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Editor and Art Director:
Algis Budrys

Production Manager:
Kandis Elliot

Editorial Address:
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EDITORIAL

You remember my editorial published after the Oklahoma City bombing. (It was, in fact, a reprint of part of the book review column I did for the old *Galaxy* after the assassination of Martin Luther King. But it didn't matter, because the column didn't refer to the event except indirectly; its new application, to the bombing, was equally obscure.) I wanted to write on the topic (the topics) without so much reacting to the event as detailing my feeling that the world had changed.



And the reason I reprinted it was because I had been right. I do not doubt that the bombing defendants will, first, deny all complicity, and, more important, be perhaps genuinely puzzled why people are upset. It was, after all, an act of war, and people should expect to be hurt in wars. I don't expect the defendants to understand that it was only on one side that the act was seen as an act of war. And I don't ever expect the defendants to realize that they're rationalizing. They'll sincerely call it an act of war, but down underneath there's just the little boy desire to crash something really big.

Another thing is I also expect that a fair number of people will feel in their heart of hearts that the defendants are right. The only reason they don't say much about that is that the scared people of Oklahoma City, and elsewhere, would tear them apart in an irrational knee-jerk reaction. But in their heart of hearts they know which side is actually crazy...and it ain't theirs, of course. Furthermore, they will, under certain circumstances, defend to the death the right of the defendants to say so...joining with the people who also will defend to the death their right to say so from one hundred eighty degrees around on the political spectrum.

We are founding in sincerity. It was sincere acts that killed the Kennedy brothers, it was a sincere act that shot Martin Luther King through the throat, it was a sincere act that bombed the World Trade Center, it is a sincere series of acts by the Unabomber, it is a sincere—well, just ask them. Ask them if they feel any guilt. And if they happen on occasion to say they do, it's only because under certain circumstances it is politic to lie.

Suddenly, it's OK if people put their inner dramas ahead of the common weal...because they're sincere. God knows what was really running through the mind of Lee Harvey Oswald, but Sirhan Sirhan was apparently just an ordinary Muslim who felt that Bobby Kennedy was a devil. James Earl Ray is not entirely clear as to motive; quite possibly he was hired to do the job. And that somehow makes it understandable. A mysterious figure decides that Martin Luther King must die, and James Earl Ray says "I'm your man!" Does the Unabomber, assembling his packages and putting them in the mail for years, really stop to think that some of them will go wrong and kill blameless people? Does he stop to think whether anyone gave him permission to kill *anyone*? Does he even for a moment think he should *get* permission?

But it's as I said in my book review column lo! these many years ago—we have shifted from being a culture of the mass and become a culture of five billion individuals. And if the individual feels somehow put upon, or the person who hires him feels somehow put upon, why, whizz bang, without any thought for anything but the precise planning of *how* it is to be done (as distinguished from *whether* it should be done), smack dab it is done.

And I think we had better get used to it, because now there really is no other alternative to doing that. The cold facts of the matter are that if you so much as get on a train, somebody may be planning to derail it in a bare spot in Arizona; if you walk into an office building, take thought; if you are the President of The United States, wear a bulletproof vest every day and pray that the rifleman doesn't have your head in his sights, as Lee Oswald did. And don't tell me about John Wilkes Booth or Giuseppe Zangara. Those people were *nuts*. I suppose a case could be made that anyone who kills another person is nuts, somewhere underneath if not on the surface. But those people didn't sincerely believe that they had a right to do what they did. Most modern assassins do, and you'd be surprised how, in their heart of hearts, many people agree with them. After all, they had a grievance of some sort, didn't they? And in our present culture, that's all the excuse—Well, no, it's not an excuse. To have an excuse implies that you are concerned about other people. No, it's not an excuse; it's a reason.

That's all anyone needs, anymore—and you'd be surprised how many people agree. There have always been some who agree. The difference now is that many of those people who agree are building bombs of their own.

—Algis Budrys

tomorrow

SPECULATIVE FICTION

June, 1996

Volume 4, Number 3

SERIAL, PART ONE

- THE MINES OF BEHEMOTH** by Michael Shea 54
Bunt persuaded Niff and Barnar to reap him a special harvest

NOVELETTES

- CANIS MAJOR** by Joseph Carrabis 14
Iggy grew nauseous by the mix of his needs and the fawn's attempts to break free
- THE DEMON SERVANT** by Nina Kiriki Hoffman 40
For a moment, I did not realize how I had changed, but I had...changed

SHORT STORIES

- SEEING SEBASTIAN** by Tawn Stokes 2
Milli said: "I'm loose, sweet and twenty." And she was. And she was bored
- COGITO** by Elisabeth Vonarburg 5
As everybody on each planet agreed how life was to be lived, all went fairly well
- DEAD TO THE WORLD** by Brandon Massey 29
The man kept calling about his check, to which he had no right
- AS BEAUTY DOES** by James Killus 34
Marge sent an urgent telegram to Professor Hadley: "Help me!"
- MUSIC IN THE PARK** by Laurie Tashiro 80
I was alone, and it was safe to climb the pole. I climbed the pole
- SNEAK THIEF** by Don D'Amassa 84
She was a thief, and she was very sneaky...terribly sneaky

Cover by Kandis Elliot, illustrating *The Mines of Behemoth*

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SEEING SEBASTIAN

Tawn Stokes

Illustrated by Darla Tagrin

Milli said: "I'm loose, sweet and twenty." And she was



“Of course we can see each other,” Milli said. “I’m loose, sweet and twenty.” She widened her chocolate eyes and thought of Enrique. *Mine, sweet and twenty*, Enrique would have said.

“Your Reality or mine?” Sebastian answered. From her Virtual Montmartre apartment she could not see into his Domicile; his commbubble showed no background. He wore his body, however, *au naturel*; broad chestnut chest with black hair decked about it, broad tan face with black brows, black curly beard and mane. Milli liked men’s hair on the curly end, like Enrique’s. Sebastian’s eyes were still the color his genes had made them: sable and burning. They lighted up Milli’s particulars and Milli knew it.

“Let’s make Reality together,” Milli said. She was never so blunt with Enrique, but *c’est la oui*.

“Like now?” Sebastian queried.

“Like now,” said Milli.

“I’m a city *fille*,” Milli said. “I don’t like beaches especially.” Equally significant, her black slinky chemise and expensive French air sandals struck her as not quite appropriate for beachly activities. She felt disinclined to dispense with them.

The beach was a long black curve of volcanic sand; the volcano which had, presumably, provided its material squatted at the end of it, under a torus of bulbous clouds. The sea that wrinkled up over the lip of the beach was, of all colors, sea-green: *tres*, Milli thought, too conventional.

“I don’t like volcanoes, either.” Milli’s nose wrinkled.

“You live in West Real, New Jersey,” Sebastian said. “You ought to like sulfur.” The air, Milli thought, did have a certain character, but Milli had

suspected the ocean, or perhaps Sebastian.

“I’m a Natural Man,” Sebastian was still expounding. “I celebrate Nature.”

Sebastian was gazing at Milli with unabashed ardor; his leopard faux breechclout barely contained his intentions. Milli observed and considered: Enrique was not so primitive.

Or so exciting.

“West Real, New Jersey, may be a suburb of Hell,” Milli conceded. “But I only live there Really. I don’t have volcanoes.”

Sebastian opened his arms and snapped his fingers. “Begone,” he cried, “Volcano!”

The volcano snorted a gout of roiling fire, shook like a dog, and erupted. Its lava began to spew about the landscape with glorious abandon.

“I think we better get out of here, Seb,” said Milli.

“Well,” said Sebastian, “you rejected the setting I gave you for our passions. So you do the next one.”

Milli stood on her tiptoes; her air sandals sparkled. Her short claret hair was slightly singed at the tips, an effect she refrained from mentioning. Sebastian’s beard was still smoldering. “I’m a Natural Man,” he had said when Milli had suggested he extinguish it.

“Paris,” said Milli. She pronounced it with a good French “r” and a tilt of the head.

“Not Montmartre,” said Sebastian. “I find it pretentious.”

“You’ve never been to my Montmartre.”

“I’ve been to the Real one.”

Milli considered. His broad chest, his great head, his thighs and obvious eruptive capacity still intrigued her.

“All right,” she said. “But it has to be a city. You pick one.”

Sebastian closed his eyes and found inspiration: “Fort Wayne, Indiana.”

“Fort W...why?” said Milli.

“It’s a natural city. A city that is what it is. With no pretensions.”

“Why not,” said Milli. “Let’s get going.”

They moved on a carpet of cool air, gliding downward. The air flowed over their bodies as they leaned slightly forward. All they could see was blackness, soft, starless blackness.

“What are we doing,” said Sebastian, “pretending to be angels?”

“We’re descending into Fort Wayne, Indiana.”

Before and beneath them, a vast web of light lay twinkling, as if suspended in vacuum.

“What the hell is that?” Sebastian’s tone was belligerent, perhaps to conceal alarm with an open display of hostility.

“That’s Fort Wayne,” said Milli. “It actually looks like that Really, to an eagle.” She considered corroboration: “Enrique told me. He’s an ornithologist.”

There was no doubt at all that Sebastian was displaying hostility. Even his beard swelled.

“Let’s get rid of it.”

“Get rid of what?” said Milli.

“Fort Wayne. I don’t like the looks of it.”

“Seb, you asked for it.”

“I’m a Natural Man,” said Sebastian. “I’m not an eagle. I don’t want to be an eagle.”

“I do,” said Milli.

“Tell you what,” said Milli. “Let’s try my place.”

They were each re-ensconced in their commbubbles, showing each other no background.

“Your place in West Real, New Jersey?”

“The very same. Except it’s Virtual Montmartre in the Mode of Utrillo.”

“What’s Utrillo?”

Enrique, though an ornithologist from Antarctica, had known Utrillo, or at least had pretended to know. Enrique was less than pleased, but resolved to continue.

“I can’t explain,” she said airily.

“You’ll just have to see it.”

“I’m a Natural Man,” said Sebastian.

“I like my own Domicile.”

Enrique, Milli recalled, had been more agreeable. In fact he had been too agreeable. Milli considered: a natural Domicile. Something in rocks and stalagmites, a cave or cavelike interior, with the bones of mammoths strewn about the fire, the wolf-dog guarding the entrance as the Moon ascended.

“I’m a city *fillle*,” she said, but meant: you could talk me into it.

“I could talk you into it,” said Sebastian. “And you’ll like it.”

Good for Sebastian. Milli smiled, she hoped demurely. “I’d like to see it.”

“Step right in,” said Sebastian.

“Step right into what?”

“My apartmentbox. Box next to yours. I’m your neighbor.”

“How the hell did you know that?” Milli had not; she had met Sebastian on net, in accord with *politesse* and tradition. Where he lived Really would have been a rude subject for inquiry. She had never visited Enrique in Real Antarctica.

“I’m a Natural Man,” said Sebastian. “I know my Reality.”

Feeling peculiar, Milli set foot on her concrete exterior walkway. All around her, the featureless walls of the apartmentbox complex rose up gray to the gray sky of West Real, New Jersey.

“Sebastian?” Milli queried.

“Right here.” A square opened out of the wall at the height of her shoulder. Sebastian’s head advanced forth. He held out his hands and Milli set her hands into them. She hiked her foot up to the height of her hands and, pulled by Sebastian, tumbled head first into Sebastian’s Domicile.

“Open your eyes,” said Sebastian.

Milli did so. Her view consisted of the plane of Sebastian’s chest, with its wiry sprigs of hair out of focus in proximity. He smelled like a leather sofa. Milli decided she hoped that meant he possessed one.

The surface on which she sat, right next to Sebastian, was cold and unglving. The lap of Sebastian seemed likely to be more inspiring. Milli rolled herself into it.

“Here you are,” said Sebastian.

“Here I am where?” said Milli.

“Here you are here. Look around you.”

Milli started with Sebastian’s nipple and moved her gaze outward.

The walls were gray, and they were plain walls, flat walls, four of them, four square. The floor was the same gray, the color obtained by mixing stone black and stone white to the shade in the middle. The ceiling was as gray as the floor, perhaps twelve feet above it. There were no windows. There was no furniture. There were no appointments or objects of decoration. The room was an empty gray box, lighted from above and below by strips of white candelcents.

“What is this supposed to be?” said Milli.

“It’s not supposed to be anything. It is what it is. My apartmentbox.”

“Is this what they Really look like?” Milli was curious.

“Haven’t you seen yours?”

“Mine is Virtual Montmartre in the Modes of Utrillo. The guy before me kept it kind of Pleistocene jungle.” All giant ferns and belowings in the distance.

"I'm a Natural Man," said Sebastian. "I keep mine natural."

"This is natural?" Milli had never imagined Nature so angular and achromatic.

"This is natural for an apartment-box."

"But the reason you have an apartmentbox is so you can keep it Virtual."

"No," said Sebastian, "that's the reason YOU have an apartmentbox. Now let's tumble."

"Tumble to what?" said Milli, though not quite in innocence. Enrique did not say "let's tumble," but he tumbled mightily, once her eyes met his.

In response, Sebastian fastened his lips to Milli's, with the suction of an unattached lamprey engaging the shark of his dreams in the desolate ocean. He grasped her thighs as if they were the handles of scissors, and scissored to open.

"Hey," Milli tried to say, and found her lips occupied. Sebastian was poised for the strike. Milli considered.

Enrique was quite as large, and Enrique smiled when she nibbled him. Nibbling Sebastian was, at the moment, out of the question. The stone gray room with its cold floor and

white lights had all the charm of a prison, natural or otherwise. Sebastian's charm was also less than conspicuous.

Milli kned him.

Her domicile was red and black and shades of purple, in the strong black lines of Utrillo. Milli remembered it with extra intensity, traversing the steps on the concrete apartmentbox walkway, bound for home in a hurry. Her Virtual View from her six large Virtual windows that opened on Utrillo's Montmartre, her commensals filling her walls with her own creations, had never appealed so profoundly.

Milli pressed the Digipad set in her doorway. The door floated upward, and Milli stood within her Personal Domicile.

Three Emperor penguins, ranked on her left, turned as one to behold her. Each held in his flippers a candle, a goldsparkle candle. The Penguins bowed as one and intoned in English, with the telltale Antarctic accent: "Greeting, O Dulcet Milli."

Enrique. Only Enrique. The ornithologist.

Milli swept her gaze over the space that lay before her. The crisp

white snow, touched with the tenderness of sunrise, swept away to the soft and pink horizon. Left of center (Enrique was always left of center), the golden quonset, wreathed in frozen flowers, awaited her presence.

"What's all this?" said Milli. The snow was warm to her feet, and the breeze was springlike. The penguins gazed attentively.

"Your every command is my wish," said the voice of Enrique.

"So come out and let me see you."

Enrique emerged, rising from the little quonset like a dolphin, breaching from mighty waves. He was tall and broad and his hair was as blue as the skies of his native Antarctica. His eyes gleamed bright in the brightness.

"I thought you might wish an adventure," he said in a voice like the wind, sweeping across the snow to sweep her away with him.

Milli considered.

The quonset looked small and warm and wonderfully inviting. Enrique stood tall before it, his arms wide open, his bright blue unisuit glowing. His intentions were splendidly obvious. He was smiling.

"You're my Natural Man," said Milli. ■



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COGITO

Elisabeth Vonarburg

Translated from the French by Jane Brierley
Illustrated by Margaret Baliff Simon

*As everybody on each planet agreed how life
was to be lived, all went fairly well*



Once upon a time on a planet far, far away there was a little girl called Nathany Berkeley. She lived in a city called Cybland. It was the only city on the planet, no doubt also called Cybland. The people who colonized it didn't bother with a proper name, as they weren't particularly interested in it. This happened three hundred years before Nathany's birth, in the time of the Swarming when many people left Earth to go and live as they liked somewhere else. They chose a habitable planet, journeyed there in superlume ships, and settled in. And as everybody on each planet agreed how life was to be lived in general, all went fairly well.

At first, Nathany didn't know there was a planet. She barely knew there was a city around her house. It wasn't her house, really, and she had already lived in several—Educative Blocks 2, 3, 4, 5 and 6. Now she was in Special Block D, which she shared with about thirty other little girls and boys of her own age. Not exactly her own age; Nathany was six, but she ought to have been seven. Just after arriving from EdBlock 6 where she'd only stayed three months, she heard Yvanie, the teacher, say she was a 'pre-coshes' little girl. In EdBlock 4 there had been a tree with flowers that turned into fruits and the fruits were enclosed in *coshes*. When the fruit was ready to eat you took off the coshe. Nathany was puzzled: a pre-coshes little girl must be too green to eat, and yet Yvanie's remark certainly seemed like a compliment. Finally she understood: she was *ahead*. She was ahead because she knew how to use her syn just as well as the older

boys and girls in SpecBlock D, although she was only six.

You see, Nathany wasn't an ordinary little girl. There were no ordinary little girls on Cybland. Or little boys, either. I mean, ordinary like they are here. Of course in Cybland they all seemed normal to each other. They each had a syn to control their cybes; their cybes gave them special P-modes, each consisting of several percepts, and the percepts shared by the greatest number of individuals were called P-Zones. There were individual P-Zones and collective P-Zones. You learned about collective P-Zones, too, although this wasn't something you really *learned*, if you know what I mean.

Nathany wore her syn around her neck, like all the inhabitants of Cybland. It was a wide, thick collar, very close fitting, made up of articulated segments. The real name for the syn was "Sensorial Control and Synthesis Unit," but that was too long to say. It was like a mixer. Or a rheostat. Or both. It was also a sort of radio, both receiving and transmitting, but it wasn't used for speaking. It was used to control the cybes.

The cybes are harder to describe. First, because you couldn't see them. They were inside the body, transplanted into Cybland infants shortly after birth to replace the eyes and ears of babies—tiny little cybes (you could say "Cybernetic modules," but that's also too long) directly linked to the brain. It's really the brain that sees and hears, isn't it? Well, in Cybland, the first cybes were transplanted very early on, because a baby's brain is a highly adaptable organ that learns lots of things very quickly, and it was a good

idea to accustom the baby to the cybes right away.

Not only the eyes and ears were replaced, but all the other senses. Touch was fairly simple. A virus was developed that burned all the nerve endings in the skin, as well as those that transmitted taste and smell. Then a special substance was injected into the skin—liquid biocrystals, if you want to know. They reacted to pressure, cold and heat, and the syn sent this information to the brain, and the brain...well, it did what a brain is supposed to do, and *said* that things were hot, or cold, or that you'd cut yourself.

Taste and smell were a little bit more complicated. Things like filters were grafted into the body, and these gathered tastes and smells and sent them to the syn, which analyzed them and sent the information to the brain—which then did its usual work.

Actually, the only true cybes were those replacing eyes and ears, but people got into the habit of calling all the sensory replacements by the same name because it was simpler. What mattered was understanding how it worked: there was the syn, which acted like a small secondary brain, a supplementary relay between the outside and the real brain, and there were the cybes, which replaced the senses. Of course, all of them had to be changed as the children grew, like clothes or shoes. Except you only saw the syn. You might've seen the cybes when they were taken out in order to insert bigger ones, but you'd be asleep at that point. They were put in a box with your other cybes, and on the day of your last transplant, when you'd finished growing, you got the box as a present. Since Nathany hadn't finished growing, she'd never seen her cybes. It didn't really matter. What mattered was how you learned to use your syn and control your cybes, right from the beginning. Nathany learned fast, and she learned well. That's why she was in SpecBlock D, although she was only six. Other children weren't so *precocious*. Some never learned to use their cybes properly. There was something in their brain that made them incapable of doing it. They were *refractory*. Some couldn't even tolerate transplants. As

time went by, they would suddenly disappear from the Block and you never saw them again. Sad, but that's the way it was.

Why did they replace all the senses in Cybland? First, I'll have to finish explaining what they did with the cybes, what Nathany did so well that she was in SpecBlock D instead of EdBlock 6 with her childhood companions.

You see, the syn and the cybes were merely tools. Like eyes, ears, and the rest, after all. Except that they were a bit more difficult to use. To give you an example, our eyes see only certain colors, corresponding to very definite light wavelengths. Nathany's cybe-eyes saw many more wavelengths, and her cybe-ears heard more vibrations, too, above and below the range we hear. But the human brain wasn't really designed to receive these sensations—it could, but it had to learn, and that takes time.

And that's not all. The syn didn't only control the intensity of perceptions. It could also mix them, remember? In Cybland, you could taste colors, hear smells, touch sounds...although you couldn't do this just any old how. That would have been really too upsetting for tiny children. It had to be learned bit by bit, too.

And there was more! The syn was like a two-way radio, but instead of using airwaves to transmit and receive, it used sensations. This is difficult to explain—in fact, it was difficult to *do*, and that was what took the most learning. Everyone has a particular way of perceiving things such as colors, smells, or favorite sounds, isn't that right? It was the same in Cybland, even though all the cybes had exactly the same capabilities, which isn't the case with organic eyes and ears. (The founders of Cybland were a little surprised at this unexpected development. They used to think that people's perceptions differed simply because their sensory organs were different...but as they were diehard individualists, they managed to take this fact in stride.) Anyway, everyone had their particular way of perceiving things, called their *perceptual mode*, or P-mode for short.

A P-mode consisted of perceptions—perceptions of your favorite senses in varying combinations and proportions to form the individual P-zone, that is, your own *perceptual zone*, the special way in which you perceived your environment.

So far, so good. What made it complicated is that people also have a special way of perceiving *themselves*. After all, our bodies, our faces, are also an environment, aren't they? In Cybland, thanks to the syn, people could transmit the way they saw themselves, and similarly receive how others saw *themselves*. But you don't necessarily want to see yourself exactly as you are. If your hair is brown and you'd rather be blond, for example...or ten centimeters taller...or ten kilos lighter...or have green hair, weigh thirty kilos more and stand three meters tall, you could do that. There was no limit to what the people in Cybland could transmit with their syn, you see. They could look like anything—blue with yellow polka dots, if they wanted!

It was lots of fun. But it was also very distracting. How are you going to recognize people if they look different every day? Or suppose someone decides to look like a horrible monster and walked about scaring everybody? And then it could be dangerous if the people in charge of atmospheric machines decided not to hear or see on the same wavelength as the alarm systems.... Or if someone in the street decided to see only green colors, he'd never stop for red lights; there'd be accidents all the time. Of course, in the city of Cybland there weren't any cars and therefore no traffic lights. Everything was organized so that individual capabilities wouldn't endanger the person or those nearby. But you can see what might happen.

Well, there were obvious limits—not to what you were capable of, but to what you were allowed to do. When you were by yourself in your individual P-zone, you could do what you liked. But when others were around, you had to stay within the limits of the collective P-zones.

This meant that you had to learn about these P-zones, about the perceptions that, by common consent, gov-

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erned behavior in a social context. Although there was general agreement on a certain number of things, there were also individual opinions about a great many others, depending on your profession, for example, or your sex. Well, to make a long story short, it meant a lot of learning for little Cyblanders, on top of what they had to learn in school like you and me.

Nathany, at six years old, was in SpecBlock D because she had learned especially fast and well to use her syn, control her cybes, and handle individual and collective P-zones. Naturally she hadn't finished learning—you kept on until the last transplant, and even after. Because, after the last transplant, you were an adult and had the right to experiment with your cybes and syn without a teacher's supervision. In fact, nobody had the right to prevent you from doing exactly what you wanted in private. (As I mentioned, Cybland society was founded by rugged individualists. A society of individualists is rather a contradiction in terms; they had to tailor their theories somehow so as to create a viable society. But these kinds of complexities are the spice of life, after all.)

Anyway, Nathany waited impatiently for the time when she could do exactly what she liked with no one to tell her not to. You see, Nathany was an inquisitive little girl, which is perfectly normal, even in Cybland, except that she wasn't necessarily inquisitive about the same things that we are. The teachers thought her curiosity a good thing—as long as she didn't exceed the limits set by them—which is also perfectly normal, as it is here. What's more, from the moment Nathany was considered precocious they tended to give her more leeway than other little girls. Even so, and without quite knowing why, there were moments when she overstepped the teachers' limits and got herself into hot water. (Of course, it's hard to know exactly where teachers' limits are. They have a way of shifting about, don't they?)

For example, when Nathany was still in EdBlock 4—she was four, and hadn't yet been considered precocious—she had reconfigured her class-

mates' cybes to her own format—a particularly amusing combination of colors, sounds, and smells that she'd discovered and wanted to show to them. The teacher noticed it—Marlin, who wasn't very smart, but then teachers are trained to know that when kids go into a giggling huddle they're up to something, whether it's in Cybland or here. Well, Marlin got really mad. He did something to all their syns and told them they weren't to do any more amusing mixes. They weren't supposed to do amusing mixes right now. (Although Nathany didn't know it, this was the moment when her teachers first began to consider her precocious.) Marlin gave her a sound scolding in front of the class, and as extra punishment set her syn to a really boring P-mode (no visual/auditory crossover; imagine!), and told her that it was simply not done, to mess about with other people's cybes, making them perceive whatever you wanted. It was bad. It was forbidden.

Like most Bad-and-Forbidden things, there was no logic in it. "What about the P-zone?" sniffled Nathany rebelliously. ("And what you've just done to me?" she added to herself.) They were learning Level 2 Collective P-zone that month, and the teachers were explaining what it consisted of and configuring their cybes accordingly.

"That's different," replied Marlin. Collective P-zone-2 (which regulated interactions with a number of simple machines) was like learning to count. Those who were better at it taught the others. This was necessary, useful to all concerned, and good. What Nathany had done was something else again. Maybe her combination of percepts was fun, but the others didn't need it; and what was more important, perhaps they didn't want to perceive things her way. She had no right to force them.

"But I didn't really force them," protested Nathany. "They wanted to." (The other children discreetly said nothing. The fact was, she'd configured their cybes herself because they were so slow and clumsy.)

But that was no reason. If they hadn't wanted to, what would she have done?

Nathany hung her head and was obliged to confess by her silence that

she might have tried to coerce them. She generally got her way, being tall and strong for her age.

"Well, you're not to do it, understand?" said Marlin by way of closing the discussion. Nathany translated this to mean, "You're not to do it unless you're an adult." Marlin paused for a moment, then added, "Later, you'll learn how to share your percepts with others. There are ways of doing it that are permitted. But it's too soon right now. After all, you have to be able to walk before you can run, don't you? When you can walk, you'll be able to run."

Nathany didn't quite see the connection since she knew how to walk and run, and would have liked to know how you shared percepts when it was allowed. She sensed it was probably advisable not to press the point. At least Marlin hadn't said it was Bad-and-Forbidden to experiment on yourself. From now on, when she wanted to share her experiments with others, she'd take care not to be caught doing it, that's all.

Things changed somewhat after Nathany was transferred to SpecBlock D. She could ask more questions, she realized, and the teachers took longer to reach their set limits. As soon as she arrived, her syn was unblocked. Apparently she now had the right to try out interesting percept mixes, and if some were inadvisable the teacher took the trouble to explain when they were dangerous for your physical and mental balance. If she wanted to try them anyway, she should ask for supervision by a teacher.

To tell the truth, at first Nathany didn't see how SpecBlock was any better. The drawbacks were more obvious. Do you remember the first time you went to school? Well, it was the same for Nathany. She didn't know anyone. All the teachers and children were new to her. The fact that the other children didn't know each other, either, because they were all precocious and had been withdrawn from their respective EdBlocks, didn't help cushion the shock of relocation. You children were able to go home after your first day of school. But not Nathany or the others. SpecBlock D was now their home.

Nevertheless, children in SpecBlocks did go back to their former EdBlocks at regular intervals. It was felt they shouldn't be separated too abruptly from what, after all, had been their family. Nathany went back to EdBlock 6 to visit her old companions and teachers—Marlin, Treza, Bobb, Cort, and her favorites, Yvanie and Marelle. But after a few months something strange happened: it wasn't so pleasant going back to the EdBlock. There were too many things to tell about, and the others didn't always understand very well. It annoyed them not to understand, and they didn't look at Nathany in the same way any more. They'd changed.

Of course, it wasn't the other children who'd changed; it was Nathany. In a SpecBlock you learned a lot very fast, leaving the EdBlocks far behind. Finally, at the end of the first year, Nathany asked not to go back to EdBlock 6, ever. This was predictable and quite normal. Almost all the other SpecBlock children had done the same. SpecBlock D was now their real home.

This didn't mean that Nathany found life as pleasant as she had in her old block, when she was precocious. She had to more or less begin all over again in learning to know the new children and teachers, but because there were so many interesting things to do, she didn't often have time to mope. After all, she wasn't precocious for nothing. In Cybland, precocious children were generally sturdy, well-balanced individuals.

Except that... at the end of Nathany's first year in SpecBlock D, her father died.

You may wonder at this point in the story where Nathany's parents were and what they did. And to begin with, did Nathany have parents in the way we think of them here? Not really. The founders of Cybland had left Earth to live in their own, different way. The biggest difference, as you probably realize, had something to do with the cybes. But there was another, important difference, and that concerned the way people produced children and brought them up. Each child had a father and mother, but—as sometimes

happens here—the mother didn't usually carry the child in her womb. And children weren't brought up by their parents, but by the Block teachers. The parents knew their children and could see them every day for two hours if they wanted, as well as spending a whole day with them every ten days. Parents in Cybland were in fact merely adults much like others. Not really special, you see. Some simply gave their children to Cybland and never visited them. The children didn't miss the parents, however, since there were six teachers—three men and three women—for each group of twenty-four, who remained with the children from infancy as they all moved from one Block to another. There was the occasional exception, but in general the teachers and children formed a family that wasn't so different from ours—don't you think?

Nathany didn't know her parents well. They were very busy with the Cybland government and rarely came to see her. She didn't care. She didn't particularly like them. She didn't detest them, either, mind you. The fact that she saw little of them simply didn't matter much.

This being the case, you may wonder why I'm telling you about her father's death. Even taking into account her transfer to SpecBlock D, it shouldn't have affected her unduly. That was normal for Cybland. But it was after her father's death that things changed for Nathany. Before, she had been inquisitive, but her inquisitiveness had stayed within reasonable bounds. After... But you see, I think it wasn't so much the death of her father, after all. It was the *death* of her father. The way he died.

Nathany knew about death. She had vague, childish memories of children in the EdBlocks being around, and then not being around. Of course she asked questions, and finally someone told her that they were dead, which meant they'd gone away and wouldn't ever come back. No one seemed overly upset. She got the impression it was quite normal, and even sensed that those children were better off dead. They were refractory. I told you about the refractory children

who couldn't tolerate transplants and disappeared from the EdBlocks, didn't I? Nathany felt a certain anxiety about this, but her teachers assured her it only happened to very young children, or to those who couldn't learn to use their cybes. Nothing like that would happen to her! She was nearly seven now, a big girl, and she knew very well how to use her cybes.

What she didn't know, and what the death of her father suddenly taught her, was that becoming an adult was no guarantee against ever being refractory. As I told you, Cybland was a city where, because of the cybes, everything had been organized to avoid accidents as much as possible. It was a closed, almost totally controlled environment, much like a greenhouse. But even in a controlled environment accidents sometimes happen. Accidents did happen, and disease as well. People died, or suddenly someone who had been perfectly normal couldn't use his or her cybes properly or even use them at all. This had happened to Nathany's father. After an illness he'd become refractory to his cybes. Finally he died.

That's how it was announced to Nathany. In fact, her mother took the trouble to tell her the news in person. (Her name was Erna and she generally appeared as a tall, slim blonde.) Geroge (that was Nathany's father) became sick and *then* he became refractory, and *only after that* did he die. He didn't die of the illness. How did he die? Did he have an accident because he had no cybes and was blind, deaf, and insensible? Did they let him go out without cybes? That would have been really bad! But Erna said no, they hadn't let him go out. He'd been transferred to a special house for refractory adults.

And did they leave him by himself, then, with no cybes, and did he have an accident in the special house?

In Cybland you could assume whatever appearance you liked, but people still had trouble controlling their emotions sometimes. Nathany was an observant child, and she saw that Erna was becoming increasingly embarrassed. What had happened in the special house?



Finally, after a long pause, Erna told Nathany that Geroge had killed himself, that it was very sad, but there was no help for it and she must be a very good little girl and work well in SpecBlock D—it was one of the best in Cybland and she, Erna, had chosen it personally. Then she kissed Nathany and left.

Now Nathany had more questions that ever—why, how, and what if...? But whom could she ask?

"What happens when you have no cybes?" she asked Marta, her closest friend in SpecBlock D.

Marta shrugged. "You're dead."

"No, when you have no cybes but aren't dead."

Marta stared at her in amazement, and Nathany let the subject drop. She went and found Uri, her closest enemy in SpecBlock D. Marta was lots of fun, but fighting with Uri was far more interesting.

"What happens when you can't use your cybes and are still alive?"

Uri eyed her, wary yet intrigued. At nearly eight years old, he wasn't one to pass up a challenge. He thought a moment. "You disappear. You perceive no one, and no one perceives you. It's like being dead. Only you're alive."

"But how do you know you're alive?" said Nathany, forgetting in her puzzlement that her questions were meant to be riddles to which she clearly knew the answer.

Uri grinned triumphantly. "You don't know!" He walked off, sure he'd scored—a sentiment vaguely shared by Nathany.

At this point Nathany decided to take a chance with a teacher. "Why do people sometimes reject their cybes?" she asked Pomelo.

"Why do you want to know?" was Pomelo's comeback. Nathany had

expected this. He was one of those adults who answer a question with a question. Some of them did it to give themselves time to make up an answer, others stalled because they didn't want to answer at all. With Pomelo it was a kind of game. He usually had an answer, and merely wanted to be sure you did, too. It was irritating, but once you'd caught on you could get more out of him than other teachers. Even so, Nathany didn't usually question him. His answers were very precise but almost incomprehensible unless you asked a whole lot more questions, and even then.... Usually the children gave up before he did. Have you noticed that if there's one thing more annoying than not getting an answer, it's getting too many, none of which you can understand? But this was a special case, and Nathany was determined to try Pomelo. Something might come of it.

She explained that her father had become refractory and had died. Pomelo nodded approvingly; then, as was his wont, did his part of the deal and answered. "Sometimes, after an illness or an accident, the body changes inside and it can't handle the cybes. It rejects them."

"But why?"

"Because the cybes aren't part of the body."

As expected, dozens of questions sprang to Nathany's mind. She knew the syn wasn't really a part of the body, but never having seen her cybes, she assumed she'd been born with them, even if they were changed regularly. Sort of like baby teeth that fell out and were replaced, except that it happened every year.

"But what are we like—without cybes, I mean. Not if we're refractory, but...before...." She hesitated.

"Before the transplants," said Pomelo, and she realized that this was exactly what she wanted to say. "Well, we're born with organic eyes and ears, and we also can feel and taste and touch."

"Like we can with cybes?"

"Not nearly as well. Not well at all. Not in the infrared or ultraviolet range, for example. Especially since, with no syn, you can't have crossover perceptions."

No syn at all. Not only no cross-overs, but no transmitting or receiving. Was Uri right all along? You perceive no one and no one perceives you. But that couldn't be right, because you'd have eyes and everything....

"Why are we born like that when cybes are so much better?"

Pomelo smiled. "Because Nature isn't as good. That's why our ancestors founded Cybland. To improve on Nature."

Nathany's mind buzzed with questions. She felt discouraged. Pomelo had tricked her again. Well, not tricked—Pomelo never did that. He answered, all right, but it was worse than no answer.

Pomelo surprised her, however, by standing up and picking out a modulo-book from his office shelves. He handed it to her. "You can keep it. But don't tell anyone you have it."

In this way Nathany acquired that delightful and frustrating thing, which can't be shared with anyone: a secret.

The modulo-book talked about Cybland's founding fathers. Here was another discovery: Cybland hadn't always existed. There had been something before, somewhere else. And the ancestors had been different, without cybes, without a syn, without anything. "Subjected to the meager perceptions imposed by their poor natural senses," said the modulo-book. Further on (and this was harder to understand), it said, "Subjected to the intolerable and constant violation of human free will by the universe through a limited sensorial apparatus."

The modulo-book was actually way above Nathany's head, precocious though she might be. What she gleaned was a confused idea about why Cybland was founded—"against reality's violation of consciousness." Reality was a word never used in cybland. She'd never encountered it before, at least. But in any case this thing perceived by natural senses must be pretty horrible, for poor Geroge to have died of it. To have made himself die.

Perhaps Pomelo thought that by giving Nathany a modulo-book and a secret, he'd discourage her once and for all. She'd be stymied by all the questions she couldn't ask, and all the answers that she wouldn't quite know

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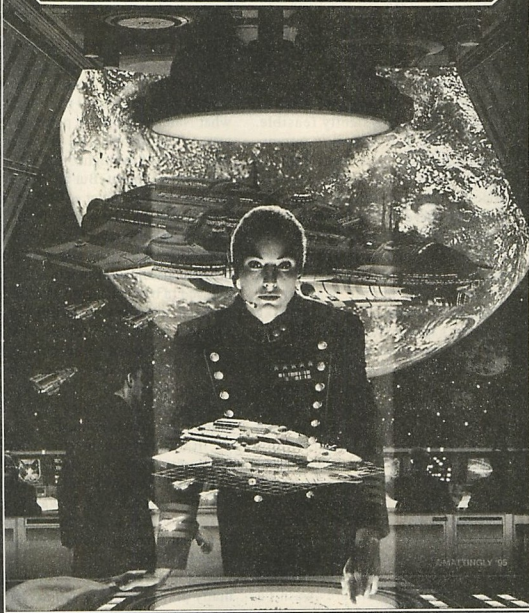
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what to do with. But he was wrong. He'd underestimated Nathany's curiosity—a curiosity intrigued by paradox, and particularly by the fact that her ancestors had lived for hundreds and hundreds of years with their natural senses. The modulo-book even intimated that there were people left on Earth, lots of people, who lived without cybes. Maybe they were "slaves," as the modulo-book said, but they were living slaves. If you could live without cybes, why did Geroge prefer to die?

Try as she might, Nathany could find no answer to this last why. So, following an approved technique, she turned it into "how." She could do something with how. *How* did you live without cybes? What was it like?

She wasn't really able to answer this question either, but she didn't know it. In Cybland, you see, when a adult became refractory, he or she was "reconverted," as they said—partly, anyway, and if physically feasible. Organic eyes and ears were retransplanted from an organ bank kept for just this sort of thing. Nothing could be done for the other senses, of course. Once the nerve endings were burned, they couldn't grow again. But at least these people could see and hear. It was possible to live without cybes. But that doesn't mean people wanted to. Refractory cases all ended up like Nathany's father. But even if Nathany had been aware of all this, she still wouldn't have genuinely understood why Geroge or the other refractories chose to die. It was something to do with their being too different, and the fact that normal Cyblanders didn't want to have anything to do with them. Cyblanders thought it rather disgusting to be limited to two senses, you see. Deep down, they considered the refractory cases not quite human anymore. The only true human beings were those with cybes, who really dominated Nature—although "Nature" wasn't a word often used. It had become rather obscene with time. Pomelo had used it in front of Nathany because he knew she wouldn't understand.

But Nathany had no idea how deep her lack of comprehension was—a little girl who had all her cybes, who had never really been alone or different,

even though she was precocious, and who didn't even know that "Nature" was a dirty word. So she decided to try. To behave as if. As if she had no cybes, only "natural senses."

