuntary bruxism. Another classical symptom, born of liquid diet,



poor electrolyte balance, and desperation. Gods, but it must have been painful, especially while she slept, every dream grinding inevitably into dull, throbbing nightmare.

Looking away, I scanned her titles. "I see you've been doing some research. The complete Anne Rice. Overblown, but useful. And the Stoker, of course." She said nothing, watching, waiting. "But the rest of this is such dreck—Tell me, sweetling, have you drunk anyone yet? Anyone...human?" I watched her eyes carefully. The eyes always told the truth.

There. The barest flicker, towards a gouged-out niche in the earthen wall. I lifted my nose into the air, inhaling theatrically, pretending to catch the scent.

"Ah." A silver-girdled magnum lay in state in the hollow, half-full of something thick and dark. She tensed for another charge as I lifted the bottle free. "No, no, darling. If you rush me again, I'll hurt you."

The cork was stuck fast; I'm afraid I flashed my own canines as I broke the scab and yanked it loose with my teeth. I spat the dirty-tasting thing out into the dimness. I tilted the bottle and took a sip of the cold, clogged liquid. Then a mouthful. It tasted of foul memories, of desperate midnight hunts through moonless, shell-shattered villages. Rat. How I loathe the stink of rat.

But I swallowed it, and smiled.

"Hmm. Earthy. Good bouquet. Nice dry finish, decent enough for a blend. Let's see...I'm getting domestic rabbit, a trace of rat, and a strong taste of dog. Large dog—retriever, perhaps? Labrador, let's say. And female. Definitely a female in heat."

"Who are you? What do you want?" Her face told the tale. I was right, on all counts. Best of all, she was still pure, innocent in one vital, special way—there wasn't a drop of human blood in that bottle. The Master would be pleased.

"Tell me, small one. Why did you change your hair?" I reached up and touched a dry lock. It felt dead, like the tail of a stuffed horse. "Black is such a...dramatic choice."

"So I wouldn't match her any more. That's why she picked me. I went with her outfit. I accessorized well." She shook her head, yanking her hair back from my grasp. A few strands came loose and stuck to my fingers. She was clearly malnourished, the poor thing—properly fed, what a tigress she would be! "You didn't answer me. Who are you?"

"Your name is Amalia Antonescu."

Suddenly she sat very still. The relevant papers were in my case; I'd memorized the facts, however, as I always do. I had a feeling, however, that documentation wouldn't be necessary, not in this case. "You were born 3 December 1989 in Bucharest, to Margid and Nikolai Antonescu, midrank functionaries of the Romanian Communist Party. Your diagnosis was incomplete at that time; multiple congenital abnormalities, most notably severe cone dystrophy, extreme oversensitivity to light." Her hand moved unbidden in the direction of her eyes. "Your parents went missing and were presumed dead in the uprising; you remained in hospital until your adoption, three months later." I paused, noting her elevated pulse rate, her controlled breathing. "Your illegal adoption."

Overdeveloped muscles twitched at the sides of her head and the corners of her jaw. A single molar-grinding crack emerged. "I'm going to ask you one more time. Who are you, and what do you want?" Her control was remarkable, really, for one so young.

"I am...a cousin. A fellow sufferer. A friend, if you'll allow it." One of her severely-plucked eyebrows arched at her. She said nothing. Even without her heritage, living with her stepmother would have taught her control. "I am here to take you home, if you'd like to go."

"And if I won't?"

"Are you familiar with a place called the Agnew State Developmental Facility?" She knew the name of the local asylum, judging from the way she shrunk into herself. "I have commitment papers here, signed by your mother." She flared again at the word; I'd used it intentionally. "Poor woman.

Her husband watched her grow old and traded her in for a newer model, and left her alone with this psychotic little girl-creature who thinks she's a vampire, of all things—"

"Stop it!" Her voice would shatter bone some day, after training. "That's enough. I'll go."

"Yes. You will." I gestured around the dusty cavern. "Is there anything you'd like to bring along?"

"From here? No." She produced a floppy black sun hat and a pair of dark green plastic glasses, one of those cheap drugstore sets that retired people wear over their spectacles. It completely encased her eyes, hiding her expression once more.

Then she smiled at me and yanked a rope I hadn't spotted. Plastic rustled. Plywood fell away. And brightly bright afternoon sunlight blasted in from the other end of the tunnel, heralding her escape.

Clever, clever girl; I should have known the hole would have a back door. The light hit my eyes like boiling acid. I growled, clenched my eyes shut, grabbed my instrument case—no time to replace the lenses—and ran after her.

Fast as she was, she still ran like a clubfooted cow. Eyes screwed tight against the bright red glare, I heard her crashing through the icplant that covered the side of the hill. Her scent alone—sharp dirty terror, ratlike and rancid—would have been enough to lead me straight to her, even if she hadn't made the grievous tactical error of turning at the end of the driveway and running straight down the road, towards the car.

Her cheap rubber-soled shoes flapped against the hot asphalt, beating counterpoint to her ragged respiration. Every fifth or sixth step, her breathing grew strained, as though she was looking back to find me closer. Timing it carefully, I grinned, a horrible sight. She ran faster. Then, at the critical moment, I called her name. Her true name.

"Amalia!"

Her stride faltered once more—  
—and I heard quick metal-on-metal sounds and a hollow thud as she ran full tilt into the Volga's open door.



Risking retinal damage, I shaded my eyes and opened them a crack.

My employer's thin, black-gloved hands dragged her, feet first, under the door and up into the car. She spasmed as her head went under the edge of the door and into shadow, clipping her forehead on the gray steel. Her hat and sunglasses fell away, revealing wide, terrified eyes that no longer minded the burning rays of the sun. She moaned once, softly, as though she was dreaming. Then she was gone behind the bulletproof door, which thunked shut with a soft, insulated sound.

My eyes felt like dull red coals. I closed them and made my way to the car, navigating by memory, the feel of the road beneath my feet, echolocation, and subtle olfactory hints. Once there, I stumbled over her sunglasses and tried them on. She'd inserted a piece of silvery plastic that seemed to be cut from a potato chip bag; the result worked almost as well as my contact lenses.

The Volga rocked once on its specially-stiffened springs; I smiled to myself, knowing the force it would have taken to do such a thing. Little Amalia was learning her first lesson: strength, speed, youth, and experience pale in comparison to the power of the Blood. I'd learned it myself in Vichy, a century ago and more, when the Master plucked me from an orphanage and set me by his side.