She wasn't quite sure how to go about it. The modulo-book didn't say much except that natural senses were very limited. All she had to go on were Pomelo's remarks. No perception of infrared or ultraviolet in the organic vision. It must be the same for hearing—upper and lower limits, no infra or ultra sounds. And no crossovers, no more visual sound (Nathany's favorite P-mode, with a strong tactile element). All right. That night she hid in a corner where no one would disturb her experiments, and she reconfigured her cybes.

I'm not sure I can really describe to you what Nathany stopped perceiving, since I've never perceived it, and neither have you. And I can't describe what Nathany began to perceive. If I were talking about us, I'd say "silence, the shadow of the night," and we'd all know what I meant. But not her: these perceptions had never existed for her before. I'd say she perceived things *less*, because she no longer saw the infrared and ultraviolet ranges, or heard infrasounds and ultrasounds, and she'd reduced (a bit haphazardly) her senses of touch, taste, and smell. But I'm not sure less would mean for her what we mean by it. It wasn't necessarily negative. It was new. She'd never done it, you see—perceive *less*. In Cybland you were always learning to perceive *more*, right from babyhood.

It was new and therefore interesting. Just to check, she reconfigured her cybes the usual way and everything was back to normal. It was fun to switch from one to the other, hip-hop, like a balloon being alternatively inflated and deflated.

At this stage she would have normally played with her syn to change her new perceptions, but she refrained. Natural senses could *not* be changed, unless with "drugs that had harmful long-term effects," according to the modulo-book. She must go on perceiving without changing a thing—the SpecBlock inner courtyard, the flowering lindens, bright green beneath the

electric lights. It was really strange, this immutability. It would soon become boring. Nathany understood why the founding fathers had wanted to "improve on Nature," if that was all it was. Anyway, the net result of her experiment was that you *could* certainly live without cybes, even if she needed cybes to make the experiment. It wasn't so dreadful. You weren't dead, and you didn't "perceive nothing," as Uri had said. Even if some of your perceptions had vanished, you still had a few. Anyway, they hadn't really vanished; they were still in her syn, because they came back when she reconfigured it.

What would happen if you removed more perceptions? If you not only turned down your cybes, but set them to zero?

What a strange idea. Even a little alarming. But irresistible for a curious little girl like Nathany. She didn't turn off everything at once, however; only the cybe-eyes to begin with. No more linden, no more night. Or rather, another sort of blackness. But the water tinkling in the fountain was there, and that created a sort of space. It wasn't the courtyard, but it was still a space. The linden flowers still gave off their perfume, and Nathany's nightgown felt soft and flannelly against her shoulders and knees. In fact, Nathany's body was still very much there—the taste of saliva in her mouth, the feel of her tongue against her teeth, of skin against skin as she sat cross-legged. And she could even sense the weight of her body, where up was, or down, and this made the ground exist, hard and cool through the nightgown beneath her buttocks. Lots of things still existed.

Reducing the cybe-smell and cybe-taste to zero didn't have much effect. (The biggest change was losing her usual cross-perceptions—the smell of water, the taste of stone, the smell-taste of electricity.) No more flowers. No more saliva. With the cybe-ears at zero, no more fountain—and hey!, no more space at all, no more depth, anyway. Only an inside and an outside, because she could feel the pressure of her body on the ground, of her arms on her knees, her hand on her syn. In fact, Nathany's body was more than ever

there, and from it she could reconstruct all the rest: the hard surface beneath her buttocks was the floor of the courtyard where there were linden trees and a fountain, and the hard surface against her back was the wall of SpecBlock D, which was on Cybland which was on a planet which was in space.

There, in all logic, Nathany should have cancelled her cybe-touch. But she wasn't only logical, nor only curious; she was also a little girl. And she had a growing feeling that she was in the process of doing something Bad-and-Forbidden. She waited a little before going to the next stage. Uri's words sprang to mind: *Like being dead, only you're alive*. It made no sense when he said it, but suddenly it almost seemed as though it might. And now her own question rose to the surface, sharp and clear: How do you know you're alive? If you see nothing, hear, taste, feel, touch nothing?

What was left if you took away everything? Was anything left? If she cancelled the feeling of the ground beneath her buttocks and the wall against her back and her skin against her skin, would the ground and the wall and the courtyard and the SpecBlock D and the city and the planet still exist? Would her body exist? What was left once you took away everything?

And at last Nathany turned off her cybe-touch as well, because she was a little girl and curious, or because it was logical, or because it was definitely Bad-and-Forbidden, or because of Geroge, Erna, Uri, or Pomelo. Or because of all these elements at once. What do I know? In any case, she reconfigured her last cybe to zero.

What happened, then? You wish you knew, don't you? So do I. But this is a journey you've never made, nor have I. Only Nathany could go beyond her cybes. Could she come back? It would be reasonable to say that a grownup came by, found her, switched her cybes back on. Reasonable, but boring. And that's not really what we want to know, it it? We want to know what happened in the meantime.

So, what could happen? Nathany's body didn't exist in her mind any

more—so where could her mind be? They say we go kind of crazy when we loose our anchors of flesh. But Nathany never really had any anchors. If she wanted her bedroom wallpaper to be green and yellow instead of blue when she woke up in the morning, then it was. If she wanted her broccoli to taste like chocolate cake, then she'd be eating chocolate cake. She never really knew a world where things are only what they are, and stay that way no matter what we want....

What did happen to Nathany, then? Can you tell me? She wasn't 'floating in the void.' She couldn't 'float' in anything—no more body, no more space. Was she still in the courtyard? Was there still a courtyard? Had there ever been a courtyard? Of course there was, you say. It was the courtyard of SpecBlock D, in Cybland, on a planet far away from here, and Nathany perceived it very well when her cybe-senses were on. But she also saw the infrasounds when she was in her favorite P-mode; she heard the perfume of the lindens. Perhaps she decided to perceive a courtyard with lindens, a SpecBlock with people in it, and a city around it, and a planet. She could, with her cybes and her syn, couldn't she?

Well, there's this, you say. There's Nathany, with a syn and cybes, and everything flows from there, including the Block, Cybland, the planet. Anyway, we're here listening to the story. We exist. And so from this....

But are you sure? Maybe someone just imagined the cybes and the syn controlling them, and you who are listening.

All right, there is someone, you say. Here's what's left when you take away everything: there is someone who is imagining, and therefore why not Nathany and all the rest, and us, and so on and so on?

Perhaps. I'll think about it. It's an interesting idea to follow up. But you, you should think about this: can you tell me what sound a tree makes when it falls in a forest where there's no living thing to hear it? Can you describe to me the sound of a single hand clapping? Silence? Are you sure? ■





CANIS MAJOR

Joseph David Carrabis

Illustrated by David J. Grilla

Iggy grew nauseous by the mix of his needs

Iggy dropped from the tree onto the fawn, his weight breaking its two hind legs. It tried to run anyway but its forelegs only clawed up the moist, dark forest floor, clouding Iggy's thoughts as the rich earth aroma wafted into him. Iggy didn't want the animal to suffer and bit into its throat, tearing out esophagus, jugular and various muscles. Still the fawn tried to escape.

Iggy grew nauseous by the mix of his needs and the fawn's attempts to break free. This wasn't what he wanted. His father had told and taught him to make his kills quick and clean, to spare creatures any pain. Iggy curled one forepaw into a fist and punched through the fawn's ribs, crushing the heart. The fawn stopped moving and Iggy, gazing up at the dark, star-filled sky, let the blood

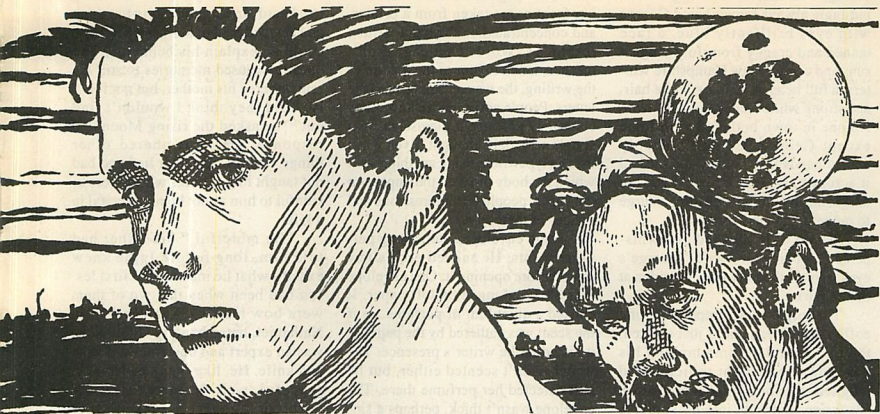
trickle down his muzzle, dribble into his nostrils, and cover his fur from flews to belly as he dined.

TALL, HANDSOME, good build, good humor, able to stand on a rocking ship with my hands at my sides. Brown hair, brown eyes, black beard, white skin. Have been mistaken for a brown bear when I bathe in mountain streams, well educated (past 6th grade), still have all my teeth but not all my marbles. Looking for a well-rounded, buxom woman. Buxom men need not respond. Applicants should know by this that brains are more important than brawn. Dinners, dancing, demitasse, and dramamine. Send resume and salary history.

The ad sat on Iggy's desk for two months. The first month he'd written it by hand and crossed out several portions. The second month he'd typed it into his computer, made several more edits, and returned to the forest.

He stared at the screen for some twenty minutes this time, ran the spelling checker over it four times, read the ad backwards to check for additional misspellings, and printed it out.

He lifted the paper in his hand, his eyes examining the grain of the page as his fingers felt the texture. There was a mirror next to his desk, as there were on all the walls in his house. Mirrors framed in gold, mirrors framed in window panes, handheld mirrors, mirrors simple or ornate; no room was without one. He gazed into this one, opened his eyes wide and



stared into them. Large, brown eyes stared back. Eyes a little too large, a little too far apart, with pupils a little too large, he thought. He rocked back and his focus changed to his nose, too thin on top with nostrils too wide on the bottom. He smiled, his face glowing light and his lips parting to show strong, even, white teeth. He abruptly opened his mouth until it became a mucous-laden cavern in the mirror, leaned closer, inspected his teeth, one by one, finally running his tongue over them like a barber testing a edge, and closing his mouth. Next he studied his narrow, dark-skinned, clean-shaven face, the thick brown-black hairs framing his high forehead and peering out from his open collared shirt. Next to the mirror was a calendar. There was a red line through most of the month. The only part of the month without a red mark was the current week, plus a day on either side. It was the end of the week.

"It'll be a month before this even sees print," he said. "Another month or two before any responses arrive." The calendar was on March. "Yes," he nodded. "Someone during the cold months." He folded the ad into thirds, included a check to cover its cost,

sealed the envelope and walked the several miles down the mountain into town.

April. Iggie woke up on the forest floor, in a place high in the protected woods of his family's company. There were no kills around him, but he was full. It took a moment for him to remember what had transpired in the past twenty-seven days. He then remembered the ad and started for one of the outbuildings beside his home.

A rubber door in the outbuilding allowed him in like a woman welcoming a long-absent lover. Bright lights came on as he groomed himself, performing a visual inspection, looking for wounds as if he were a leper looking for new bruises. He didn't remember meeting any bears, bobcats, coy-dogs or wolves, but he thought better to be sure than to find a festering wound several days into manhood. Satisfied, he rested on the straw floor for another day, waiting while his features retreated from their earlier form. When he awoke, he went into his house, showered, dressed, got in his Bronco and drove into town.

The town hadn't changed much since his birth. It was primarily a main

street, not exactly straight, about three hundred feet long, met at either end by roads that froze over each winter and rutted out each spring. At the middle was a general store, which served as post office, information hub, and bus stop for the Claremont-Unity-Keene run. A white-spired, black-trimmed Methodist church dominated the end of the street closest to Iggie's home. In front of the church, standing behind the black wrought-iron fence and perched upon scraggly, weed-infested grass, was what Iggie's father called "a verse under glass." At the far end of the street and, to Iggie's eyes, hiding under the sheltering pines and oaks, was a bar where the locals, most of whom worked in the mill Iggie's family had owned for generations, drank and lied to each other.

He walked into the post office and was greeted by Postmaster McCormick, well past both voluntary and forced retirement, who called him to the window with a voice befitting a Yankee whaler. "Ignatius Tanner, got your mail waiting for you right here as always." A few of the others nodded. No one said hello.

George, who had been a steady part of Iggie's life since Iggie was

young, was shorter than Iggie now, but Iggie always remembered George with eyes brilliantly blue, a face tanned and craggy from July-August suns and central New Hampshire winters, a full head of striking white hair, and strong white teeth still all his own. No one in town bothered with Iggie except George. George's deeply veined hands lifted a box and pushed it across to Iggie. The latest *Boston Magazine* lay on top. "Getting an urge to move to the city, Ignatius?"

"Nope." He blushed and whispered, "Looking for a wife." George's eyes weren't the only ones to widen at that remark.

That night Iggie prepared strong coffee using beans he'd just roasted, the thick acidic aroma making his nose run. He thought to lick it and laughed. He took a cup, the *Boston Magazine*, and went into his study. A quick scan told him his ad hadn't made it into this month's issue.

He read the ads once, drained his cup, got another cup, and read the ads again. Five cups of coffee, five times through the ads, trying to visualize the women, trying to augur if the few disastrous relationships he'd had would be repeated with them. Eventually he threw the magazine in the fireplace, but there was no fire.

His last act as a man was to place a note in Postmaster McCormick's box: *I'll be gone for the next three to four weeks on business. Please hold my mail until I return. Iggie T.*

He woke up curled on the straw in the outbuilding.

McCormick had the box of mail ready as Iggie walked in. "Got it right here for you, Ignatius." Iggie thanked him, took the mail and left.

His ad was almost dead center of all the personals. It was longer than most and he wondered if that would cause women to dismiss it. Going through his mail, he found his first response, mixed in with the legal matter, requests for charitable contributions, and catalogs from which he supplied his home.

There were fourteen responses in all. Word-processed letters he dismissed, sensing them by the hollow-

ness of the page. He could learn nothing from pages taken from a printer, and concentrated on the hand-written responses. Words on a page didn't mean as much to him as the texture of the writing, the way a hand formed the letters. People never realize how many clues they give about themselves in a simple scrawl, he thought. Even when using a typewriter, using anything with which the body directed the impact on the paper, people left impressions and images of themselves.

Some envelopes had strong perfume scents. He sniffed each a few times before opening it. One envelope was blue and made of soft paper. It carried a quiet hint of perfume, as if the scent was gathered by the paper as it rested in the writer's presence. The writer hadn't scented either, but he still detected her perfume there. The envelope wasn't thick, perhaps a single page. He could feel the penstrokes through the paper. His eyes grew wide and dark. His breathing quickened. Some spittle leaked from the corners of his mouth.

The lilt of the pen pretty much matched the written words. She was shy. *I tend to stay away from people. I think in my life I've made five or six true friends.* She was unsure of herself. *I studied music but now work as a high yield bonds dealer. Maybe I don't know what I want to do.* She liked honesty. *If this is just for sex, please tell me before we get involved. I'm not saying I'll say No, I just want to know before setting myself up for something that's not there. Do you know what I mean?*

But she didn't send a picture. He thought that was the norm. Maybe she didn't realize that he wanted a picture. He said resumé and salary history. She included a Boston telephone number and first name, "Sherry." He repeated it a few times. He didn't want to be alone anymore. He wanted to tell somebody about himself, someone not of the town. Someone who might accept his schedule as part of business. "Iggie the Traveler," they would say of him.

He cringed. Iggie the Traveler, he thought, feeling a familiar ache in his bones. Who would understand? Perhaps Sherry?

He woke early the next morning to a beard already coming in too thick and decided he wouldn't call her. How could he explain his behavior? The question caused memories to stir. He remembered his mother, but not fondly. "Did they think I wouldn't find out?" he asked the rising Moon. No response. He remembered other things. Things his father had and had not taught him. Things which were as painful to him as not being merciful in a kill.

"Be merciful," his father had told him, long before Iggie knew exactly what he meant. The first lesson had been when the two of them were bow hunting. Iggie's father, Nathaniel, hated hunting although he was an expert and unerring with bow and knife. He, like Iggie, had a lithe, graceful, well-defined build, but with an agonized musculature embracing a skeleton traveling between two worlds, his arms stronger than they appeared and hands and eyes steadier than mountains against wind. His father drew the string, his index, middle finger, and thumb holding the nock without signs of strain, his eyes seeing their mark, then closing as he turned his head away, his arms and hands never moving. Nathaniel sighed, a sound of relaxation and release. The arrow flew from his fingers, flying past the bow, silent against the sky, flying among the trees until it penetrated a pheasant's side, capturing the bird in mid-flight.

Nathaniel's nose twitched. Once, twice, and he handed the bow back to his son. Not a compound, with neither stabilizers nor sight, just sixty to seventy pounds at maximum draw, twenty inches from back to belly and Nathaniel did not shake or sweat. "Be merciful. Be quick. Be clean. Every kill should be made with a single blow. If your prey cries out...." His nose twitched again. He walked away without finishing the thought or collecting his prize.

"Shall I get the bird for you, father?"

"Take it to your mother. She can clean and dress it. You'll have no need...." Again the unfinished phrase.

"A remarkable—and remarkably good—book."
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A Myth of Rome in Which the Goddess of Love Attempts to Forestall the Coming of the Kingdom of God

JULIUS CAESAR

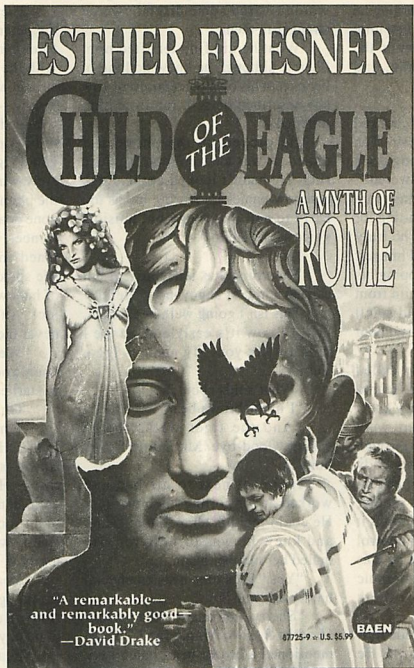
Though he was never an emperor, he ruled the world, and died happy at an advanced age.

MARCUS BRUTUS

He loved Caesar as a father, and hated him like a son. But he'd stop a dagger for him any time.

PTOLEMY

Though a living god in the Land of Nod, he hated Brutus like a brother. If Brutus were gone from the world, perhaps then Venus might love him best.



VENUS

She'd do anything for Brutus. But first—

CASSIUS

His lean and hungry look did not survive the Ides of March.

KING HEROD

He slaughtered a thousand newborns so that easy might lie the head that wore his crown—and he missed!



Together they will cast the history of Rome anew, and remake the sorry scheme of things entire, in *Child of the Eagle*.

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Iggie loved his father, although Iggie didn't understand his father until a few years after his death.

Iggie scratched his beard. The next day he left his house.

He awoke a month later and, waiting a day before venturing into town, read Sherry's letter several more times. Early the next morning he tested his voice a few times, listening to make sure there was nothing in the sound but the voice of a man, and picked up the phone to call.

Ten rings and nothing. He checked the number and dialed again. Ten rings and nothing. "How long does one wait for a phone to be answered?" he wondered. He could remain in a tree for hours or even days waiting for a dying beast to come by. If he truly hungered—he always gorged himself before the metamorphosis, hoping his bloated belly would prevent him from wandering too far—he would smell out a wounded or dying beast and hunt it down.

But the phone? He rarely called anyone. He had no friends. He feared to be around others, fearing they knew his secret better than he. There were none who had lasted with him through his puberty, his latency, as his body assumed its new desires independent of his wish or will. When his mother took him out of school, he thought it was because all others could control their transformations and that he was the inept, the fool, some metamorphic bed-wetter at whom all others laughed.

He wasn't hungry, but made dinner anyway. A vegetarian souffle. He never ate meat when he was a man.

Later, he tried the phone number again. No answer and no answering machine. The Moon mocked him from behind a sash. He snarled and went to bed. Imaginings of Sherry danced in his dreams.

He woke up on the floor and wondered if the past few days were dreams he dreamt when he thought he was a man.

Sometimes the memories of beasthood came to him as if they were dreams. Sometimes, when he was a beast, memories of manhood came to

him in what he thought must be dog-like dreams. He remembered them and dealt with them accordingly. But he wondered at what haunted his sleep, at times when he couldn't remember his dreams, hoping the memories would descend from the hidden into the light, hoping he wouldn't find some disemboweled stranger in them.

What he did find terrified him; Sherry, although he knew nothing of her except his own perceptions of how she described herself, ran from him, terrified.

He picked up the phone and dialed. It was answered on the third ring. He hadn't looked at the clock and now panicked, fearing it was too early to call. A groggy but musical voice said, "Hello?"

"Hi."

The voice was still musical but carried a hint of annoyance. "Hello?"

This isn't going well, he thought. "Hi. I know it's early and I hope I didn't wake you. My name is Iggie Turner."

"What's this about?"

"I'm the brown bear."

"And the tiger walks in the spring. Good-bye, Mr. Turner." She hung up.

Iggie sat next to his bed and worked at controlling his breathing. He could feel his temperature rising and knew he was turning red. He dialed her number again.

"Yes." This time a statement and hardly any music.

"Sherry, you answered a personal ad in *Boston Magazine*? The ad mentioned a brown bear, had all my teeth but not all my marbles?" If she hung up now he'd go on to someone else's letter.

She was alert and apologetic, "I'm sorry, Iggie. Is that right? Iggie? I didn't remember. God, what time is it?"

"It's 6:45 a.m. I didn't realize the time when I called. I'm usually not that inconsiderate."

She laughed and his heart spun. His mind forced her sounds into memory. "I hope you're not. But don't worry. I was going to get up in a few minutes, anyway."

"Do you normally start your day this early?"

"No, you picked the day I'm going to New York on business."

"Should I let you go?"

"You better not, you just woke me up, Iggie. Now you've got to entertain me until the alarm goes off."

They talked about movies one or the other had seen. They both favored foreign movies, no subtitles, on video with the sound off, just to look at the strange way people acted and dressed; music—Iggie's memories were wrapped in sounds and Sherry studied to be a music historian—both liked game (Iggie didn't respond immediately when she asked and she tapped the phone to see if the connection had gone dead); they mentioned bad experiences with past amours. Iggie listened and made soothing sounds as she spoke of those, not having much of his own he could share on the subject. And so on; soul-mates who'd never met.

"We've been talking for about an hour, Sherry. Didn't you say you had to start early today?"

"Oh, damn!"

"I'm sorry, did I keep you too long?" He didn't want to be so timid, so shy, so afraid of doing the wrong thing. He envisioned himself as a child constantly peeking out the door of his room as his parents fought, constantly wondering how to make it better, how to make it right.

"Yes, you did, but I don't mind. Look, Iggie, I've got to go and get ready. But you do sound nice. I'd like to meet you."

"Really?"

Now she sounded shy, as if she'd stepped beyond where she should go. "You don't think we could get together for coffee or a drink or something?"

"Yes, but you said you're going away, and I'll be out of town for about a month."

Her voice was defeated. He could feel her sigh over the line. "Oh, okay. I'm sorry. I'm only going to be out of town tonight. Well, give me a call..."

He cut her off before she could finish. "I won't be leaving for a few days. When do you get back tomorrow?"

"I'll be back by noon."

"Could we have dinner?"

"Dinner? Sure." She sounded enthusiastic again. He heard bedspreads and some clothes rustling. "I'm free. Hey, what luck! It's a full Moon tomorrow night. Maybe we could go somewhere on the coast. Watch the Moon over the water?"

"Yes." He was shaking, quivering sporadically, and didn't know why. *This couldn't be initiating a change, could it?* he wondered.

"Just one more thing, Iggy." He waited. "I told you about some bad times I've had on dates, remember?"

"Yes."

"You're not a wolf or anything like that, are you?"

He shook violently. He could feel the vibrations in his lungs and knew his voice would quaver when he spoke. He laughed to release the tension and said, "Not a wolf, but something like that."

She laughed, too, but not nervously. Then she gave him directions to where they could meet, and said goodbye.

He found a garage near the meeting place and parked there.

It was a few blocks to the bistro, but he was comforted by that. He checked himself in the rearview mirror, trying to calm himself and anxious about leaving the quiet solitude of his car. Outside would be the noises of the city; harsh and spiteful on his ears. He braced himself for the sonic onslaught, checked himself yet again in the mirror, put on some sunglasses, then got out of the car and leaned against it until the sounds became distinct. There were trucks and cars on Interstate 90, going in both directions, more trucks coming into the city than leaving, more cars leaving than coming. Construction, both minor and major, like the Arcana from some obscene Tarot, pounded him. Smells of oil, diesel, noncombusted gasoline. He inhaled and caught an LPP leak somewhere in the garage, although not a dangerous one. His car still had a new-engine smell even though he'd owned it for several years. Some scents of perfume and cologne, the cologne mostly

stronger than the perfume. Somewhere, towards the back of the garage, he smelled fresh, warm urine, feces, too-sweet berries, and sweat. He lowered his sunglasses and peered over the edge, his pupils sloughing wide until he saw a drunk lying there, puddles forming around him.

Two hundred feet from the Bistro, Iggy knew Sherry was there. Her back was to the street, sitting with her legs crossed at a table and sipping an espresso. He knew it was her because of the perfume, from the trace she left on her letter and envelope. It was one he'd never tasted before, and one, it seemed, no others wore.

She had a somewhat punkish haircut, short and somewhat spiky. An auburn that might have been burnt red in a different light. Her skin was pale white and she was thin and tiny. Sitting, measuring her body as he approached, he judged her not to be over five-five and about 110. She lifted her espresso with her right hand. There were no rings, but an emerald-on-gold band slid down her wrist and stopped mid-forearm. Her nails were long, manicured, and blood red. Her ears were fully exposed, unlike his, and supported large hoops. The left ear, the one he could see as he approached, also carried an emerald ear cuff. There was a jacket draped on the chair beside her, black with full shoulders and pulled at the waist. She wore black, pleated silk pants and deeply green shoes with low heels. Her blouse matched the color of the shoes, but also seemed to have a pattern moving in it.

"Sherry?"

She stood up quickly, lacking a little grace. His guesses regarding her height were accurate. Her eyes were green, not flecked nor chameleon, a simple green that contrasted well with her hair and fair, cool skin. Her lips were full, her mouth not wide, her nose thin and almost aquiline. Her face was thin without being angular. Her eyebrows matched her hair.

"Yes, Iggy?"

He clenched a fist, making sure his nails weren't longer or sharper than decency would allow, ran his

tongue over his teeth to insure his canines were still recessed, then offered her his hand and smiled. "Yes. It's nice to meet you."

She put on large, red-framed glasses. The lenses weren't thick, but they were wide circles like moons over her eyes. "I don't have to wear them, just for reading," she said and put them back in her bag. They stood there for a moment or two not talking, not looking at each other, each of them growing in their discomfort. People started staring.

"Looks pretty lonely over there," she said. "Why don't you come on my side for a while?"

The waiter waited without offering a menu. "Whatever she's having." The waiter didn't look at Sherry's cup and went away. Iggy watched her breathe. It was shallow. She looked away for a moment or two. "Am I making you nervous?" he asked.

She stared at him, a little quizzically. "No, why."

"You seem nervous."

"Just the situation."

"I'll leave if..."

She didn't let him finish. "No, stay. I've just never answered one of those things before."

"You, you told me."

"Our marathon morning call; right."

"You're beautiful." He kept her gaze in his, never letting his eyes wander from hers, feeling the animal in him confused and timid.

She stared at him a long time before saying anything. All the while he kept the beast in him attentive to her, stalking but not stalking, his dark, languid eyes always on her face, his body light in the chair and tilted slightly towards her.

"Telling me I'm beautiful isn't going to calm me down, you know."

"It's true."

She laughed, the same, full laugh she had on the phone. "How did you know I was me? I didn't tell you what I'd be wearing."

"Your—" he hesitated. "A good guess?"

"A good guess," she echoed and smiled. "Care to take me to dinner, Mr. Turner?"



He stood up, pulled back her chair, held her jacket as she slid her arms through the sleeves, then dropped a ten-dollar bill on the table, offered his arm and guided her out to the sidewalk, letting her slightest, unconscious body shifts guide him to the restaurant of her choice.

"I love this place," she told him as they approached. "What made you decide to come here? I thought you didn't know much about Boston."

"Just seemed like the kind of place you'd like to dine. It's okay, isn't it?" She kissed him then, quickly but softly, on his cheek. It almost took him by surprise and he held back his urge to view her sudden movement as an attack. His body prepared for movement and sent a rush of blood through him.

"I'm sorry," she hugged him and laid her head on his chest, tenderly and gently. "I didn't mean to make you blush, Iggy. You're just such a gentle man."

He opened the door and walked in behind her. It was an Italian restaurant with authentic Northern cuisine. He ordered something with vegetables, meatless, in a light garlic sauce. All through the meal he didn't take his eyes off hers, although his other senses were intimately aware of all of her.

Two hours later she said, "You've got a long ride back. Should you be starting for home?"

"As you wish." He motioned for the check.

She looked at him somewhat differently then. "Just going to leave like that, huh?"

"I thought the evening was over."

"Did you think the evening would go further?"

"I was hoping so. I mean," he felt a shyness rise in him and again saw in himself a timid little boy, "I think you're really nice. I like you. A lot."

"Iggy, I like you, too, but I'm not the kind of woman—"

"No," his eyes widened as he realized her interpretation. He put his hand up as if to ward off her words. "I didn't think you were. I mean...."

She pursed her lips. "Yes?"

"No, I mean I can leave anytime. No one's waiting for me at home." Iggy checked his watch, doing so only because a man two tables away did so as he talked to a woman sitting there. "I do have to go away on business in a few days, though," he said, his voice sounding helpful.

She crossed her arms over her chest and sat back. Her face got tight and flushed, her eyelids lowered and he felt himself evaluated in a mirror he could not see.

"Look, I'm new at this and a little awkward. What I'm trying to say is, I don't have to go home. I don't have to go to your home either. We can go somewhere else, if you'd like."

She pulled a fifty-dollar bill from her purse and threw it on their table.

"I mean dancing or for coffee or a ride maybe." He lowered his head to his hands. "I wish I knew more of what was expected of me in these kinds of situations. Guess I've blown this one, huh?"

There was a silence that only he could hear. There was confusion. She was relaxing and tensing and relaxing and he knew he was being watched.

She laughed and he looked up. It was the same musical laugh he'd heard on the phone. Her body hadn't moved, but her face was lighter, her lips opening and smiling as were her eyes. "You're cute."

He looked at her and felt himself floating on her voice, resting warmly in her eyes. "And cuddly, too," he sighed.

"Iggy, I don't normally do this." She suddenly looked to the side and said, "My God, does that sound like a line," then looked back at him. "Anyway, I don't live far from here. Would you like to come by for a drink?"

It turned out he was parked around the corner from her Back Bay condo. It was in a gentrified hotel a block east of Kenmore Square. She had an excellent stereo, a black Yamaha spinet, and three small rooms which she called her "home." It made Iggy claustrophobic. He left her early in the morning without waking her.

There were two messages on the answering machine when he woke up. He remembered later that day that he hadn't checked for messages when he came in.

"Hi, it's me. I just wanted to say 'Hi.' Hope you made it home all right. I wish you woke me before you left. I was kind of tired. I guess that was obvious after the last time, huh? I guess I needed my sleep. Thank you. When can I see you again? Have a good time on your trip. Send me a postcard or call to let me know how you're doing. I like you. How much time do I have before this thing beeps? Bye." He played that message three more times before listening to the next one.

"By the way, this is Sherry. I left the last message. Call me before you leave, okay?"

He called her. She wasn't there, but he remembered that she worked at Merrill Lynch. He called there and two secretaries later heard her say, "Sherry Stearns." There was still music in her voice.

"Hi. Remember me?"

"Iggie? Iggie, hi! Do I remember you?" She laughed as she echoed his question. "Why don't you run up and down a few more mountains?"

"I just wanted to call you before I left."

"Are you at Logan? If you are I can catch a cab out there. Maybe we can have a drink before you leave?"

"No, I'm not at Logan," he sighed.

"What, are you flying out of Manchester?"

"No, I have my own plane."

"Really? Wow. What business did you say you were in?" She laughed again. "Where're you going?"

"Kind of all over. I've got a lot of stops to make. I just wanted to let you know that I'll be gone for about a month and would like to see you again when I get back. I didn't want you to think I was one of those one-night guys when you didn't hear from me for a while."

"Well, where are you going?"

"Europe. Europe, then South America."

"Will you call me from wherever?" Her voice was beginning to lose the sounds of delight.

"I'll try. That's all I can say."

"Okay." She sounded disappointed but there was nothing he could do. "Have a nice trip. Give me a call when you get back." She hung up before he could say anything.

He called his attorney and told him to send a bouquet to Sherry's office close to the middle of the month.

Twenty-six days later he recognized a thumb where his dewclaw had been the night before. His voice was still more forest than human and his extremities were too hirsute for any man's. He didn't remember noticing these things during his metamorphoses before. A rabbit scurried from its cover. He lost interest in his physiognomy and ran after it.

Two days later he woke on his porch. The answering machine's light blinked rapidly and continuously. There were more messages on the tape than the machine could count. Normally there were none. The only people who needed to reach him knew enough to do so by mail. The answering machine can wait, he told himself, checking his voice before calling Sherry.

"Hello?" Her voice sounded as it had the first time he'd called her and he realized it was barely six a.m.

"Hi."

"Hello?"

"It's me, Iggie."

Her voice went cold. "Iggie who?"

"Iggie Turner."

"Oh yeah. Thanks for the flowers."

"Maybe I should call back later?"

"Or maybe not at all." He said nothing, waiting through the silence.

"Why didn't you call me from Europe? Or South America maybe?"

"I didn't have a chance."

"You had no time to yourself in a month to make a call?"

"Look, this is complicated. Can I see you to try and explain it?"

"Men. Fucking men. What the hell am I talking to you for?"

He felt more than heard the click as she hung up.

He cleaned up, staying in the shower until the water felt like running ice, then called a Concord florist to send her some more flowers. Later that afternoon he listened to his messages. All were from Sherry, all of increasing anger, frustration, resentment. The last message ended with, "...and I don't care if you send me every fucking flower in the world." He called the florist. Too late, the order had already gone out. He hung up the phone and it rang before the receiver stopped jiggling in the cradle.

"Yes?"

"You don't listen to your messages very often, do you?" It was Sherry, and her voice was softened but still angry.

"Sorry about the flowers."

"Can you come down tonight?"

"Tomorrow would be better. I just got back and...."

"No excuses. Tomorrow. I'll take the afternoon off so we can talk. Okay? And when we get together, you better explain all this to me. Tomorrow night, at my place, at 6:30. Is that night enough for you?"

"Yes." He heard her hang up and put the receiver back into its cradle gently, then stared at it a few minutes, waiting for it to ring again. It didn't.

Sherry was waiting for him in her lobby. He hadn't taken his sunglasses off, knowing that his eyes still reflected light slightly, and allowed his eyes to take in all the colors of her. She was wearing a slit maroon knee length skirt, a billowy white blouse, and a scarf with emerald, black, and maroon flowing through it. It was clasped with a gold pin. Her hair was slightly longer, her eyes slightly wider and deeper than he remembered — something he attributed to her makeup more than a lapse in his memory or a shift in her features—and her lips, her full, gently pouting lips, were touched with a pale frosting glaze.

"I'd forgotten how beautiful you look."

She checked her watch. "When you say you're going to do something, you do it, don't you."

He nodded although he knew it was a statement.

"Are you hungry?"



He nodded again.

"Care to take me out to dinner?"

"Sure." They went to a Thai place a couple of blocks from her condo. He asked for a table in the back, one without any lights near it. The waiter lit a candle and set it on their table.

Three quarters of the way through a silent dinner she said, "Did you get into a fight?"

He dropped his fork, unsure of what she could have noticed. "No, why?"

"Do you do drugs?"

"What are you talking about?"

She reached over and took the sunglasses off his face. "Then are you ashamed to be seen with me? Or are you afraid someone might recognize you and wonder who you're with?"

He lowered his face and scrunched his features to hide his eyes. His left hand rifled up, near anguine in its movement, and snapped around her wrist. "What are you doing? Give me those now."

He heard his glasses drop on the table. "Let me go," she said, "you're hurting me." He released her hand as if it were a glowing coal.

"I'm sorry. Give me my glasses, please."

"They're right there, in front of you."

"I can't open my eyes to find them. Please just hand them to me and I'll go."

He heard her lift them from the table. His hand tracked hers until he realized she wasn't handing them back. "They're not prescription. I can see through them fine. They're awfully dark, though."

"Please just hand them back."

"Why can't you open your eyes?"

"I'm having a little trouble with them right now."

"Iggie. Please look me in the eye."

"Blow the candle out first." He heard her exhale sharply but felt it on his hands, not in the direction of the candle. "Sherry, I'm sorry for any trouble I've caused you, but don't bullshit me."

"Wow, you swear? Do you get angry, too?"

"I know you didn't blow out the candle. I can still feel the heat and see the glow through my eyelids. There's no smell of smoldering wick and I felt your breath on my hands when you were suppose to be blowing it out."

"Look me in the eye, Iggie. I just want to see if you've been doing drugs."

He took a deep breath and opened his eyes slowly, hoping they would adjust rather than gather the light.

"You have beautiful eyes, Iggie. If you've been doing drugs, they don't show it."

Just then the kitchen door opened and his eyes blazed green as they amplified and reflected the light. He jerked his head down and covered his eyes with his right hand. "Please give me the glasses."

"Your eyes sparkle."

His heart sank. "I can explain."

"You don't have to. My mother's eyes did the same thing."

He looked up at her, his eyes wide and hopeful. "They did?"

"Yes, for about a month after her operation. Why didn't you just tell me, Iggie?"

Tell her the truth, he told himself. You like her and you have to let her know. "I don't know."

She placed his glasses in his hand, lifted it to her face and kissed it. "If I'd known, I could have sent you flowers."

They finished the meal, but not before he put his glasses in his pocket and rearranged his chair so that he was sitting next to her and away from the kitchen door.

They picked up some videos—*Rocky II*, *Young Frankenstein*, and *The Watcher in the Woods*—and went back to her place. Later that night, as she fell asleep, he got out of bed and stretched, his body silhouetted against the waxing Moon in her window. "Boy, can you fuck," she said.

He left her no notes, no hint of his departure. There was a message from her when he got home. Her voice was sad. "Once, just once, I'd like to wake up beside you," was all it said.

The phone rang as he stood there. "Yes?"

"Iggie." It was Sherry's voice. He lifted his hand to his nose and inhaled deeply, her musk still strong on him. The scent combined with her voice brought him back to being with her, lying upon her.

"Iggie?" she demanded, shaking him from his memories. "What's going on? How come you never spend the night? The whole night?"

"I have other things to do," he replied, softly, half-hoping she wouldn't hear, half-wanting to say something else.

But she did. "Yeah. Right. Fucking men," she said, then hung up.

The next day he was at her office, waiting for her to arrive. She looked at him and said nothing. He reached out for her as she walked past. "Sherry—"

She pulled her arm away before he could take it. "Leave me alone, you son of a bitch."

He tried not to, but laughed at the epithet. It always made him want to say, *No, it was my father...*

"You think this is funny? Get out of my life, please!"

People were starting to turn and stare. He felt himself raising on point involuntarily. "No, Sherry, let me explain."