Over all, truly and finally, the Bloodline always ruled.

I brushed grit from my knees and elbows, straightened my tie, and slid behind the wheel. Behind heavily-tinted glass, the interior of the car was dim enough for me to remove Amalia's sunglasses. Then I carefully cleaned and reinserted my lenses. During the time-consuming process I was dimly aware of two or three more gentle swaying motions and an imperfectly-muffled thump against the black glass behind my head; the girl, I presumed, was putting up a struggle.

Strange. The Master had only mentioned his belief that Amalia's parents were half-Blood, as I was. When I'd been in her place he'd subdued me almost instantly, pinning me

to the ground, opening my throat, and owning me completely from that moment forward.

I'd never had the temerity to ask the Master what percentage of the Blood flowed through his own veins. It wasn't sufficient to win him a throne in one of the ruling houses of Europe or Asia. It was more than enough, however, to grant him complete dominion over his hidden American empire.

Ah. Something was happening; the black glass partition that divided the car's front and rear compartments began to slide down on silent bearings. I straightened and placed my hands on the wheel at two and ten o'clock, assuming the chauffeur's ever-ready position. The dank brown aroma of the Master's native soil came rolling into the forward compartment. It smelled wetter than usual; perhaps I needed to turn down the humidifiers, before mold began to grow.

"Yes, sir?" I wondered why he hadn't used the intercom, but thought better of asking.

Amalia giggled.

I spun in the seat. She sat in the Master's lap, gently cradling his ancient, hairless head in her arms in an obscene parody of a lover's embrace. Her face was black with blood, none of it hers. She laughed again, a horrible, inhuman sound, and released him. His head lolled back, revealing the sawed-apart ends of trachea, esophagus, and arteries. A stubby little knife glinted in her hand, serrations clogged with bits of flesh and skin.

"He bit me," she said, a ghost of a frown passing over her face. She held up one thin white wrist, showing me the Master's careful signature, a quickly-healing laceration. I felt a stab of jealousy; he hadn't taken nearly as much care not to scar me. "Then he freaked out, and I cut him."

The Bloodline had ruled again, patient, eternal. After an unknowable span of centuries, the Master had made the simplest possible error: taking Blood purer than his own.

I'd actually managed to open the instrument case and get a hand inside before she saw what I was doing. She sprang upon me in a flash, moving

faster than my eyes could follow. I heaved in the seat, once, and felt the cold metal kiss of the blade against my neck.

"Hold still, darling. This won't hurt. Much." Her head whipped around, swift as a striking snake. Her teeth met in my jugular.

A long time later, she sat back, pushing the Master's empty shell away with a backhand gesture. Her eyes danced, glowing with unholy life. "What's your name, *sweetling*?" I recognized my own mocking tone but was too weary to give anything back but what she demanded.

"Agh." I licked my lips. "Philippe."

"Philippe *what*?"

"Philippe...ah...." Try as I might, I was unable to remember my family name. But that wasn't what she wanted.

"*Mistress*. Madame. Or milady."

"M-milady. Sorry."

"That's better." She released me, vibrating with life, glowing with possibilities. The Bloodline ruled; hers was stronger than the Master had believed, it seemed. "Philippe, old boy, do me a favor and hand me my sunglasses."

Suddenly she sounded exactly like her stepmother. *Dear lord*, I thought, *what have I done?*

I leaned forward and scooped them off the dashboard, wincing at the pulling sensation in my neck. "Madame? Are you, ah, going somewhere?" I cringed inside, mentally berating myself for asking the question. The Master would have flayed me for that impertinence. But she only smiled, wiped a smear of my blood away from her lips, and reached into my instrument case, open on the seat beside me.

"Only a minor delay, Philippe. Then we'll be on our way." She found what she wanted and pulled it back through the opening into the rear of the car. She opened the door and stepped daintily out, adjusting her sun hat. "I'll be right back."

And then she skipped up the road towards the house, mallet swinging from one hand, wooden stake held firmly in the other. ■



# THE GOLDEN HOUR: AN ELEGY

Marc Matz

Illustrated by Bob Hobbs

"O senhor, we have incoming," said the station's business voice

"So, Lord," Simeon thinks after the fear had passed, "we start this day with a minor miracle. An omen, or are You just playing one of Your favorite riffs?"

It had begun while he was sleeping, dreaming he was young and back on the Torre, holding on by swollen fingertips to a stormswept wall. It was one of those vivid, kinesthetic dreams. He *felt* the wind ripping away at the safety lines, ice splinters like shrapnel burning his face as he clung as tightly as a desperate lover to the sheer rock—when he woke suddenly into the harsh beating of his heart.

A moment of confusion, of not knowing who or where he was, then a burst of frightening certainty and he opened his eyes, calling out for the VD. Tiny green numbers and graphs blurred into focus centimeters from his face: EKG; pulse rate—220 bpm and rising; blood pressure; respiration rate; and at the edge of his sight, a stop watch madly ticking precious seconds away.

The rapping in his chest grew. He bore down, clutched the crib bars and sobbed, "*Sh'ma Yisreal, Adonoi Elo-henu, Adonoi*"—his words had caught on a wash of jolting pain as the Cardiac Assist came on.

After the agony, the fear, the questioning, he now takes his first easy breath. The timer shows 22.36 seconds, a personal best; useless datum, but comforting. He dismisses the display and links with his Resident.

**IR: Evaluation.** A redundant request; the itch behind his sternum tells him that it had already started to referee the data flow.

"Housekeeper," he whispers, "*Musica please...Berg's Violin Concerto.*"

With the soft, liquid contralto of this generation's Incomparable, the station responds: "Your performance, *o senhor?*"

At a better time he would have laughed. "No...I need to listen for the unexpected." He pauses and swallows roughly. It's hard to think. "The centennial recording by Capoletti with of the Amsterdam. One minute delay." A ghost pain stitches across his chest, "better make that two minutes, starting...now."

He closes his eyes and listens to his breathing, bringing it steadily under control. Finding his center. He is ready for meditation when the wonderfully difficult and moving piece begins.