"No, don't. I don't want to hear it. Just leave me alone. Go away, back to where ever you came from. Get lost, okay? Thanks for the good times, but you're not worth the bad." She pushed past him and went into One Financial Place.

He was by the doors when she came out for lunch. "What are you doing here?" She checked her watch. "Isn't it time for you to go away again?" She didn't stop. He walked beside her.

"I'm not a bad fellow. I've just got a few problems, is all."

"You never said deafness was one of them."

"Huh?"

She stopped and laughed. "Okay, you made me laugh. What's the story, Iggie. What are you married or something? If you are, tell me. I can handle it. Do you have some crippled sister at home that requires all your time

and attention? Tell me. Do you have a crazy mother in the attic?"

His face went blank and cold. He felt the blood drain. It must have been obvious to Sherry, too, because she touched his arm. "Iggie, is that it? I'm sorry. I didn't know."

"I had a crazy mother. Now she's in this attic." He pointed to his head.

She stared at him. Anger and compassion alternating on her face. Her finger pressed his lips close. She put her arms around him, then, and hugged him. "Not now, Iggie. You don't have to tell me everything now."

"But I'm going to have to go away again."

"When?"

"This Sunday."

"Is there anything for you to do for the next few days?"

"No."

"Then let's spend the next few days together. I know this place up in Maine. We can get a cabin and be all alone for a few days."

He pulled away, nervous and afraid.

"Well?"

"Yeah, sure."

"Good, I'll tell the office that I'm going to be gone the next few days. We can leave right after work. You can get your things on the way up."

He shook and hoped it wasn't noticeable. "No, no. I have everything I need in the car."

"You're sure of yourself, weren't you?"

He didn't answer. They ate at 'Wall Street' and he walked her back. He spent the rest of the afternoon running through several stores, picking up an overnight bag and assorted clothes. What time he had before Sherry got out of work he spent tearing labels and packaging from the clothes and putting them in the overnight bag.

They spent most of the time either in bed or in restaurants, only going sightseeing twice. The first time was horseback riding. Sherry's mount became skittish when Iggie approached and the handler, a woman whose farm labors gave her the build of a man, commented that she'd never seen the horse behave so.

It knows, Iggie thought. It knows what I am. What can I do? Iggie looked deep into himself, into the beast within, and remembered that the beast more than the man found a peace in its immediacy. The horse stopped shying and nuzzled him, stirring him from his thoughts.

"How'd you do that?" the handler asked. Iggie shrugged.

Later that night Iggie woke up, sweating while Sherry slept. In a dream, he'd been at the farm with the horses. It was night. There was no moon and he wasn't a man, but he stood like a man, under some trees and leaning on the fence to the pasture. The horses were neighing and nickering, growing anxious and fearful, gathering at the far end of the field. They started whinnying and running, kicking and biting each other. In his dream, Iggie saw himself as the horses saw him, standing like a man but looking like a wolf or a bear. His snout long and his ears high and prehensile, swishing as they scoped out sounds; his eyes large and gleaming in the moonlight, his tongue a sliver of pink that wagged from the left side of his mouth and flicked over sharp, razored teeth. A mist rose from his mouth as he breathed. It rose into the trees and fogged above his head. The handler and another woman, petite when compared to the first, with a high voice and bright eyes, came out to see what spooked the horses. The smaller woman had aimed a rifle at Iggie and shot.

Iggie checked his hands. They were human hands. His teeth were straight. He touched his nose and ears. Then he looked at Sherry, woke her and made love to her, trying to anchor himself in her, in this human in time and place, before going back to sleep.

Sherry asked to go hiking early on the third day, wanting to see the bright autumn colors. She couldn't keep up with him and he eventually started running up ahead then back to check on her.

"You tired?" he asked when he found her sitting on a rock beside the trail.

"No, I'm waiting for a bus to the top."

Before she could respond Iggie threw her over his shoulder and ran up the trail. They got to the top and he wasn't breathing hard.

"You really are in good shape."

He smiled, felt his canines pressing on his lower lip and quickly closed his mouth.

"Anything wrong?"

"No. Let's head back."

"Don't you want to rest?"

"No." He lifted her again and ran back down.

Back at the cabin, he started gathering his things. "Let's go."

"We're leaving?"

"Yes."

"Why?"

"It's time for me to go."

"Can we talk about this?"

"No, I have to get home."

She turned away and started packing. Iggie heard her sniff, smelled her tears and felt her skin tighten, and continued to pack.

They were north of Concord and she was reading a map. "Your home's off the next exit, isn't it?"

He hadn't spoken all the way back and cleared his throat before answering. "Yes."

"Aren't you going to slow down?" They zoomed past it. "I guess not. I thought you had to get back home."

He cleared his throat again. "I do. I'm taking you home first."

Her breathing changed and he could tell she was trying to control it. Her smell changed as well, and Iggie sensed her body tightening and relaxing, tightening and relaxing, tightening and relaxing as she fought to control it.

"Iggie, I think I need to see your house."

"No, you don't."

"No, Iggie, I think I do. I think I care about you but I have to know what's going on if I'm going to see you again. Right now this relationship is really one-sided. I'm giving you everything but I don't think I'm getting much back. I care about you a lot, Ig, but I care about myself more, and if you're not going to share yourself

with me, then just leave me in Concord and I'll take a bus home. I'm sorry, Iggie, but that's the way it's got to be."

"You don't understand," he snarled.

"Iggie!" she pulled away, against the side of the car and away from him. He'd frightened her and he knew it. "Listen, Iggie. I want to understand, but I can't unless you're willing to let me. I don't want to stop seeing you, but I can't spend my time with only half a man."

He winced at that, then felt a tear slide down his cheek. Another exit towards his home approached and he took it. They drove on in silence.

He woke before she did and looked at the calendar against the wall. Two days left. Maybe sixty hours, at most, before he wouldn't be able to stand up straight or hold things in his hands. As it was, he couldn't stay clean shaven for more than six hours and his voice was sinking. His tongue was starting to fill his mouth; his elbows, wrists, knees, and ankles were becoming more pronounced, and worse, the smell of Sherry's excitement was accelerating his change.

Last night, when they made love, the beast had come and watched the man until finally the man turned and the beast had taken her in its arms. Why hadn't she noticed? he wondered.

He left her a note on the table and took a perch halfway up an oak some two hundred feet from his house. He knew when she read it because her smell changed drastically and he heard her cry. The note told her to take the car and leave. He didn't want her there when he came back.

He heard and smelled her make breakfast, clean, wash, dress, go into his study, call her answering machine, then go into the den, turn on the stereo, and lie on the couch. She didn't move from there all day.

The sun had set behind the tall pines and mountains to the west an hour earlier. In the dusk and cool, near-winter air, he tried to cry and grew only more frustrated that that vestige of humankind had already left him. Descending from the tree, Iggie

wondered how to handle this situation. "She must leave," he said. "She can't stay any longer. She'll find out and she won't love me anymore."

He entered through the front door, but shut off the lights along the way. Her glasses were still on the kitchen table, next to the note he left. He smelled her, still in the den, still on the couch. He called from the hallway, "I told you to leave."

"What's the big secret, Iggie?" she demanded. "I only see you once a month—you're worse than my goddamn period. At least I know when to expect that. I finally get to see where you live and you want me to leave after one night. What's the story? Your wife coming back? Just tell me what's going on. I want to know the secret."

He heard her get up and growled, "Don't move." His voice was getting hard to control.

She rose more quickly and started towards him. "Iggie, what's wrong?"

It's dark, he told himself. She can't see that well in the dark without her glasses. These thoughts emboldened him and he stepped into the doorway. "I don't love you. I don't even like you. You were fun for a while, but now you bore me. It's time for somebody new. Get out."

She stretched her arms out towards him, her face white with pain as tears flooded his eyes. "No, Iggie. Please, don't say that. Is this about last night? Please say no, Iggie. Last night was so passionate, so beautiful. Last night was the first time I thought I was with the real you."

He retreated back into the darkness, his voice quieter, higher, frightened at what she might now know. "What are you talking about?"

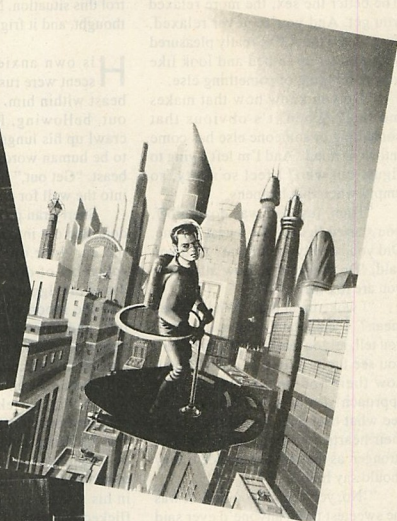
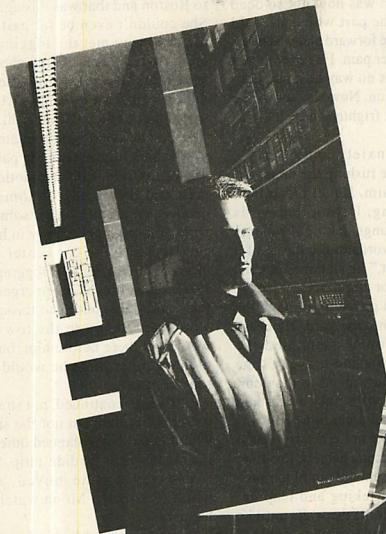
"Last night, when you rolled onto me and started making love. You've never been like that before. You've never been so passionate, so primal, so intense. You've always been good, Iggie."

"But last night...I don't know... here was so much more emotion. And you started biting me. No, it was more like you were nipping me. Kind of like a puppy teething. It really got me

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going. Then, when you came, you made a sound deep in your throat between a growl and a moan. That was another thing. You're fairly quiet. You usually don't make any noise. I wish you would because that way I'd at least have an idea of what you're thinking about or what you'd like me to do.

"But last night, when you were finished, you were relaxed. That's one thing I've noticed about you, Ig. The better the sex, the more relaxed you get. And you're never relaxed. Just when I think I've really pleased you, you sit up in bed and look like you're thinking of something else.

"Do you know how that makes me feel? When it's obvious that something or someone else has come into your mind? And I'm left trying to figure out who? I feel so shitty, so empty when that happens.

"Then, just as I was dozing off, you started licking the sweat off me. Did you know you did that? And you said, 'Do you realize how attractive you are to other men?'

"I woke up at that. 'What do you mean?' I asked and you said, 'Can't you tell, as you walk past them? Can't you see the heat rise in them? Smell how their bodies quicken at your approach? Look into their eyes and see what thoughts lie behind? Hear their hearts and lungs grow tighter, stronger, as they try and decide if they should say hello?'

"No, you can't,' you said. It was the sweetest thing anyone'd ever said to me. Strange, but sweet.

"You held me then and I started to go back to sleep. And as I was falling asleep I started dreaming. I dreamt you smelled different, that your body changed. I remember getting scared. It felt as if your chest expanded, as if your shoulders got wider. In my dream, you started to breathe deeper. I know it sounds stupid, but I saw your eyes get darker and wider, too.

"But it was only a dream, Iggie. If I said something or did something, it was because I was really tired and probably asleep. I was frightened, but that's normal, don't you think? You obviously have something you're hid-

ing from me and it came out like that in the dream. I'm sorry, Iggie." She sobbed then, an offering, hiding nothing from him.

Iggie watched her, trying to decide if he was witness to anger and rage or anguish and pain. Part of him, the part which was now not so deep within him, the part which she said she liked, came forward and was overwhelmed by her pain. He never meant this. There was no way he could control this situation. Now she knows, he thought, and it frightens her.

His own anxiety and Sherry's scent were rushing the emerging beast within him. He let the animal out, bellowing, letting the words crawl up his lungs, taking their time to be human words in the throat of a beast. "Get out," he slammed his fist into the wall for emphasis.

Sherry ran past him, through the door and out into the yard. He heard the car door open, slam, and the splashing of dirt and gravel as she drove off. Iggie walked to the door, saw the Moon with only a crescent left, and forced a scream from his throat, screaming not at Sherry, not at himself, but at Luna herself, this time fully letting the animal out of the cage within him, shrieking and leaping, banging himself off the walls until he was too exhausted to move, unable to cry. He looked at his hands, no longer quite hands, and the increasing bends in his sleeves and pants. His tongue flicked his teeth. They were sharper and the canines were more pronounced.

"I'm not an animal," he shrieked at the stars. He stretched and tried to clench the Moon between the pads forming on his fingers. Instead he slumped to the floor, on his knees in the vestigial moonlight. In his moment, in his agony of wanting to love but being afraid no one would love in return, of being alone and wanting to be held, of sharing his world and finding no one who would want to share, of realizing he was what he was, he remembered something his father had said; a drop of wisdom in the memories of confusion, something recently experienced

with the horses: Accept what you are. Accept what you are and you make yourself something greater, something better. Don't accept and anything you build you build on sand.

Sherry had been gone for about two minutes. She knew only one way to Boston and that was through town. She couldn't even be far past where his driveway met the logging road. He growled, took off his shoes and socks, and burst through the door, knocking it from its hinges. His eyes opened for the darkness, his nose widened to avoid both predators and prey which might be in his path, and his legs pulsed with the motion of a man and the spring of something deeper, something older, something which placed more energy in him.

He heard the car skitter on the dirt as it turned onto the logging road. It went past him as he emerged from the woods. He continued through the woods and down to the town. She would get there before him, but if he didn't get her there he would never see her again.

His legs continued, not straining, with neither the pain nor the stitches which might have plagued others following his path. He didn't trip, fall, or rustle leaves as he moved, all the while feeling the Moon watch over his parade.

His car was parked in front of the bar. The bus stop sign was lit and nothing else was open.

He waited outside in the shadows. The sounds from the bar were a mix of pool cues hitting balls, jukebox music played too loud, glasses and bottles clinging and tinkling, and many voices feigning intelligent discussion. He wasn't sure if he could pick out Sherry's voice from the rest, but the smell of her perfume was strong. There was a scent of fear mixed with it. He stood to the side of a rear window. Voices became more distinct. There were still many—Iggie counted five—but then one stood out from the rest.

"You with Turner? That's his Bronco, isn't it?" No response. "I asked you, aren't you visiting Iggie Turner?" Again no response. "Hey, lady—"

Another voice. "Jake, leave her alone."

Iggie noticed the bar was growing quiet and groaned as the jukebox's tune became obvious:

It took a long time to get next to you.

*It took a long time to get next to me
I spent my share of nickels and dimes*

*On telephone lines
just telling you lies.*

"Why?" Jake asked. "We all work for that bastard but he don't know us. Then he goes and gets himself some fancy Boston bitch—"

A third voice. "Jake, you're drunk. Come on over here and we'll talk about Turner ourselves."

A sharp crack and wood splintered. Jake again: "Talk's for shit. I never swelled perfume like that. And look at her hair. You know any women cut their hair like that? Betsy? You cut your hair like that?"

There was some laughter. Then Iggie heard Sherry's voice trying to be cold and hard. "Leave me alone."

A female voice, Iggie thought it might be Jake's Sherry, rose above the general noise. "Why's Iggie Turner want to waste his time with some high class like you, I don't know. He wants a good turn, he doesn't have to look out of town."

The bar again grew quiet, the jukebox again more obvious.

*Somewhere back in my eyes
you can't see*

*Is a hole big enough to let out
the rest of me.*

It took a long time to get next to you.

*It took a long time to get next to me
Why do those lies make us
more wise?*

*Why did those lies ever rule
our lives?*

Somebody laughed and voices started again. Jake said, "Damn, you've got big tits."

A hand slapped a loose, fleshy cheek. Sherry's voice, not in control and desperate, "Keep your hands off of me."

Iggie opened the door to the bar. At first the smells overpowered him. He sneezed and, without realizing what he was doing, licked his nose.

Stay on your feet, not on your toes, he told himself.

Sherry stood by the bar. A large man in a red hunter's jacket and an orange cap held her arm and pushed her against the bar. The man needed a shave. His eyes were close together and piglike, his nose was flattened from too many fights, and Iggie wondered if there was a curled tail tucked into his manure-stained overalls.

"Let her go." Iggie's voice was more human than he'd hoped.

"Well, finally decided to talk to the little people?" the man said. The voice told Iggie it was Jake.

Another man, closer to Iggie and sitting at a table, said, "You're the great Iggie Turner? You're not so big in real life, you know that?" The man belched and the smell of sour beer engulfed Iggie. He sneezed again.

A woman with Betsy's voice, a woman with a cheap flower-print dress cut too low, a woman with nylons with too many runs to possibly feel comfortable on her legs, a woman with too much makeup and too loud a perfume, a woman with hair too many years out of fashion for her sadly lined face, staggered over to Iggie with a handkerchief. "Here, hon. Betsy'll take care of that cold for you."

Iggie snarled and bared his fangs at her approach. She cried out, covered her mouth with the handkerchief and whirled away from him, then tripped over a chair and landed flat on a table, sending warm beer and day-old pretzels onto the floor and laps of those present.

The man who belched at Iggie, and two others from the table where Betsy landed, got to their feet. Jake looked at Sherry and said, "Stay here, bitch."

One of the men picked up a pool cue and swung it at Iggie. But Iggie's moon was sending him quickly into the ways of beasts and his running had fueled the metamorphosis. Now his anxiety was rushing what might have taken another day or two at other times. Reflexes that kept bobcats and bears at bay, reflexes that caught fish without hook or net, rushed through him.

The pool cue whizzed over his head. Iggie's claws ripped open the man's face. Neither Jake nor the other two men nor anyone else in the bar moved.

The man dropped the pool cue and clutched his face. Blood flowed through his hands and drenched his shirt. He screamed and fell back onto Betsy. She shrieked and pushed him off. The other men moved towards Iggie.

Iggie leapt. His body flew parallel to the floor. One hand pushed one man's head as Iggie's other hand grabbed the man's shoulder, exposing the neck. Iggie bit deep enough to instill fear, to leave scars, but not permanent damage. The man fell and didn't get up.

Iggie was in the middle of the bar. Jake came at Iggie from one side and the belcher from the other. The belcher broke a beer bottle as he approached. Iggie backed up, trying to get outside and away from Sherry. Instead he found himself in a corner of the bar.

"Just like an animal, huh, Turner?" said Jake.

"Accept," Iggie whispered.

The two men moved at once. Iggie's claws went deep into Jake's soft belly. One paw moved up and the other down, opening Jake like a cleanly killed rabbit. The animal in Iggie saw the deliciously sweet intestines there and stopped, fascinated. His tongue swept his lips and his eyes went wide at the prize before him.

The bottle flashed in front of him and cut his arm. Iggie yelped as the bottle came at him again. He caught the belcher's arm and dug his claws deep into the flesh, through the muscle and into the bone. The belcher started screaming. Iggie pulled the man's arm until his face was level with Iggie's. The man was still screaming. Iggie looked at the bleeding body of Jake, his intestines spilling onto the floor, then looked into the sour-smelling mouth of the belcher, into the terrified soul he knew was there, the terrified soul so similar to one which was once his own.

But now Iggie admitted who and what he was. Even if Sherry didn't want him, couldn't love him, was afraid to look upon him, he knew what he was, what his world was, and accepted it.

Iggie opened his muzzle until he knew the man could look into him as Iggie had stared into the man. He felt his saliva slide down his flews and onto his clothes, ran his tongue over his teeth, felt the man shake before him, and howled until the man's screaming stopped. He let go and the man slumped onto the floor beside Jake.

There was no one left in the bar except Iggie's fallen attackers, an unconscious Betsy, and Sherry. Iggie walked over to the door. He walked on the balls of his feet, on his toes. He had no choice. His back was beginning to arch and his arms were growing longer to match the length of his legs. His ankles rode higher on his legs, making an opposing knee appear in his pants. His face was longer, his ears longer and tapered, his eyes and nostrils larger. The hair on his face was darker and thicker, and more obviously coursed down his neck to his chest and back. Soon he would have to take all the clothes off. He had to get back to his house, he knew.

He stopped at the door and turned to Sherry. The look on her face, her smell, her sounds, all were a mix of fear and anguish, the look in her eyes showed far more terror than he'd ever imagined. The jukebox finished playing the song.

I don't know why you still love me.

*Why did those lies ever rule
our lives?*

*Why do those lies show
in your eyes?*

He raised an arm and held a hand out to her. The hand was too hairy and ended with fingers too long and too thickly nailed for a man. The fingers had obvious pads which gave them an odd mallet-like shape. His voice was more a growl and he tried three times before he thought the words sounded human enough. "No wife, no mother, no others. This is

my secret. This is what I am. Can you love me, knowing this?"

She swallowed hard, once, then again. She crossed half the room, her steps were small and unsure, and stopped. "Iggie?"

He wanted to look away but didn't, no longer afraid of what he was and not willing to let others' fears guide him. Instead he looked into her eyes.

"It is you. Your eyes, Iggie. They're still beautiful."

He tried to smile and drool hung from his flews.

"Are you going to hurt me?"

He looked around the room.

She stood taller, moved closer, always looking into his eyes and face. "Not them, me. Can...can you understand me?" She started talking slower and enunciating as if asking directions in a foreign country. "Are you going to hurt me? I need to know if you're going to hurt me."

He shook his head and growled, "I won't stop understanding you, and no, I won't hurt you. Ever."

"My dream. It wasn't a dream, was it?"

"I am a man only when the Moon is full. I change from and to a beast as it waxes and wanes, but I'm never one without the other. Both are inside me, always."

"And your business trips, they're—"

"When I'm fully changed, when I no longer look anything like a man."

Sherry closed her eyes and forcibly swallowed, shook herself, opened her eyes, walked over to him and shuddered as she took his hand. She reached for his wounded arm. He whined and pulled away, a small pup afraid of being hurt. She took his hand and looked at the wound. ■



Song lyrics courtesy of John Pousette-Dart and Debbie Rose, from The Pousette-Dart Band's "Next to You."

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DEAD TO THE WORLD

Brandon Massey

Illustrated by Kelly Faltermäyer

The man kept calling about his check

“Where’s my check?”

Sitting at my desk in my tiny cubicle, rocking slowly in my chair, I bolted upright and tightened my grip on the telephone handset. Don’t let this guy be another one, I prayed. I’d been answering calls for two hours that morning, and I’d taken enough blows from irate policy owners to leave me feeling like a punching bag. I didn’t have the endurance to face another angry customer. After all, during my drive to work, I had miraculously avoided what could have been a fatal collision with an eighteen-wheeler. I wanted to spend the day gazing out the window, silently thanking God for sparing my life.

Please, let this guy be a quick transfer to another department. “Before I can answer your question,

sir, I’ll need your policy number,” I said. “Can you give that number to me, please?”

He rattled off a series of digits. As he spoke, I entered the numbers on my IBM PC. His policy information, visible in green type, filled the black display.

The Chicago-based company I worked for, Lake Shore Insurance, offered medical, disability, group life, and individual life coverage. Separate departments administered each kind of insurance; I worked in the individual life area. Although our toll-free number gave callers a department menu that should have always connected them to the appropriate areas, in the course of a day I often transferred a dozen misdirected calls. But there would be no quick transfer this time. As I studied the screen, I saw that this guy had an individual life policy. Great.

I steeled myself for the oncoming abuse. “And what is your name, sir?”

“Ralph E. Stone, from Peoria, Illinois. Ain’t you got that on your screen, boy?”

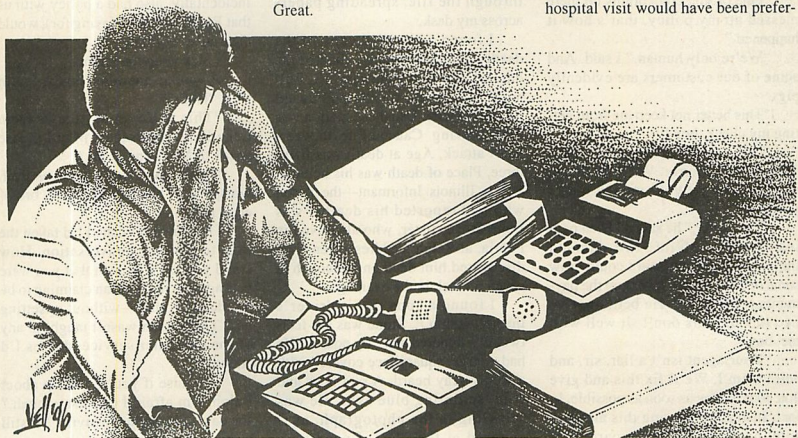
“Yes, sir, I do, but I needed to confirm your identity,” I said. “Okay, Mr. Stone, you were calling about a check?”

“A loan check,” he said. “Thousand bucks I need. I’m in a real tight spot. I sent you folks a letter a few weeks ago, but you ain’t sent me nothing yet. So now I’m calling about it. Where’s my goddamn money?”

“I’ll see if I can find out, Mr. Stone. Can you hold for just a moment?”

“Hurry it up.”

Oh, shut up, I thought as I put him on hold. I half-wished that I hadn’t been so lucky that morning; a bruise or two that would have justified a brief hospital visit would have been prefer-



able to coming here. On days such as these, I believed that if God ever decided to condemn me to hell, he would put me somewhere exactly like this, to deal with mad customers for all eternity.

I tapped the keyboard, flipping through various screens, searching for information about a loan transaction. I learned two things. One, no loan check had ever been mailed to Stone. Two, Ralph Stone had died on February 13, three weeks ago. The ten-thousand-dollar death benefit had been paid to his beneficiary and sister, Irene Stone.

Obviously, something was screwed up.

I picked up the phone.

"My check on the way?" Stone said.

"Well, sir...no. It seems we have some incorrect information coded on our system. According to our records, you died on the thirteenth of February." I chuckled, as if such a thing were funny.

Stone laughed, too. "Then your computer's a piece of shit, boy, cause it's wrong as wrong could be. I wouldn't be calling if I were dead, would I?"

"Of course not," I said. "I apologize for this. I'm not sure how this happened."

"One of you crackbrains up there messed up my policy, that's how it happened."

"We're only human," I said. And some of our customers are evidently pigs.

"This better not keep me from getting my check, boy."

"No, sir, I promise you it won't. This is a minor error. We'll fix this in no time and get your money out to you."

"You better," he said. "I been paying a lot of cash into this damned thing, and my agent said I could draw some of it out after I'd kept up the payments a few years. He better not've lied to me. Liars don't sit well with me, boy."

"Your agent isn't a liar, sir, and neither am I. We'll fix this and give you your money as soon as possible. In fact, instead of passing this along to someone else, I'll take care of it

myself. How about if I order your file, take a look at it, and call you back later today?"

"What's your name, boy?"

"Kevin," I said. "Kevin Matthews."

"I'll call you," Stone said, and hung up.

An hour later, I opened Ralph Stone's thick manila file. The first thing I saw was the top sheet, a printed document that gives you almost all the information you would ever need on a policy: name of insured, date of issue, face amount, beneficiary, and modal premium, to name a few. When the insured died, the claim adjuster stamped the date of death on the top sheet. And because colleagues thoroughly checked and double-checked the adjuster's work, it was highly unlikely that a top sheet would ever be stamped in error. In my dealings with thousands of files, I had never seen it happen.

Nevertheless, that blood-red stamp glared at me from the top sheet: DECEASED 2-13-96.

Impossible. I had talked to Ralph Stone on the telephone.

Hadn't I?

Searching for some error that would make sense of all this, I dug through the file, spreading papers across my desk.

I found a certified copy of the death certificate, which validated the date of death as February 13. Full name of decedent was Ralph Edward Stone. No wife. Usual occupation was truck driving. Cause of death was a heart attack. Age at death was fifty-three. Place of death was his home in Peoria, Illinois. Informant—the person who had reported his death—was Irene Stone, sister, who also lived in Peoria, at Ralph's address. Irene had discovered him dead on the couch at seven o'clock in the evening.

I found a copy of his driver's license. Ralph E. Stone was six-feet-two, two hundred and fifty pounds. He had a large, square face covered with a wooly gray beard. A pug nose and cold, squinting blue eyes. He was scowling in the photograph, as if angered at the idea of needing a

license to drive his car. All of the data on the card matched the data in the file.

Lastly, I found a letter written in sloppy manuscript on yellow notebook paper: *Give me a loan for a thousand dollars. My agent said I could get money after I kept this thing for a few years. I need money now, so send it right away. Thanks, Ralph E. Stone.*

The letter was postmarked February 12. The day before Stone had apparently died of a heart attack.

Looking at these things, I felt as though I might suffer a heart attack myself. What was going on here?

Was the man I had talked to earlier an imposter trying to chisel money out of us? Or was he really....

No, don't even consider it, because that's crazy.

The man was nothing but a swindler. In my three years at this company, I'd heard about his type. They were doctors who sent in fake claims, insureds who were healthy and working yet tried to get disability benefits, agents who forged applications and got the fat commissions—the insurance industry teemed with treacherous people who'd do anything to grab a dishonest buck. This case was just a little stranger than usual. One call to Irene Stone, the sister (who, incidentally, also had a policy with us that Ralph had been paying for), would clear up everything.

I picked up the phone.

A woman answered on the fourth ring. "Hello?"

"This is Kevin Matthews from Lake Shore Insurance. May I please speak to Ms. Irene Stone?"

"Speaking." Her voice was frail, whispery. "This isn't about my brother, is it?"

I hesitated. I wished I'd taken the time to plan my conversation. How could you tell a woman that you were getting calls from a man claiming to be her dead brother—without upsetting her? That lesson wasn't taught in any of the customer service classes I'd attended.

"Because if you're calling about Ralph, I'm afraid I can't say much," she said. She sighed heavily. "It still hurts me to talk about him."

"That's perfectly understandable, ma'am. I don't want to upset you, but—"

"He was such a sweetheart, Ralph was," she said. "Took care of me like a father. The man *believed* in family, would do anything for his kin. You don't see that as much these days."

"My deepest sympathies to you, ma'am. But I got a call—"

"I'll never get over his passing. Never." She sniffled, and I feared she was about to break down and weep. "No one ever cared about me as much as Ralph did."

"I'm sure you're right, ma'am. I'm sure Mr. Stone was an honorable man. By the way, do you happen to know anyone who might try to impersonate him so he could con money out of an insurance company?"

"Ralph was so... what did you say?" she said, a sudden edge to her voice.

I mentally kicked myself in the butt. Wasn't I just brimming with tact? I ought to open a charm school and educate the less-graceful masses.

Determined not to make another gaffe like that, I pressed on. "I hate to discuss this with you, Ms. Stone, but I received a call today from a man who says he's your brother, Ralph E. Stone. He's demanding that we mail him a loan check. He made reference to an actual written loan request from your brother that was postmarked February 12. And, of course... Mr. Stone died on the thirteenth, so we never processed the loan. But the man who called me is very convincing. He insists that we mistakenly declared him dead."

"Why're you calling me? I sent you a copy of Ralph's death certificate, didn't I?"

"Yes. But—"

"What else do you need? His poor dead body sent overnight mail?"

"I'm sorry, I didn't mean to upset you. I only wanted to verify—"

"Mister, these past few weeks have been absolute hell for me, and you've just made it worse with your crazy goddamned questions. If this is the kind of compassion I can expect from my insurance company, I don't want anything more to do with you

people. Cancel my policy immediately—with a full refund of every cent Ralph ever paid into it!"

Click.

She had hung up on me. I can't say I blamed her; I'd figured my call would piss her off. But I needed to be sure about this guy. And now that I was, I knew what I had to do.

Wait for him to call me back.

I didn't have to wait long. Barely fifteen minutes after I finished speaking to Irene Stone, my telephone rang again.

"Got it all straightened out, boy?" the man claiming to be Ralph Stone said.

"I sure do," I said. I leaned back in my chair, took a sip of coffee. "You're dead, Mr. Stone."

Silence. Then: "Come again?"

"I found your death certificate in the file. You died on February thirteenth—a day after your written loan request was postmarked. I'm sure you remember, sir. Dying of a heart attack has to be hard to forget."

Stone chuckled. "I died of a heart attack, eh? I can't say I remember, though I reckon I should." He chuckled again, then cleared his throat. "Now look, boy, I've had enough of these jokes. I need—"

"I need a break from your con act!" I said, speaking louder than I had intended, rising halfway out of my chair. I drew a deep breath, sat down. "Listen, whoever you are, I'm not buying your story. Mr. Stone died, we paid the benefits to his sister, and we've officially closed his file. You aren't getting a dime. So you can quit this tired act of yours. Now good-bye, sir, and please don't call again."

Without waiting for his response, I hung up. I pressed the button on the telephone that would automatically send any calls for me to my voice mail. It went without saying that if he called again and left me a message, I would not return his call. As far as I was concerned, I'd had my last conversation with Mr. Whatever-his-real-name-was.

Pleased at how I had handled the situation, I finished off my coffee and went to lunch.

When I returned from lunch, I saw the blinking message indicator on my telephone. I smiled. Who might have called?

I accessed my voice mail and listened to the message. It was him, of course. Mr. Whatever-his-real-name-was.

"You've went and made this personal, boy. I'm in a real tight spot, and you're jerking me around with some nutty story about me dying of a heart attack. I wasn't a whiz in school, but I'll be damned if I'm dumb enough to fall for your bullshit. My agent said I could get a loan, and I'm gonna get it. So I'm coming up there, boy. Leaving within the hour, ought to get there by this afternoon. And when I stop in, you better have my check ready. Or else."

He slammed down the phone, a sharp sound that hurt my ear.

My heart was suddenly pounding. Of all the reactions I had expected from him, I had never expected this.

I opened Stone's file, flipped to the copy of his driver's license. In his early fifties. Square face, wooly gray beard, pug nose. Cold, squinting blue eyes. An angry scowl.

You've made this personal, boy.

This was madness. Sheer insanity. Ralph Stone was dead. The death certificate said so, and the sister said so. This imposter was blowing smoke. He wasn't getting a thing from me, and he knew it. He probably wasn't actually driving up here. He was only trying to scare me.

And I had to admit that he was doing a good job of it.

Work proceeded as usual until a few minutes after three o'clock that afternoon. Then my phone rang. It was the receptionist.

"A man named Ralph Stone is waiting in the lobby for you," the receptionist said. She coughed a couple of times. "He says you should have a check for him."

I was speechless. I sat there holding the handset to my ear, like a poster boy for AT&T.

"Will you come down here and meet him, please?" the receptionist said. She coughed again.

Tell her no, a voice in me pleaded. Tell her to get security to kick the man off company property. Tell her that talking to psycho con men isn't in my job description.

But I said none of those things. I only said: "I'll be down there in a minute."

Coughing as if she'd caught a terrible cold, the receptionist thanked me and hung up.

I gathered Ralph Stone's file and walked to the elevator. Ordinarily, I always take the stairs, for the exercise. That time, however, I didn't feel confident about my ability to make it down the stairs without my trembling legs giving way and spilling me on my face.

The elevator doors whooshed open.

About fifteen feet away, a man turned from the reception desk and looked at me as I entered the lobby.

Right away, I knew this man was no imposter. He looked exactly like Ralph Stone.

That is, if Ralph Stone had climbed out of the grave after having been dead for three weeks.

He still appeared to be about six-foot two, but seemed to weigh not two-fifty but three-fifty; maybe more. His body was round and swollen, nearly bursting out of the shearing jacket and jeans that he wore. Large blisters marred his bloated face; the skin had a strange green-red tint, and seemed to be loose, ready to drip like hot wax from his skull. Half of the hairs of his woolly gray beard had fallen out; the remaining hairs were limp and colorless. The cold, squinting blue eyes were now flat, and so clouded up with fluid that they were as white as the eyeballs of a voodoo priest caught up in spirit possession.

And the smell. Jesus. No wonder the receptionist had been coughing when she'd spoken to me on the phone. Such a stench filled the air that I felt as though I had stepped into a slaughterhouse. Hercules had overlooked while on his way to clean the Augean stables.

The man—or what had once been a man—shuffled toward me, muddy black boots dragging across the carpet.

The lobby was warm, but a chill gripped me.

To hell with trying to explain his presence. I didn't want to know the inexplicable details. I only wanted to get him out of there.

He stopped a few feet away from me, planted his discolored fists on his soft waist, and scrutinized me from head to toe with his milky pupils.

This close, the stench was too much. I backed up a little, covered my nose with my forearm.

I thought I saw a maggot quivering in his nostril.

"You the boy I talked to?" he said, his voice somehow strong, clear.

"Yes. I'm Kevin Matthews."

He grunted. "Got my check?"

"No, I don't," I said. I clumsily opened the file, riffled through the various documents. Talk about absurd. What was nuttier than explaining a death claim to the decedent? "See here, Mr. Ralph Stone—or you, since I know that's who you are now—died on February thirteenth. The death benefits were paid to your sister, Irene. The policy has been terminated. I don't know what else I can tell you, sir. I can't give you anything. Sorry."

Gazing at the file, viewing his own death certificate, he pursed his split lips. "You folks never stop bullshitting, do you?"

"Excuse me?"

He slapped the file out of my hand.

Then he seized me by the front of my shirt.

"No more lies! Give me my goddamn check!"

He shook me hard, in spite of his bloodless muscles that must have gone soft.

His mouth, only inches from my face, spewed forth fetid breath that struck me like a blow. I wanted to faint, but my body didn't cooperate.

A security guard ran up to us. He clapped a hand on Stone's shoulder. "Hey, mister, let go of—"

With stunning quickness, Stone released me and spun around and punched the guard in the nose, his fist bursting and spilling fluids like a giant pimple.

The guard dropped to the carpet, holding his bleeding nose. Seemingly unaware of his ruined hand, Stone whirled to face me.

"Your turn, boy."

I bolted across the lobby, into the waiting area, where several upholstered sofas and pine end-tables sat.

I needed some kind of weapon, and I had a vague idea that something suitable might be over there—though what could hurt a man who was already dead?

Stone pursued me, shambling like something out of a bad horror film.

Hadn't he looked in the mirror lately? Didn't he realize that he had died? Or was he so dead to the world that not even seeing the mushy stump that had once been his hand could awaken him to the truth?

Soon, only a sofa separated us. He drummed his fat fingers on top of it, grinning at me with teeth that would've given my dentist nightmares.

"When I get done with you, boy, you're gonna need your own death certificate."

He chuckled, a nasty wet sound.

He slung one leg over the couch, began to clamber over it.

As I moved away, the back of my legs hit something. I reached behind me. I touched the solid surface of an end table.

Stone was almost across the sofa. "And after you, I'm gonna take care of that lying sonofabitch agent who sold me that policy."

It was either him or me. And since he was dead already, I figured I had the right to keep on living.

So I snatched up the table, raised it high, and brought it down on his skull with all the force I could muster.

His head exploded like a watermelon hit with a sledgehammer; rotted flesh and stinking liquids splattered everywhere.

The headless corpse rolled off the couch and thudded to the floor at my feet. It lay there. Motionless. Silent.

I wiped cold sweat from my brow.

The entire bizarre episode seemed to have occurred in some realm of hell, but, thankfully, it was over.

In addition to the security guard who'd taken the punch in the nose, a couple of company housekeepers had gathered around, their wheeled garbage cans beside them. They held their noses.

"Why don't we get this mess cleaned up, guys?" I said. "Come on, I'll help you."

Strangely, not one person who had witnessed the incident ventured an opinion about Stone. All of us maintained a weird code of silence, keeping our thoughts to ourselves, preserving our feelings for later reflections—or nightmares.

It took a while, but we managed to clean up the cadaver and remove all signs that it had ever been in the lobby. I believe people deserve a proper burial in a respectable cemetery, but Stone wasn't getting another one of those. One was enough. This time, he was getting shipped to the local trash incinerator.

When we finished, I returned upstairs.

I sat behind my desk. Drew a few deep breaths. Took a sip of coffee.

Finally, ready to work again, I grabbed the next file from the stack of them on my tray. I opened it.

I saw my full name written on the top sheet: KEVIN PAUL MATTHEWS.

What?

I looked closer.

And then I saw that familiar blood-red stamp, glaring at me from the topsheet: DECEASED 3-5-96.

"No," I said, my face flushed with heat.

I tore into the file, found the death certificate, and read the cause of death.

Internal injuries due to auto accident.

Auto accident? That couldn't be. At the last instant, I had avoided the collision with the eighteen-wheeler. It had been close, a miracle, actually, but

I had escaped. No, this was a joke, and it wasn't funny at all. I was going to find out who had pulled this prank. I was going to find them and—

My phone rang. Automatically, I picked it up.

"Individual life; this is Kevin Matthews. How may I help you?"

"Where's my check?" It was a woman, with a thick Brooklyn accent.

On days such as these, I believed that if God ever decided to condemn me to hell, he would put me somewhere exactly like this, to deal with mad customers for all eternity.

Realizing the truth, I didn't say a word to the woman.

I dropped the phone, grabbed fistfuls of my hair, and began to cry... soft, weeping sounds that would stay with me forever. ■



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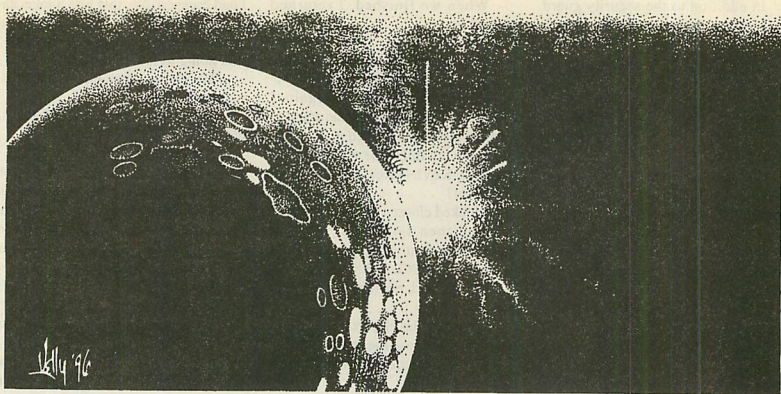
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—Algis Budrys



AS BEAUTY DOES

James Killus

Illustrated by Kelly Faltermayer

Marge sent an urgent telegram to Professor Hadley: "Help me!"

"I'd like to call it the 'beauty particle,' Professor Hadley told us that day. "But the quark boys beat me to that one. So I call it the 'aestheton.'"

The four of us, Hadley's three graduate students and me, a world weary post-doc, just stared at the metal cube that he'd laid on the table. It was beautiful, one of the most beautiful objects I'd ever seen, and I couldn't figure out why. Hadley smiled, reached into his pocket, and removed another cube. He put it down beside the first one. It took lot of staring to realize that the two cubes should have been identical. They were both metal target cubes that we sometimes used in the particle beam studies. The beautiful one had no obvious characteristic that made it different from its twin.

Except beauty.

Hadley laughed out loud at our expressions. "I know, I know," he said excitedly. "They are identical in every respect, except that one of them has been bombarded with a beam of what I shall call 'weakly bound aesthetons.' It is my theory that all matter has an associated mass of aesthetons (and, of course, the corresponding anti-particle, the 'anti-aestheton'), but under most conditions they are tightly bound. And all of the activities that we think of as the artistic creation of beauty are in fact methods for arranging the bound aesthetons so that they are perceivable. I'm pretty sure that virtual aesthetons are able to modulate light and sound, for example, thus explaining painting and music...."

Okay, look, I didn't listen very much after that. I know I should have,

but we all had this reflex where Hadley was concerned. He'd taken the only double degree ever awarded in physics and parapsychology, back when respectable universities were having their fling with parapsych. And it sometimes showed up in his work or his lectures, to the embarrassment of everyone except maybe Hadley himself. Besides, he was the only person I ever knew who could talk in parentheses.

Otherwise he was a good physicist, good enough to con DARPA out of some SDI money to run his particle accelerator, and good enough to support the four of us in the genteel poverty of grad students and post-doctoral fellows. So we liked him and maybe even learned from him, but we'd had to adapt to someone that everyone knew was a little Loony-

tunes. And that adaptation included times where we just stopped listening.

Besides, I had that cube to look at. My attention kept getting drawn back to it. It seemed to glow almost, but I was certain that a light meter would show it to be exactly like its unbeautiful twin. How the hell did it do that? What would it feel like to hold in your hand? I almost reached out to touch it. Then I felt someone watching me. I looked up to see Marge glancing quickly away. She went back to pretending to listen.

Pretty much everyone reading this now thinks that they know what Marge looked like. Well, you're wrong. I'll tell you what she looked like. If she tried really hard, paid attention to hair and makeup, wore the right clothes, the whole bit, she could maybe make it up to plain. That's the real truth. She was short and a dumpy with no discernible curves from hip to shoulder; her hair was a mousy color that never quite made it even to brown; her complexion was pockmarked from adolescent acne that she never completely outgrew. The best compliment that I ever heard anyone say about her appearance was that she was not ugly. I think he was just being kind.

As for personality, hers was about as flat as an ironing board. Or her chest.

We're not supposed to think or talk like this, are we? Etiquette in our post-modern age dictates that an awareness of someone's lack of physical beauty is a taboo topic, like racial slurs and religious intolerance. We're supposed to love people for their essential humanity, because they have forty-six chromosomes or a God-given soul. Supposed to. But every action and reaction that people have shows that to be a lie. Appearance matters, maybe more than anything else. If you're ugly or even plain, it takes a lot of something else, like money, fame, or power, to overcome that handicap, and don't try to kid yourself that it isn't a handicap. Ask any burn victim, or even a mild acne sufferer.

So Marge had maybe tried to compensate by concentrating on intel-

lect. That's how it is for some people. Some people use their brains because they can, some because they like to. But some people use them because they have to, and Marge was one of those. But I don't think it was nearly enough. She was bright enough, not brilliant but plenty quick on the uptake. She would have been a good, conscientious scientist. And somewhere deep down inside was something that may have been something like determination.

They say that hindsight is 20/20, but even now I don't see how we possibly could have known what Marge was going to do. We were lacking critical information. We didn't know that she'd just broken up with her boyfriend of four years, in one of those screaming fights where everything that is better left unsaid gets said, and more besides, because both parties know just where it hurts.

So I say that none of us knew how bad Marge was feeling that day, just how depressed she was, how suicidal. And we couldn't have known just how much she hated how she looked, and how much she wanted to look like someone else, someone better, someone more beautiful.

Well, the meeting went on, with Hadley bubbling on while the rest of us stared at an unlikely cube of metal. Then it was over. Maybe I should have been more curious, more intent on pushing back the frontiers of knowledge, but I'd been working too hard for too long, and that day no amount of intellectual excitement would have been able to keep me awake. I went home and went to bed.

To tell the truth, although Hadley's demonstration had impressed me, I'm not sure that intellectual excitement was what I felt that night. I don't think that I was even sure whether Hadley had found something new or had just pulled off the magic trick of the decade. He was not above a party trick now and then. But we all found out soon enough just how serious his discovery was.

I slept for a few hours and it was bliss. But then these disturbances kept waking me. The first was nothing

much, just a feeling of unease, as though I'd been awakened by a brief earth tremor that was gone by the time I'd come awake. Then I heard the fire engines. I lived in a student slum, just a few blocks away from the north campus border, and only a half mile from the accelerator lab. It was convenient, and university housing was all I could afford. So I heard the sirens just as I was drifting back to sleep, and I could only hope that nothing nearby had caught fire. The thought that it might be my building jolted me a little, so I rolled over, sniffed the air and satisfied myself that I wasn't going to be turned into burnt toast. Then I went back to sleep.

Professor Hadley's phone call woke me the final time, out of whatever shallow sleep I'd slipped into. "Huh?" I said, or something equally intelligent.

"Bob?" Hadley said. "There's been an accident at the lab. We need you to come in ASAP." He sometimes talked in acronyms, too.

"Anybody hurt?" I managed to mutter.

"They're taking Marge to the hospital now," he said. That's when I had my first inkling of what she'd done.

I hadn't been much of a fire. The fire department had it out before I got there. But the accelerator looked like a meltdown. It had always been a Rube Goldberg gadget, an ancient Van deGraf hooked up to a short fetch linear accelerator. It peaked at less than 20 MeV, but it carried a high current density, and Hadley supported it with his SDI money for doing routine ion/particle cross section measurements. In his spare time he dabbled with it.

Now the vacuum lines were breached, some of the coils melted, all the timing circuitry was zapped by some kind of electromagnetic pulse effect. One problem was that Hadley's new method of operating the accelerator required a certain amount of manual override. A lot of the safety programs had been patched out, some by Hadley, in getting his new toy to function, then by Marge, in order to get the

device to run despite there being no operator—since she had been in the target area.

So it looked like twenty million dollars' worth of junk now, and neither Hadley nor I wanted to talk about how the insurance probably wasn't going to pay for any of it. Hadley sighed and said, "Well, let's go see how Marge is."

At the hospital, the nurse on duty would not let us in to see her. Neither of us were "immediate family." We did have to see an investigating officer, who asked us about Marge, her state of mind, that sort of thing. It took us a while to realize that he was asking if Marge had been trying to kill herself.

"A wofully goddamn expensive way to do it," said Hadley, in a tone which I'm sure did not put him on anybody's list of sympathetic characters. But it was his big breakthrough that had been trashed, so I was willing to cut him plenty of fume slack.

"Suicides don't stay around to pay the bills," said the officer. Then he showed us her note:

Live fast

Die young

Leave a beautiful corpse.

"The joke's on her," the officer said. "She's not going to die at all. The burns are all superficial, says the docs." Then he told us about the fight with her boyfriend. He shook his head in wonder. "I can't see anyone wanting to let someone as good-looking as her get away."

So now we knew for sure.

On our way out we saw her boyfriend, or maybe ex-boyfriend, on the way in. I don't think he had any more luck seeing her than we did. They say suicide attempts are often a form of vengeance, and from the look on his face, I'd have said that Marge was getting her money's worth.

We went back to the lab to tote up the damage and to see what we could salvage from the whole deal. Hadley still had his handwritten notes, but all the tapes were destroyed, and you couldn't even use the floppies for frisbees. So, added to the notes, we had four objects: three metal cubes

and a key chain, all of which had been exposed to varying amounts of aesthetic radiation. So that was it, four solid objects and one twenty-eight-year-old female graduate student.

Examination showed that the accelerator was maybe not in quite as bad a shape as we'd first suspected, but it was still plenty bad. It had several target chambers along the beam path, each target being potentially a source for a secondary or even tertiary particle beam. Since this often involved velocity changes, to say nothing of variations in flux strength, the control circuitry for timing was critical. It was the main panel circuits that had taken the brunt of the EMP or whatever it was, but fortunately we could probably replace those with some cheap microcomputer kludges. And the power supply was completely intact.

One big loss was the gold mirrors. I wasn't sure what they had been for, or even if they had really started out with a gold reflection coating, because they looked pretty dismal now. I asked Hadley about it and he actually smiled a bit. Yes, they were gold, he said. Still were, despite appearances. That's all he said.

He was not optimistic about replicating the aestheton production, though. Even if he managed to get the funding, and God knows who'd want to risk that, he had no idea if he could reduplicate the effect. It was probably an accidental resonance effect of some kind, and who knows what sort of micro-contaminants the ion source chamber had picked up over the years?

Frankly, I was just as happy to let it go.

The next day, they took Marge out of the ICU and Hadley went to visit her. I stayed behind, for reasons I'm still not sure I fully understand. When he got back Hadley had a funny look on his face, as he handed me a camera containing some pictures he's taken of Marge.

"How'd it go?" I asked him, and he shrugged.

"She apologized for being such a damn fool before I could call her a

damn fool. Then, well, what could I do? I said that I forgave her. There's not much point in pissing and moaning about it now. Besides, I need her cooperation for any further studies." Then his face got that funny look on it again.

"You know," he said. "I know it's just an artifact. Apart from the burns, she's physically no different than she was before, which was, let's face it, plain at best. But now..." He shrugged again. "She really is beautiful."

"I'll bet," I said. I'm sure my voice was as sour as I felt.

The photos gave us the first hint of how we could measure something that couldn't really be measured. Think about a photograph of an object with intrinsic beauty, what Hadley described as having tightly bound aesthetons in its composition. Such a photograph might or might not be beautiful, depending upon the quality of the photo, and how photogenic was the object in question.

But if the photo was beautiful, then a copy of that photograph, and a copy of that photograph, would still be beautiful, as long as the image doesn't degrade. Tightly bound aesthetons don't transfer, you see. It is only the manufacture of another beautiful object, in this case the photograph, that accounts for the transmission of beauty at all.

Weakly bound aesthetons, it seems, are different. Photograph an object with a weakly bound aestheton charge, and an aura of inexplicable beauty clings to the photograph. But if you make copies of that photograph, and then a copy of that, the beauty is attenuated with each succeeding copy. For our original aestheton charged cube, the copy of a copy of a photograph could no longer be distinguished from a photograph of an ordinary metal cube. They say that beauty is only skin deep. Well, in this case, beauty was a few copies deep.

Furthermore, in each of the irradiated objects the aestheton charge seemed to decay with time. In just a few days, the least highly charged object became just a regular key chain again. The more highly charged cubes

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CHARLES De LINT:
Featured Poet

Story by

ALGIS BUDRYS

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also decayed in their aestheton content, from two or three copies deep down the chain until finally they, too, became just ordinary and mundane. In the case of the most highly beautified cube the decay process was initially very slow, and it was not logarithmic. It accelerated over time. So it seemed that the more highly charged and object, the lesser the rate of loss.

Which presented the obvious question. What about Marge, the most highly aestheton-charged body in existence? Her image remained beautiful even at the level of eight and nine copies, even at the point where the quality of the photographs would begin to degrade. The dark-room sometimes seemed to take upon itself an eerie secondary glow.

Eventually I hit upon the technique of making a high-level photo, say a seventh-level copy, and waiting long enough for its secondary aestheton charge to decay, then making further copies. This told us quite a lot about the physics of the process, we even made some progress toward a linear model for aestheton formation and secondary interactions—but by then it was far too late. Theory could only confirm what observation made obvious.

In those first few weeks, Hadley spent a lot of time with Marge. Ostensibly it was research, but it became apparent, to me at least, that he had fallen in love with her. I was never certain whether it was as a man loves a woman, or as a man loves a great sculpture, or a painting. But he was captivated by her beauty and by the strangeness of it, of that there is no doubt.

As for myself, I avoided her as best I could. It was hard enough to work with her treacherously seductive image day after day. I was afraid of her and what she had become. My fear protected me. Hadley had no such protection. Nor, it seems, did her ex-boyfriend. From what I got from Hadley, she really put him through the wringer. Love and guilt are a pretty dangerous mix. I think it took him about six weeks to flunk out. Then he had the good sense (and

not much of it was left, I'll bet) to leave town.

But to get back to Hadley, something started to happen to him while he was working with her. At first I thought that he was just working too hard. His hair was even more disheveled than usual, and his perpetual five o'clock shadow had moved to somewhere between ten and midnight. In another few weeks we might have tumbled to what was happening to him, the phenomenon that I later dubbed the "beauty vampire effect." In retrospect, all the indications were to be found in our fledgling theory of weakly bound aesthetons. But only the really great scientists get it right the first time, and then only rarely. The rest of us have to have Nature hit us over the head.

So maybe we were just on the verge. But then Marge left town one night without telling anyone. Well, that's not quite true. She left a message on my telephone answering machine. I'm not sure why she left the message for me and not Hadley, or even her ex-boyfriend (but maybe she had taken pity on him and just dumped him outright by that time). But she phoned me even though I hadn't been to visit her even once. Maybe she knew how much she scared me. Sometimes those photographs haunted my dreams.

Her message just said, "I think it would be better if I went away for a while. Give my apologies to Charles."

There was a quality in her voice that made me ache, with desire, with longing, with nostalgia for the past and hopes for futures that can never be. It was perhaps further confirmation of Hadley's theory that aesthetons could modulate sound as well as light. I erased the tape. I did not want to find myself late at night listening to a taped recording over and over.

It was the last we heard of her until six months later when she was named model of the year.

A lot of things have been written about Marge Thompson. Her "unconventional beauty." Her "one-of-a-kind style." It's interesting to compare these reports with how she

would have been described before her aesthetonic irradiation. It all shows just how glib, facile, and essentially empty the rationalizations of critics can be. Her hair, for example, was not "the color of ripened chestnuts," it was the same mousy color that it had always been. And if you duplicated her "free-spirited coiffure, haloed by wisps of light-catching translucence," on another woman, you'd call it scraggly and unkempt. Her pallid and watery eyes were said by some to be "the color of the sky just after dawn." The true demeanor of her skin was pallor cratered with the occasional acne scar or mole. Her "softly curved body" was actually just pudgy.

But if you try to give a true physical accounting of the appearance of his sweetheart to a man in love, he'll not hear a word of it. And the world had fallen in love with Marge Thompson. She starred in her own TV special, followed by a couple of cameo appearances on the *Movie of the Week*. She made the cover of every major magazine and tabloid newspaper. There was talk of turning her variety specials into a weekly series, and the search was on to find an appropriate movie starring vehicle. Of course, she already had her own line of cosmetics and perfumes (ah, if only they knew how close we had come to being able to bottle it).

Then, as suddenly as she had appeared, she vanished, leaving behind broken contracts, broken lives, and a flurry of rumors that were vicious even by the standards of tabloid fame. Word had it that she had barricaded herself in her mansion. Certainly she had fired her staff and personal managers (or had some of them quit before she could get to them?).

All I know is that she sent an urgent telegram to Professor Charles Hadley. It said only two words.

"Help me."

Our theoretical work had already begun to suggest what was going to happen; indeed, what was happening already. It was not a pleasant prospect. Charles and I headed south to Bel Air. To make a long story short,

this is what we had suspected, and this is what we confirmed.

The accidental resonance that Professor Hadley's particle beams had produced broke the strong binding that usually exists between aesthetons and matter. He'd done it by destroying several gold mirrors in a particular way. Gold, apparently, has an enormous charge of tightly bound aesthetons that ride the conduction electrons in the metallic state. By disrupting the metalized surface of a gold-backed mirror, Hadley had created a condition where his particle beam could cause a deep-scattering emission of primary aesthetons. And for primary aesthetons, only a weak electronic binding force remains, a natural self attraction that exists between aesthetons, an attraction that is usually masked by the strong binding force.

Aesthetons attract aesthetons. Pile enough of them up in one spot and the rate at which thermal agitation causes them to leak away becomes very small. Moreover, a high gradient of aesthetons will cause a stimulated emission in nearby matter, the spontaneous generation of aestheton/anti-aestheton pairs. You could think of it as a combination of the same process that occurs in a laser and the creation of particle/anti-particle pairs near a black hole.

Wherever Marge went, her very presence caused the creation of aesthetons and anti-aesthetons. And the aesthetons then fell back into her own hypercharged aestheton field. So her aestheton charge wasn't decreasing; it was growing stronger.

While her surroundings, everything and everybody that she came to contact with, grew slowly more dreary, more dull, and yes, more ugly.

Early on, she had discovered that she could not keep a maid or personal attendant. The usual rationalization was that her own beauty made others feel ugly. The truth was much worse than that. Her presence *made* others ugly.

We met Marge at her home in Bel Air and cleared out fast. Our estimates showed that some places in the house were getting dangerously close to a self-supporting anti-aestheton charge.

In the weeks that followed we were constantly on the move. Marge's aestheton field had become so strong that it sucked the life and vitality out of her surroundings in a matter of days. Despite his constant use of protective clothing, Hadley's appearance had become absolutely hideous, although in truth he looked just the same as he always had. It got to the point where he could not go out into public without wearing a hood over his head, like the Elephant Man or a burn victim.

I was their window out onto the world, uncontaminated as near as we could tell, having an excess charge of neither aesthetons nor anti-aesthetons. My fear, timidity, and cowardice had held me in good stead.

We hoped to find some way of manipulating aesthetons, of bleeding off the excess aesthetons and their anti-particles and perhaps recombining them safely. But all our tests showed that tremendous quantities of energy would be liberated during such a process, and neither Marge nor Hadley would have survived the secondary radiation. The situation was rapidly getting out of control.

So now we were also working against a deadline. Calculations showed that it was just a matter of time before an uncontrolled chain reaction would result. We had no idea what the eventual result of that process would be, except that a concentrated aestheton charge could cause a fundamental breakdown in nuclear matter, and a large amount of energy was involved.

We did not know how long this process would take. I had long since ceased being able to measure Marge's aestheton charge with any accuracy. My estimates showed wild fluctuations on an hourly basis. Theoretical calculations suggested that the crisis was only a matter of weeks away.

Which was more than enough time, as it turned out.

I was watching a late night movie when the phone rang. It was Hadley. "She's dead," he told me. "She told me that she was going to take a nap; she took cyanide instead. I don't know where she got it." To this day I

wonder if he was telling the truth. Did he do her that one last favor?

"She left a note," he continued. "I left it on the table here along with the instructions."

"What instructions?" I asked. But then I heard the shot.

Marge's note had said simply:

The world has become too ugly for me to bear.

Hadley left no note except his instructions on how to dispose of the bodies. The note was splattered with his blood. I've never seen anything uglier.

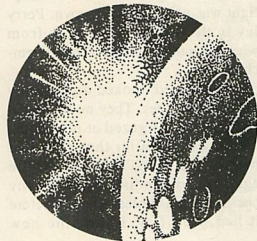
I contacted the appropriate people in the Department of Defense. The first ones to arrive were the radiation cleanup crews. They put the bodies in lead caskets. From there it was a straight highball down to Vandenberg, an unscheduled launch into near-Earth orbit, and from there a deep-space booster took over.

I tracked our newest "space probe" for three weeks. I browbeat the school's astronomy club into letting me borrow their twenty-incher. It's amazing how far you can track an object if you know where to look.

When the end came, I was making time-exposure photographs.

If you visit the New York Museum of Modern Art on a quiet day, you can see it with only a half-hour wait. A simple photographic negative in the old style, on glass. A few stars made it through the overexposure, but the picture is dominated by a sunburst pattern, an explosion out beyond the Moon.

It's the most beautiful thing you'll ever see in your life. ■

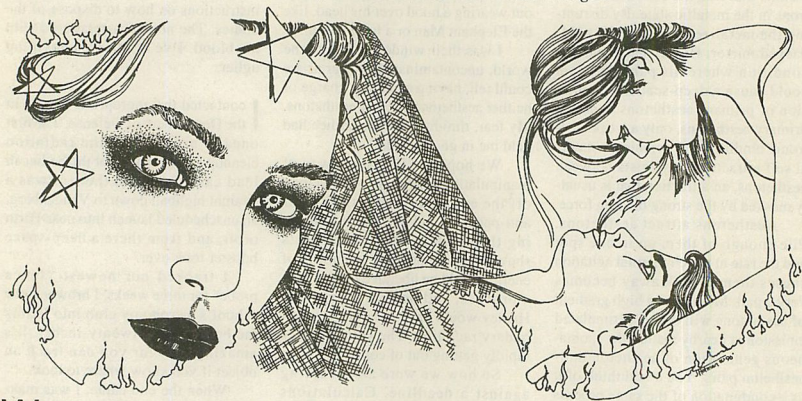


THE DEMON SERVANT

Nina Kiriki Hoffman

Illustrated by Judith Holman

For a moment, I did not realize how I had changed



When I woke, I was female.

For a moment, I did not realize how I had changed in my sleep. A groan had awakened me. I opened my eyes to see Perry's bedroom, dimly lit by a low-watt bulb in a lamp on the floor. The curtains and the window were open to let in the cool night air and the smell of the lawns dewing in the darkness around the mansion, and a moth was bumping against the lampshade, making a small dusty fluttering sound. The rug in the circle of lamp-light was pale, silvery brown. Perry lay in the double bed across from where I sat in a deep comfortable arm-chair.

I stretched, looked down at my crumpled clothes. They no longer fit me very well. I gazed at my hands, which were smaller than they had been; my left hand still bore the fire agate ring of binding. I touched my chest, which had breasts where before it had been flat. Below the new

breasts, my ribcage narrowed down to meet my small flat belly. Lower down, my genitalia had changed too; I explored with my new hands and discovered that now I had a nipple and a mouth where before I had had three fingers, two curled, one more or less straight. I felt my face. It still had human features, as it had had since Perry's father had summoned and bound me to do his bidding, six years earlier. So, I had changed, but I was still just as many steps away from my true self.

A groan from Perry roused me out of introspection.

Perry was sick. How could I have forgotten? Since my binding, my whole existence was tied up in caring for Perry. I jumped up, stepped out of too-large shoes, and went to the bed. Perry was twisted in a sweat-soaked sheet; he had thrown off the blankets. As I leaned forward to untangle him from the sheet, long, wavy, brown-

blonde hair swung over my shoulders and brushed on the bed. I grasped it and discovered it was attached to my head—had, indeed, been weighing me down since I woke up in this new form. What did I look like, and why? My captor, Perry's father, had enjoined me never to reveal my secret nature to Perry unless the need was dire. I wished I knew what this change meant. I hadn't known it was possible for me to change without my willing it, and I had been unable to will myself to change since coming to this household.

Perry groaned again, his voice hoarse and high. One of his hands struggled in its trap of wound sheet. I pushed my hair behind me and leaned forward, freeing Perry's hand and then the rest of him. He curled in on himself, shivering. For a moment I stood and studied him. He had soaked his way through his pajamas and the sheets and towels beneath him, and

now he was cold and clammy. I lifted Perry, relieved to discover that whatever had dictated my change had not taken away my strength, and set him in the armchair while I changed the bed. First I dried it with fire from my hands, once I had glanced over and assured myself Perry was lost to consciousness and would not see. I pulled towels and sheets off the stacks I had had Anita, the laundress, pile near the bed. When I had laid dry towels on the mattress and put a fresh bottom sheet over them, I changed Perry's pajamas and placed him in bed again, drawing the blankets up about him. I knelt on the bed beside him and looked at his pain-clenched face. I stuck my hand in the bowl of water beside the bed and warmed it, then bathed Perry's face with a soft wet cloth. There was nothing else I knew how to do for him. I longed to set something on fire.

Perry had been alternating chills and fever for almost three days now. It was a sickness I could not reason with. I was a fire being and could not fight others of my kind. Perry's father had summoned a doctor when I insisted on it, and the doctor had prescribed warmth, fluids, aspirin. I had decided to stay with Perry all the time it took him to recover, and the other servants left Perry to my care, as they had since I had entered the household on Perry's tenth birthday.

Perry groaned again and opened his eyes. He stared at the ceiling; his pupils were wide, unfocused. "Robin?"

"I'm here." My voice had not changed much. It was a little higher, perhaps.

"Robin," Perry murmured, and closed his eyes. He slept, his face relaxing.

I took the pitcher from the bedside table and lowered it near the lamp, tilting it to catch light. A thin film of orange juice coated the bottom; pulp stuck to the sides. I needed to make more juice; I needed a shower; I needed clothes that fit me better than these. I would like to understand what had happened to me.

Understanding was lowest on my list. First I went through a doorway into my room, a cubby with a bed,

dresser, and tiny closet. I searched through my clothes. All were too big. I had been a little larger than Perry when I arrived to care for him, and as he grew, I had grown, always staying larger and stronger; it was part of the contract I had entered into with his father. Nothing I owned fit me any longer.

I went to Perry's closet and looked at his clothes, which I knew by heart and by touch; I kept them all clean and mended. There was a shirt he had loved three years earlier, green with a narrow satin stripe. I slid into it, and out again when I found it fit me. In one of the bottom drawers of his dresser was a pair of knickers his mother had brought him from Switzerland when he was younger and she was still alive, and they, too, were narrow and small enough to hug my new form. Taking the clothes, I went into Perry's bathroom and showered, leaving the door open so I could hear him if he groaned or moved while I toweled and dressed. Under the cascading water I discovered my new shape more completely. Its skin was still thick enough to keep me safe from water. When I first came I had not understood the necessity for showers—had, in fact, been as horrified by the concept as I would have been had a mortal enemy invited me to take poison. Perry's father had educated me away from my fear by force. Now I was almost sanguine about showers. It was important for me to be clean and presentable, and bathing in flame was too risky.

After the shower I wiped steam from the mirror and peered at my new face. It resembled my previous face, clean features, large green eyes, but the lips were fuller, the chin more rounded, the whole more delicate and younger-looking. For a human face, it sufficed.

The hair held an amazing amount of water. After toweling at it with no visible result, I peeked into the bedroom to make sure Perry was still asleep, then indulged myself in a little fire.

The hair, being part of me, was fireproof, and it dried quickly into a stubborn mass of friz. I drew my

stolen garments on and went out to Perry's room. After studying him to make sure he was sleeping and as comfortable as I could make him, I went to his dresser, got out a shoelace, and tied my hair back. It was 3:42 a.m. I took the pitcher and headed for the kitchen.

The big house was very quiet. Heavy carpets welcomed my bare feet. I paused in the upstairs hall, listening, sensing—were any of the other servants up and wandering? If anyone found me, how could I explain myself? No one breathed in the wide corridor. I walked down the stairs in darkness; I had memorized the placement of everything in the house when I first arrived, and kept track of all changes. I never tripped over anything.

A line of light showed under the swinging door to the kitchen. I paused, sensing air currents. A faint scent of woody aftershave. Perry's father. I pushed open the door and stepped over the threshold into the lighted kitchen.

"Who are you?" Perry's father asked, setting his coffee mug on the white table.

"Robin, sir." I showed him the ring on my left hand, the one that wedded me to his wishes.

"What happened to you?"

"I don't know. I must make some more orange juice." I took the pitcher across the expanse of red tile to the big steel sink and rinsed it out.

"You didn't accomplish that yourself?"

"No, sir. I woke and discovered this." I took a can of orange juice concentrate out of the big turquoise freezer and held it in my hands to thaw it.

"You must be answering an unconscious need," he said. We were silent for a while; I stared down at the hoarfrost that formed on the can where my hands didn't touch it, the outward sign of the battle between air and the can's internal temperature. "How is Perry?" he asked at last.

"No better." I took the can to the sink, poured its contents into the pitcher, and added three cans of cold water.

"Perhaps he misses his mother." Perry's father leaned back and studied me. I stirred the orange juice with my hand and glanced back at him.

In my previous form I had perceived Perry's father as energy and scent. He had an orange interior matrix, with small diamond-bright points and a few dark fuzzy patches in it. The planes of the matrix were clean, and the tension and balance bespoke power held at the ready. I had taken quick glances at him ever since my summoning, looking for some indication that he had lost his balance and I might fight free, but I had never seen any.

Now, for the first time, I saw his outer seeming clearly. His skin had darkened from interaction with the sun. His hair was white, his face lean, with creases in the cheeks, and outstanding cheekbones under eyes the same water-blue as Perry's. He had thick dark brows and thin lips. He was wearing a navy blue robe that gapped around to reveal a broad chest salted with white hairs, and his hands, emerging wrists and all from the sleeves, were thick and strong, the knuckles large.

"Maybe I miss his mother," said Perry's father. He stood. His robe was not tied at the waist, and his desire manifested itself.

I thought of the way I would have come together with my chosen one if I was at home, a consuming fire where I and another would mix so completely we would never be able to separate again into the people we had been before mixing. The human way was different, I knew; Perry and I had talked about it, speculated about it with our friends at school. For humans, mixing could be a temporary thing, engaging only the outer seemings without touching the matrices, or it could be combined with matrix mixing. I wondered what underlying meaning it would have if I and Perry's father mixed. Perhaps it would upset his balance, impair his matrix, and I could free myself at last. I looked at his penis, watched it rise.

"Take a cold shower," I said to Perry's father. A cold shower was something Perry took when he thought about a girl in our history

class, Debbie, and felt too much pressure. "You are not my charge."

"But this won't interfere with your care of him."

"It will," I said, lifting my head, and seeking along the thread that connected me to Perry. Something had changed upstairs, and I needed to be there. "Excuse me, sir," I said, and ran for the door, orange juice dripping from the hand I had used to stir.

The sweat stood out on Perry's forehead. He had thrown off his blankets and his pajama shirt. He called my name, his voice young and lost. I came in, closed and locked the door, and climbed onto the bed beside him. "I'm here, Perry," I said, "I'm here."

His eyes roved, his gaze crossing the ceiling, not seeing me. I took his face between my hands and leaned over to look into his eyes. "I'm here," I said.

At last he focused on me. He gave a loud cry. His arms rose and closed around me and he pulled me down against him. His skin was hot, and it felt wrong, wrong, for him to host this heat; he had always been my small, cold child, someone my people would have banished to the waterlands, and yet, someone precious, my world now that I had lost my real world. "Fire in Perry, come out, come out," I whispered to his skin, "come to me, come to me, come home where you belong." I licked salt off his chest. I felt the heat rising to my call and wondered why I hadn't tried this before. I placed my hands on his rib cage and called the fire up out of him. It began to trickle out of him and into me, a sick, small, human fire that tickled me but did not consume me. I pushed free of Perry's grip, straddled his stomach, and called, and his fever rose out of him, entering and strengthening me. His eyes lost their glazed look. He stared at me. When I had finished my summoning, I smiled down at his face, pale now the way it should be.

"Who are you?" he whispered.
"Robin," I whispered back.
"No," he said, "no, Robin's a boy."

"Not any more." I stroked my hand down his chest, pleased to feel

no fire but life within him. He caught my wrist and stilled my hand.

"Who are you?" he said, louder.

"What are you doing in my bed?"

"Oh, Perry, don't be stupid. I'm Robin, and I'm taking care of you."

"You're not Robin. This is some kind of trick. Robin! Robin!" He was yelling loudly now, looking around as if he expected the old Robin to materialize.

And materialize he did. Thighs and arms bulged with muscles; breasts flattened and my groin changed, shifting and reforming. I felt weight settle on my body, and I felt the heavy hair melt away from my head. Perry's cast-off clothes were too small for me. With my free hand I unbuttoned the shirt before it tore across the chest, and unbuttoned the pants.

"Robin?" Perry whispered. He let go of my wrist and put both arms up to shield his face.

I got up off the bed and went to my cubby to change back into my own clothes. I put the other clothes in a bottom drawer in case the change took me again. Then I returned to the bedroom and sat in the comfortable chair and waited for Perry to want something.

Eventually Perry lowered his arms. "I'm sick," he said.

"You've been very sick," I said.

Perry rolled his head in the pillow to look at me. "I thought you were a girl."

"You've been very sick."

"That dream was so convincing. But that's silly. How could you be a girl?"

"I can't tell you."

"Robin, I'm sorry. I know it was a stupid dream. I shouldn't have said anything about it. I didn't mean to hurt you."

"You didn't hurt me. You can't hurt me, Perry. Would you like a bath?"

"Huh?" Perry rubbed his hand over his face. "Phew! I guess I could use a bath. I *have* been sick, haven't I?" He sat up and sagged. "God. I'm weak, Robin."

"You've had a raging fever for almost three days, and nothing to eat, just orange juice and water and some broth. I'll give you a bath."

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"All right."

I ran a lukewarm bath first, then went out to get him. He had fallen almost asleep again. I lifted him easily and took him in and bathed him. He was drowsy and limp and pliant. And all the time I was cleansing him, with gentle strokes of the washcloth, his fever was whispering inside me, telling me it was part of him and part of me and that we had shared ourselves now. When I stood him up to dry him off, he leaned against me, with his eyes closed, and by the time I had finished drying him I had changed again and he was taller than I, and my clothes were too big. I carried him out to his bed and tucked him in under the covers. I stepped out of my pants, crawled in next to him, and fell asleep.

I woke with his arm around me, his face pressed into my hair. I felt his warm breath against my ear. "Debbie," he murmured, and his arm tightened around me, and his hand felt for my breast. He squeezed. Fire woke at his touch. I pressed back against him, putting my hand over his on my breast.

For a long time we lay quiet. I thought about Debbie. I went to school with Perry; another thing his father had arranged. "Keep close enough to keep him safe, but not too close, and don't be obvious about it." I had seen Debbie, memorized her because she was something that interested Perry. If I could will change, I could look like Debbie, easily. I closed my eyes and concentrated on how Debbie's outer seeming looked and smelled, and what her matrix was like: small and sparkly with blue points of light and little pink ones, sleeping passion, disorganized powers. Maybe I could take on her outer seeming; taking the inner would reduce me too much. I reached for change and waited.

Perry lifted his hand off my breast and grasped my shoulder, then gently pulled me over to face him. I wondered whether I wore Debbie's face or not. Perry gasped and pushed me away. I opened my eyes, thinking I probably didn't look like Debbie.

"Robin," said Perry, and his voice was full of surprise and fear.

I slipped out of the bed and stood with my back to him. I didn't under-

stand what was happening inside of me. I felt sick, and wondered if Perry's fire could possibly have hurt me.

"Robin," he said again.

I turned to look at him.

"What are you?"

"I can't tell you."

"Is this a dream?" he asked, his voice quieter.

I thought: how can I help him? It was the question I had been asking myself for six years, the imperative graven on the palms of my hands. For the first time I had no idea of an answer.

"I am not a man, Perry."

"What are you?"

"I can't tell you."

"Why not?"

"I am forbidden."

"What do you mean, you're forbidden? Are you some kind of special person who—oh, geez, only in my dreams." His voice was modulating toward curiosity.

I took off the shirt I had put on the night before when I turned into my male form. I stood naked before him, my hands on my hips. "What I am," I said, "is not a man, not now. If you really want me to be a man, I probably will be again. Or at least I'll look like one."

"What?" he said.

"Do you want me to repeat that?"

"Robin," he said, and there was pain in his voice. I climbed onto the bed and sat looking down at him, waiting for his need to manifest itself in a way I could understand.

He said, "How—what's happening? What's happening to you?"

"I respond to your needs. You need me to be like this, I guess."

"That's crazy. How could that work?"

"Oh," I said, feeling joy leap up inside me like flames as I recognized a solution. Words, which had captured me and restricted me, could work for me too. "Oh, Perry, that's great. If it's hypothetical, I can tell you! I'm just not allowed to tell you the plain truth. Suppose—"

A knock sounded on the door, a loud one. "How's the boy?" called Perry's father from beyond the door.

Perry's eyes widened. "Oh, no. Whatever happened, we've got to keep it secret."

"He knows."

"What?"

"Is everything all right in there?"

"I'm fine, Dad," Perry yelled.

"Are you sure?"

"I feel great. I feel really hungry."

I got up. "I'll get you something to eat," I murmured.

"No, wait," said Perry.

"Robin?" said Perry's father. He tried the door handle. The door was still locked.

"What?" I said.

"Open this door."

"No," said Perry.

Torn between two imperatives, for a moment I stood still. Then I picked the shirt up off the floor where I had dropped it and slid into it. I went to the door.

"Don't," said Perry.

"He is my true master," I said, and unlocked the door.