When the last measure ends, he doesn't need to call back the display. A finger on a wrist tells him that his pulse is back down to its normal fifty to sixty beats; as badly damaged as it is, his heart yet retains that legacy from an athletic life. And thanks to an endocrine rush he feels momentarily great. The nodal implants that help sustain him perform at their best—are "tuned up" as the *gringo* surgeon who had done the embedding had joked—by the exercise. It was odd that he



could never recall the man's name, just his avuncular, off-hand demeanor, as if trying to say, "Listen, I am not impressed. I've dealt with the merely famous before." At the time Simeon would have preferred far less humor and a lot more respect. But then, as the tiring cliché goes, doctors always make the worst patients.

No doubt the surgeon had thought that Simeon would use the technique known as Standardized Clinical Meditation. He would have been as surprised as the SCM instructor was when Simeon had patiently explained that his grandfather, a Musar rabbi, had started teaching him focused meditation when Simeon was eleven and had passed out from stage fright at his first professional concert. Wisdom is a flower that grows in unexpected spaces.

He unclips the bed tethers and does an effortless hand-over-hand up though the habitat's clutter of equipment to the washroom. (The first thing he had done on starting his tour was to move the bed crib "down" by the Command module.) Inside the cubicle he sucks some lukewarm water and runs a damp cloth over his face.

>Reporting: Grade two arrhythmic episode. Mild atrial flutter. Successful interruption of the re-entry circuit. Enzyme series indicates no perceptible tissue damage due to this event. Situation stabilized. Recommend increasing gamma-interferon and paraquinidine therapies. Rest.<

Stabilized. He thinks it's a splendid word. At this stage of his life it ranks right up there with love, truth and beauty.

IR: Yes on the interferon, no, repeat no, on the quinidine. At current dosage he's pushing his tolerance limit. And there are few things less pleasant than dizziness and vomiting in micro-gravity. *Muito obrigado.*

The gaunt-faced other in the mirror manages a wry smile. It's absurd to thank one's bodycomputer, but he had been raised with sturdy habits.

As for resting, he won't hurry but he cannot rest. Never.

On making his way back to the crib he checks the hour: 5:30 a.m.—an

observant life had certainly become easier since the UN finally adopted Greenwich Mean as Standard Space Time—pulls from his locker a long wool shawl, his *tallit*, covers his head and shoulders, and begins his brief *shacharith*—morning prayers. His grandfather would have been shocked, prayer without *tephillin*? But while he has had to make some compromises with his life, Simeon has not forgotten who he is, where he came from, where he is going. Again the *Sh'ma*, this time however gratefully, gracefully, as the first affirmation, not the last. "Hear Israel, The Lord, our God, the Lord is one." Followed by the *Adon Olam*. A prayer selected out of pride and sentiment. For his mother's family claimed descent from its author, Solomon Ibn Gabriel, the legendary poet and philosopher of Moorish Spain. And years ago, his lost sister had written an arrangement of that elegant prayer for soprano and violin. Every time he recited the words he could smell her faint jasmine perfume, feel the coolness of the porch of their summer home high in the dark granite hills outside Rio, remember how they sat close to each other and played.

If, as his grandfather believed, love tempers conceit, then his prayers were safe with the Lord.

When he is done he kisses the shawl, puts it carefully away, and drifts into the Station Master's chair. On auto cue, the hull hood slides away, *mate* starts brewing, and an old Jobim standard softly comes on. He hardly looks at the huge Moon and faraway gauzy Earth, both dramatically half-lit by the sun. When he did his first tour on the Station he would stare unblinking at the sight until his eyes watered; now....

A quick check to make sure that the medical monitors had dumped their data into a by-pass file. While his colleagues are aware of his illness, how considerably it has progressed is so far—software willing—known only to him and his love, his *esposa*.

The thought of Bera causes his hand—dancing a little from nerves—to reach out and touch the glass shell of the bonsai terrarium velcroed onto the near wall. A tiny jacaranda tree in

full purple bloom, with a curving carpet of thimble-sized orange flowers. He doesn't know their name. Botany is his wife's hobby, mountains were his.

He sometimes wonders how long it would be before some other Station Master, out of boredom, finds his swindle routine. It certainly wouldn't be hard to spot. Simeon has little skill at programming, or for that matter, deceit. He wonders if it matters. Ah well....

Reflexively he takes a ritual look at the traffic telemetry, even though the Station would have awakened him if any ships were detected incoming. *Nada*. He whistles a refrain to a guitar's descending line.

"So Lord, when it comes to blessings we're on short rations. Pity, You used to be more generous."

He takes the *mate* gourd out of the server. It is one of those lovely happenstances that a container invented by *gauchos*, a round wooden bowl with a clasped silver top and straw, works perfectly in space. He says the blessing and carefully sips at the scalding herbal tea infusion.

Very well, on to Systems. All's fine except for a small deuterium anomaly on tug Number 4. Releasing one of the camera rovers, he scans the docks: Tugs Number 1 through Number 3 are neatly berthed in their slips, but Number 4 is jiggling slightly as the arthobot maintenance crew swarms over the stern fuel tanks. As usual, the Station has the problem well in hand.

That fact helps keep away any guilt he might feel about falsifying medical records. While the odds of him dying on a two-week tour are mercifully small, the precedent of a Chief of Staff lying is not something to feel proud about. But he had wanted to be at Koch Base, at the medical frontier, wanted to take a Station tour like any other volunteer—and he almost always got what he wanted.

He sends the camera skimming out to the endslip and over the construction shack that half covers the first extra-solar probe. Only the hundred-meter tail, the torch propulsion system, is clearly visible. Inside the mylar tent is the rest of the probe, a kiloton of sensors, shielded computers, power-



plant, and the iridescent wing-like TS-drive generators. It is hard to believe that such a tiny craft can make the nearly five-hundred-year journey to the Alpha Centuri system. To Simeon the ship looks exactly like one of the dragonflies that used to buzz forlornly around his clinic in the upper Amazon—although he is careful not to share that observation with the project engineers; they're touchy about their shoe-stringed venture.

Still, he admires them, and as he freely admits to himself, resents them a little as well. They are like young climbers off to try a new approach, a new mountain, while he, is condemned to the flatlands without a promise of tomorrow.

Speaking of the young, he runs his fingers over the etched glass surface of the Command board. Life Support tells him that the two engineers currently living in the shack, Susan and Mustaf—no, Collins and Boukeneuf, given names are out of fashion nowadays—are quite awake. A lifetime of reading signs alerts him that what they are about is definitely not work related. The first genuine laugh of the morning, Simeon has heard from reliable sources that the mechanics of love in free-fall can be as daunting as doing it in a hammock during a high wind—damned daunting, that was an analogy that he could take literally. As Freddie, his old English *compadre* frequently boasted, and always tried to prove: "Climbers bloody well do it with altitude."

He wishes Collins and Boukeneuf well, and in remembrance of sweet Freddie, raises in his mind's eye a glass of whiskey—neat, no ice. "To the best who walked the sky."

A last sigh for Freddie and he sends the camera home and boots up his Secretary for the day's agenda.

The top of the time log displays a terse message sent up via the Farside multiplexor from T. Zane, Koch Base Administrator. Please call him at Simeon's earliest convenience. The Secretary's filter had it flagged yellow—low priority (he may respect his Resident, but he loves his Secretary). If the key-words routine is accurate,

probably another bitch about some petty larceny that the lab warriors chronically engage in, along with some veiled personal innuendos. In regards to the former, he has no sympathy. His people are supposed to be creative—and it is a matter of life and death. As for the latter, he does have some compassion. After all Zane is a mandarin, chosen for his competence, whereas Simeon is, quite honestly, a political appointee, picked because he wanted the post and had the right friends. Were their situations reversed, he would be as riled as the Administrator. But then, who promised a fair life?

T. Zane is no problem. After dealing with orchestra conductors, pen-pushers are but sheep to his wolf.

Next a review of status charts and lab progress reports, for him a fairly perfunctory task. There are forty-two physicians, all the best in their specialties, out of a total base population of three hundred and seventeen. Not much input is needed from an old tropical diagnostician. All that he can give them is the example of his life, a reminder of why.

A lengthy missive from Mendes, his lawyer. It seems that this year's royalties are not likely to cover the clinic's overhead. Hell, after all these years it amazes him that his work is still in DGG's musical catalog. He may have been the prodigal of his generation, but that generation is long past, and tastes have changed—as witness that cold, pointillistic rendition by Cappoletti. Mendes was recommending, for the *n*th time, accepting the constantly offered government assistance. He snorts. Guilt money.

When he and Bera first started the clinic, he of course first went to the National Ministry of Health. Thanks to his name and connections, he did not have to wait in unending corridors that smelled of floor wax and nervous sweat. No, not he, not the *Maestro*. He was swiftly ushered into offices furnished with big rosewood desks and small fixed smiles. He told them how the clinic was already handling a case load of two hundred patients a day, some with afflictions

that were supposedly eradicated decades ago, some with diseases that no one on the datanet, human or machine, had ever even heard of. And while they listened to him and nodded politely, their eyes would always shift away, not seeing the artist once toasted on three continents, the new physician with honors already budding, the young husband astonished at his luck, but seeing behind their dark eyes just another supplicant for the useless *indios* and *camponeros*—and a Jew. Their promises were as hollow as the sound of his departing footsteps in those unending halls.

Do not forget, do not forgive.

Mendes also recommends more corporate "donations." He groans. Even when the money comes from someone good like Antonio Yamuchi—they grew up together playing football and sonatas—of Santos Pharmaceuticals, there's always a price. Yes, that's all the clinic needs, more handshakes with the Devil.

He bites off the urge to scrawl "No!" across the entire surface of the floating screen. Better to let Bera decide; she has the sensibility that offsets his righteousness.

But he will tell her to sell his violin first. A Stradivarius will buy a few more years, a few more lives.

Sadness fills him. "Loneliness is like the rain; from out of the sea..." Oh Lord, will I hold her again?"

No answer, but then, no expectation.

A splash of bright notes from Jobim's guitar brings him back to here and now. To work.

The promised, and long put-off, article for *Lancet* on early recognition of necrotizing enterocolitis, NEC for short, with minimal field equipment. A subject in which he has become an unwilling expert; four of the last six babies born on the Moon have been complicated prematures, all of them developed NEC, their gastrointestinal systems collapsing, dying. Only one survived.

And he had thought that particular battlefield had been left behind.

It's ironic that with all those brilliances in residence, Simeon is the

only one with significant obstetrical experience. Considering that most of the personnel who aren't World Health or military are Rockers—stubbornly determined to make Koch Base more than just a research site—it's preposterous of the Secretary-General to keep turning down his request for a real ob/gyn and a pediatric surgeon, or, at the very damned least, a capable primary care nurse.

So much for vaunted clout. And he has three more pregnancies in first trimester. At the moment he's trying steroid therapy, hope, and compassion.

He tells the Secretary to send *Lancet* an apology for the delay and moves on. Another yellow flag. This time a request for an interview from a reporter for the *Jerusalem Times*. It was supposed to be for yet one more story on why there were so many viral plagues these last fifty years. The reporter not so subtly mentioning that he was Simeon's second cousin twice removed. He instructs the Secretary to send the standard decline tape. What new words could he say to his kinsman? That the reasons were many and complex and in the end you could just say, and probably not lie, that it is the last revenge of the rain forest?

But the forests were destroyed not so much by greed, but by dreams. The dream of a better life, the dream of children no longer crying from hunger. The dream of hope. Who wants to believe that their dreams released death?

Glancing over the outline of proposed questions prompts him to call up a holo of the Foe. No, he corrects himself, just another adversary. While there is only one way into this world, there are still many ways out.

Strictly speaking, it is an enterovirus, number 176. Thirty nanometers in diameter; cubic symmetry with a RNA genome of four major, three minor, polypeptides—that extra bit of mind being a real interesting kicker. The holo shows, draped around the virus like a clotted mass of blue seaweed, the mycobacteria that are the virus's allies and symbiotes.

Simeon was one of the first to discover the virus. Luckily not the very first; the idea of this beast being named

after him instead of poor Hobbs makes him shudder. *No obrigado*; one pandemic to a reputation will suffice.

At the beginning he had thought it was an outbreak of epidemic myalgia—another supposedly eradicated disease—among the children; the early symptoms were so similar. The serum analyzer soon revealed a far more serious problem. A "new" virus, partnered and protected by a variant of the *avium* mycobacterium—a pathogen, halfway between virus and bacterium, able to hide in cells along with the virus and notably resistant to the body's own immune system and to chemical attack. The two germs working in tandem degenerated the heart's conduction system, gradually destroying the rhythm of the heart's beat, and almost as an afterthought, producing masses of fibrous lesions on the heart wall. There was no need to estimate the mortality rate.