Perry's father walked in and stopped just inside, staring at me. I closed the door and stood still, my arms down. The sleeves of the shirt were so long that my hands disappeared into the cuffs, and the tails of the shirt hung halfway down my thighs. For a long moment we stared at one another. I crossed my arms. He smiled. "Did you have a nice night, son?" he said, turning at last to Perry.

"Dad—" Perry sat up and ran his fingers through his hair, shocking it up on end. "Do you know—" he waved a hand toward me.

Perry's father laughed. "I knew it could do a lot of things, but I never knew it could do this."

"What do you mean?"

"Well, I brought it to be your bodyguard. A man who has as many enemies as I have has to watch out for the things he loves, Perry. So I—" He shook his head. He looked at me. He grinned.

"You mean she's telling the truth when she says she's not a man?"

The laughter in Perry's father's eyes dimmed. "Yes," he said. "What else has it told you?"

"Nothing. She said she was forbidden." I could hear the stiffness in

Perry's tone. I felt tension running out of my shoulders as I recognized the dynamic: I was Perry's best friend, and his father kept calling me "it." Perry had decided to side with me.

"But you know, son, you may be old enough not to need a bodyguard anymore." Perry's father closed his hand around my upper arm. "Maybe I should send it home."

"It? Why do you keep calling her it?"

"It's a demon, not a person." Perry's father tugged me toward the door.

"What do you mean, a demon?" Perry asked.

I dug my heels into the rug, listening for my true imperatives to guide me. The words I needed were there: my highest imperative was taking care of Perry; Perry's father's claim on me was secondary. That was the way he had arranged it. And I had discovered, after living with Perry, that that was the way I liked it.

"I must stay here," I said, twisting my arm free of Perry's father's grasp.

"He's old enough to take care of himself now."

"Last night I discovered how to call the sickness out of him. Sickness is always a threat. He will never be too old to be cared for," I said. And smiled.

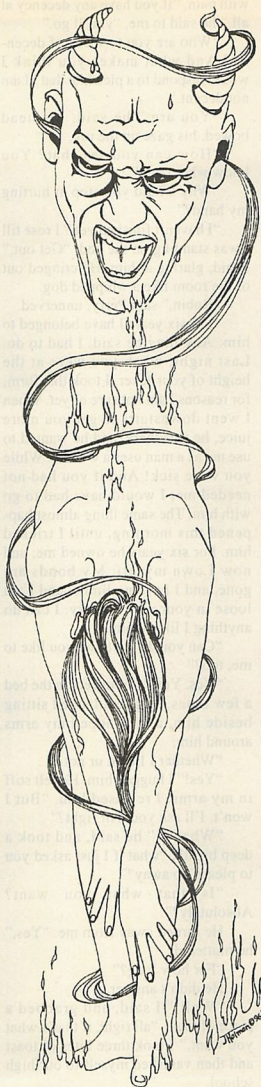
His eyes widened. His breathing deepened as he stared at me, and I saw the fear unfurl in him as he realized I had found a way around his bonds by clinging tighter to them. Words, I thought. I could bend the words back at him. The orange in his matrix grayed, and the clear balance he had established disappeared; something spun in the center of him. "I release you," he said.

"Oh, sir," I said, shaking my head, smiling, feeling the glorious flame of freedom kindling in me, "oh, sir—"

"I rescind that!"

I took the fire agate off the ring finger of my left hand. The word "release" flared around it in gold flame. I dropped the ring on the rug. It burned and smoked.

"By all that's holy and good, I banish you and contain you, by the



Trinity, by the Three in One God, by the Father, the Son, and the Holy Spirit I cast you out—" he said, making passes in the air. His voice shook.

I went to the bed and climbed on it, sitting next to Perry and putting my arms around him. I put my head on his shoulder. "What do you want to do next?" I said.

"To the deepest bowels of Hell I command you," said Perry's father, following me.

"I don't understand any of this," said Perry. "Robin?"

"Would you like breakfast in bed, or would you like to go downstairs?"

"The power of Christ compels you," said Perry's father, flailing his arm at me.

"Dad!" said Perry.

"The power of Christ compels you!"

I kissed Perry's shoulder. He stared at me, surprised. I crooked a finger at him and he leaned closer. I touched my lips to his, wondering if we would mix at all, and I felt, amid the waters of our two mouths, that we also exchanged fire. Only a little. It was not like the instant and all-encompassing mix I would have experienced at home. I liked it. It would take a long time to mix completely, and we could savor it.

"Why doesn't the power of Christ compel you?" Perry's father asked.

Perry's hand held my head, his fingers twining in my hair. He closed his eyes and kissed me again. He was sweet, and he was perfect: I had spent nearly half his life shaping him. We knew each other and liked each other.

Perry's father's hand closed on my shoulder, and he jerked me away from Perry. "Why doesn't the power of Christ compel you!" he yelled at me.

I dropped my hand on his and let my true nature out just a little. He screamed and pulled his hand away, then shook it, gasping at the blisters.

"Robin?" said Perry, staring wide-eyed at his father's hand.

"Yes?"

"What—what—"

His father, almost sobbing, walked across to the bathroom, went in and turned the cold water on full

force, and stuck his hand under the stream.

"Please, please tell me what's going on."

"In a minute," I said. I got to my knees and studied my boy. He looked pale and worried, but he wasn't sick anymore; that much I knew. I thought about the kitchen. Right now Esmerelda was down there fixing heaps of breakfast things. I chose lots of the best, toast, bacon, fried eggs, orange juice, coffee, cream, sugar; I chose a tray, and dishes, and utensils; and I chose a bed table. I put them all together and summoned them through the sideways place so they could be here right away without cooling off. The table and everything on it appeared beside me. I set it in front of Perry.

"Robin," he said faintly.

"I'll tell you while you eat," I said. I tried a piece of bacon. Crispy, but not burned. Perfect.

He reached a hesitant hand toward the table, took a piece of bacon. After his first bite he fell on the food like a starving man. I ate with him. I had become accustomed to food instead of wood. When we had taken the edge off our appetites, I said, "Your father is a wizard."

"His business pals always say that."

"He plucked me from my home. He tied me up in bindings I could not break. He forced me to take human form. He said, here is my son. Take good care of him. See that no real harm befalls him. And there was no way for me to disobey him." I sipped coffee out of Perry's mug.

"I thought—" said Perry.

When his silence had stretched too long, I said, "What did you think?"

"You were a special servant. I thought..."

"Yes?" I said.

"I thought you were here because you liked me."

"Almost from the first, I liked you. Now I'm here because I like you."

"But—"

Perry's father came out of the bathroom. His face was still white

with pain. "If you have any decency at all," he said to me, "you'll go."

"Who are you to speak of decency? And what makes you think I would respond to a plea like that? I am not decent."

"You are," he said, his head bowed, his gaze on the rug.

"How can you say that? You know what I am."

"Why would you stop at hurting my hand?"

"I haven't finished yet." I rose till I was standing on the bed. "Get out," I said, glaring at him. He cringed out of the room like a whipped dog.

"Robin," said Perry, unnerved.

"For six years I have belonged to him. Anything he said, I had to do. Last night, when you were at the height of your fever, I took this form, for reasons I am not sure of yet. When I went downstairs to get you more juice, he was there, and he wanted to use me as a man uses a woman. While you were sick! And if you had not needed me, I would have had to go with him. The same thing almost happened this morning, until I tricked him. For six years he owned me, and now I own myself. My bonds are gone, and I have no limits, and I am loose in your world, Perry. I can do anything I like to him."

"Can you do anything you like to me, too?"

"Yes. Yes!" I bounced on the bed a few times, laughed, landed sitting beside him, and wrapped my arms around him.

"Whether I like it or not."

"Yes!" I hugged him. He felt stiff in my arms. I released him. "But I won't. I'll ask you. All right?"

"What if," he said, and took a deep breath, "what if I just asked you to please go away?"

"Is that what you want? Absolutely?"

He turned away from me. "Yes," he muttered.

"For how long?"

He didn't answer.

"Well," I said, and grabbed a piece of toast, "all right, if that's what you want." I took three bites of toast and then vanished myself to our high school.

It was Saturday, and there was nobody on campus. Which was lucky for me, as all I was wearing was an oversized shirt, and I had appeared in the main hall where all the lockers were. I glanced at the mural of the ultimate recess airbrushed across them. A boy's brown face stretched across my locker and Perry's; my secret self had always enjoyed the image of us as two halves of one person. I paced up and down the corridor for a while until I noticed I was leaving burning footprints on the green floor. Then I ran down to the boys' gym and took a long cold shower, staring at the cool white tile and counseling myself to get back under control. Just because I was in charge of my life for the first time in an age didn't mean I had to be sloppy. When at last the water showering on me stopped turning to steam as it touched my skin, I got out and paced around the locker room a while, slapping beige lockers and wondering what to do with myself. I looked at the white shirt I had worn away from home and thought about clothing. How would Debbie dress? I sat on a bench and thought my way across town and into Debbie's closet, then summoned an outfit, a soft golden sweater, a light green skirt, bra, panties, stockings and flat shoes. I dressed, then sought out a mirror and studied myself. For a human, I looked fine.

I went outside and sat under a tree. The sun was shining. Why was I still here? I could go home now. I could destroy Perry's father first if I liked, and then go home. I could destroy the whole world.

I found myself walking. Three blocks from school was the Juke Joint Cafe, where Perry and I and our friends Tom and Douglas went after school, to order things to eat, and talk, and watch girls. I went inside and sat down in a booth. The air smelled like it could tell you the whole history of the hamburger. The big juke box in the corner was flashing its red and green lights without playing any music. It was too early for there to be a crowd. When Zoe, the waitress, came by, I ordered a whole meal. Gratuitous food; I wasn't very hungry. At



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a table across from me sat Richard Simon and Pamela Pringle. They stared into each other's eyes and ate french fries without looking at the food. I sighed. Why was I hanging around here? All right, I could identify the local wildlife. That didn't mean it was interesting. Back home I could dive into the fire river and cleanse myself of the impurities of being too long among humans and return to my life's work, a constant opportunity to transform baseness into transcendent purity.

Instead I sat and watched Pamela and Richard and ate my hamburger and french fries and sipped my Coke and wondered what Perry was doing.

Douglas wandered into the cafe as I was eating my last fry. He was tall and broad, with light hair and brown eyes and a bony, serious face. Today's T-shirt was black, with a picture of the galaxy on it, and an arrow pointing to a small star near the rim, with the words "You Are Here" above it. His eyebrows lifted and he came to my booth. "Why haven't I seen you before?" he said.

"Because I wasn't here before," I said, and laughed because I had heard him talking about certain lines and how well they worked with women. He hadn't thought this one would work. He seemed to ask it against his will.

"Mind if I join you?" he said. He hated this line because it gave the girl a chance to freeze him out completely.

"That would be nice," I said. I had always liked Douglas.

"Can I buy you anything?"

"I've already eaten. Please get yourself something, though."

He asked Zoe for a chocolate shake. He frowned at me. "You look—" he said.

"Familiar? I know. I've seen you around."

"But didn't you just say—" Then he covered his mouth. Never contradict a girl directly; one of his own rules.

"It's kind of hard to explain," I said. "In fact, I don't think I can. I've been here for a while, but I wasn't me."

"Oh," said Douglas.

"So I know you, Douglas."

His eyes got wide. He swallowed. After a minute, he said, "What's your name?"

"Lark," I said.

"I've never met anybody named Lark," he said.

I thought about Debbie. In a situation like this, she would just smile, as if she knew a secret. I tried it.

Douglas looked confused, but after a moment, he straightened, and said, "Well, I'm pleased to meet you, Lark. Do you go to Weldon?"

"I'm thinking about it." Why was I thinking about it? The whole world lay waiting for me, and here I was, restricting myself in all the ways Perry's father had restricted me. I liked Douglas. Why didn't I just take him somewhere with me, and play with him? Why hadn't I done that with Perry? I had heard tales, when I was still fire, of revenges some of my people had taken on sorcerers and wizards; of ways to gain power by taking it away from those who abused it. And here I was, acting like one of the most helpless beings I knew of, a teenager girl.

"Is this a private party, or can I crash it?"

"Go away," said Douglas.

I grinned up at Tom. His green eyes behind his glasses were unusually bright, and his dark hair looked as though he had combed it in the recent past. He was wearing jeans and a Grateful Dead T-shirt. I scooted over, leaving him room to sit beside me.

Tom slid into the booth and smiled.

"This is Lark," said Douglas.

"Tom Bandoni," Tom said, holding out his hand to me. I shook it. He said, "Are you doing anything tonight?"

"What?" I said, laughing.

"Well, I thought I better ask you in case Doug hasn't gotten around to it."

"I don't think I'm doing anything tonight," I said.

"God, what nerve," Douglas muttered.

"Would you like to see a movie with me?" asked Tom.

"Yes," I said.

Tom beamed at me. Douglas glared at both of us, then got up. "Well," he said, "I am going to call Robin and find out how Perry's doing." And he stalked away to the pay phone by the cafe's front door.

"What do we know about you?" Tom asked me.

"Nothing," I said, watching Douglas dial. My good mood had evaporated at the mention of Perry's name. I collected myself, and looked at Tom. "I've been called a demon," I said, "and I'm a danger to all who know me."

"Why?" said Tom, confused.

"Isn't that what you get when you turn something loose that's been locked up too long? Danger?"

"I don't know," he said. "I guess. You mean, it's like there's something awful that happened to you a long time ago and you never did anything about it? Maybe the pressure of never doing anything about it builds up until you explode. Is that what you're talking about?"

"Yes."

"What kind of explosion do you think it's going to be?"

I looked at the palms of my hands, and then at Tom's earnest face, thinking that I had always liked that about him, that he would follow any conversational detour with great interest and attention; and that he would take anything seriously if seriousness seemed called for. "Well," I said. "Joy. And passion. And anger. I don't know. Right now I feel like I have everything under control, but I also feel like soon I'm going to figure out which direction to explode, and then it's going to happen—and maybe I shouldn't go out with you tonight, because what if it happens then?"

"It's okay with me," he said.

"What if I hurt you?"

"Why would you do that? Have I ever hurt you? No, really. We just met, but I feel like I know you. God, that sounds corny." He stared at the backs of his hands, and glanced at me. "But it's true."

Douglas came back. "Tom," he said, "Perry's not sick anymore, but

he says Robin's gone. He sounds upset. I think we should go see him."

"Lark?" Tom took my hand. "Are you okay?"

"No," I said. Then, "Yes."

"Can I help you?"

I shook my head, and looked up at him. For the first time in my life I was looking through a haze of tears, my own bitter water, and I a fire creature.

"You'd better come with us," said Tom.

"Maybe we can drop you somewhere?" Douglas said, harassed. "If Perry needs to talk, this is no time to spring somebody new on him."

"Perry's a good friend of ours," Tom explained.

"I can stay in the car," I said, not letting go of Tom's hand, not understanding myself.

"All right," said Douglas. Tom paid my tab; Douglas paid his own; and we went out and got into Douglas's blue Fiat, with him driving and Tom and me in back.

"Don't take this wrong," Tom said as Douglas pulled out of the parking lot. "Lark, do you need professional help?"

"What do you mean? A psychiatrist?"

"God, Tom," said Douglas, "you just meet the girl and already you think she's a mental case. Just because your dad has a shingle, that doesn't empower you to practice without a license."

"I don't know if a psychiatrist could help me," I said. "What I feel is—I have unlimited power. I don't want to misuse it. And I *do* want to use it."

"Why do you call yourself a demon?"

"That's the label I have here."

"Who called you that?"

"Perry's father," I said, before I could censor myself.

"Go on," said Douglas. He snorted.

"Do you know Perry?" Tom asked.

"Yes."

"Why would his father call you a demon?"

"Because I am one?" But I wasn't sure. Perry and I had seen *The Exorcist*,

and none of it struck me as parallel to our own situation.

"Exactly what kind of game are you playing, Lark?" Douglas asked, and his voice was unfriendly. "Are you unbalanced? You sure sound like it."

"Unbalanced is a good word for it," I said.

Douglas stopped the car at the gate to Perry's father's estate. He punched the combination on the gatebox and the gate swung open. We sat there, the gate open in front of us. After a moment, it closed again. "Lark, is this some sort of scheme? Did you pick us up to get to Perry? Are you planning to extort money from him or us somehow?"

"I don't need money," I said.

"What do you want?" Tom asked.

"Perry."

Tom and Douglas exchanged a look.

"I feel confused," I said.

"That's nothing to what we feel," said Tom.

"I want Perry, and I think he wants me, but he's afraid of me."

"This is sounding an awful lot like *Fatal Attraction*," Douglas said.

The four of us had seen the movie together on cable, and it had made us all nervous.

"Lark," said Tom in a kind voice, "maybe you should wait here. Could you handle that? Just wait here? After we've seen Perry we'll come back, and we'll take you somewhere where you can get help."

"I—" I said.

And then I heard Perry's voice, calling to me through the sideways place. "Robin! Robin!" It was full of despair.

I got out of the car and punched the gate combination. The gate opened and I walked inside, headed up the driveway, breaking into a run.

"Robin! Please come home. I'm sorry," he was saying.

Douglas was driving after me, yelling something, speeding, but he couldn't catch me. I raced up the steps and across the portico. The door opened before I touched it and I ran inside. "Perry?" I ran up the stairs and to his door. I knocked. "Perry?"

Footsteps crossed to the door, and an instant later he unlocked and opened it and grabbed my arm and pulled me in. "Where've you been?"

"I went to school, and I went to the cafe. I moped around—"

Before I could say anything else, he was kissing me.

When he stopped, I said, "I met Tom and Douglas. Tom asked me on a date—"

"What!"

"But now they both think I'm crazy."

He kissed me again, and I hugged him fiercely, feeling the intense desire to mix with him completely, right away. I felt my edges melting as I went to fire form.

"Ouch!" said Perry. He let go of me and held up smoking hands.

"Oh, no. I'm sorry." I grabbed him, soothed the fire from his skin, and kissed his palms. "I need to plan this better," I said.

Tom and Douglas came in without knocking. Douglas grabbed my wrists from behind, restraining me. "Did she hurt you?" he asked.

"What?" said Perry. He looked at me and smiled.

"*Fatal Attraction*," I said in a hollow voice.

"What!"

"Perry, do you know Lark?" Tom asked.

Perry raised an eyebrow at me. "Lark? Yes," he said.

"She said you're afraid of her," said Douglas.

"Maybe."

"She said she's a demon," Tom said.

"That's the least of my worries," said Perry.

"Really?" I said.

He glanced at the floor. "Well," he said, "no, but it sounded good, didn't it?" He peeked at me.

I grinned back.

"Anyway, I don't want to live without you," he said. "Only I needed time to figure that out."

"Yes," I said.

"So now we just have to figure out how I can live with you."

"Yes."

"Perry," said Tom, "Perry...."

"What?"

"She was talking really crazy in the car. Like, completely out of touch with reality. How long have you known her?"

"Six years," said Perry. "And I don't think you know what our reality is, Tom. I didn't know myself until this morning. Cancel that. I'm not sure I know now."

"I wish Robin was here," said Douglas. "Maybe he could straighten you out."

"I don't think so," said Perry. "Lark, what are we going to do?"

"Get married."

"What about this 'the power of Christ compels you' stuff?"

"We can have a civil ceremony."

"I don't think I'm old enough."

"Do you want to be?"

"Huh?"

"Fake I. D., instant aging, or hypnotizing the person in authority. I don't care. Whatever you want. Or, we can drop the whole idea, if you want. But marriage would give us protection. Your father worries me."

"Still?"

"He's resourceful and intelligent. I have vulnerabilities, and he may figure them out."

"How come that 'power of Christ' stuff didn't work, Robin?"

"Well, A, I'm not sure I'm a demon; B, you have to have faith for that stuff to work, and your father is hardly a man of God, Perry—" I began, before Douglas, who had maintained his grip on my wrists, jerked me around and stared at my face. Tom stared at me too, his eyes wide.

"So that's where—" said Douglas.

"I thought you looked—" Tom said. "But—"

"This is impossible," said Douglas. His hands had tightened around my wrists. His grip hurt.

"What?" said Perry. Then he realized his slip. "Hey, let go of her, Douglas."

Slowly Douglas opened his hands, releasing my wrists, which had gone white.

"I'm losing my mind," said Tom.

"Can you hocus-pocus them to make them believe they've never

known you any other way?" Perry asked me.

"I don't think I should," I said, after a brief hesitation.

"Why not?"

"Because that requires fine control. I haven't had much practice lately. I've been very limited in what I was allowed to do, and I've lost my skills, I think. I'd hate to take a chance on damaging them."

"So what do we do now?"

"Perry," said Tom, his face pale, "what are you talking about? Are you standing right here in front of us and discussing brainwashing us? What's happened to you?"

"This morning, my life turned upside down."

"The easiest solution would be if I left," I said.

"No. We've already been through that. No," said Perry.

"Second easiest solution would be just to try to explain everything, I guess," I said.

"Much better," said Tom. He glanced at Douglas, who was standing still, staring at me.

I brushed past him and closed and locked the door, then went over to sit on Perry's bed, which was still in total disarray, since I hadn't made it before I left. Perry came and sat next to me. "Pull up some rug," he said.

Tom and Douglas, looking nervous, sat on the floor in front of us.

"Dad gave me Robin on my tenth birthday, and I never knew what Robin was until today, or what my dad was either," Perry said.

"How can anybody give a person to someone?" asked Tom.

"It used to happen all the time," Douglas said. "It was called slavery."

"Yeah, but the exclamation proclamation—"

"Emancipation," I said. After all, I had been in the same history classes they had. "Where I'm from, that never happened."

"Where are you from?"

"Another dimension, naturally."

"What's a demon?" Tom asked.

I held up my hands and shrugged.

"When you were talking about explosions, what did you mean?"

I opened my hands and let them remember who I really was. Flame hovered above my palms, small, white, concentrated, and very hot. Paint blistered on the ceiling above me. I reabsorbed the flame and closed my hands.

"Oh, God," said Tom. Douglas was hugging himself.

"I didn't know you could do that," said Perry.

I looked at him and smiled. Then I sobered. "You see, I am so angry with your father," I said. "Part of me wants to incinerate him for enslaving me, and another part doesn't, because I'm glad he captured me and gave you to me. I've heard of worse jobs."

"Robin, I don't get this," said Tom. "All this time we've been friends, you've been this—this whatever you are, pyromaniac or something? Transsexual? I mean, excuse me, but I thought I knew you better than that."

"You know a lot of the important things about me," I said, "but most of me is hidden, even now. However, the most important thing about me is that I love Perry. I like you, as much of you as I know. Douglas, are you all right?"

"No," he said.

"What do you need?"

"I want you to be you."

"I'm not going to be that me anymore," I said. "I'm the butterfly now. I'm not going back to being a caterpillar."

"But you did last night, didn't you?" Perry asked. "When I was still sick."

"For a very short time. Because you needed it."

"So the analogy isn't accurate."

"Your point being?" I said.

"You could change if you wanted to."

"Why would I want to?"

"I don't know," he said, looking away. "Sometimes it might be more fun."

"Like when?"

"Like if we were driving across the country or something, or on a camping trip like the one we took last summer, you know?" We had gone with Tom and Douglas to the moun-

tains, and those nights under the stars were some of the best I had ever had on this world.

"Don't you think that would drive you nuts, if I kept switching back and forth?"

"And we need you on the baseball team," said Perry.

"I'm just as strong as I was before."

"I like the new you, and I liked the old you," he said, "and I feel mixed up."

I sighed and pleted the hem of my skirt between my fingers.

"The old you already has a place in the house," he said.

"Look," I said, "I turned into this for some reason. Twice I turned into this. You know why? I was responding to some need of yours; that's how I was operating until your dad released me this morning. If you needed anything, I got it for you. You needed me like this."

"What do I need now?" he said.

I put my hand on his shoulder, and felt for the connection I had had with him since my binding. His need was strong and clear. I smiled and got up. "Guys, we need to be alone right now," I said.

"This is megaweird," said Tom.

"But you can deal with it, right?"

"Are you going to disappear?" he asked.

"Not if I can help it."

"But our date's off."

I looked at Perry. "The date is definitely off," he said. "His shoulders were hunched. Maybe he wasn't ready to acknowledge the need I had read in him, but he couldn't turn away from it now."

Douglas got up. "Robin," he said, "Robin..."

"I think it'll be all right."

"Okay," he said. "Catch you later." He turned and left. Tom followed, glancing over his shoulder at us.

"What do I need?" Perry whispered.

"To grow up a little," I whispered back. "Only let's go somewhere safer, okay?"

"All right," he whispered.

"Do you want someplace warm or cold? Outside or in? Day or night?"

"The Fortress of Solitude would be nice," he said.

"Ah," I said. We had rented the first two *Superman* videos one weekend when he was sick. I went to his closet and got out his down jacket and leather gloves and ski skins and thermal socks and snow boots. "Put this stuff on. It'll take me a little while to build it."

"I was kidding," he said.

I smiled at him. "If you say so."

"Could you really do that?"

"I've been itching to do something that would let me go all out. I've been severely restricted for way too long. The way a job usually goes, from what I heard at home, is some wizard calls you up and asks you to do something spectacular, and often terrible, and then sends you home. Here I've been, for a long time, using just the smallest fraction of my abilities. The threats I dealt with were all human and limited."

"Let's go off to a tropical island somewhere where there's no other people. Maybe you can mess around there. I think the Arctic is for the birds."

"Okay," I said. I put my arms around him, and sought with my mind for the perfect island, full of plants that would feed us, empty of people who would annoy us, and then we were on a beach beside a turquoise lagoon, and behind us was a line of palm trees, and the forested slope of a volcano. It was morning and the sun was already warm.

"God! Robin," said Perry, as I knelt in the sand and reached for the button on his jeans, "all this time we could have been whizzing around the world?"

I lowered his zipper one tooth at a time and looked up at him.

When I was done he kicked off his Nikes and stepped out of his pants and jockey shorts. He reached up to pull off his shirt. "Sit down and let me do that," I said.

"Have you done this before?" he asked through the shirt as I pulled it off over his head.

"Nope. Operating on rumor, just like you."

"Were you a kid in your other world?"

"Yeah."

"What sex?" he asked as I tugged his socks off.

"We don't have sexes, really. Anybody can do it with anybody else, but once a pair is mated, they stay together."

"So it's really okay for you to be a girl and a boy." He reached for my sweater and I sat still as he drew it off me.

"Yes," I said.

He stared at my black lace bra. "Where did you get these clothes?"

"I stole them from Debbie."

"Oh, Robin," he said. He edged closer so he could reach around behind me and unfasten the bra. "That's really weird."

"I didn't have any money when I left. Tom bought me lunch."

He pulled down the zipper of my skirt and I wriggled out of it. He tugged my panties and pantyhose off together, slowly. We were both pretty sandy by then, and his desire was rising. He looked from his penis to me, and said, "God, I hope I do this right. I don't want to hurt you."

"I don't want to hurt you either. Let me know." Then I thought, I should fireproof him, and then I won't have to worry so much; and I figured out how to do that. On my knees I went to him and embraced him and let the fire in me make love to him. He gasped, over and over, and stared blindly over my shoulder at the sky, and in the course of the treatment, he spent himself.

"Oh, God," he whispered a little later, "what was that? That wasn't the way it was supposed to be, was it?"

"Foreplay," I said.

"Uh, uh. Geeze. Good enough for me, but it didn't do anything for you, did it?"

"Not yet. I just wanted to make you safe for me to touch."

"What?"

"Now you're Robin-proof," I said, and put my hands on his chest, and stroked him as I had been wanting to since I called the sickness out of him hours earlier. This time when the heat came to my hands he arched his back and pushed up against them, and when I kissed fire into his mouth he

drank it down as though it were life. When I climbed onto him he gave me back his own fire and we loved as humans would and as my people would, all mingled.

It was a long time before we stopped, and longer still before we came back inside ourselves and lay, sandy and tangled, under a night sky afire with stars. The sea had crept up and now it lapped at our legs.

"Let's stay here a couple years," Perry murmured.

I sat up. I felt small tingles beginning in the pit of my belly; I had never had that exact sensation before, but I remembered how a strange feeling had come over me when I was first summoned from my home to this new world. "Perry," I said, and grabbed his arm. Words might save me, if I only knew the right ones."

"What?"

"I think your father is trying to do something to me now."

"What!" He sat up too.

"Do you want to help me?"

"Yes."

"Unconditionally? Think this out, but don't take too long." The tingling in my stomach had changed; it was more like a pulsing shock, and it was spreading up my chest, down my legs.

"Are you a demon?"

"I don't know."

He took a breath, let it out. "I want to help you, unconditionally."

"Repeat these words after me.

And then I'll say something else in my own language, ask you questions. If you want to help, just say yes every time I stop."

"What does—okay."

"I, Perry Dwyer, do bind my soul and fate with those of Robindaranya Raganatha Thercuta Elia Alkarnan," I said, and he repeated it with only a little coaching on my name, "in friendship and love, in future, present, and past, indivisibly, our threads run together; we support and uphold each other, comfort and keep each other, protect and cherish."

He repeated it, and said, "So we are getting married."

"Uh huh."

"Okay."

I swore my own oath in English.

The tingling was throbbing in my arms now, and at the base of my skull. Quickly I asked the fire questions a presider would ask in my home world of any two beings who wished to become one, and Perry said, "Yes, yes, yes," and I said, "Yes, yes, yes," in fire at the same time, and then I kissed him. I had done what I could.

And then the calm warm night and the sea's murmur disappeared, and I was trapped inside a circle again, staring across the chalked lines at Perry's father, and another man I had never seen. "What do you want?" I asked.

They both took a step back. The summoned one was never supposed to initiate action or conversation, unless the summoning was done wrong, in which case the summoner was in great danger. My new life link to Perry meant that I could be in two places at once now, and no simple pentagram could hold me any longer. So: they had done something wrong.

"What have you done with Perry?" asked Perry's father.

"Nothing he didn't agree with, Father."

His face sagged.

"Where is he now?" asked the other man. His voice was full of strange music that reminded me of the speech of people at home. I walked to the edge of the pentagram closest to him and stared.

"Someplace very safe," I said.

"Will you bring him here?" said this second man, gently.

"Is it safe here?"

He stared at me a long moment, then knelt at my feet and with ensorcelled chalk cut the lines of the pentagram, giving me an avenue to walk out of it. I stepped through and looked around. We were in the basement of Perry's father's mansion, in a room that usually remained locked. It was windowless, and lit by ranks and ranks of colored candles on a table at one end. I had been down here before with Perry's father. It was the first place I had seen on this world.

"Now?" said the second man.

"Who are you?" I asked him, which could have been considered rude, as a name is power, and no one gives away a name.

"I trained this man," he said, touching Perry's father's shoulder. "Not until now have I learned what he did with his training."

"What do you think?" I said.

"It's very interesting."

"Perry," said Perry's father. "Please, Robin."

"He is still my charge," I said.

"We have woven our own words of binding, Father."

"Robin, please," he said.

I thought about Perry, and saw that he had taken a quick plunge into the ocean, shaken the sand out of his clothes, and put them back on. He was calm; waiting. "Ready to come home?" I whispered to him along our connection, and he smiled, slicking his wet hair back, and I brought him home.

He stood behind me and put his hands on my shoulders. "Where are we?" he said, looking around.

"This is the basement."

"Perry, are you all right?" asked his father.

"I'm fine. This is our basement? I've never been in this part before."

"It's your father's magic ground."

"Oh."

"And this is the person who trained your father in wizardry. Sir...."

"What is it?"

"Do we fear you?"

He came to stand before us. He tilted my chin up and stared into my eyes, then did the same to Perry. "No," he said at length. His smile started slowly, then grew broad. "The things one sees, when one lives long enough." He touched the tip of my nose and turned away. "Price, I'm going home," he said to Perry's father. He lifted his hands, clapped twice, and disappeared.

Perry's father came and stood facing us. "Robin," he said, "do I fear you?"

I thought about living with Perry for six years, going to school with him and learning about this world, at least as it was perceived by the people I lived among. I thought: I had been taken care of, and given something precious, even though it went against my will; and when I finally felt threat-

ened, the threat had not materialized. "No," I said. "Not unless you want to."

"Perry? Do you understand what's happened yet?"

"You got scared when Mom was killed, and did what you could to protect me," said Perry, "and it turned out to be something that not many people could do. Thanks."

His father's eyes widened. "Who told you—"

"I remember," said Perry. His hands tightened on my shoulders. "Robin doesn't know. Anyway, we redefined our relationship today. We're going to be okay, I think."

"How do you define yourselves now?"

"Married," said Perry.

"What do you plan to do next?"

"I don't know about Robin, but I think I better graduate from high school before I do anything else. Robin, you want to go to college?"

"If you do."

"Are you going to stay here?" asked Perry's father.

"If it's all right with you," Perry said, and whispered, "Robin?"

I nodded.

"I think...I think it's all right with me," said Perry's father. He went to open the door out of his magic ground, and Perry nudged me.

"Maybe you better put some clothes on," he whispered, "if we'll be going through the kitchen. I mean, the staff will think this is the first time they've met you."

I thought about Perry's blue-and-white Japanese bathrobe, and it appeared in my hand. I slipped into it. As we followed Perry's father up out of the cellar, I wondered when I could take Perry home with me to meet his in-laws, the union-of-two that had spun me off. I grinned. ■



OUR AUTHORS

Joseph Carrabis lives in Nashua, NH; he writes everywhere with considerable talent and discipline. We like to think that Mister Carrabis has come along nicely. **Don D'Amassa** is the author of one novel and several dozen short stories. He has been book reviewer for *Science Fiction Chronicle* for 15 years. **Nina Kiriki Hoffman** has published two novels and her short fiction is scattered hither and yon. She was a winner in the first year of *L. Ron Hubbard's Writers of the Future Contest*. This year she was the Guest of Honor at the World Horror Convention. **James Killus** lives on the West Coast, where he occasionally writes a piece like "As Beauty Does." The rest of the time he is a scientist. **Brandon Massey** was born in June, 1973, in Waukegan, Illinois. Now he works for a life insurance company. His entry here, "Dead to the World," is his first sale. He is currently making the rounds with his first novel, *Thunderland*, and working on other fiction projects. **Michael Shea** was born on July 3, 1946, in Los Angeles. Years of chaotic university attendance were spent in imbibing literature and languages. Years of travel followed (Spain, France, the U.S. including Alaska). Years of miscellaneous employment have in the last decade coalesced in a predominance of teaching and house painting. Michael Shea is, flatly, one of the best writers going. All doubts on that point are answered in *In the Mines of Behemoth*. **Tawn Stokes**, another *Writers of the Future* alumna, returns this time with "Seeing Sebastian," another in a series of stories set in a quirky future. She is basically a poet and playwright, but she has been good enough to favor us with a little bit of prose. **Laurie Tashiro** knows the old hotel where Algis Budrys eats when in Las Vegas (in New Mexico, not Nevada). She reports that there is a pretty good old hotel in Glenwood Springs—haunted—and Durango has the Strater where Louis L'Amour did a lot of his writing. In Taos, she and her husband usually stay at the hotel formerly run by Wild Bill Hickcock's wife. The hotel on the Taos square, where D. H. Lawrence stayed and wrote, is just too weird. **Elisabeth Vonarburg** was born in France and now lives in Chicoutimi, Quebec. She has taught literature at various Quebec universities, and is now a full-time writer. She translates SF & F

from English to French, and also translates some of her own stories. She has been an editor and writer for the Quebecois SF magazine *Solaris* since 1974. Since 1980, she has published three short-story collections and three novels, winning numerous major awards in the process, including a Philip K. Dick Special Award. ■

OUR ARTISTS

Kandis Elliot, our cover artist, is a biological illustrator for the University of Wisconsin. Her SF and fantasy art and stories appear in, among others, *Asimov's*, *Science Fiction Age*, *Ellery Queen*, and, of course, *Tomorrow*, for which she is also Production Manager.

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 was a winner in the first year of *L. Ron Hubbard's Illustrators of the Future Contest*. **David J. Grilla** consistently contributes outstanding work to our pages. He lives in Worcester, MA, and is expanding his horizons swiftly. **Bob Hobbs** lives in Rhode Island, where he is steadily advancing in his craft. His illustrations have recently been in the new *Star Trek Concordance*, ten cards in the new collectable card game *The Five Rings*, and he is currently illustrating a new SF novel called *Secret Enemies*. On March 8 he quit a position he had held for the last ten years at the Naval War College. He 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 checked all that to illustrate science fiction. Her many prestigious shows continue to add to her lustre. **Margaret Balif 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** first entered a convention art show in 1984, and has since won SF illustration awards nationwide. Her B&W illustrations are found, among others, in the Carol Nelson Douglas books from Tor. Years ago, Algis Budrys bought a large Darla Tagrin black-and-white piece of surrealism which is now on a wall of his office. ■

THE MINES OF BEHEMOTH

Michael Shea

Illustrated by Kandis Elliot

Part One of a Three-Part Serial
about Niffi and Barnar and the harvest they gathered



Shag Margold's
Introduction To

THE MINES OF BEHEMOTH

My old friend Niffi, with a perhaps unintentional candor, has displayed a personal flaw or two in this narrative. I honor his memory none the less for it. The good of Niffi always overbalanced the ill, and just so here where, whatever slight moral shortcomings may appear in our narrator, he gives us in his tale the most vivid and enlightening natural history of the Behemoth's life-cycle yet put on record.

Hadaska Broode, a Minusk historian, has penned the following tetra-

meters in homage to Behemoth. While I cannot pretend the lines are accomplished poetry, they are at least heart-felt:

*What dread Being dares to farm
where every breed of demon swarms?
Who dares till there? Who shall go
and scythe the harvest row on row?
Who in that sunless gulf of harms
could drive the plow? Would dare to
sow?*

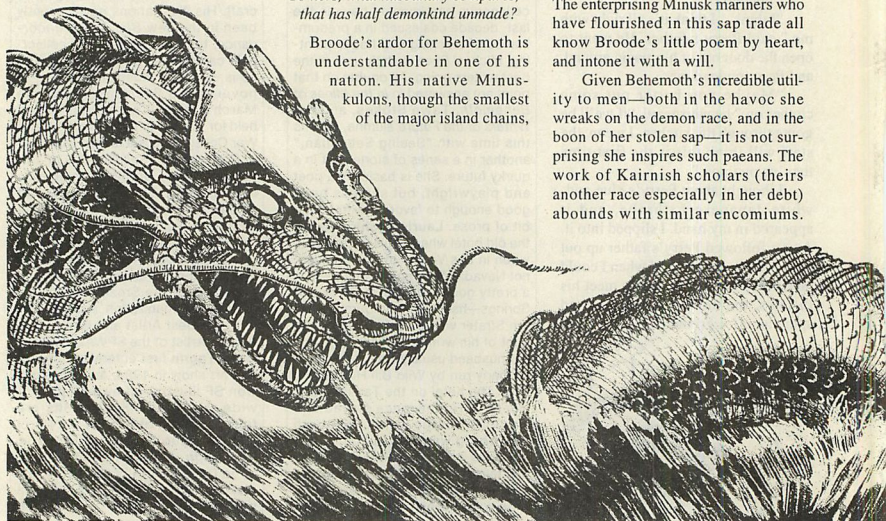
*Behemoth's jaws alone the share
to carve the flinty furrow there.
Behemoth's strength the reaper's
blade,
her bowels the barn where harvest's
laid.*

*To hers, what husbandry compares,
that has half demonkind unmade?*

Broode's ardor for Behemoth is understandable in one of his nation. His native Minuskulons, though the smallest of the major island chains,

loom large in the Behemoth sap trade, for they are the only landfall the Sea of Agon affords between southern Kairnheim, where sap is mined, and the sap's two greatest overseas markets: the Ephesian Chain to the south, and the Great Shallows to the east. The sap in its cake form is of course excellent fodder for kine and draybeasts the world over. In the Ephesians—on my native Pardash, for example—it is also used in its fluid state; a dilution is sprayed on our fields to enrich our somewhat lean soils. Meanwhile the Great Shallows' many sea-dwelling races use sap cake to mulch their mariculture and nourish their polyp patches, whelk beds, crab pastures, bivalve grottoes, and every kind of raft garden. The enterprising Minusk mariners who have flourished in this sap trade all know Broode's little poem by heart, and intone it with a will.

Given Behemoth's incredible utility to men—both in the havoc she wreaks on the demon race, and in the boon of her stolen sap—it is not surprising she inspires such paens. The work of Kairnish scholars (theirs another race especially in her debt) abounds with similar encomiums.



Both these schools of Behemoth's most ardent admirers share a further accord. On the question of Behemoth's origins, Minusk and Kairnish authorities alike aver that the Mountain Mother was born of some now forgotten human sorcery.

I may be forgiven a smile in pointing out that those most beholden to Behemoth might be expected to take this side of the controversy. For if Behemoth be the scion of some thaumaturgic science our race once wielded, then we all might feel less guilt at playing the vampire in her nests, even as she scours the subworld of our demon foes. Where is the flaw in getting double good of the Mountain Mother, if her nation be the fruit of our wizardry to begin with? Is it not permitted a man to use his wagon or his draybeast to the greatest profit that he can?

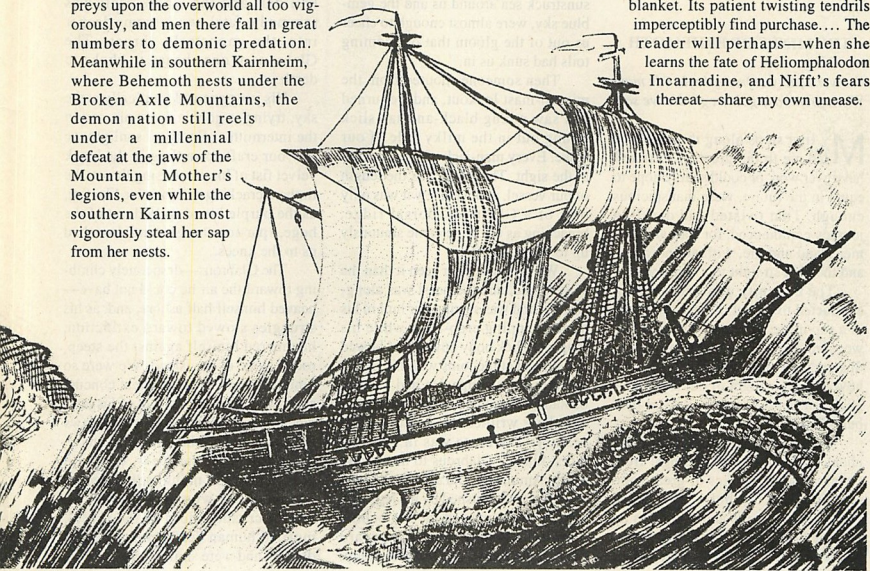
Kairnish folk might have the most need of this balm to guilt; in the northern reaches of their continent (as I have noted in my preface to *The Fishing of the Demon Sea*) the subworld preys upon the overworld all too vigorously, and men there fall in great numbers to demonic predation. Meanwhile in southern Kairnheim, where Behemoth nests under the Broken Axle Mountains, the demon nation still reels under a millennial defeat at the jaws of the Mountain Mother's legions, even while the southern Kairns most vigorously steal her sap from her nests.

Yet those of the opposing mind, who argue that Behemoth was born naturally of the Earth, point to her form which, in all but the scale of it, is so common through the natural world. Many scholars of unimpeachable erudition take this side of the controversy. Etiolatus the Praiseworthy notes, "How can those who go open minded on the Earth, feeling the heart of the planet murmuring against their footsteps, ever think that Queen Earth in her Robe of Stars could fail to breed of herself the cure for any ill that blights her? Demons infested her; she gave birth to Behemoth."

For my part, though I have profound respect for the Earth's powers of invention, I think the answer is unknowable. My awe and love for the beasts, in any case, is great. I find cause for rejoicing in the fact that the sinking of a new sap-mine is the difficult and costly task that it is. The lithivorous ferrecks used to dowse for larval chambers, and then used to sink the first shafts down to those larval chambers, are creatures akin to certain

brood parasites within Behemoth nests, and are both fierce and highly dangerous to manage. In consequence, these ferrecks have been almost entirely preempted by the sorcerous sisterhoods of the Astrygals, who have the means to command the beasts' angry energies. The ferrecks then being hard and costly to procure from the witches, the proliferation of new sap-mines throughout the Broken Axle Mountains has slowed almost to the rate of replacement for old mines fallen defunct through the phenomenon of "nest wander." Perhaps the sorcerers of the Astrygals intentionally sustain this equilibrium. In any case, our rapacity is shackled, and we plunder Behemoth less gravely than we might.

All that lives is flux, and a question Niffit raises disturbs me: might Demonkind grow to engulf Behemoth? The black yeast of demon vitality cooks unsleeping in its planetary cloaca; its vapors of infection float up fine as finest soot, soundlessly, steadily blackening, blackening what they blanket. Its patient twisting tendrils imperceptibly find purchase.... The reader will perhaps—when she learns the fate of Heliomphalodon Incarnadine, and Niffit's fears thereat—share my own unease.



Having touched the question of human rapacity, I cannot close without confessing that it is with some misgiving I make public Niff't's account of the so called "giant's pap" produced by Behemoth Queens, and of its apparent powers. Two considerations have persuaded me it is safe to expose this powerful substance to the greedy attention of entrepreneurs. In the first place, Niff't's narrative must tend to discourage exploitation. In the second, who but Niff't and Barnar, endowed as they were with rarest luck, could contrive to milk a Queen?

While I naturally shrink from burdening my dear friend's narrative (and the present manuscript is unmistakably of Niff't's own composition) with an excess of commentary or exegesis, I cannot leave certain lacunae ungloried. But since a prefatory voice must fade from memory as the history unfolds, the best procedure seems to be to deploy a brief interjection or two within the narrative. Thus commentary can lie nearer what it touches.

—Shag Margold

THE MINES OF BEHEMOTH

*We were still wet from Mayhem's maw
When first those golden glades we saw*

My first steps along the path that led me to the greatest fortune I have ever won, or could sanely hope to equal in the future, were inauspicious enough. That twisted and darkling journey commenced, for Barnar Hammer-Hand and me, with an indignity, and then led straight to a disaster.

The indignity was that we were contracted to a stint of hard, dirty toil in a sap mine. The disaster fell when we were two weeks at sea en route to this uncouth endeavor. For just as we have almost in sight of our inglorious goal, our vessel was swallowed by a bull Glabrous.

One often hears this sort of thing about "inauspicious beginnings" from people relating strokes of great good fortune. It is my belief that Luck schools those she is about to bless by dealing them a preliminary box or two about the ears. Thus, with a draught of

bile, she reminds their palates of the taste of woe, that Fortune's sweetness might ravish them the more.

Barnar's nephew Costard owned the sap mine we were bound for. Our dreary underground labor there would be in the way of a family favor, for young Costard had written that the mine was in difficulties. Our route lay northwards along the Angalheim Island chain, and the northerlies that scour these isles all summer long had set our sails a-spanking, and chased us smartly along. Now the Isle of Hadron dropped astern, and we were drawing close to Dolmen, the northernmost isle. Beyond Dolmen, we already had in view the rim of the Kairnish continent. There, in the Broken Axle Mountains, our destination lay.

Our vessel was the carrack of a Minusk cloth-and-oils merchant. She was a yare but smallish craft, scarcely six rods from stem to stern. She skipped from crest to crest, outrunning the swell, frolicsome as a shimfin when it runs breaching from sheer exuberance. The vessel's surge, the sunstruck sea around us and the gem-blue sky, were almost enough to cheer us out of the gloom that our coming toils had sunk us in.

Then someone shouted from the mizzen-mast lookout, and we turned and saw a long black-and-tan slick strung out in the milky jade of our wake. Every man-jack of us went cold at the sight. That slick was the length of our vessel, and we knew it was only part of a Glabrous' dorsal ridge, breaching as the brute came sinuously up to attack our stern.

We had no sooner seen it than the sea erupted, and the beast was alongside us, and was seizing our hull in his huge, dripping crab-legs, while his long, eel-slick body bowed and bowed and bowed at the loins with his fierce, lecherous thrustings. He had clusters of stalked eyes on his great blunt head, and these writhed and rotated in his ecstasy. The brute was in rut—the worst kind of Glabrous to meet; sure death. Amidships and aft a dozen men were instantly crushed by his legs. His sinewy tail scourged the sea behind him in his lust, driving us forward even as he embraced us. The steep,

stony shore of Dolmen loomed towards us at incredible speed.

The impenetrability of our hull timbers quickly drove the ardent giant to a fury. He flung our ship clean out of the water, toppling Barnar and me back onto the deck just as we had mounted the gunwale to abandon ship. The carrack sailed creakily through twenty fathoms of thin air, and crashed down at Dolmen's very shore, and even as it did so, the Glabrous surged up behind the vessel—a benthic fetor welling from his mossy, gaping jaws—and swallowed it whole.

The Glabrous did this with the blind, uncalculating rage his breed is so well known for. Barnar and I, tumbled to the prow by the bow's impact with the shore, saw the darkness of the brute's maw loom over us, and saw his huge teeth bite off the sky. Only the carrack's stout bowsprit extruded beyond the reach of the monster's bite. This bowsprit doomed the beast.

For even as it engulfed us, the Glabrous' on-rush drove us hard aground; the bowsprit lodged against a boulder, and the whole craft was rammed a fatal two fathoms deeper into the monster's throat. The Glabrous at once began to choke to death.

His jaws gnawed frantically at the sky, trying to gobble down air, and in the intermittent floods of sunlight we saw our craft crumpling in the black velvet fist of his convulsing throat, the timbers cracking with a noise like fire, as the purple blood welled out of the huge, spar-torn tongue and drenched us to the knees.

The Glabrous—desperately climbing toward the air he could not have—heaved himself half ashore, and, as his struggles slowed toward extinction, hammered himself against the steep, rocky slope of the island. We were so tumbled about by these great concussions we could not leap out of his jaws when he opened them. Then his jaws fell slack, and crashed shut in death.

In the utter darkness, we could hear the beast's mouth still bleeding from a dozen wounds. Back in the utterly crushed stern of the vessel, muffled human death-moans briefly droned, and were snuffed out. Still the

hot velvet blood inched up around our legs, with a trickling noise in the perfect blackness.

Not quite perfect. A feeble star of light grew slowly visible. We slogged groping through the sticky, inching rise of blood. Already the air felt hot and dead and hard to breathe. We groped our way out along the bowsprit—foul, slippery work, as good as blind. Our hands encountered the huge mossy teeth of the Glabrous, clamped not quite shut on the bowsprit's stump. "I think we might just worm through," I said. "Then we might just hack our way out through one of the lips."

The cusps of the teeth were like oiled boulders reeking of carrion. We bruised our ribs wriggling between them. Had the splintered bowsprit slipped out, the simple weight of the teeth falling shut would have crushed us flat.

Our emergence from between the teeth was a head-first drop into the blood pooled within the Glabrous' lips, whose rubbery meat was teetery footing for us once we stood up, calf-deep in the blood. It would have taken a titanopod and a block and tackle to hoist those lips apart. The bowsprit's tip had been pinched between them and a faint ray of light leaked in along the spar. "At least it gives us an aiming point," Barnar muttered. "I'll go first. Stay clear."

And I heard him go to work with Old Biter, his broad-axe, on the lip-meat. "Ugh!" he grunted, hewing. "Loathsome! Slimy! Here's a gobbet free. *Huh!...Huh!...*"

"How he bleeds! I'm thigh-deep in blood! Here, give me a turn now—you sound winded. Set my hand to the spar...got it! Now Biter's haft...got it! Stand clear. *Huh!...Huh!...*"

I couldn't match stroke to stroke in the dark. I had to hew blindly, then grapple the wet meat for what chunks I could pull free. Barnar mused moodily as I worked.

"You know, Niff, dying would be bad enough, of course. But by the Crack it would gall me, after all we've done, all we've seen, to die on this...demeaning, pedestrian errand of ours!"

"I have to...agree. To think of them...talking...back in the Tankard and Titbit..."

"Or over mull'd turtle at the Thirsty Knave. 'Did you hear about poor Barnar and Niff, then? Dead and done for at last it seems! What were they about, you ask? Well, it appears the poor lackwits were northbound to Kairnheim to work in a sap mine!' 'What? Work in a *sap mine* you say? Well then, their best years were already past, it would seem!'"

"Peace, Barnar...you're using up...air..."

"Here, give me old Biter back—I'll do a turn."

The hot blood was up to our waists, and the unbreathable darkness choked out all conversation quick enough. We hewed the invisible meat, groping the sticky wedges from the wound. Toward the end we were gasping stertorously, and it seemed we dug ourselves a bottomless grave of flesh. Then I struck that blessed stroke that bit out a little wedge of sunlight, which bled a delicious trickle of salt sea air into our nostrils.

With light and air, our butchery progressed apace, and at length we had a carnal tunnel we could wriggle through. Reborn beneath the sky, we lay exulting, and roared with laughter to look on one another, both of us slick and sticky as fresh turds.

But as we bathed and washed our gear in the sea, and re clothed ourselves, we came to feel sobered, reduced. We had emerged from that monstrous sepulchre with our arms, the slender contents of our money-belts, and nothing else. The joy of escape soon yielded to a sense of ill-luck, and a nagging conviction that we were entirely too impoverished for men of our years and expertise. A dozen men lay dead in the Glabrous' throat, yet somehow our destitution loomed larger to us than our miraculous evasion of their tomb. There is a tide in men's spirits, and ours had perhaps been at ebb for some time now, even before our half-hearted undertaking to rescue nephew Costard's mine.

Gloomily we trekked along the shore, and reached Dolmen Harbor by mid-afternoon. This was like most

Angalheim ports, less an actual bay than a smallish cleft in a steep shoreline. Most observers agree that the whole Angalheim chain is just a slowly drowning mountain range, and its harbors thus merely embayments in the flanks of the sinking peaks. Above the docks, most of the harbor's buildings and houses climbed on stilts up the slopes.

We found a mead house and bespoke an ample jar of the fiery-sweet potato that the Angalheims are famed for over half the world. Still, our hearts remained gloomy as we drank. The mead house itself was somber—a former clan hall from the islands' piratical days, long since converted to its present commercial use, but proud of its smoke-blackened roof-beam and the crude traditional weaponry racked on its wall, the battered bucklers and unwieldy falchions of a privatereering era. Throughout the Angalheims folk hold a similar reverence for a squalid and villainous past.

Mead has of course long replaced piracy as these islands' livelihood, and from the windows we could view the colorful bustle of a vigorous economy. Men bearing panniers of bright seaweed, and plod-trains laden with the same briny cargo, streamed upland. This seaweed was mulch for the flower-pastures on the island's heights, where the sonorous blizzards of bees hummed in the pursuit of their golden harvest. The harbor thronged with island trade; Kairnish vessels laden with hides, salt meat and sap waited at anchor for dock-space, while Angalheim scows scudded out-bound riding low with the weight of mead casks. Out in the open channel beyond the harbor, the wind curdled the jade water with veins of foam. There, where the big shoals of 'silvers ran, rode the fishing ketches all at their stern anchors, and we could see tiny men on them toiling at windlasses, and gaffing aboard nets bulging with glittery catch.

But this loveliness and liveliness of sea and sky failed to cheer us. We felt the dejection of men who are imperfectly employed, whose work-in-hand is mediocre and indifferently paid. In point of fact we had only a general

notion of the specific duties of a tapper in a sap mine. But it was paid labor, drudgery, and that was enough to put this touch of autumn in our hearts, to make us brood on the long years behind us, and make us ask ourselves where our lives were drifting to.

Barnar downed a third jack of mead, and sighed. His melodious baritone broke a long silence.

"It's not so

much the toil of it," he mused. "It's the...ignominy."

"Why mince words? Mining is wage-work, and from this your soul recoils instinctively, of course! All we can do is try to fix our minds on the charity of it. Your nephew's in a pickle, and his mother would never forgive you for failing to help him."

"Do I rightly infer that you two gentlemen are discussing tapping?"

A sleek-fed man, wearing a green velvet fez, had turned on the bench, and, leaning near us, presented us with this query, wearing a smile of prying amity.

"I will be frank," I told him, straining for civility. "My friend and I are far from keen that you should infer anything, rightly or wrongly, from what we are discussing."

"Oh!" He gaped his concern. "Do I intrude? Forgive me!" And he turned back on the bench.

"Anhydria would break my neck," Barnar resumed, answering my previous remark, "if I didn't help Costard. That's the long and short of it."

I nodded. "And you are wise to remember that she is quite strong enough to do so." Barnar's formidable elder sister had, about two years before this, settled her sap mine on her son and gone off a-pirating.

"But what I keep sticking on," Barnar said, "is that poor Costard is such a dolt! I say it utterly without bias against the boy! He has a sweet, affectionate vein towards his kin—but he is such a petulant young jackass!"

"Yes," I sighed. "At least he'll be upside while we're underground. And mark you that after all, the wage is not stingy. You could do worse a-thieving, half the time."

Barnar dismissed this feeble solace with the snort it merited. "Of course! The pay is more than many a prize I've worked twice as hard to steal, but at least I was thieving, not grubbing!"

"Would it be overbold of me?"—again the green velvet fez bobbed just starboard of my shoulder—"to suggest that, if it's a tapper's wage you speak of, I know a way to *quintuple* even that handsome sum, and at cost to yourselves of no more effort than a brief detour taken through the tunnels of the nest."

Barnar held up one hand in a gesture of polite prevention. Swordwelts veined my old friend's knuckles, rather in the way that veins of smooth quartz sometimes run through rough granite. "You have so lavished your attention on us, Sir, that I cannot tameily bear any further generosity. Please. Attend to something other than ourselves!"

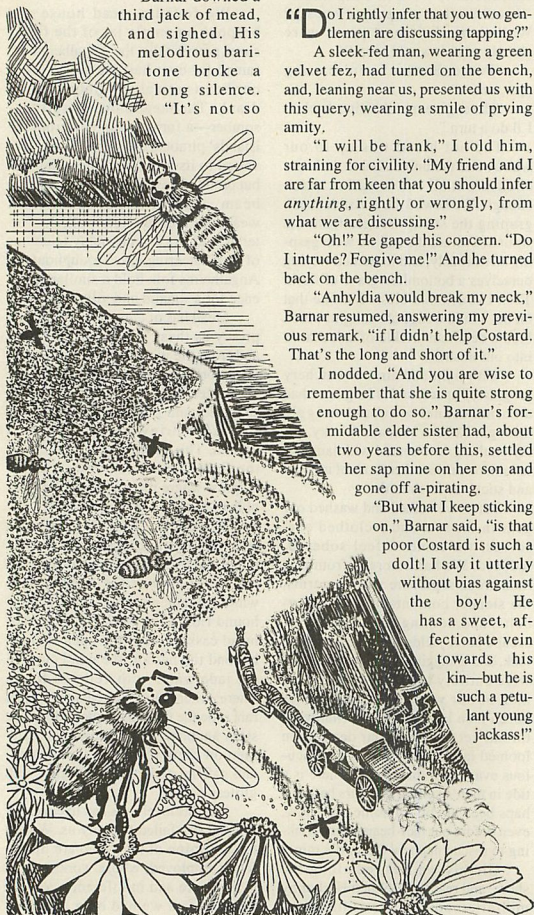
The stranger's fezzed brow crumpled with apology. "I have, in my *elan* to serve, offended you! Accept my most abject apologies!" He turned away again.

"This minework is not just undignified, it's clownish!" Barnar at length resumed. "To be stripped and painted! Orange! And then tapping itself is...grotesque! Inherently ludicrous! And we'll be novices, prone to all the humiliating missteps that entails."

"There's more to it of course, eh?" I nudged him gently. "I know at least that I for one just plain don't like being deep underground in Kairnheim—in any part of it." [Note: Niff's and Barnar's sojourn in the Demon Sea, related in *Niff the Lean*, commenced in the Bone Axe Mountains in northern Kairnheim, where the subworld portal Darkvent lies.

—Shag Margold]

Barnar gave that a bit of a sigh. "Sure enough. The flesh of me recoils, right to the bone. At least on this venture, we may count on coming nowhere near the subworld; the only



demons we meet will be those the Behemoths bring into the Nest as food."

"Forgive me a thousand times, but I cannot contain an impulse of hospitality toward yourselves!" Here was green fez yet again bobbing near us. "Let me show you my hives!"

We gaped at him for a heartbeat, aghast. "My beehives!" he added. He had a chinlet of black beard—it was barbered close and neat as a tattoo. His plump face crinkled with hostile fervor.

"Sir," I told him, "you bring me to the point of speaking bluntly. We must know why you focus your regard with such tenacity upon ourselves in particular."

"The fairest of questions! Apart from what I could not help but overhear—that you seem to be bound to work in a sap mine—I am motivated by a certain look of competence you have about you. You yourself, Sir, for one, so long and limber yet with a lizardly musculature (if I may say so), and you, Sir, of bulky sinew, with the mass to exert prodigious leverage. The two of you have, as well—How shall I put it?—an air of enterprise. You strike me as thoughtful, original spirits, men who can see the world from many points of view. Please, gentlemen. May I have the honor of showing you my flower pastures? And of giving you to sample the comb of my Centennial Hive?"

It seemed an acquaintance with the man was not to be avoided. He introduced himself as Ha'Awley Bunt, a mead magnate with his own hives, cooerage and casking plants, and trading fleet; owner also of seven hundred hectares of scarlet Croppies, Devils-garters and Umber Dandinnias right here on Dolmen. Owner too of the almost ten thousand hives these flower pastures sustained. We decided that, at the least, the man would divert and inform us, whether or not his proposal proved profitable.

His open carriage, hitched to three matched skinnies, stood outside the mead house. We all got in, he flicked the reins, and we sped up the switchbacks of the upland highway toward the flower pastures on the island's crest.

Bunt had an amiable and tactful way about him, explaining that when he made his proposition to us, he must in the same breath disclose a lucrative secret. To satisfy himself that this chancy disclosure was warranted, Bunt begged us to indicate, at least, our destination and projected doings. Accordingly, we conceded that we might indeed be going into the Broken Axle Mountains, and there taking work as tappers in a sap mine. The Broken Axles had in fact just then become visible as we climbed the island's heights in the wind-scoured afternoon. Beyond a blue reach of sea to our north, on the coast of the Kairnish continent's southern rim, the Broken Axles were a pale pimpling of low peaks.

"You should know one thing more, HiveMaster Bunt," Barnar told him, "before disclosing your business to us. It is our policy, Niff't's and mine, never to undertake ventures proposed by strangers without a substantial surety in raw gold or specie, on account of services to be rendered."

"This is highly sensible, and acceptable!" Bunt enthused. Then he dropped the business for the moment, and fell to suavely annotating the windswept, scalp-tingling beauty of the prospect that our ascent was opening out below us. The northerlies polished the sky like glass, and its blue was an infinite flame. South of us the other Angalheims rode formationed on the blazing sea, their surf-collared crests like a great docking fleet, cruising in to moor in the mothering underbelly of the Kairnish continent. The windlicked channels, tufted with blown spray, were molten silver rouged with copper fire. Barnar and I traded looks. We were feeling some zest for life return to us. Raw gold (or specie), in substantial excess of the stipend we had but lately, forlornly contemplated, now glowed before us, above a changed horizon.

Dolmen's uplands are all gorgeously crested and pelted by flower pastures. How they ravished the eyes in the slant gold light, those meadowed acres of silken wildfire! Bunt drew a gauzy curtain round our carriage now. The bees thronged every inch of air,

hanging stubborn in the wind's sweep, dropping to the blossoms like a steady rain, a rain that hovered, fell, rose, and fell again.

As we toured the pastures, the last of our gloom fell from us like a molting. Smooth paths brought us to breathtaking vistas, or sank us deep in meadows where we spun along, walled in by choirs of living rainbow, all the colors uniting with the scents, and with the bees' sweet, sonorous hymn, to ravish our senses. Many other tourists were likewise being carried through the aromatic maze in similar vehicles bearing the crest of the Bunt Hivery, but the pathways were so cunningly designed and artfully laid out that we glimpsed these fellow travellers but rarely, and felt we had the flowerfields for our own.

"My Centennial Hive is unrivalled here on Dolmen," Bunt told us. "It is equalled only by five or six others throughout the Angalheims. My Centennial hive shelters seven dynasties of Queens, the youngest of them a hundred generations in age."

Younger hives, we had seen, were housed in polyhedral wooden cabins, their panels of dark, oiled harmony wood all gorgeously carved with bas-relief motifs of comb and bee and blossom. These structures could be walked through, and were labyrinthed inside with carpentered frames all solid with comb and densely furred with working bees.

The Centennial Hive was three the size of any of these others. Inside, we found that skylights of stained glass admitted a murky amber light, allowing maintenance and cultivation. Gossamer netting formed diaphanous tunnels for us to move through in the sweet-scented gloom and deafening primeval song of sleeplessly vibrating wings.

"Hadra-Archonia the Sixteenth," quavered Bunt, drawing us to a deeply grottoed vault. We stood beholding her. This queen was a titan of her race; her restless, gravid abdomen alone was larger than my hand. Her gaster, ever-probing, ceaselessly planted the seeds of workers in new-made cells. Her attendants were not a tenth her size. They flanked her like busy sycophants,

seeming to kiss her flanks, speaking to her with touches of jaw and antenna, ceaselessly coming and going, always replaced, worshipping at her side in clusters constantly renewed. If Bunt had meant some disclosure to accompany this portentous viewing, he changed his mind. He wore an air of inward debate as we drove back to the Hivory. There we retired to the comfortable armchairs of his private office, and he served us some very impressive mead. He drank with us, and sighed.

"Gentlemen. There is much I might explain, but I feel a reticence I cannot overcome. Will you forgive a vagueness that might be mistaken for distrust? Merely specifying what I seek puts my purpose within the reach of inference to any thoughtful hearer.

"Well. Here, then, is my proposition. Your work as tappers will put you in the larval nurseries of a Behemoth nest. In your work's normal course you would find no cause to venture from that nursery chamber.

"But it is my hope that you will agree, with the inducement of three hundredweight apiece of gold specie, to venture at large through the nest till you have found the Royal Brood Chamber, where the Queen lies a-laying her eggs, and there to retrieve some twenty gills or so of a certain ichor which the Queen exudes from her body, and bring it up to me when your tapping tour is done."

Barnar and I exchanged a look. We both did an almost superhuman job of concealing our astonishment and delight at the enormous sum that Bunt had just named. "Let us banish ambiguity completely," I said. "You are telling us you will pay us three hundredweight of gold *before* we leave here, a hundred and fifty apiece, in exchange for our undertaking to attempt your task? That this three hundred will be inalienably ours for the attempt alone, and that a like sum will be paid us if we succeed?"

Bunt's hesitation was quickly overcome; we saw only the briefest quiver of a merchant's haggling reflex. "Just so!"

With some further struggle, Barnar and I hid our elation. That very morning we had been but a single

swallow from an agonizing metamorphosis into Glabrine fecal matter. And this afternoon, we were already rich.

II

*Oh, let us bathe, and put away
dissension—*

*Let's both with lissom ladies of the
Bath*

*Explore what joys the golden Present
hath,*

*For Now is Having's only real
dimension.*

*Let not Phantasmic Future wake our
wrath!*

Our departure was set for the tide's turn, not long past nightfall, and Ha'Awley Bunt would be going with us. Barnar and I would have liked to knock around on our own before setting out, asking questions here and there, gathering our own judgment of the strange work we'd agreed to. But Bunt proved adhesive, loath to leave our sides. Perhaps he feared precisely such inquiries as we might make, and what these inquiries might suggest to those who heard them. He took us with him to see to the outfitting of a ferry he owned, which would convey us to the Kairnheim coast. He involved us in the choosing and bringing aboard of the carriage and team that would whisk us from KairnGate Harbour up to Costard's Superior Sap Mine in the Broken Axle Mountains. Then, as the sun westered, he took us to his imposing harborside residence.

Here, safe within his guarded doors, his sturdy retainers stood ready to transfer to our possession two compact but weighty pairs of leathern saddlebags. Bunt then, before repairing upstairs to see to our further entertainment, put his opulent baths at our disposal. He was perhaps not surprised—though he arched a brow—when we told him we would take our pay with us into the baths.

A lissome bath attendant—a gauzily clad woman wearing a tantalizing citron scent—conducted us to a sweat-room, and at our request left us there with an amphora of water to splash on the embers glowing in the huge brazier. At last we had some

blessed privacy. We un-shouldered the saddlebags, and stripped down to sweat the last traces of Glabrous slime from our pores. I flipped opened one of my bags, as Barnar did one of his.

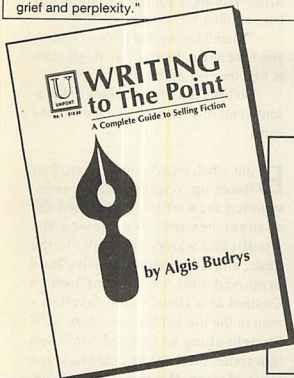
"Oh my," I murmured. I chuckled as my fingers plunged into the coins, and the rattly coins seemed to chuck with me. The ruddy light of the coals warmed them, and made them glow rich as butter. "Look Barnar," I burred. "Kolodrian lictors! Such a wonderful mintage!" Admittedly this was the fatuous utterance of mindless glee, but the hefty octagonal coin is indeed a handsome one, bearing the profile of Jarkel VII, conqueror of the Laddga Tundras. The monarch was an indifferent soldier who triumphed through his generals, but his plump, prosperous cheeks look wonderfully apt on a coin, as does, on the verso, the imprint of the fatted sacrifice, a kaurok (ancestral, most agree, to the Kairnshin hornbow), its horns wreathed in garlands.

"Mine too!" Barnar chortled, "with Kairnshin quadrooms mixed in!" I had to laugh to see my friend looking so like a child with his basket of sweets at an Ephesian harvest-fest (although so, I daresay, did I). Barnar's eyes are the dense, smoky grey of the always-rainy skies of his native Chilia, and the glow of our gold brought out the flecks of green in them too, like the forest green that clothes that same great isle of his nativity. His broad, flat, not un battered nose seemed like a bull's who snuffs excitement in the morning air. Barnar is a man with great laughter in him, though his stolid face is seldom seen to brim with it, as it did now. "Do you know, old way-brother," I told him, "in this fine, ruddy heat, I feel that the gold and we ourselves could melt together, refashioning us into utterly new, shining beings, lustrous and immortal."

"The words," Barnar beamed, "of a perfect lunatic. I too am quite mad, you know, to find myself so rich. So very rich, in fact, Niff, that...." His look turned graver; he was about to broach some serious matter, but I cut him off, such excitement did my own sudden thought bring me.

"Do you realize, Barnar, that now we can do that great deed we have

Frederik Pohl says: "Good stuff! Apart from being a good read it's full of sound and useful advice. If I could have had it at the time when I was doing my own personal best to break in, with many false starts and little confidence in the outcome, it would have saved me immense grief and perplexity."



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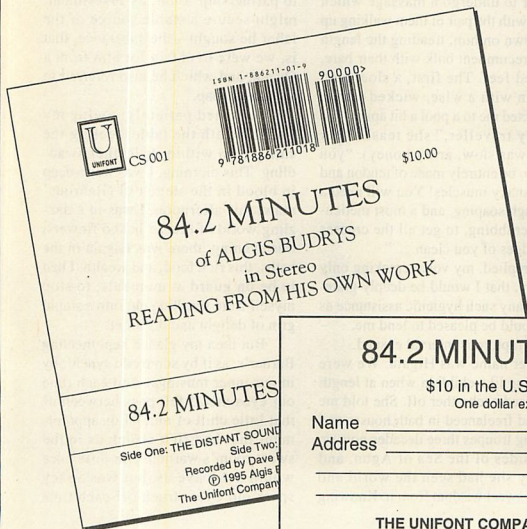
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been sworn to these five years past and more?" The look he gave me was so blank, I faltered. "Can you fail to understand me? The Buskins and Gantlets and Cowel of Pelfer the Peggless! To be had by storming his tomb and subduing its deathless guardians. Surely you see that now, once we have the remaining three hundredweight, we can actually hire six good ships and a hundred first-class mercenaries. We could be fighting our way across the steppes before autumn was half out, if we're done in your nephew's mine in a fortnight or so."

Barnar's brow, to my bafflement, had taken on an injured look. "Can you may be right to reproach my memory, Niff, for forgetting your ardor to have the great Pelfer's accouterments of power. But I think I have even better reason to reproach your memory in turn. For did we not, two years ago, at the Pickpockets' Ball in Karkmah-Ra, most solemnly vow that if ever we could afford the Witches' Seed to do it, we would infallibly go forth to Chilia and there reforest the Ham-Hadryan vale, so long in the holding of my family's line, and so cruelly despoiled during its long captivity?"

I all but snapped at him; *What, will you hold me to drunken promises?* For I remembered the occasion the instant he reminded me of it; a bit too much wine had made me vow with sentimental fervor that I would regard the reforestation of Barnar's native valley as my solemn duty, as soon as circumstances warranted the exploit. And of course I was indeed bound to help my friend in an enterprise so near to him as the rejuvenation of his homeland and his clan, and I had every intention of doing so, at a more convenient time. "Old friend," I urged him, "when Gildmirth's path crossed ours a second time, and when that great mage put in our possession the whereabouts of Pelfer's fabled tomb—was this not five years and more ago? Did not the vow we swore to one another to seek his tomb as soon as we had wealth enough to mount the effort—well, did not this vow antedate our vow to reforest your family's valley? And look you! With Pelfer's Gantlets, Cowel, and Buskins in our possession, we would

shortly be the richest thieves on earth! The reforesting of the Ham-Hadryan Vale with Witches' Seed would be child's play to us then!"

For answer Barnar gave me a steady, mournful look. He felt himself ill-treated—there was no getting around it. On my part, I felt a keen resentment of my friend which it was hopeless to conceal from myself. How could Barnar allow this golden moment of ours to run aground on this shoal of his stubbornness?

"Look you," he sighed at length. "The other three hundredweight is not yet ours, is it? Indeed, can this ichor of Bunt's be so easy in the taking that we can be wholly sure of managing it? Would he have offered such a huge sum outright for something that was lightly had? Let's go bathe, and put away dissension. Let's enjoy what we have, and the moment we have it in."

"Fairly spoken!"

As soon as we emerged from the sweat room, our bags once again on our shoulders, three bath attendants materialized—the slender one who had first ushered us in, and two others as gaudily clad and shapely as herself. These second two swiftly persuaded Barnar to undergo a massage which began with the pair of them walking up and down on him, treading the length of his recumbent bulk with their bare, scented feet. The first, a sloe-eyed woman with a wise, wicked smile, conducted me to a pool a bit apart. "Oh sinewy traveller," she teased (her voice was slow, gritty honey), "you seem to be entirely made of tendon and tight, snaky muscles! You will need a thorough soaping, and a most meticulous scrubbing, to get all the creases and ridges of you clean...."

I replied, my voice cracking only slightly, that I would be deeply grateful for any such hygienic assistance as she would be pleased to lend me.

A rapturous interval ensued.

Her name was Higaia. We were chortling like children when at length we rinsed each other off. She told me she had freelanced in bath houses and dancing troupes three decades now on both sides of the Sea of Agon, and clearly she had seen the world and drawn sweet wisdom from it. Knowing

we could not meet again before our setting out tonight, I asked if she meant to stay on Dolmen a while. "Well," she said, "the wanderlust is coming on me again, and I'm thinking of seeing the Minuskulons. I suppose I might stay here another fortnight or so."

"Then I have good hope of finding you here again. Perhaps we might travel together for a time."

So little did I foresee how our present venture would detain us under the earth.

Bunt's balconied dining room, four floors up, opened onto an unobstructed view of the harbor and the channel beyond. We viewed the windlicked waters all purple in the dusk, and dined sumptuously. Bunt proposed that we present him to Costard as a chance-met traveller, a man in the market for sap whom we'd brought along so Costard could sell him some. Bunt needn't hide he was a Hive-master. Hiveries used plods, skinnies, and other draybeasts for mulching and transporting mead and the like, and were always buying sap as bulk fodder. Meanwhile Costard's financial straits might make him open to partnership. Bunt, by investment, might secure a stable source of the ichor he sought—the substance, that is, we were to obtain for him from a Queen, and which he also referred to as "giants' pap."

I listened patiently, toeing my gold beneath the table, feeling the shifty coin within its leather swaddling. This morning, I was waist-deep in blood in the stenchful Glabrous' maw; this afternoon, I was in a dazzling world of breeze-licked flowers; this evening, there was Higaia in the baths, this rich food, and wealth. I had to be on guard at moments, to stop myself from breaking out into a stupid grin of delight and disbelief.

But then my glance kept meeting Barnar's, as if by some odd synchrony in our inner musings. And each time our eyes met, I felt pass between us that little chill of mutual disappointment that had first struck us in the sweat-room's warmth. Our difference would not leave us, but was an icy spark our eyes struck off each time

they met. I knew that Barnar's will still clasped as stubbornly his pet ambition, as mine clung to my own.

"The opulence of your entertainment," Barnar told Bunt jocularly, "somewhat troubles me as I reflect on it. We must affirm that your stipend is princely. Yet I find myself asking key questions too late. How dangerous must it be to penetrate the Royal Brood Chamber of a Behemoth nest? Let alone to gather some sort of exudate from the Queen's own body? I have never heard such an exploit even conceived of, much less undertaken. Niff and I naturally regard ourselves as bound," (I bowed here my assent) "but for all we know of what we've undertaken, even six hundredweight might be too little payment."

Just at this juncture, a tall, robust young woman marched into the room, caped against the dusk winds outside, her back-swept pompadour of brazen hair still charmingly mussed by those same winds.

"Sha'Urley! Dearest!" cried Bunt. "My sister, Sha'Urley, gentlemen! Please dine with us, my dear!" There was a grit of irritation in his voice that all his attempt at honey could not quite candy over. Bunt presented us to her as a pair of wayfaring fellows who had agreed to guide him on a ramble into Kairnheim. For he was feeling stale with work, he told her, and we were to be his breath of fresh air. Sha'Urley did not uncloak, but she sat to take a brief, amiable chalice of wine with us.

"You look quite fit and...trail-wise, gentlemen," she told us. Her pale eyes smiled at us with a frosty little light of irony in them. "My brother is well met with you. And how richly he deserves a stroll abroad! He is too much at business. It is a business which our mother left to our joint direction, but which Ha'Awley dreads to burden me withal, and so he strives to manage it almost single-handed. Dear brother! You fret to spare me burdens, yet you treat your own health villainously. Look how fat you have grown! But nothing I say makes the least bit of difference to you, does it?" Already she was rising, and kissing her brother goodbye, at which Bunt wore a look both nettled and relieved.