He had sent off his samples to World Health and the Ministry and promptly instituted standard hygienic containment policies. But even then he had underestimated the dangers. He had mistakenly thought that because of its likeness to certain other diseases, transmission was solely through the fecal-oral route. Then the teenage parents started showing infection and, too late, he found out that in its early stages the disease also had an air-borne vector.

*I was tired, overworked, depressed.*

*I have no excuses.*

The disease turned out to have a dormancy period related to the age and size of its victim. In Simeon's case it had only become aggressive a little more than two years ago, shortly before he had arrived on the Moon.

Anti-viral agents and immunoboosters buy time. Cryothermic surgery on the nerve bundles buys time. Artificial transplants are fine if you don't mind a hefty chance of a fatal embolism, and the disease then deciding that your pulmonary and/or your central nervous system make good alternative sites. Low gravity buys time—enhancing the calcium influx in cells (A nice discovery Doctor, another citation for you in the

Abstracts. But tell us, how does it help the millions down in the Well? Silence). Bodycomputers buy time, if you have the money or the fame and can tolerate the surgery.

This plague, like others, will be defeated. Our knowledge is vast; our tools are strong. Six years, they say, maybe eight; just hold on long enough.

Sutton's Law of medical research: When there is time, there is no money; when there is money, there's no time.

Buying time. The justification for Koch Base, the Station and the ships it patiently waits for. The reason he is so far from those who love him.

All right, enough damned introspection, there's that hapless *Lancet* paper to be finished.

It is early in the afternoon when the Station's business voice—baritone, authoritative—calls to him: "*O sensor, we have incoming.*"

"Confirmed?"

"Positive K meson emissions are being detected; standard ship's signature."

"Well, come on, show me!"

Obediently, the hull's window opaquates and then displays a region of stars. In the center of the field the Station simulates in brilliant orange the rending tracery of meson particles.

Yes, definitely a ship, but which one? The *Jenner*, the *Salk*—no, she came in last month—the *Pasteur*, the *Hiro*, or the *Ivanovski*? His Resident chimes a soft warning about his pulse rate.

Next up, the unique catenoid shape of the TS drive, as delicately colored and as translucent as a soap bubble suspended between two rings. And finally, sharply, as the drive finishes twisting through the Argand plane, the ship.

Not even an engineer would call it pretty. While the little probe may look like a dragonfly, the ships most resemble the picked over skeletal remains of a vulture. But in this case form misleads function. It carries life, and hope.

"Which vessel?"

"Scanning... it is the *Pasteur*."

The Resident chimes again, louder. He ignored it. *Nesso!* "Station, ready tugs Number 1 and Number 3,



establish communication channels and alert me in five minutes." This time he uses the lilting *Bossa Nova* strains in the background as his focus....

"Communications ready."

Pulse in the low nineties, tolerable. Awkwardly he shifts to thinking in English. "On."

A flat screen replaces the window. A man seated before a glassy console appears. Sorenson, grayer, and surprisingly much thinner. Simeon's hands move over the board, making sure that the tugs have extra stores of food and water.

"Welcome back to reality, Captain."

The man smiles. "Doctor Pinheiro, is that you?"

"Yes, still in the flesh." Simeon touches the register. "I have you gone three weeks, five days and forty-six minutes. Your time?"

"Six years, seven months and—" Sorenson rubs his face, "some odd hours."

"Long voyage."

"Yes, we went very nearly perpendicular to the arrow, strained the *Temporalspatiale* generators to the max. Out to Pallas and back."

"I know; we received your signal ten days ago. Good trip?"

"Well, if we ever start any asteroid mining, Pallas is going to be at the top of list. She's a beauty, incredibly rich in heavy metals—sorry, Doctor—I expect that you're more interested in the lab results."

The big Norwegian has a mastery talent for understatement. Simeon draws back, teasing, "Yes, I rather do."

"Of course. On your mark I'll engage direct link with the tugs and then transfer you to the Director."

Simeon looks at the Command board. Tugs are free of their slips and control codes sent. He snaps his fingers and says, "They are all yours, Captain."

Sorenson nods. There is a brief moment of blackout and Davout comes on. Unlike the Pasteur's captain, spending more than half a decade in imaginary time has hardly affected the Frenchman; but then Davout has one of those plump,

cherubic faces that defies the years. He lazily waves a drinking bulb at Simeon. "Allo, my friend!"

"Hello, Paul. Celebrating?"

"This?" He sloshes the amber liquid in the bulb and grins. "Hine cognac, best of the century. An appropriate end of voyage libation. But yes, in the labs we are celebrating."

If Sorenson were a thousand kilometers closer he would have demonstrated to Davout the strength of an old mountaineer's grip. "Would you care to tell me the reason?"

"I suppose I could tell you about our new pan-spectrum antibiotics, or that yet another cold virus has, as the Americans would say, 'bitten the dust.'"

Davout is a great scientist, a fellow laureate. It would be breaking a Commandment. Murder is out of the question. "Tell me about Hobb's disease."

A female hand appears from off camera and ruffles Davout's bald fringe. He turns around and kisses the hand. When he faces Simeon again his expression is clear, his words composed. "We were unable to find any new way to genetically attack the enterovirus; it's defenses are too formidable."

Simeon unclenches his hands. "So...."

"However, we did find a new direction to the mycobacterium problem. We have created a new viroid—bah! what a terrible name—one of those circular strands of RNA that—"

"—I believe I know what a viroid is."

"Of course, Simeon, my apologies. I have been preparing the media release," Davout shrugs, "you know how it goes."

"I do. Please continue—and you can skip the deep design specifications."

Davout nods abruptly. "We piggy-backed a protein sequence onto the viroid that inserts itself into the mycobacteria's enzyme-producing code—Simeon, my boys and girls did such beautiful work! Especially seeing as how sensitive the chaos is at the nano level. The result is that the

pathogen no longer finds the virus appealing. When they meet they have a *contretemps*—an argument. With the two separated, divorced, from each other, our conventional therapies become far more effective. Not a cure, but there should be no further deterioration, giving neural regeneration a chance."

"Has this procedure been fully tested?"

"Four thousand hours on the organic analogs. Uniform success. And the viroid's absolutely harmless." Davout leans towards Simeon. "Listen, my old friend, we have now the breathing space we need. Remember when I came down to your forsaken clinic during that terrible cholera outbreak; we were doing triage round the clock until—like Rilke's angels—we were hardly able to distinguish between the living and the dead. And how I would swear and you would pray for minutes, golden minutes, for our patients before the worst happened? Now we have our hours, countless hours. We will win this war—and all the others."