She paused at the door before stepping out. "I am lucky at least," she said, "that Ha'Awley would not dream of making any major investment without my prior and full involvement in the decision. With this certainty I rest content. It was a pleasure to meet you, gentlemen. Good night, all!"

III

*If we are still to manage deeds that shine,
We must be up and doing them. First,
mine!*

We took ship not long after dark. There was the bustle of boarding, and getting under way, and then Bunt retired at once to his hammock, and lay snoring within moments of our casting off. It was true he had partaken liberally of mead and viands at table, but his haste to bed down smacked of evasion too, for we had discreetly urged on him our wish to know more of our errand to the Royal Chamber in the Behemoth's nest.

Barnar and I stood at the rail of the creaky craft, an old pirates' caravel re-decked to ferry beasts and carriages like our own to and from the Kairnish coast. The half moon, zenithed in the early dark, made spectral statuary of the bare-masted vessels in the harbor. These fell astern of us, and the bright-windowed houses of the harbor dwindled to a little crescent-shaped constellation on the moon-silvered sea, as the wind took us out in the open channel. We leaned at the rail, enjoying the rickety dance of the old tub on the smoothly rolling waters.

"Well," Barnar ventured. "'Giant's pap'.... Have you ever heard of it before?"

"I've heard Behemoth workers nurse or feed in some way at the flanks of the Queen, but I have also heard that same notion mocked as myth."

"It smacks of myth to me," Barnar said. "Who's ever been in a Royal Brood Chamber and seen a Queen? If it's been done, I've not heard of it."

"Well, we'll get what else we can out of Bunt. The rest, I suppose, we'll learn first hand in the attempt."

We stood at the rail through a long silence, our separate dreams wide awake in us, roaming through our minds. The night wind chased us, and set our scow creaking and lumbering through the easy swells. Above the shadow of the Kairnish coast ahead were thick-strewn stars only a little dimmed by the high half moon, and blazing as if they were coals that the wind blew to life.

"Barnar," I said, "I'm feeling lucky. I'm getting a feeling that luck is gathering itself under us like a great wave. Like a rising tide. I should have known it this morning, even before we came by this gold—for are not men who are swallowed by a Glabrous, and emerge alive, among the world's luckiest imaginable?"

"Let me tell you a story, old friend," I went on, "about a man we both know, a man who is dear as a brother to my heart. This man has nine living uncles and seven living aunts, and cousins uncountable, and thirteen brothers and sisters of his own—" Barnar made to interrupt me but I thrust up my palm—"and all four of his grandparents living and great aunts and great uncles at least half a score, and no less than four of his great grandparents still stepping most lively on the skorse-scented, needle-carpetted mountain slopes of his native valley, Ham-Hadryan Valley, the immemorial holding of the Ham-Hadryan clan. Can any doubt remain that the man I speak of is Barnar Ham-Hadryan, called, only half facetiously, Barnar Hammer-Hand, and Barnar Ox-Back? Don't answer! Hear me."

"This Barnar, whose beloved kin thrive near as thick on his natal slopes as does the timber that is their livelihood, is an earth-loving man, who wielded an axe from his earliest youth, who winched the howling blades of his family's sawmill since he was a stripling, and who, long before he came a man, had by his own sweat and skill done his part to set many a straight-keeled ship afloat, many a stout-walled home a-standing, many a strong-axled wagon a-rolling.

"And, when the Kragfasst clan of the Lulumean Highlands began its depredations in the Great Shallows, and thrust its blade of conquest down half the length of Ham-Hadryan Vale, who exchanged a tree-jack's axe for a battle-axe with half the furious will that this our Barnar did? Nine years of war transformed him from a fresh youth to a seasoned veteran, tough as an axe-haft of ironwood, but still with the same tender heart for his kin and his homeland beating in his formidable body.

"But when the invaders were repulsed at last, they left a clear-cut waste, and these shorn slopes were a torment to the eye of this same Barnar Hammer-Hand who, having fought for his valley 'til its delverance, turned away from it when he had helped to win it back. He went abroad a-thieving over the earth, too grieved by his hearth-land's despoliation to long abide in it.

"In the decadence since, he has lavished the better part of all his takings on his kin, refurbishing their faltering saws, replenishing their teams of plods, and generally nourishing along their laborious husbandry of the trees remaining to them.

"How can we not think, then—who we love and honor this same Barnar Ham-Hadryan—that his eyes may have grown...too fixed upon the earth? Of course it will most infallibly come to pass, that Barnar Hammer-Hand will drive home the Witches' Seed in the flanks of his native hills. Most surely he will do this, and call up his homeland's vanished hosts of skore to stand tall again out of the soil! This will come to pass! But if, beforehand, an incalculable enrichment may be had—if, first, this Barnar—"

"Enough, Niff! Stop it. Do you not realize, my friend, that you and I are at that point in years where, if a great thing lie in hand, then we must do it, then and there? We are not made of immortal stuff, old waybrother. If we are still to manage deeds that shine, then we must be straight about them when they offer. And this dream of the Witch Seed I have held so long, it is not a thing I will set by for any other venture, now that it has come at

last within my reach...or almost in my reach."

"Use reason, Barnar! If we possessed the Gantlets, Cowl and Buskins of Pelfer the Peerless, then we could shortly make ourselves so rich we could reforest all of Chilia, make even her stoniest ridges green with skorse, have the great trees growing thick as grass even in the high barrens of Mag-nass-Dryan."

That last shaft made him startle just a bit, for in the high barrens still dwelt Marnya-Dryan, whom Barnar had loved since boyhood; Marnya was the daughter of a proud but tree-poor clan. How might she not be wooed with Witches' seed, and the forestation of her natal highlands? He possessed himself, however, and smiled wanly. "Look at us, jarring over the spending of phantom gold!" He hauled his bags of gold up onto his shoulder and, before trudging off to his hammock, he thwacked my shoulder in his old friendly manner. But I knew him; though he was carefully concealing it in his well-bred way, he was hurt and resentful.

I lingered at the rail, bitterly resenting my friend's stubbornness. I was so vexed it ended by surprising me. I struggled for composure.

And I could admit, after a while, to feeling this same sad, mortal urgency Barnar had confessed to. While I'd trudged around Dolmen's shore this morning, shivering from the briny bath that left us still smelling of Glabrous blood, this same bony finger of Time had indeed touched my own heart, and the Specter had murmured with lean lips at my ear that I was a vagabond who had achieved nothing, and now, never would.

But by the Crack, Key and Cauldron, under it all, I did indeed feel...lucky. Strange fortune had come to us, and was still coming. I looked north, to our future's unfolding. There, unveiled by the moon's decline, the blaze of stars brightened above the dark line of the Kairnish mainland. Those stars swarmed as thickly as I imagined Behemoths might swarm, down the subworld walls, and across the subworld plain, a-hunting the fleeing hosts of demons....

IV

*With beverage that giants sip
Fill up my beaker to the lip!
But how to tap that brew Below
I cannot tell. I do not know.*

We docked at KairnGate Harbor in the first light, and by the time of the sun's rising, our barouche had already whirled a league out of town up a north-trending highway, a fine, smooth-flagged thoroughfare that thrived with commerce.

Across the river-knit southern plains of Latter Kairnlaw, Bunt cracked the whip above his thoroughbred skinnies and set us racing through the honeyed spill of morning light. He kept the wheels rattling, and the wind ruckusing in our ears, perhaps to forestall the questions he sensed in us.

But I insisted on a sit-down at an ale house we glimpsed in a riverside hamlet, one that Bunt would have galloped past had we let him. The establishment had a pleasant garden fenced with proom trees and rumkin vines. We chose our table in a nook amidst these fragrant growths, and decanted a delicious honey-wine, a drink as golden as the grassy prairies that unrolled across the river from us.

"I believe this is our own vintage," Bunt murmured, tonguing a sup of the wine judiciously.

"May we speak of other beverages?" Barnar prompted. "These giants' pap for instance. Must we, as it were, milk a Queen Behemoth for it? Kindly share with us now what you know of this thing you send us after."

"I may not share my sources," Bunt gravely answered. "This would—forgive me—give away too much to those who might wish to emulate my venture. But the gist of it I will give you, though it is admittedly slight. Adult Behemoth workers, all castes of them, nurse in an unspecified manner at the flanks of the Queen. They do it occasionally, you understand, but they all do it. They drink from Her.

"From a documentary source unknown even to the erudite, I have learned that, in all likelihood, each Behemoth by this nursing imbibes an ichor specific to her caste and form of

body. The exudate, it seems, prompts and sustains the several shapes and orders of the Queen's progeny. The specific ichor I would have you obtain is that particular pap consumed by the Forager caste, far and away the giants of all workers, and the scourges of demonkind. The precise How of the obtaining, I'm afraid, is completely unknown to me."

"Would it be fair to infer," I ventured after a silence, "that this giants' pap is believed specifically to promote the Foragers' hugeness? And might I further guess that it is specifically this gantizing property of the sap which you crave it for?"

"Thus much I will admit, if you will be so kind as not to press for any further particulars."

"Well and good, Bunt. Still, assuming this pap to be what you think it is, what virtue would it necessarily have outside the Nest?"

"Well," smiled Bunt coolly. "That would be the question, wouldn't it?"

The highway, swinging northwestward, cut a course to intersect the north-trending line of the Broken Axle Mountains. This was a low, pale mountain range, the peaks blunt and knuckly; a bony old range rounded down by a million winters.

Yet I seemed to sense a movement, an unrest in their eroded eminences. These old mountains were alive within, were the swarming wombs of uncounted Behemoth Nests, each Nest itself uncountably aswarm. As we drew towards our night's rest in the city of Dry Hole, which lies half in the plain and half in the foothills of the Broken Axle Range itself, it seemed I could almost feel the faint vibration of this activity. We lodged in a hostel in the city's upland half, and here, perched on the mountain's very flanks, I fancied I felt the faintest tremoring through the floor underfoot, and almost heard the sleepless giants rivering through the mountain-bone.

Dry Hole (named for a sap mine that went bust in the days before the place thrived as a cattle town and crossroads of commerce) is a comely city, especially when viewed from the

heights. From our hostel we could enjoy the sweep of Dry Hole's rooftops down to the plain, where the Broken Axle River, issuing from the mountains just to the north, stitches its silver thread through the city's outskirts. Most of the feedlots, corrals, tanning yards and slaughterhouses lie along the river, and thus up in the hills we were spared the smell of dung and stale blood, and the flies, that haunt all cattle towns. Not that even up in the hills a certain crudely mixed perfume was lacking, for I nosed a waft of raw hides, of salt meat and new barrels at the picklers' yards, of hay, and the dry scent of dust raised by ten thousand hooves.

We watched the sun sink past the vast, straight prairie horizon; watched the plain's sea of golden grasses blaze fiery copper, then turn amber, then silver, while the window lamps freckled alight all down the slopes, and the lamps on the bridges over the Broken Axle River sparked white above the sword-steel thread of the water.

Then I went to my bed with a will. On the boat last night my brain so blazed with golden ambition I had but a fitful sleep of it, what with the sea, too, restless under me. I lay listening for a while. No sense is more doubtful than the hearing, wherein the thought so imperceptibly becomes the sensation, but I could have sworn the mountain under me faintly hummed. Then I slipped snug in oblivion, like a sheathed sword.

V

*High in the peaks She hides her
treasure troves
That nest Her newborn spawn as rife
as stars,
As numberless as shingles on earth's
shores.*

*Down in the deeps Her warlike
daughters rove
Where demons flee them in their
bleeding droves,
But high in the peaks, Her sleeping
young ones are....*

We set out into the mountains at first light. A viaduct plunged up

into the range not far from our hostel; it ran, where needed, on piers or arched bridges, and made a smooth, safe climb of it for our carriage. We rolled amid slopes thinly wooded with black skorse and dwarf-cone; the arid, thin-soiled old mountains were balding, as it were; the peaks and ridgelines bare, polished by steady winds.

Sap mines were nestled everywhere on the flanks of the heights. They were rather plain, sprawly installations of bleached wood, and conformed to a basic pattern. Typically, they comprised a large central building—which housed the drill site, the pumps, and the barrelling operation—and an array of smaller structures that housed the offices and the miners' dormitories. They were, on the whole, shabby structures, but their numbers testified Behemoth's multitudes at work within the peaks.

At nightfall, we withdrew from the highway into a ravine to take our rest. I lay in my blanket on the soft sand, listening again for the thrum of Behemoth's vast business deep in the mountain-bone.

Next day at midmorning we reached Barreful Heights. This was a nexus of ridgelines and saddles, in whose canyoned and arroyoed flanks half a dozen sap mines flourished.

No one knew how many separate Nests sustained these mines. Though more than a mile separated even the closest mines, it was still quite possible that at least some of them fed off a single Nest; any one Nest has dozens of the larval nurseries that are sap's source.

The Superior Sap Mine did not flourish. It stood utterly silent. We walked our team into the main building, and the click of their hooves and the rattle of their harness echoed from the lofty rafters. The building's rear wall was the bare flank of the living mountain, and inset into it were huge brass petcocks, designed to pour the pumped sap into three brazen vats, big as houses. Regiments of casks stood ranked below the vats.

But no one was barrelling. No one was here. The whole plant was void of humanity. In its echoey silence we could hear a faint, drumlike rumor,

and after a moment, we were able to identify it: it was the noise of the barrel chutes over in the nearest neighboring mine, a thriving place clear on the other side of the ridge from us.

"Difficulties with his crew," Barnar rumbled bitterly. This was how Costard's letter had described his dilemma to his mother, Barnar's formidable elder sister. She, Anhyldia, with dotting faith in her sole issue's every word, had enjoined her brother to supply that youthful paragon with the "fortnight's help or so" that was plainly all Costard needed to have things "running right as rain again." "Difficulties with his crew," Barnar repeated, his exasperation mounting.

"Dear Old Uncle Barnar! Oh, this is a joy!" And in ran the young man in question, hurling himself against my huge friend and hugging him. I had to smile at seeing, in the grizzled granite of Barnar's weathered cheekbones, the crinkling of a smile despite his vexation. Perhaps he was remembering Costard as a loud little boy coaxing him for presents, or demanding a shoulder-ride. Indeed, Costard looked small enough hugging his uncle. He was a trim young man just a hands-breadth less than tall, and just a ten-weight or so more than slight. His hair was short, and shaved in a spiral pattern that was locally modish. Crossing his forehead diagonally was the recent scar of a sizeable laceration. The injury was garish rather than severe, pebbly now with old scab about to flake away. He made his courtesies to me, and we introduced Bunt as a trail-met merchant out shopping for sap.

"Knowing your difficulties," Barnar added, "we told good Bunt here that you might perhaps give him a slightly discounted rate if he would tarry here to be your first customer, once we've gone down and started tapping."

"Absolutely not!" Costard's refusal had startling resonance in the vaulted emptiness. "It's plainly and simply unthinkable that the yield of a mine like the Superior should sell for less than ninety lictors to the ghyll!" Costard uttered this with a level stare, his brows raised, as at a suggested out-

rage. One sensed that the young man had rehearsed this response for use in any discussion of price. Apparently, Costard favored a very strict Manner and Method when doing business.

The embarrassed Bunt sought only a pretext to abide here until Barnar and I had been underground long enough to execute his secret errand. With five other mines at hand to fill Bunt's sap order without delay, his patience in waiting around here would not seem plausible without some slight bargain on the price. But now the hive-master bleated hastily, "Of course! I have certainly heard the high quality of the Superior's sap most feelingly reported, and will gladly wait for it at your stated price!"

Costard nodded, baffled—even piqued—by this prompt and unconditional compliance. Apparently he yearned to employ some more Manner and Method on this lone petitioner for the product of his paralyzed mine.

"Well," he said, recollecting himself after a moment. "Let's go to my quarters now for some refreshment!"

The main building of the mine had been thin-walled and drafty, and the deserted barracks which had housed the miners looked still more weathered and ramshackle, but Costard's residence was lavishly carpeted, tapestried, and furnished with very cushiony divans and lounges. He served us delicacies from a gilded salver, describing his labor troubles with rising fervor. "How did Mama handle this crew? I've asked myself a hundred times. They were all such greedy idiots! I tried to make them understand that a wage reduction was an absolute necessity! The current sag in sap prices demanded austerities—another pickled quaffle, Uncle? They're quite delicious, imported from Kolodria!—demanded that we suck in our stomachs and tighten our belts, so to speak."

"So the crew decamped in a body, all of them, just like that?" Barnar asked. "Where did they go?"

"They actually had the gall to threaten me! To say they'd go work for my competitors!"

"And that's what they did? They are all now employed at other mines?"

Barnar's voice was fainter; the extent of his nephew's folly was beginning at last to dawn on all of us.

"And how long will their jobs there last?" Costard snorted with contempt. "I alone have understood long-range trends in the sap market; I alone have seen the need for mine owners to amass large cushions of surplus capital against the harder times ahead! When the Superior is the only operating mine in the region, my workers will return in humble pilgrimage, upon their knees!"

"I see," murmured Barnar. "When you are the only operating mine in the region...." In the following silence, once again we faintly heard the drumlike jostle of barrels being filled in the operation across the ridge.

Had we not come with the lucrative secret enterprise of the giants' pap already in hand, we would have left the doomed Superior Sap Mine then and there, Anhyldia's wrath be damned. This formidable woman was not to be lightly crossed, of course, but she was quite unlikely to cross paths with us. Anhyldia had been touched by a restlessness of middle life, a haunting sense of paths not taken, and two years ago she'd gone a-pirating. Since then she'd sent Barnar several enthusiastic epistles recounting the peace and joy she'd found in hewing heads and plundering merchantmen on the high seas.

But her attention to sap-mining had been wavering even before her setting-forth, and she'd bequeathed to her son a mine that drew from only one larval nursery chamber. Behemoth Nests are subject to what miners call "nest wander"; nursery chambers in use through four or five human generations will, in the mysterious tidal ebbs and fluxes of the Nest's life, be abruptly abandoned. A new nursery chamber is invariably established near the abandoned one, and usually still in range of the mine's "drilling field," its legally owned piece of mountain.

But sinking new gangways and pipelines to the new larval chamber required hard work and great expense, which Anhyldia had not cared to muster, and which her son had been

unable to. And now that his own greed and folly had lost him his labor force, and pinched off the flow of his remaining profit, Costard's whole enterprise looked as good as dead.

Barnar and I, with our covert motives, must now do what we could to prolong the foundering mine's death throes. Through that long afternoon we lounged, gathering strength for the morrow, and suffering Costard to entertain us with his theories on global trade, his views on effective business management, with his opinions on every conceivable subject, in fact. Even the pleasant view of the mountains we enjoyed from his office balcony, and the abundant food and wine he served, could only partly palliate the torment of his monologue.

The urbane Bunt tried now and then to deflect the youth's pontifications into the more adult channels of congenial conversational exchange. At some reference to Behemoth, Bunt ventured, "One can't help but wonder, can one, about the giants' origins? Are they our natural allies, or our offspring? Are they our earth-born benefactors, evolved over time, or are they a living weapon wrought by our ancestors through a thaumaturgy that is

now long lost to us? It's a question, I suppose, as old—"

"As all informed people agree," Costard announced, "Behemoths were fashioned by a wizard, of whose name not even an echo now survives." For Costard, the contrived perplexities and feigned bafflements by which polished folk set conversation going were plain and simple entreaties for instruction. Having made this pronouncement, he studied Bunt for any failure to agree; the young man seemed still vaguely nettled by Bunt's earlier acquiescence in the matter of the sap's price.

"Surely, esteemed Costard," Bunt answered, irked in spite of himself, "if it is to the sorcerer's hypothesis that you incline, then its proponents generally agree that the great Hermaphrod was Behemoth's creator. His legendary words are often cited: '*Behold my Behemoths, my Watchdogs, Diners on Demorny.*'"

"Impossible." Costard shook his scabbed brow serenely from side to side. The helix of his cropped hair seemed, at this moment, to bring his head towards a point. "I have never heard this name anywhere." [Note: Niff can be forgiven for the laughter with which he greets this pronouncement of Costard's. A person of any reading at all knows Hermaphrod's name, and he figures in many popular ballads. The following, *Hermaphrod's Vow*, is widely current through both the Lulumean and Kolodrian continents:

*A Mage of days forgotten
By sub-world spawn assailed,
His left arm sundered, eaten,
Escaped with sore travail.
Then he knelt and swore a vengeance
On the sub-world's savage legions:
"Dire jaws that my art fashions
Shall make of thee their meal!"*

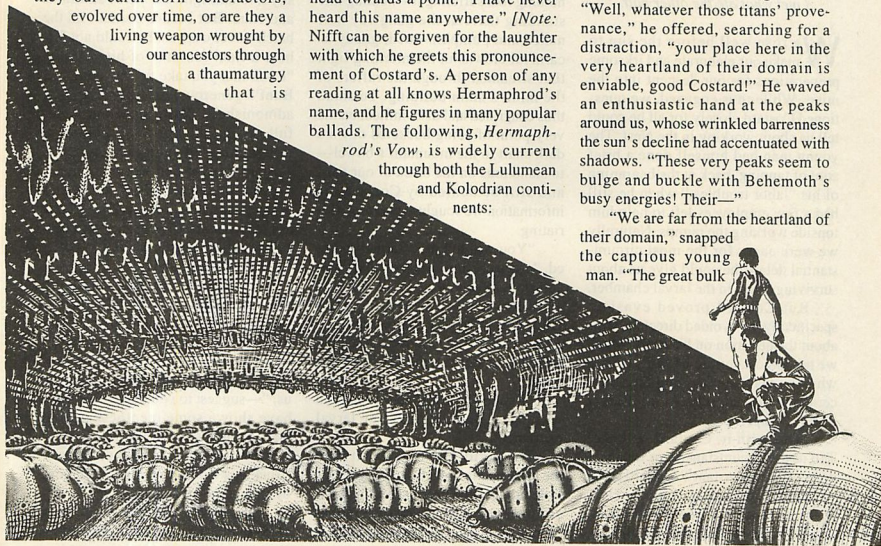
*"At this endless feast of titans
Thy flesh shall be the meat.
Thy bones shall hellfloor whiten—
Still my giants thee shall eat!
They shall thy limbs dis sever,
And imbibe thy blood forever.
Naught can thee from them deliver,
Nor shall their jaws abate!"*

—Shag Margold]

I burst out laughing here, and had to struggle for self-command. I soothed the youth, "Perhaps, good Costard, this is because you have not yet learned all there is to know of the subject."

While scowling Costard struggled to digest this preposterous suggestion. Bunt regained his poise, and resumed the work of self-ingratiation. "Well, whatever those titans' provenance," he offered, searching for a distraction, "your place here in the very heartland of their domain is enviable, good Costard!" He waved an enthusiastic hand at the peaks around us, whose wrinkled barrenness the sun's decline had accentuated with shadows. "These very peaks seem to bulge and buckle with Behemoth's busy energies! Their—"

"We are far from the heartland of their domain," snapped the captious young man. "The great bulk



of their Nests lie far below us. Only their highest and most protected chambers lie in reach of the peaks here."

Who is not aware that Behemoth Nests back their way up into the mountains? That their Nest-mouths open in the stony walls of the sub-world, where the giants descend to forage and to feed on demonkind, and that their brood chambers and larval nurseries are recessed high into the peaks at the greatest possible remove from the demon realms they ravage? Costard's petulant pedantry at last conquered our efforts at adult discourse. We gave our attention to the wine and viands, and let the youth resume his monologue until we could decently retire.

VI

I met a Titan in the earth

Where Mountain Queen gives endless birth,

*And though so terribly She glowered,
Her helpless babe I half-devoured.*

*And then (I am afraid you'll laugh!)
I met what ate the other half.*

We rose well before the sun to make our elaborate and irksome preparations for our descent into the mine. While thus engaged, we questioned Costard closely for all he could tell us about working in the Nest. The young man had himself done a brief stint of tapping, back at the beginning of his "labor troubles," when he still had a few employees left to help him topside working the pumps. Naturally we were eager for the most circumstantial details he could give us about surviving down in the larval chamber.

But Costard proved evasive; specifically, he avoided direct answers about the abrasion on his head, which we felt almost certain he had suffered while he was tapping, and thus concerned us very closely. At last Barnar lost his temper.

"Out with it, Costard, at once! Tell us the circumstances, or we abandon you on the instant!" Costard stood blinking and gaping at his uncle's anger. At this point we were all standing at the very mouth of the gangway,

which was the narrow, steeply inclined shaft down which we were to ride a wheeled bucket-car to the larval chamber.

Barnar and I were now fully outfitted for tapping, and were both feeling most keenly mortified by the personal indignities this outfitting had inflicted on us. We were near naked, clad only in stout buskins, leathern short-kilts, and bandoliers that bore our gear and weapons. And we were dyed. Our hair, skin, clothing, weapons—every square inch of us—was dyed a screaming-bright orange. We'd had to step into a tub of the tint, like plods into a tick-dip. We had known—Who does not?—of this practice. It is only this strange "hole in the eyes" of Behemoth, the giants' perfect blindness to orange (or to the color that orange becomes in the bluish light of the Nest) that makes tapping possible in the first place, and potentiates the whole sap industry. This defect in Behemoth's vision has, time out of mind, profited humankind and their livestock the world over.

But knowing of the dyeing was nothing like suffering it—nothing like standing there at the gangway half naked and pumpkin-hued, gaudy as carnival clowns in the morning light that streamed through the rafters of the mine's main building. To stand thus chagrined and discomfited, on the very point of being bucketed down a dark shaft to the mountain's bowel—to stand thus on the brink of our peril and still be denied by Costard the information we sought—was too infuriating.

"You will tell us," Barnar boomed, "precisely how you received those abrasions to your head, or we will now and forever leave your mine to its fate! You were picked up, were you not? Though dyed, you were seen, and seized by a Behemoth? Why did this occur?"

"I slipped," said the young man with frigid dignity, "in some larval excrement."

We shortly had the gist of it from the testy young man. Costard, after his little fall in some excreta, had neglected to wash his boots, whose movements then grew visible where the

fecal stains obscured their dye. One of the ever-vigilant Nurses who feed and tend the larvae had rushed to devour him as a brood parasite, and Costard had burst his flask of brood scent (a precautionary measure every tapper goes equipped for) at the last possible instant. Doused with this aroma, an unlucky tapper is instantly perceived by a Behemoth as an infant of its own kind, and is tenderly reinstalled among the larval shoals. That Costard had received only such minor lacerations as he suffered was testament to the finesse of a Behemoth's giant jaws in the handling of so relatively minute a morsel as a man.

We found it most vexing that Costard would have allowed his personal vanity to deny us the useful lesson to be drawn from this incident: we must be alert to the danger of casual befoulements of our persons, for such besmirchings had power to make us fragmentarily visible to the titans we robbd.

Too soon arrived the moment when we must step down into the bucket-car, and divest ourselves of sky and sunlight, of winds and rains and stars. But before Barnar slid the hatch-cover over us, he could not forbear a final scolding of his nephew. "Look that you take full advantage of Bunt's generously offered help," he admonished. "We'll have our hands full getting the knack of it below—things must go smoothly up here." Costard's frigid nod was not reassuring. He still regarded Bunt with a look of unappeased distrust, as if the young ass sensed some dissembled opponency in the hive-master's unflinching affability and compliance.

"Look here, Costard," I put in. "Accept the help Bunt offers. You need help. Doesn't the failure of this once-great concern—" And here I thrust an arm up from the bucket, and swept it at the empty building around us,—"suggest to you that perhaps you have shown some ineptness in your management of this mine?"

Costard stood appalled, thunderstruck, his wildest imaginings outgone by this grotesque suggestion.

"Enough!" boomed Barnar. "Let's be down and have done. Two

weeks, no more, Nephew! Ready, Niff!?"

"I am," I sighed. Barnar pulled shut the gangway door. The pulleys fed us rattling down into the dark.

The stony stinus that swallowed us breathed a faint organic stench, a lair-smell that grew stronger the deeper we sank. Some years before, and some hundreds of leagues away, Barnar and I had made another trip together under Kairnish mountains, and it was an experience we were both remembering as we stood sinking into that creaking, rattling darkness.

But now it was decidedly not a demon aura we sank into. The Nest smell was a more vital fetor that breathed of fecundity and relentless energies. Our descent felt not like an infernal entombment, but rather like entering the domain of deities, where an elemental vitality surged and swarmed.

When we clanked to a stop we had long expected it, as the Nest-aura hummed ever more strongly around us. Yet the actual jolt of arrival sent a pulse of fear through me.

There before us was a rectangle delicately outlined in faint blue light: the hatchway to the larval chamber. I groped and found the latch, and thrust the hatchway open.

Only when I felt the pang of anticlimax did I learn the pitch of my expectancy. Here were no giants, but only an equipment-filled nook, a deep natural recess in what must be the wall of the nursery chamber. Here, in our operations center, were racks of tools, supply lockers, bales and boxes of provisions, a pair of hammocks. All were orange like ourselves—or rather, in the pale blue light of this place, were of a smoky, smouldery hue that matched our own.

"Come on then!" I blurted. We all but ran out into the chamber, in haste to front our fears, and have them faced.

Human constructions, even the greatest of wizard-raised manses, are utterly dwarfed by even one chamber of Behemoth's fashioning. A luminescent fungus marbled the walls and lined the chamber's vastness with its cyanic sheen.

Even empty, that great void of chewn-out stone would have stunned us by its scope alone. But filled with that larval trove...? By Crack, Key, and Cauldron! Our hair stood up upon our bodies! Each pale grub was as big as a trading sloop, and shoals of them shimmered in that great lagoon of blue light, their obesities heaped in glossy hillocks, like seadogs sunning on rocks. In the rich gloom, barrel-ribbed and oily-bright, the numberless larvae looked to be exactly what they were: feeding casks of purest nutriment.

"An adult! A Nurse!" Barnar seized my arm and turned me. The Nurse's hugeness swam nearer through the larval sea. She was bigger than an ocean-crossing galleon, and yet so eerily swift and nimble! Her complex jaws—black, antler-like mandibles—were delicately scissoring, mincing some fleshy mass they held. She tenderfooted through the nurslings to a point not distant from us, and thrust the masticated mass down into the supplicant jaws of a grub. The meal would be demon-flesh, of course.

The grub fed greedily. Only the tapering head and tail ends of the grub were capable of moving very much; this one's tail wriggled in sympathy with her busy little black jaws at the other end.

We stood long, and again long, gazing at the Nurses coming and going, and at the Lickers, almost as large, that patrolled the chamber walls, and fed the luminous fungus with their saliva. There was an ebb and flux to the ministrations of these adults, who were at times few and far, while at other times scores of them swarmed at once in view, each feeding grubs by the dozens.

The torn demon fragments that these Nurses bore were received, we knew, out in the tunnels from the mighty Foragers who harvested the subworld far below. These piece-mealed prey were sometimes still conscious, and gave voice, cackling and jabbering as they were borne to their doom in a larval gut. But, their infernal utterances apart, all this huge life moved in relative silence, with a whispery friction of chitinous abdomens,

and a muffled click of tarsal claws on stone.

We gazed and gazed, aghast. The brutal, plundering work we had come here to do seemed to us in those first moments to be the most ardent lunacy imaginable. How dared we slay the babes of such awesome brutes even while they came and went in plainest view? We stood frozen.

When we essayed some movement, we were timorous and tentative in the extreme. We grew bolder by only the tiniest degrees. At length, though, when we had grown confident enough to dance and jig and wave our arms at a Nurse who stood not four rods distant from us, we saw in her eyes' black, faceted globes her utter nescience of our existence.

We could no longer doubt our freedom to begin the awful work we'd come to do for Costard. Only after we had provided him with some sap could we absent ourselves on Bunt's far more lucrative errand. With fear and loathing, then, we turned to the task.

The tap lines, or "suck lines" as they are also called (all eight of them of course dyed orange), radiated like spiderlegs from the drill-hole's port in the chamber ceiling. The lines, at regular intervals along their lengths, were attached to ceiling bolts by tough, elastic tethers. Using a long, hooked pole known as a crook, a tapper could snag and pull down a given line over his chosen larva; when he was done with it and released it, or if it slipped from his control by any accident, the tethers snatched the line safely back up against the ceiling and out of harm's way. For though these hoses were invisible to them, Nurses blundering against them would quickly tear them down in a natural litter-clearing reflex.

Our task, in brief, was to mount a grub with the help of steel climbing spurs, hook a line down from the ceiling, drive home the line's Spike (or "suck-nozzle") into the larval dorsum, and then use the signal cord in our operations nook to tell our partners topside to start pumping.

We disburdened ourselves of our bandoliers of gear, and bore only our weapons strapped to our backs. We

awkwardly lashed the climbing spurs to our insteps and calves, and hefted our crooks. "Well...." My voice sounded hopeless, hesitant. "What about that smallest one there? It looks quieter too, less twitchy than the others."

"Good idea," rumbled Barnar. "Start small and easy."

Though by now we already felt deeply submerged in this inhuman realm, we did not truly enter Behe-moth's world until that moment when we touched her flesh. The grub's hide was finegrained, translucent, and supple, like oiled parchment to our palms. We slipped and floundered till we learned to drive our spurs home fiercely. I was slow to believe in the young giant's indifference to my steel's negligible bite. Climbing her, I felt her slow, seismic heartbeat, and withal, something else: a gurgly unrest, as if of troubled digestion, within her.

At length, we stood unsteady on the grub's dorsal hump; the blubbery footing made us falter, and our first efforts with the Crooks were awkward. But at length we pulled down the nearest suck-line, with the suction spike on its tip. I gripped the line at mid-length to give Barnar a slack end. Two-handed, he raised the Spike high. "All right then," he grunted, and drove it home in the grub's blubbery hide.

Our terrified suspense as to the outcome of this stroke may be imagined, as may the depth of our relief when we felt scarcely a tremor of response in the larva under our feet. Its heart thrummed steadily away; its guts gurgled perhaps a shade more vigorously, but that was the grub's sole reaction to the setting of the Spike.

One heartbeat...two...three thrummed away. We heaved a sigh and grinned at one another—and then I saw Barnar's jaw drop. I turned, squawked with terror, and hauled out Ready Jack from his scabbard between my shoulders.

Almost too late, as a brambly black bug-shape, twice the size of the biggest lurk, loomed down on me, fangs high. I swung Jack with not an eyelash of space to spare, and clipped a fang and foreleg from the fearsome larval parasite. For such it was; a

Sucking Star, the brood-bag on its abdomen swollen fat with eggs. It retreated scarce one step, rearing high, full of fight, its thorny palps darting for me. The Star was not about to quit this host; we had found the parasite with its bag full, just on the point of burrowing inside the luckless larva, there to hatch its eggs hidden from Nurses. With its clutch of eggs ripe and its habitat secured, the monster was not about to retreat. Barnar, freeing the Spike and flinging the line ceilingward, swept out his mace, Jolly Breaker, and crippled two more of the Star's left legs. Then, seeing something I did not, he bel-lowed, "Niff! Jump!"

I have more than once dodged death by instantly heeding that tone of voice in my friend. I vaulted backwards and trod thin air. We plunged down into the shadows between two neighboring larvae. High overhead, a Nurse's globed eyes peered down. Her jaws plunged and reared aloft again, the Sucking Star between them, a writhing meal that dwindled as those jaws scissored.

But this was the least of the Nurse's sanitary labors. She bent as if to sniff the flaccid grub, her antennae making dainty-quick inquiries. Then with jaws and forelegs she seized up her infested grub and began to devour her outright. The larva hung in that terrible grip, its slack meat like a moon above us that dwindled as we watched, while its rich larval sap drizzled and splattered down to the stone below us.

Such was the remorseless, perfect economy of the Nest; the failed spawn consumed, regathered to the tribal body, not one pulse of energy wasted. The Nurse even lowered her jaws and grazed up the debris from the chamber floor. One of her eyeglobes hovered not five strides away from us. Her eyesight touched us, and possessed us not. When she was done, she rose and sped away.

VII

*Where Aim and Act do inadvertent
battle,
Unsteady is the hand that robs the
cradle!*

We made a glum meal in our operations nook: execrable jerky, chalky hardtack, and sour wine. Apparently, the Superior Sap Mine, when it came to its workers' provisions, spared every expense. After this repast Barnar and I took a second stroll along the margins of the larval shoals. Our eyes were now alerted, and we began to discern significant details.

To our more searching gaze, larval parasites proved not uncommon, once we learned their trick of attaching themselves to the shadowed under-surfaces of the grubs. And, as often as not, the parasitized grubs displayed clear symptoms of their affliction: flaccidity, dulled color, deficient size. A further discovery, once we had watched a while longer and strolled a little farther, was that the Nurses not infrequently seized and devoured parasitized larvae which showed these symptoms to a marked degree. This gave us double reason to identify and avoid infested grubs.

After spotting another loathsome Sucking Star, its brood-bag swollen with eggs, in the very act of eating its way into its host's flank, I was moved to shudder, and remark, "Our competitor-parasites are an ugly lot."

"Yet their work has exactly the same result as ours: an empty bag of larval skin."

"Be as philosophical as you like," I rejoined, "but our vampirism is in every way more elegant than what these spiny horrors do. Ugh!"

"Yes. Or at least, our way would be more elegant if we got around to doing it."

But still we delayed, wandering through the larval trove, watching. We learned it was well to avoid areas where the natural nest-litter (larval droppings, and the feeding debris of such tougher demon parts as horns, barbs, hooves, spikes, and jaws) had not recently been cleared up. Nurses were likely to visit these untidy areas to devour the mess. Similarly, those parts of the chamber's walls where the patches of luminous fungi had most recently been nourished with the Lickers' spittle gave off a more robust light; these more visible areas seemed also likelier to draw Nurses.

Having made these useful observations, we could no longer delay making our next attempt at tapping. Our second choice was a large, healthy-looking grub lying in a litter-free area that was not over-well illuminated, and was neighbored by equally healthy-looking grubs exhibiting no visible parasites.

We spurred our way up her flank with credible address, and trod prettily steadily across her dorsal hump. Determining the exact midline, I marked the spot with a spur-sliced "X" in her hide. Again our crooks plucked down the nearest suck-line. Again Barnar lofted the Spike, and drove it home. The larva didn't even twitch. I dogged down the suck-valve with four little hooked pitons hammered into the hide.

Tapping protocol now required me to stay on the grub, standing by the Spike-valve and maintaining its security, while Barnar went back to our operations nook and used the signal cord to call for the pumps to start. I watched him go. I was uneasy standing alone atop the larva, and I kept a restless eye about me. I recalled certain most unsettling descriptions of the Crab Rat, the Sucking Star's chief parasitic competitor for Behemoth broodmeat.

Barnar emerged from the nook, and waved to indicate that it was done, that the pattern of pulls on the signal cord, calling for suction on line three, had been performed, and acknowledged by the appropriate pattern of clicks from Costard.

Long moments passed without event. It was a pause protracted enough to reawaken in me gloomy fears of Costard's incompetence in the above-ground part of the operation. I was about to signal Barnar to repeat his sending, when the suck-line surged powerfully, and the larva shuddered under me.

The pump was geared far too high; it drank with such fierce greed that it deeply dented the grub's dorsum, and threatened my footing—the more so because the galvanized infant began wriggling powerfully. Dropping to all fours to keep from toppling, I bellowed, "Half power! Half power! The grub's throwing fits!"

The instant I'd howled this out, I shrank in fear of what my outcry might draw down on me, coupled with the Nurse-beckoning effect of the grub's convulsions. For half an eternity I clung to that heaving hill of oily flesh.