Simeon whispers in reply, "And all our battlefields are holy."

Davout stares at him. "How do you do that? After all we have been through?"

An old argument, an old answer. "Paul, it is precisely what allows me to keep going through."

His friend sighs, "I do not see and undoubtedly never will...however, if it works."

"Yes, I try to be practical. My congratulations and gratitude, Paul. I will speak to you again soon, but now I need to be alone."

"For prayer?"

"A conversation."

The Frenchman, misunderstanding, quietly shakes his head and signs off. Simeon sets the window back to the Moon and Earth and watches for a while, unblinking.

"And thou shalt forget thy misery and remember it as waters that sweep away...." Thank You."

"Station?"

"O senhor?"

"Please connect me with my wife." ■



# WITHOUT FEAR OF REJECTION

Sten Westgard

Illustrated by Bob Hobbs

*When we were kids, Paul and I were inseparable*

The halogen landing lights strobe, making the tears on my mother's cheeks twinkle. The helicopter engine shrieks as it pulls us off the ground, burdened with the weight of me and Doc and my parents. The blades chop off whole parts of the carefully trimmed evergreens, littering the grounds of the estate with shattered fir needles. As the pilot drags us up into the clouds, the air gets colder and colder in the cabin, chilling my bones and my lungs. And I begin to fear about all this unconditioned air. Yet all I can really think about, as the rotor screams and the pilot radios ahead for clearance and my parents look at each other worriedly, is that I'm going to see Paul again.

Paul is my brother, my twin, the separated part of myself. Until this moment, I had always considered him my healthier self. Now he's the one

with the problems, not me. At least, for the moment.

"Shouldn't I have a mask?" I shout at Doc, trying to make myself heard over the turning of the blades. "Or a suit? Won't the air be bad for me?" Years ago, Doc taught me to be afraid of the outside; he told me I had a disease.

"Don't worry," Doc shouts back, his voice fighting to reach me even though he's sitting to my right. "You'll be okay."

"You have nothing to worry about," Dad shouts suddenly across the cabin at me. Even with fear in his eyes, his voice is hard and controlled.

Watching the ground speed beneath us, I try to still the fear for myself. I turn my thoughts, my fears to Paul, the reason for this midnight journey. Something's wrong with him, but neither Doc nor Dad has told

me what. They're too busy talking with the pilot, or using the cellular to talk with the surgeons at the hospital. Mom is just sitting on the bench across from me, sobbing and crying. Crying about Paul.

When we were kids, Paul and I were inseparable. Mom and Dad couldn't tell us apart sometimes, so we got away with a lot of mischief. And there was a lot of mischief, because Dad was so strict and Paul was so cunning. Dad kept us at the estate, secluded, cloistered from the world outside. Dad didn't like to see the two of us; didn't like the sleek-suited guests to know he had children. There were too many board meetings, too many gene-therapy sessions, for parenting. He had servants for that. And when he made time, we made it hard for him.



"Romulus and Remus," Dad called us, in the sporadic moments when he was home. He shook his head whenever we tried to use Mom's electron microscope to look at the insects we captured, or when we dropped our dolls in her reagents to watch them dissolve. Dad stopped shaking his head when we wiped his drives with the electromagnet Paul made. Trouble didn't last long. It gave way to something else.

I remember Paul more by the holograph I have than by actual recollection. Haven't seen him in eleven years. Haven't seen hardly anyone except the servants and Doc and my parents. They tell me he's done well out there, past the trimmed hedgerows and the lines of trees that make up the Grundahl estate, this little Gothic mansion that my parents call home. I think they actually call it Post-modern Gothic. I'm not that particular. I keep to my room and Mom's lab, mostly. Long ago, Doc told me I could never go outside, or the viruses and the bacteria would consume me. So I spent my time inside, looking out from the glass-walled atrium at the droopy-petalled irises.

"What's wrong with Paul?" I ask Doc, as he puts the cellular down.

"He's sick," Doc shouts. "Can't move him. We've got to go to him."

The wind whips through the cabin, rushing in through a door that doesn't seem to close properly. It's like a fifth person in the cabin with us, crying and shouting at us and blowing Mom and Dad's hair all over.

I look at them for a moment. Dad's arm thrown around Mom, gripping her tightly, his hands shaking slightly as he holds her. I've never seen him afraid like this. He's ridden out five-hundred point plunges in the markets and remained unruffled. But now his son's life is in danger. I've never seen him care so much.

"Is he going to be all right?" I shout at them, though Doc is right next to me.

Mom and Dad are looking away, out the window at the city lights

streaming below us. They haven't heard me.

"He's going to be fine," Doc says, gripping my arm tightly, holding onto me a bit too long. "He's at the BioCon laboratory. We'll be able to save him."

I shrug him off, frightened even more by the tone in Doc's voice. I've forgotten that this is my second time out in the real world.

I've been outside the estate once before, but there's no way I remember it. Before we were born, we were brought to Grundahl estate from the BioCon laboratory, custom-made kids ready for implantation in Mom's fallopian tubes. Yeah, that's right. My brother and I are gene-dreams, chromosome carvings, whatever epithet you want to hurl at us—born from a zygote made with spliced sperm and a lab-grown egg, combined in ideal laboratory conditions, witnessed by two medtechs in clean suits. Depending on how you look at it, we're the product of a genetic orgy or an immaculate conception.

It's not that Mom and Dad couldn't conceive us; Dad's germline has had as much surgery done on it as the rest of him. But Dad wanted his kids done right. No sense in a random sperm-meets-egg story. Dad wanted the best, the finest, the latest model that science had to offer. So he went to BioCon to check out their new line of sperm and the year's latest ova. It's funny, only sixteen years have passed and we're almost back to where we started from. But that's all the traveling I've done until now. Any more, Doc warned me, and I might die.

The weird part is that, at first, they didn't even realize we'd be twins, much less what might go wrong with us. All that scrutiny and technology, and they couldn't control how many successes they got. Two geniuses for the price of one, what a deal, eh? Somewhere in that Petri dish, or whatever they had us in, what was supposed to be one perfect embryo split in two. Blame chaos or divine will or some careless medtech, it doesn't matter. Paul and I are ragged halves of

what should have been a seamless whole; we took something from each other when we became brothers. The sonogram must have been quite a surprise. They thought we'd both be screwed up, two more DN-decays for the Swiss hospitals or the government asylums.

Mom and Dad were lucky. Paul was exactly as they wanted him. For a while, so was I.

The first five years of our childhood, Paul and I were always together, the perfect matched set. At first, we played under neon lights in windowless rooms where the air was purified and the humidity was controlled and the toys were always sterile. Dad and Doc wanted it that way, to let us grow a bit before they saw what the real world would do to us.

Paul and I loved Legos most of all. We built castles and starports and more out of those square plastic bricks. Everything we built meshed together. My cathedral flowed perfectly into Paul's shopping mall and somehow the two things were better that way. Paul always knew how to bring out the best in me.

We had a game we played, for a while, at least, that whoever won Doc's quiz would call himself Paul. It was a wonderful trick for us, because Mom and Dad saw us so rarely, they could never tell us apart. They gave us clothes with names and we'd just exchange them. Or rip off the names. Whoever was Paul wore Paul's clothes. We competed to see who would stay Paul the longest, and who could get the most toys from Mom and Dad while being him. It lasted until Paul stopped looking so much like me, until his skin grew a little more white than mine, and stretched tighter around his eyes.

I think Paul was better at being Paul than me. Not by much, but enough. Yet he never held it against me. He might have beaten me at more of the quizzes Doc gave us, but he never rubbed it in. If he won at chess in front of Doc, he would lose at checkers later on, when we were alone. And when Mom and Dad gave him stars to put in his workbook, he always saved one for me.



One day we saw a new face at the estate. A small man in a gray suit with suitcases and suitcases full of equipment. All of it for testing me and Paul. Holograph games that pitted our logic against an AI. Tiny sensors to stick to our forehead, to measure our sweat and our nervousness. For three days, they tested us. Paul and I had to stay in separate rooms; we couldn't even talk to each other. At the end of it, the gray-suited man took my parents aside. I could overhear bits and pieces of their conversation while Paul and I made up for the lost playtime. They kept mentioning Paul's name, and phrases like "future patent development," "genius potential," and "paradigm breaker." I guess Paul held the promise of Nobels and quantum leaps. Me, I was just smart. I had gotten over a percentage point less than Paul on the tests, only ninety-eight point six.

The next day Doc took a sample of my blood into his lab. When he came back, he told me that I had ADA—adenosine deaminase deficiency. Nothing in my system to protect me from disease or infection. Never mind that Mom and Dad had been letting us out of the rooms for a year when Doc told me. Never mind that Paul and I played cop & cracker on the grounds, tinkered with the sonostove in the kitchen, went anywhere on the estate, really, and I had never had a problem. I guess you could say I was lucky.

The first thing I worried about when Doc told me was Paul. Paul and I were so identical. At the moment I heard the news, I was so afraid that Paul would have ADA, too. That he would get sick and die. And leave me alone with the servants on the estate.

But when I turned to Paul all I saw were tears. Paul was crying, not for himself, but for me. He asked Doc if there was anything he could do to help, staring at him with pleading eyes. Doc shook his head. Mom took Paul away in her arms, trying to comfort him. Dad, in one of his rare cameos, came down from his suite, frowned at me, and said I was sick.

The next day Paul went away for school. Not the school that normal

people have. Not even the VR tutoring that Mom and Dad gave me. Paul got a real tutor, one who worked him, tested him, challenged him through the headset. Interactive education from sight to sound to touch to personality. Six hours a day in VR to start, Mom says. And more as he grew up.

Now Paul's at the University. Head of his class. Nearly head of his department already. The labcoats look at him and drool, and not just because of his genome. He's brilliant, Mom tells me. As I would have been if I could have left. Paul's got three patents to his name already, with Mom and Dad handling the money until he reaches his majority. They've set up a corporation to sell the processing rights. Thanks to Paul, we're all set for life. And we're all grateful, especially Mom and Dad. Every Christmas they fly to his campus to celebrate with him.

I wonder if he remembers me still? He's fuzzy to me now, the mythical archetype of a true friend. It's hard to remember that this creature I've idealized was a scamp like me. We played hide and seek amongst the rhododendrons; Mom hated how we would come back stinking like flowers.

"What's happened to Paul?" I ask, shouting across the wind-whipped space between me and my parents. Finally I get their attention. They look at each other, then at Doc.

"He's sick," Mom says, trying not to explain, trying to give some brave face instead.

"You already told me that," I say. "What's wrong with him?"

"He has something wrong with his blood," Doc says.

"Leukemia," Dad shouts angrily, "Say the damn word at least!"

"His stem cells...his bone marrow is failing," Doc protests. "It's not necessarily leukemia!"

"Damn near everything else is failing, too!" Dad shouts, hurling the words across the compartment, not at me but at Doc.

"It's going to be all right!" Doc shouts back. Then he turns to me and

smiles. "Everything's going to be fine. Paul's going to make it."

I look away from Doc's gaze. Doc is still too full of himself. Still can't forget that Paul and I are mostly his creation. My parents' money, true. But Doc's splicing. Doc's selection. And now, Doc's mistake.

Mom is sitting over there, Dad's strong arm around her, looking at me with reddening eyes. The wind is blowing too fast through the compartment for the tears to fall. They dry up, or are blown away. Is she remembering Paul? Or is she remembering the time before?

Mom told me once why they were keeping me at home. One day, when I was still very young, I had a fit and tried to run away. Luckily Dad switched off the security fence or I would have electrocuted myself. The servants picked me up just a few yards outside past the hedges, scratched by thorns and gravel. That night, after Dad had slapped me, Mom came in during the middle of the night, woke me up, and told me why they wouldn't let me leave.

"We had a daughter once. Years before we had you," Mom said, laying her hand on my bruised face. "She was brilliant. She was our child and not our child, like you and Paul."

The floodlights of the grounds reflected in her watery eyes. "She lived only fifteen years. Then her synapses—her brain—began to degenerate. And the decay took her away from us."

She hugged me to her bosom. "Your Dad swore that he would never let a child of his die. That he would never lose another brilliant child to the decay. He had put so much time into raising her, and it melted away into nothing. All those years, all that money, gone. You can't imagine how angry Dad was."

I could, actually. But I didn't say anything, because it was the first time I had ever seen her cry. The tears smudged her mascara and made her face look clownish.

"When we decided to have another child, Dad wanted to make sure that the DN-decay wouldn't take his child



again. We spared no expense to insure it. Dad doesn't want to lose his son the same way he lost Iris. And I don't want to lose both you and Paul. I don't want to lose my children." Then Mom kissed me. On the forehead, on my cheeks, on my hands.

"You're so much like him. So much like Paul. I feel like he's here when I talk to you. You talk like him, you know."

To be like Paul is all I ever wanted. If by becoming a surrogate Paul for my mother, I have lost myself, at least I have felt closer to him. If Paul was Paul in the outside world, at least I could be Paul inside the Grundahl hedgerows. In a way, I've been trying to thank him for his tears that day Doc told me that the outside world would kill me. Even when the whole world, with its fetid air and its dirt and its cruelty, rejected me, Paul never did.

Of course, the air in the helicopter doesn't seem to be making me cough. I can smell what must be oil and smog and the odors of the city below us. Out the window are its blinking lights, rushing past us. Each breath is a new experience for me, but I am still fine. In the back of my mind, something long dormant stirs; I feel confused.

After Mom spoke with me, I never rebelled again, knowing how she felt. I just stayed at home, watching the tel, hooking up to the VR, working with her and Doc in the lab. I was the animal caretaker, sweeping and spraying the stainless steel cages of the monkeys and rabbits and even the tiny white mice. It was like having a whole zoo for pets, except I could never play with them. They were kept behind the cage doors, awaiting the attentions of Doc and Mom. Every week or so, I came into the lab and a couple of cages would be empty. Most often, there were two animals missing. A few days later, of course, the cages were full again, but Doc didn't like to discuss what he and Mom were doing with the animals. Mom told me it had to do with multiple-organ transplants, and tissue matching. Immuno-suppressors and

anti-toxins and lots of other tech terms.

I never saw much of Dad. He was away in Osaka most of the time, or else he was with Paul. It was mostly just Mom and I.

Suddenly the helicopter begins to descend. My body tugs at the straps as we drop. Mom gasps. Dad grits his teeth. Doc closes his eyes. I just watch, listen to the crackle coming through the pilot's radio and hearing him answer it.

"This is Medflight one-niner. Medflight one-niner. Clear the pad for Grundahl."

As I look out the window, the ground is coming up to meet us. The landing pad is flashing with bright lights, painted in fluorescent colors spelling B-I-O-C-O-N. At the edge of the pad, in the spill of floodlights near the doorway, are about a dozen medtechs and medics, some of them holding a gurney.

For eleven years I have been cloistered. Hidden away. Now I shall glimpse the real world for the first time. Perhaps that is the fear in the back of my mind.

As the helicopter lands, Mom and Dad and Doc seem even more nervous. Doc has his hands on my shoulder and Mom is crying, moaning. I can see in her eyes she is reliving the loss of her daughter. The sister I never had. Now another child is being claimed. And Dad is shouting furiously, "We agreed on this a long time ago. We hoped it wouldn't happen but it did."

Mom suddenly darts across the cabin, taking hold of me and giving me a hug as she sobs. Dad pulls her back and slaps her across the cheek. The force of the blow drives her to the floor. "There's no turning back!" he shouts. "Don't risk everything we've built on your feelings!"

Doc grabs me tightly, pushing me towards the door. I don't like it; I push back. Suddenly I can see the medtechs and doctors rushing towards the helicopter with the empty gurney. As I wrest free of Doc's hands, they all stop a moment, watching me like I was prey.

And I understand. I know. ■

(Our Authors, continued)

**John Park** is another Canadian. "Retrieval" originally appeared in a Canadian small press publication. **Robert Reed** is no stranger to our readers, or to many other readers. His most recent novel, *An Exaltation of Larks*, is out from Tor Books. **Della Van Hise** lives in Yuca Valley, CA, with her partner in crime, Wendy Rathbone, and way too many cats and dogs. Her most recent work, *Kiss of the Black Angel*, a homoerotic vampire novel, should see print in 1997. **Heather G. Wells** was until recently known as Heather Pearson. She has just returned from a four-year stay in Japan. Aside from her writing, which has appeared in several places, and received honorable mention in *The Year's Best Fantasy and Horror*, she works as a graphic artist and has started her own business: Night Grins Publications. **Sten Westgard** started writing after attending a science fiction writing course given by Kathleen Massie-Ferch. About 14 of her students, including Sten, have formed a writers' group. He graduated in 1993 from the UW-Madison with a degree in English literature and history. And, he got married very shortly after "Without Fear of Rejection" hit print. ■

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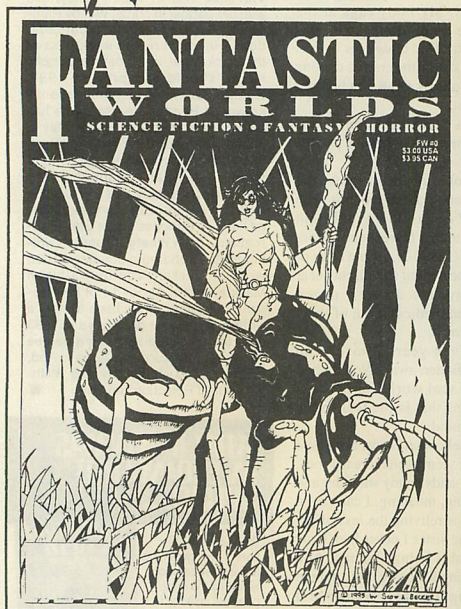
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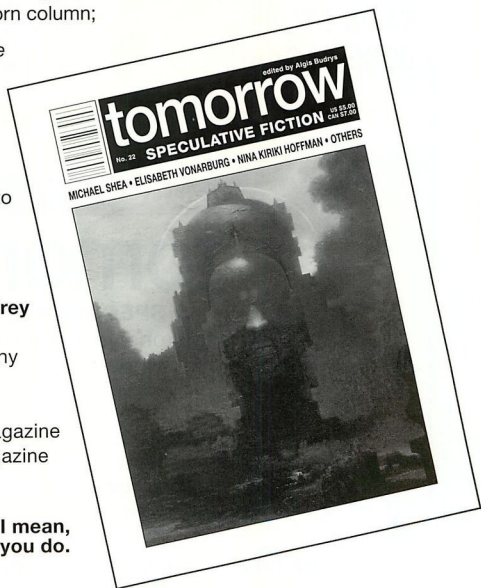
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