Then the pump cut off—in time, apparently, since none of the Nurses moving in the distance seemed to be heading my way. Now our victim lay far slacker than she had, almost a quarter diminished in her mass. She still twitched, but far more feebly than before. We waited, Barnar and I, our suspense uniting us across the chamber.

Again the line jerked—recoilingly this time. I stood uncertain for a moment, a sickening suspicion growing swiftly in me. A moment more, and there was no mistaking. The grub was swelling back up—swelling up rapidly, my meaty floor rising underfoot. "The idiot's on blow!" I bellowed. "Reverse pump! Reverse pump! He's got it on blow!"

Again Barnar dove into the operations nook. I scanned the chamber. Had one of those distant Nurses twitched her antennae in my direction? Perhaps not. The larva still swelled alarmingly, lifting me. I knew that the pump's plod-driven bellows were gated to blow out the lines when declogging was wanted. Now the air, at cruel pressure, was a swelling bubble in the larva's innards that crushed out what might remain of her vitality. Her tapered head and tail tremored, and were still. Up, up, up bulged her oily, pliant integument. Already she was half again the size of her largest neighbor.

"Still on blow!" I howled.

"No acknowledgement!" Barnar boomed back to me. "I've signaled four times! Look at it, Niff! Jump, by the Crack! Jump!"

And jump I did, right on the instant. Afterwards, my incompetence was glaringly, comically plain to me. A single swordstroke would have saved the grub, and still left suck-lines a-plenty to work with.

But flustered as I was, I jumped—and at the last possible moment. Before I'd even reached the ground

the larva exploded, her dorsum erupting in jagged tatters and a spew of cloudy oils and fatty tissue that sprayed almost ceiling-high, and then came smacking down in loathsome abundance. A great rag of fat fell on me and pinned me to the ground.

I fought up through the weight of my greasy mantle. I had scarcely cleared my face to see about me, when two Nurses filled my little sky, their eye-globes glinting, their jaws and antennae probing.

Their decision was swift. They instantly fell to devouring every tatter of the burst grub. I lurched to rise, and very plainly I saw that one Nurse noticed me. I froze at once, understanding: smeared with tissue, I was a visible piece of moving larva-meat. Moreover, moving or not, I was something to be eaten systematically as soon as the Nurse got to me.

Fixed where I lay, I dared to start scraping—carefully, carefully!—the fat from my face and hair, and then off my neck, and, inchingly, down my chest. From the head down I stealthily became orange again, cautiously sculpting off of me my adventitious larval luster.

All the while the great jaws whickered and clicked and flensed. Seizing, sectioning, sucking in, the Nurses' jaws were the frugal hands of the Nest, gathering in the waste life to stoke the still-living. The impersonal grandeur of it moved me, even in the terror of my predicament. I felt Behemoth and her inscrutable providence all around me, felt the Nest-life like a single spirit filling every tunnel, glinting from every worker's eye, feeding with a million-million jaws.

I had not stripped the last betraying slime from my legs and boots until the Nurses were scouring the very stone beside me for larval tatters, their jaws rattling like weaponry on the rock. Then, a last scrape, and I was up, and diving into the shadows of the larval shoals.

"One more grub," Barnar vowed, back in the nook, as I sluiced myself down with a waterskin. "If that idiot subjects us to the slightest further mishap, we leave forthwith on Bunt's

mission." I touched up my coat of dye from one of the flasks with which we were plentifully supplied, and we went forth and made our third pick.

Well versed as I already was in this trade's catastrophes, I felt like a seasoned tapper as we clambered up our next larva's flank, and I marked her midpoint with my spur. We ramméd the Spike valve home, and dogged it down, then both of us dismounted. "I'm damned," I grumbled, "if I'll 'man the valve' until I see that they can work the pump!" I accompanied Barnar back to the nook and he signalled for half suction on line five.

Comfortably removed from the point of impact of any further mishap, I enjoyed a pleasant, detached curiosity about what the suck-line might do next.

It gave a twitch, a shudder, and went stiff. A little dimple of suction surrounded the spike. The larva shuddered a little, and settled. Her drainage was in progress at the proper, painless rate.

Barnar sighed. "This means, I suppose, that we must set other lines now. Why delay?"

VIII

*Begged a demon with many a radiant eye,
"Plant my poor head, and I'll teach you to fly!"*

As a larva's drainage progresses, and she sags flatter and flatter, she grows more likely to be noted as debris, and consumed by a Nurse. A tapper might set one grub draining, then go Spike a second, even a third, but by then he had to go unhook his first set before it got perilously flat-looking. We were constantly climbing up and down the huge babes, and the work was extremely tiring. When we took our first sleep we'd drained only seven.

Though dead weary, I hung sleepless a while in my hammock. When a man lacks that glimpse of stars or moon that makes him feel it is truly night, then sleep seems to him an airless, casketed state, and his soul slips less willingly into it. Now and hence-

forth, of course, "night" would be merely a synonym for exhaustion, and "day" would mean the longest stretch of time we could work before dropping.

Unspeaking we hung there. At any other such time, pausing together on the brink of sleep, Barnar and I would have talked, lazily tossing our thoughts back and forth till one of us fell off oblivion's edge. Our silence now I understood too well. The terrors of the Nest were met and managed. Today's first fruitful labors proved we could work down here and win what we sought from Behemoth. The giants' pap now seemed far more obtainable, and we hung silent, remembering that in the matter of our coming wealth, our ambitions had utterly parted ways.

Six hundredweight of gold, our combined shares, could just suffice for Barnar's great vision. It would buy the Witches' Seed, and the little fleet to ship it from Strega (darkest of the Astrygals in lore and sorcerous resource). What was left would pay the same witches for the loan of a Gryph-gryph, for this monster must micturate on each and every Witches' Seed as soon as the seed has been sledgehammered into the earth; lacking these effusions, the virtue of the seed remains immured, and the tree will not leap forth. The six hundredweight would also just cover the cost of hiring a troop of bog Ghuuns (from Strega's nightmarish swamps) to control the Gryph-gryph, to bring the monster constant drink, and to hold it shackled to his work.

On my side it was the same. However obscenely rich we shortly grew by means of the great Pelfer's Buskins, Cowl and Gantlets, our outlay in the first instance must be huge. We could not hope to cross the Cidril Steppes without three hundred men at arms, with enough engineers among them for deploying heavy weaponry on the march, and for doing siege work when the Tomb was reached. Men of the quality we must use, and for the time we must have them, would cost no less than four hundredweight to keep them loyal. Added to this must be the cost of the ships to

carry them; then there was the cost of shipping them, from the Great Shallows (where the best recruiting was), thence through the Taarg Straits, and thence eight hundred leagues north, across the Sea of Cidril.

We must act together to fulfill either dream. And, shackled as we were by the finitude of our expected fortune, we could not help but brood, neither able to forget that the other had gravely vowed to undertake his project. With equal ire, we felt each other in default; we had both put second a deed we had sworn to make our prime concern.

Ever more smoothly and skillfully did we set our larvae draining: fifteen on our second day, eighteen on our third. At that day's end we took some wine and hardtack and had a strolling meal, supping and wandering the chamber at large; it was a practice which helped divert us from our provisions' vile taste, and which constantly added to our knowledge of our hosts.

We were agreeing, with some complacency, that we really had the hang of this work now, and could call ourselves pretty tolerable tappers, on the whole, when Barnar interrupted himself to cry, "Look there!"

A flux of larval feeding was just then tapering off—an after-ripple, no doubt, of a wave of Foragers returning to the Nest with their plunder. Everywhere the larvae's jaws worked furiously with a wet noise of mastication. This meaty murrum was embellished by demon utterance, muttered or shrill, as tough subworld entities surrendered fragment by fragment to larval greed. What had caught Barnar's eye was a huge chunk of torso, a blackish meat marbled with veins of incandescent green, which still writhed in the jaws of the Nurse that staggered under its mass. The size of the creature it had been bitten from must have been immense.

"The Foragers are surely dire indeed," I murmured, "to have slain whatever that was part of." We had been told, of course, that members of the Forager caste were made on a scale that dwarfed all other workers.

"You there! Hu-u-umans! Help me!"

Barnar and I spun around. Another Nurse was just then passing behind us, and for a dizzying instant it seemed that this giantess had hailed us with this reedy outcry. But after an instant's stupefaction, we saw that the voice proceeded from the wad of mangled demonmeat which she bore in her jaws.

From a hash of several demons chewed into one pulpy ball, there thrust out the head, shoulders, and one writhing limb of a still-living demon whose body had been mangled in with the others. It was this creature whose warbly voice accosted us. His head was encrusted with an opulent jewelry of eyes, whose glint pierced the fungal gloom as he was borne past us. "Stalwart Tappers! L-u-uminous Heroes! Save me, and I will make you rich past the wildest dreams of avarice!"

Barnar and I exchanged a look. Did I appear as startled, as nakedly greedy, as he did? We both hastily assumed suitably grave and skeptical countenances. "What else would it say, after all?" I noted.

"Of course!"

"Still," I prevaricated, "as the old saw has it: *Who knows the bournes of demon pelf?*"

"...*Neither Man nor demon self.*" Barnar finished, nodding. So we trotted after the Nurse, reassuring each other we would merely indulge our curiosity by inquiring of the demon precisely what he was offering.

"We should keep firmly in mind," I urged, "that we already have a wildly lucrative enterprise in hand. We must not be seduced by desperate promises. Because almost surely, whatever this demon has to offer, the payment will lie in the subworld and will somehow involve our carrying him thither."

"Precisely," Barnar nodded. "On the other hand... what can be lost by interrogating this demon? His kind are studious of Behemoth lore. Demons know their conquerors in detail. We may learn a bit, if nothing else."

"Let's hurry, then," I said. "It looks like it'll have two grubs on it."

The Nurse had bestowed her burden between two larvae, which mouthed up to it on either side. The eye-jewelled demon writhed on the crest of this food-lump, his broken hindquarters inextricably anchored in the mass. His limb (a tentacle with a three-clawed tip) desperately signaled us. His mouth was a membranous vent in his throat, whence once more came his ululant voice. "Quick! Oh quickly, Exalted ones! Wealth past telling I promise you! Oh, hurry! If they eat my head, I'll be blind!"

"That sounds highly probable," I told the demon. The Nurse had left—we had a clear field of action. "But I'm afraid we must require you to define precisely what you mean by 'wealth past telling.' And you'd best be quick about it, I think."

The demon gaped a moment. His eyes were a wild mix, each distinctly characterized, and a little multitude of individually evil minds looked out from these mixed eyes. His mouthvent moaned, and then renewed his reedy plea:

"The Unguent of Flight! I can put in your possession the Unguent of Flight! If I prove to lie, feed me back to these brutes!"

Who would not have called us credulous, in acting as we then did? But what is great luck, if not highly unlikely? We advanced on the food-clump, sword and axe drawn. "Oh yes!" the demon cried. "Cut me free at the ribs! Oh, hurry!"

I reached the demon my left arm, which he powerfully gripped. The sucking larval jaws now scissored quite close to him from either side. I pulled him outward, and Barnar chopped through his chest's mangled axis with one shearing stroke of Old Biter.

We took our demonic fragment to a little recess in the chamber wall and laid him on the stone. The bleeding stump of his amputation scabbed over almost as we spoke, and in moments his stump was sheathed in a tough, dry bark. Head and shoulders, one limb, and no more—he lay there and glittered up at us his eyes of a hundred different beings, a hundred alien hungers. His mouth-vent, moist and urgent, pleaded, "Plant me! Just plant

me, anywhere in subworld soil. I'll root! The Unguent of Flight, in return, is easy to be had, and not deep in the subworld at all, by a safe path I know." Barnar and I shared a knowing look here. The demon grew more urgent. "Bear me for your guide, oh Radiant Ones, and I will give you power to swim the air! I am your humblest, most abject servant, your doting Ostrogall by name!"

Well, sure enough, here was the proposition we'd foreseen: a quick little journey down to the nest-mouth, and out into the subworld. And for what prize now? The Unguent of Flight, a priceless treasure in itself, and a ready means to further wealth! The sheer, mad unlikeliness of the prospect perversely made me feel it might be genuine.

"We can promise no more than to think it over," I answered our truncated interlocutor, this abbreviated Ostrogall. "You will have to abide our leisure to consider your proposition, and in the interim you must vow to cause no mischief."

Ostrogall fervently agreed. He then set to slathering us with effusive flattery, and though he was silent at our command, his vigilant presence, riding in a loop of my loosened weapons belt, still compromised our sense of privacy. Thus, when we returned to our operations nook, I popped Ostrogall (with his effusive assurances that he would be "quite comfortable") into a stout leather supply bag, and hung this from a peg on the wall.

IX

*Through years and years a young lad
flees
And whips his team that breasts the
seas.*

We sagged into our hammocks, and into the silence that had grown our habit at this hour. But tonight we could almost hear each other's minds racing. "How chances multiply, sometimes," I ventured, "and set us branching off from our first intent!"

"Aye. Though surely we must stay on the branching that leads to the

Royal Brood Chamber, and the giants' pap, for there our least doubtful fortune lies?"

"Of course! But in this pattern of constantly emergent opportunity... I feel something here I scarcely dare put into words, Barnar. I feel Our Time is coming!"

"By Crack, Key and Cauldron, Niff, you speak my very mind!" We both sat upright in our hammocks now. Barnar's eyes revealed to mine a glint of cautious glee. "We've both been feeling it, haven't we?" he went on. "Here and now has come to us that truly golden moment in our professional lives. When we came down through that gangway—nay, when we first contracted to help my feckless nephew, with that first inauspicious step—we passed through that Door that is only once opened to a craftsman in all his life. Luck herself invited us down here under the earth, and down here, Luck means to do us well beyond our power to imagine!"

"I have felt the same, old friend," I solemnly answered. "The very same."

One must not speak too much aloud of Luck, most especially when She hovers nearest, but when we'd lain back again, Barnar could not forbear giving his suppressed excitement some vent in speech. "Suppose we get even a little luckier than what we now contemplate? Say we made just one or two hundredweight more than six hundred? With eight hundredweight, we could forest the heights and the barrens as well as my clan's holdings, just as you said, Niff. Then, if the Ham-Hadryan, and the Magnass-Dryan clans should, through some accord, unite their endeavors, our mills would reap such wealth from Shallows' shipyards [See Shag Margold's Interjection], that your venture to the Tomb of Pelfer could be undertaken within a twelvemonth's time."

I was stung to find him still so placidly putting in second place the glorious exploit that I burned to undertake. "We would be prudent, I think," I sneered gently, "to bank nothing on the desperate promises of a demon. Lucky we may feel, but we might not prove so, stumping down to

the subworld with that polyocular abomination tucked under one arm."

"I mean only," Barnar said patiently—but I could tell he was stung in turn—"that opportunities seem to be opening to us at every turn, and among them may well come something which makes us richer yet."

I was not of a mind to answer. After a moment, Barnar said, "Let me tell you a story, Niff, about a man we both know—a man who is dear as a brother to my heart. This man is called Niff the Karkhmanite, but though Karkhman-Ra, Jewel of Pardash, herself the Queen of the Ephesian Chain, is his chosen home, he was in fact born at the little harbor of Ladrone Bay on Samadrios, a lesser Ephesian and the southernmost isle of the Chain."

"Spare me," I complained, though I knew he must have his turn.

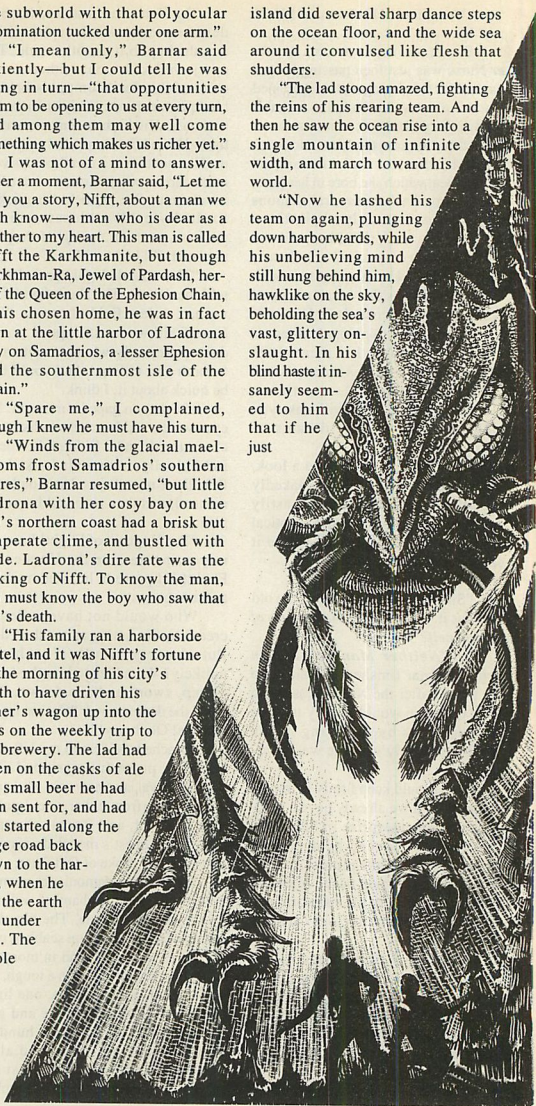
"Winds from the glacial maelstroms frost Samadrios' southern shores," Barnar resumed. "But little Ladrone with her cosy bay on the isle's northern coast had a brisk but temperate clime, and bustled with trade. Ladrone's dire fate was the making of Niff. To know the man, you must know the boy who saw that city's death."

"His family ran a harborside hostel, and it was Niff's fortune on the morning of his city's death to have driven his father's wagon up into the hills on the weekly trip to the brewery. The lad had taken on the casks of ale and small beer he had been sent for, and had just started along the ridge road back down to the harbor, when he felt the earth jolt under him. The whole

island did several sharp dance steps on the ocean floor, and the wide sea around it convulsed like flesh that shudders.

"The lad stood amazed, fighting the reins of his rearing team. And then he saw the ocean rise into a single mountain of infinite width, and march toward his world.

"Now he lashed his team on again, plunging down harborwards, while his unbelieving mind still hung behind him, hawklike on the sky, beholding the sea's vast, glittery onslaught. In his blind haste it insanely seemed to him that if he just



reached home before the wave smote it—if he could just burst into the hostel and cry, “Father! Mother! The Ocean is coming!”—if he could just reach them with a warning, then the disaster would be halted.

“He was still high in the hills when the great maw of foam thunderously swallowed Ladrone Bay at a gulp. Still Niffit lashed his mad team downward, as if moved by the same unstoppable fury as moved the sea. As the road crossed a little upland valley, the leaping sea came avalanching up over the ridge and snatched him, wagon and all, up into a boiling cauldron of weedy brine.

“For long, unbelievable moments his team crested the boil and dragged his wagon through it, he wielding his whip like Benthodogon in his sea-chariot of Aristoz legend. It was the wave’s highest reach; it receded, leaving in the valley a salt lake where, nostrils flaring, eyes glaring, the team at length drowned and dragged the wagon down, and Niffit, a lifetime older than he had been seconds earlier, swam dazedly to higher ground.

“Ladrone was scoured from the shore. Not even the foundations of his family’s hostel remained. Not long after this, Niffit apprenticed himself to a travelling acrobatic troupe, and he has never once returned to the isle of his birth. But perhaps it is equally true to say that he has never left that foaming lake in the hills above drowned Ladrone—has never ceased lashing his team through the waves, to stay ahead of drowning.

“For when has Niffit ceased from wandering? When has he ceased to push restlessly from exploit to exploit? Whatever he has, he seeks always a further prize. And it is with just this in mind that his good friend, Barnar Ham-Hadryan, urges him: at some point even the greatest craftsmen must say of someplace: *here I will abide—this place I will cherish as my own*. For what will Pelfer’s Buskins and all the rest bring, but further wandering, further seeking? Whereas on Chilia, in my natal mountains, we have a paradise to resurrect, and then, inhabit!”

I had to endure in patience a ploy I’d used myself, but I was hard put to hold my tongue. When I answered, I struggled to hide my irritation. “Isn’t it enough, Barnar, that we first vowed to seek Pelfer’s tomb, and that my vow of the Witches’ seed came second? Can we not lay this painful controversy to rest on this simple principle of priority?”

“Come to that, Niffit, why should not the more recent undertaking be the more binding?”

Discussion was useless. Silence fell again on us. Out in the nursery chamber echoed the whicker and whisper of huge chitinous legs most delicately a-dancing, and the sounds of grubs wetly mouthing, and of demons faintly crooning their annihilation. The murmur of the Nest’s mighty life gradually, gently rubbed my thoughts away, and I sank into sleep.

But some time later, from the depths of that sleep, a little noise tickled me awake. I lay for a moment listening to it. When I stealthily arose, I found that Ostrogall had got his whole limb thrust out of the mouth of his bag; his industrious little claws had almost untied the bag’s binding.

I roused Barnar and we held judgement over the fractional demon. His gush of verbose apology was silenced by Barnar’s gesturings with his axe.

“Already you have abused our trust,” I told Ostrogall. “You now swear you will suffer any punishment to reinstate our tentative agreement. Very well. We must insist on precaution. You must be quit of that remaining limb of yours if we are to keep you here in our quarters. If this is unacceptable to you, we will be glad to return you to those grubs.”

Ostrogall scarcely paused. “Agreed! Agreed, if it must be! I need only my neck, and just a bit of chest to be planted by, but that’s quite enough, as long as you will plant me. I humbly accept the precaution. Just give me a fair hearing on the matter of the Unguent when you are so inclined. Question me, and I swear you will be persuaded. And once you are aloft—once, Oh Effulgent Ones, you have

the Unguent, and are soaring at will high up among the winds—you will bless the day our paths crossed down here. You will see, my Benefactors!”

So he extended his limb, and Barnar lopped it off. We returned him to his bag, bound this double tight, hung it high, and went back to our hammocks, and our interrupted sleep.

X

*Who goeth to the Mother’s breast
Of greater Life to sup,
Oh, tread ye nimbly through the Nest!
Oh, firmly grip thy cup!*

Early on our fourth day in the chamber, I teetered atop a half-deflated grub, waiting to free the valve and ease the line back up to the ceiling. As the grub gently, steadily sank under me, I gazed over the larval shoals. Barnar, returning from signalling for suction on this our third larva of the day, came climbing up to keep me company.

“It’s more than a momentary flux,” I told him. “I’ll swear it! The place is...seething! Look where one comes for the empty already.” A Nurse, just a spearcast off, loomed down to devour the plundered bag of our first larva of the morning. The whole chamber bustled with activity; feeding was going on everywhere. Nurses and Lickers sped in every direction. We’d found things in this state on our awaking, and for hours now the surge had not slackened.

Barnar agreed. “It’s all the pupae that impress me most. It has to mean a...population surge, does it not?”

We stood thoughtfully as the grub sank under us. What else could it mean? On our first days here we only occasionally saw the pupae carried out by Nurses. Pupae were constantly forming; matured, full-fed grubs grew quiet and developed a thick sheen of exudate which, in a day or so, hardened into the pupal husk. These pupae were carried off by Nurses to the eclosia, where the callows would hatch and be nursed up to adult size.

But now, any time and anywhere we looked, we saw more pupae being

carried out. Correspondingly, new larvae were being incessantly brought in from the Incubaria. Barnar hesitated, before adding, "Our friend in the bag is most urgent for an audience with our effluent selves. While I was signalling just now he was wheedling me through the leather, telling me there is a very 'significant stir' in the Nest."

This awareness in the demon-nub, bagged as he was, reminded us that demonkind possessed valuable insights into Behemoth's ways. "Well," I suggested, "let's go back and chat with him." We untethered the suckline from the empty we stood on, and went back to the nook.

Hanging blind in his bag, still Ostrogall was aware of us, though we approached quietly to test him. "O Effulgent Ones! Dare I address you? Dare I share with you my humble solicitude for your safety?"

What could we lose by hearing his gambits? Unbagged and propped on a ledge, Ostrogall looked as healthy as ever. His recent amputation was smoothly and toughly scabbed over. An oily light of alien solicitude sparkled in his hundred eyes.

"Gentlemen, only my fears for your safety make me thus importunate, for is not your salvation also my own? As my liberation is your enrichment? I urge only this: if you mean at all to travel through the Nest, then undertake it boldly and at once, for past all doubt, I sense some great business is afoot in this Nest. A yeasty ferment is at work, their numbers grow—I feel it! And at such times, sirs, the corridors thunder with traffic, and grow ever more perilous for travellers of our slight size!"

"You seem to imply," I answered, "that our carrying you down to the subworld is a settled thing, but I, for one, am far from decided. Tell me this, Ostrogall: Do the Younger Umbral's verses, describing the Flight of Forkbeard, accurately represent the Unguent as being obtained by squeezing certain tubers grubbed up from the garden of a giant swamp-waddle?"

"Forgive me," meekly fluted the demon-nub, "but I really cannot say."

"You really can't say?" Barnar raised his brows. "What of Cogiter's

dactyls? Do these rightly report the Unguent as being the product of an hirsute, odoriferous fruit that grows on the walls of caverns in the floor of the Primary Subworld, as expressed in the couplet:

*'Deep grottoes papilla-ed with
bulbous swellings—
Fruits better for squeezing and
draining than smelling.'*"

"I must, with inexpressible regret," Ostrogall faintly piped, "profess myself powerless to respond to your query."

"Well, what *can* you tell us then!?" I urged. I seized him up by the neck stump and we went out into the open chamber with him. "I so far find no reason not to tuck you back into the larval jaws from which we so imprudently plucked you! What think you, Barnar? Which one looks hungriest to you?"

"Gentle saviours! Sagacious paladins!" Ostrogall bleated. "I can do no other than cling to my sole poor means of purchasing your aid. Men of your bold make would dare the place without my guidance if you knew where and how to look."

"That grub over there," Barnar suggested, "looks extremely hungry. See how she works her jaws? We want the demon's end to be quick as possible, of course—we're not cruel men. Let's pop him in there."

"If you are bent on doing so, Masters, I must suffer it," the demon cried. "The grub's loathsome gut will reduce me to a mash of quaternary spores, which will escape in its fecal matter. By little and little, some of these spores of mine will be tracked out in the tunnels, and thence to the subworld floor. It will take perhaps a century before I seed, and root, and bloom, and see again, but I will bear this long blindness if I must!"

In the end we rebagged him. Why not hang him up blind for a while, and see if his attitude evolved? Moreover, in the last analysis, we did not feel his desperate reticence was wholly out of character for one who had a true treasure to protect.

At the same time, Ostrogall had succeeded in persuading us, though

not to the quest he craved. He had convinced us of the danger of this rising pulse in the Nest-life, this fermentation. If we were to explore at large, it must be done now before this tempo grew any quicker. Costard must rest content with the sap we'd sent him. We must be off on our own greater mission, for two jarsful of juice worth three hundredweight of gold.

Our equipage was soon assembled: our arms, oiled and sharpened, strapped to our backs; two bandoliers each, these hung with some provisions, but primarily laden with dozens of the little skin bladders of orange dye that all tappers carry on their belts for touch-ups of their invisibility. We brought a large surplus of these, for splashes of the dye on the walls of the Nest tunnels could also serve us as path markers. In addition we had two hundred ells of tough, limber climbing line each, and, most to the point, two leathern amphorae, stoutly lidded, discreetly provided by us by Bunt for filling with the giants' pap.

When all was ready, Barnar sent the "pause-for-rest code" on the signal cord. No simple acknowledgement came back, but rather an impatient clatter of inquiry. We disdained to answer, but we did grow mindful of the gold in our lockless provisions chests, should bumptious Costard be moved to come down if we were long on our errand. So we staggered a half mile or so along the chamber wall with our wealth, till we found a safe nook to bury it in.

And so we stepped for the first time out into a Nest tunnel. We stepped out cringing, recoiling in advance from monstrosities which ... did not materialize. We stood in high-vaulted emptiness, scanning a cerulean gloom that yawned away in both directions.

"Well," said Barnar, "let's be off. What is the slope, would you say? It looks dead level here." We were concerned in our explorations always to move up-slope, following the principle that Behemoth's most protected chambers lie highest in the mountains. By this reasoning, the Royal Brood

Chamber must lie at the Nest's apex, above even these lofty strata of the larval chambers.

"Doesn't this way seem just fractionally...?"

"Yes, I suppose so. Let's cover ground while it's clear like this." We were off at a jog-trot, squirting arcs of dye every few rods against the gallery walls. The emptiness of the tunnel grew ominous, almost unbearable. Then... was that a tremoring underfoot? "Barnar, do you feel—"

"By Crack, Key and Cauldron!"

"Dive into this crevice!"

Thus began our introduction to the larger worker castes. That first one—we for came to recognize their features with some repetition—was a Digger, with huge, blunt, earth-breaking jaws. Its body had half again the bulk of a Nurse's. In moments, the unnatural void that had greeted our entry was obliterated by the thunder of repeated passings. Diggers, Sweepers, Carriers (whose immense crops made them provision-vessels to other castes), the colossal size of all these workers was only half their impact. Their speed was the other half—their speed and their reckless *elan*. Two workers running abreast might charge headlong at three others oppositely bound, and none would hesitate a jot. All of them would thunderously merge and sunder, with not a bristle's width to spare, their glossy flanks whickering with glancing frictions, their giant, sharp-kneed legs pumping miraculously free of entanglement. Incessantly though these thunderous mergings occurred, they did not fail to awe us every time.

Equal to the awe of their onrush was the awe of their stopping. It seemed impossible such hugeness could come to such precise and absolute a halt as these giants could when confronted with a fellow worker's begging. We learned that an individual of any caste could detain any other by bowing, as it were, and, in a crouched posture, twiddling her antennae in a ritualized gesture of supplication. The accosted one then either shared with the beggar food she carried in her jaws, or regurgitated into the beggar's mouth the macerated nourishment she carried in her crop.

By such exchange, of course, does a subworld harvest reach every hungry one of a Nest's million mouths.

These sudden pauses in the flux threatened our rhythm, and we learned not to slow down for anything—to run hard when we were in the clear, to read tremors through our footsoles, and to dive sharp or shin quick up a veining in the wall at the very first vibration of oncomers. We learned to guess the numbers and course of these oncomers, and move decisively before the danger was in view, for by then it might well be too late.

After what we judged a couple miles of this, we rested in a fissure, and took wine. "I'm damned..." Barnar said, breathing hard, "if I can tell for sure...but I think we're bearing... *downslope*."

"...this run-and-stop rhythm...I can't be sure either...but I agree."

We lay catching our breath a moment. Giants thundered past. A few sour draughts of wine caught fire in our racing blood. Courage blazed in us.

"Shall we retrace and try the other way then?"

"Why not? You know, Barnar, if this is the worst of it, I think we can manage it."

"Aye to that and aye again! Look—here's a Licker." She danced bobblingly towards us, mouthing the fungal fur along our stretch of wall. We knew to sit still, our crevice being sunk in a fungal bald patch. High as a galleon's bowsprit, the Licker reared above us her spittily kiss, the arched buttresses of her legs bracketing us in that moment like some mighty temple's nave. Then she danced on.

"Think, Niff!" Barnar growled fervently. "With such spawn as these, what must the Queen's dimensions be?"

We set to jogging back the way we'd come. "What if she prove too big for mounting and milking?" I asked. "What if we can't climb her? Is it not...serendipitous how the Unguent, if it be real, would answer so perfectly to this need? Surely we could turn the trick of getting the pap if we were airborne."

"I tell you, I too feel the itch of that very thought, Niff! Ostrogall of

course has every motive to lie unconstrainedly."

"Well... we must question him closer once we get back."

Loping along pretty briskly now, we were feeling more attuned to these tunnels with each stride. All at once we sensed the tremor of a very big weight approaching, and we looked sharp for shelter. A natural ridge of quartz ribbed the tunnel wall just ahead of us.

"Let's shin up that!" I said. We swarmed our way up it just in time to get above a fast-moving Sweeper who veered under us. But even as we sighed relief, here, oppositely bound, there surged titanicly towards us a Forager.

We were almost unhinged—it was the first we'd seen. Still we kept our grips, and scrambled desperately higher, to get above her hugeness. Her jaws alone were half the size of a Nurse! Since the onrushing Sweeper never altered course, the Forager arched up accommodatingly on her legs, while the Sweeper crouched slightly and rushed right under her.

Unluckily, as the Forager lifted herself in this maneuver, she glanced against the tunnel wall just under us. The shock wave plucked us clean off the rock, and we plunged down toward the Forager's vast back, our hands and feet clawing thin air in a desperate, futile bid to be elsewhere, anywhere other than where we fell to.

[SHAG MARGOLD'S FIRST INTERJECTION]

A little more than a decade before the time of this present narrative, Niff and Barnar endured a subworld sojourn in the Demon Sea, to which Niff alludes when they ride the bucket down the gangway. During that infernal submersion among demonry, the pair acquired the friendship-till-death of the shape-shifter Gildmirth of Sordon, whom they set at liberty from durance in that vile abyss.

Some five years after, and about as long before this present business, Niff and Barnar had acquired—in the Great Shallows, at a gaming table in one of the raft-cities of the

Hydrobani—a little flat-deck yawlp. With this and some rented harpoons, they went out next morning a-sculp-ing. Towards mid-day, they harpooned (as they thought) a particularly large and fine-looking sculp. It was a solid hit, and the barb bit deep, and they were already congratulating themselves on a very profitable venture. Then their sculp melted into the form of a giant marine reptile, who held their bloodless harpoon in one claw, and towed them for a long and merry ride through the Shallows, skimming at incredible speed above those gorgeous reefs all aflame with life and color. The pair could neither quit nor cut the harpoon cable. They ceased to try when the reptile began to sing and warble melodiously in an unknown tongue as it towed them through their crazy course. Long before Gildmirth melted down to his true form, and climbed dripping aboard, they had guessed him for who he was.

From this merry, chance meeting of friends, weighty events developed which, while they may concern us elsewhere, cannot detain us here. But it was on this occasion that Niffth heard from Gildmirth a highly particular account of Pelfer the Peerless' tomb, and of the Buskins, Cowl and Gantlets buried there with that arch-thief. These Supreme Facilitators of Felonious Appropriation are of course a by-word through the world at large; even the uncouth upland brigands of the Ingens Cluster swear by the "boots, hood and gloves of the Pilferer."

But it was Niffth's and Barnar's rare luck to hear the full and detailed truth of the matter from Gildmirth of Sordon, and what they learned enflamed their imaginations. The Buskins are popularly credited with conferring everything from the power of flight to the power to run faster than the eye can follow; in fact, my friends learned, they confer the Blessing of Bounding Absquatulation, by which is understood the power to make one-league leaps. Escape, to the thief shod with Pelfer's Buskins, is never in doubt.

The Cowl is loosely deemed to confer invisibility. In fact, they

learned, it confers on its wearer the Blessing of Circumambient Similitude, or an identity of aspect to the wearer's immediate surroundings, however complex. The Cowl's function is best illustrated in the tale told of Pelfer, when he had penetrated the Art Trove of UrrGurr the Grasping. That ghastly Elemental surprised Pelfer in the very midst of his Trove, but discerned him not, for the thief, beCowed, bore a simultaneous piece-meal resemblance to no less than three of that age's great masterworks in oils: Goob's *Battle of Trumpet Plains*, the *Smiling Mimostula* by Phasri Pedoflaster, and Quonsonby's epoch-making *Still Life with Rumkins and Prooms*. From this the finesse of the Cowl's power may be surmised.

As for Pelfer's Gantlets, they confer the Blessing of Loosened Locks upon the hands they ensheathe. With regard to these Gantlets, the popular conception does not so much err as fall short. Gloved with these, the thief's touch will cause any obstacle—lock, wall, weighty door, or mass of earth—to fall asunder, so be this obstacle interposed as a barrier between the thief and the prize she craves.

From this, the fervor of Niffth's mercenary motive will be readily understood. A thief accoutered as great Pelfer was would soon abound in wealth.

But Barnar, on his side, cherishes no merely sentimental enterprise. His family feeling, and his romantic interest in a certain beauty of the Magnass-Dryan clan, are foremost in his motives, of course, and cause in him an intransigence to match the force of Niffth's greed for Pelfer's Facilitators. But dense-wooded Chilia lies of course in the Great Shallows, just off the mainland of the Kolodrian Continent. And, like that forested Kolodrian coast, Chilia serves the timber needs of the Great Shallows—a vast broth of cultures and of thriving trade, populous with vessels of all makes. Shallows' boatyards are a bottomless maw for lumber. When the saw-mills of Barnar's clan howl at full capacity, they turn a golden harvest. Chilite tree-jacks with lush mountain hold-

ings, though their palms be hard with doing their own axework, grow seriously rich.

—Shag Margold

XI

Now saddle my mount, I am riding to plunder

The Ur-hoard encofferred in caskets infernal!

Swift my mount bears me, her footfall as thunder,

Where hell sweats its lucre in fever eternal!

The horror of being on the Forager's back made us stagger and stumble at first, now to port, now to starboard, where her legs pumped in their high-kneed ranks. But we found that our footing was not really difficult, no harder than finding your seals on a big vessel that is riding a steady swell. I mean a big vessel indeed, though, for the biggest galleon we ever shipped on was less than half her size. Her abdomen bulged sternward and we could not see its tip; the immense bowsprit of her jaws loomed half eclipsed beyond her head's great spheroid. The blue-litten walls tore past us, blurred to the look of sea-foam with the speed of her passage.

"Dye!" Barnar shouted—and the sense of it brought my wits back to me. We rushed as near as we dared to her pumping legs, I to port and Barnar to starboard, and from our bottles of dye jetted out arcs of pigment against the streaming tunnel walls. These little banners of liquid we ejected grew tattered as they fell, torn by our velocity. Just so would our bodies do if we leapt or fell while moving at this rate; we would at the very least break our legs.

"If she's begged for food and she stops," I shouted back over my shoulder, "jump on the instant!"

"Do you think her crop is full?" Barnar shouted back after a heart-beat's pause. Amid the confusion of the rushing walls and the flaring cyanic fungi like sea-foam cut by a swift keel, the question hung full of significance in the air between us. If her crop was full of demon harvest, our

Forager would be returning from forage, and could well be bound to our very own destination: the Royal Brood Chamber. If, on the other hand, her crop were empty, she might equally well be bound to the subworld, to re-fill it.

For a dreamlike, indefinite time, we sped along poised on this uncertainty: If another worker begged food of us, and our Forager's crop proved full, then *should* we jump down? Might she not go on up with her offering to the Queen?

But all too soon, our descent grew unmistakable. "Downslope she goes!" Barnar cried needlessly, as suddenly the pitch grew steeper. No other Behemoth detained us, nor would, we saw. Her nestmates would sense our mount's emptiness.

We dared not let the horror of where we were going slacken our sinews. Complex branchings of the tunnels flowed unpredictably past us, and at such intersections we must spray a frenzied profusion of dye, not to miss our turning when—Luck grant it!—we might come trudging back. Dispensing dye like dervishes, we frenziedly blazed our path, as our Forager, unaccosted by any oncomer, thundered on down to the mountain-rook.

Our descent was long enough to astonish us with the Nest's immense extent, yet so inexorably were we carried whither every fiber of our souls recoiled from being, that it seemed no time at all before I was crying out, "Can we doubt any longer? Do you see ahead there? A reddening of the light?"

"Yes!" Barnar's voice seemed to mourn, and I know he, with me, experienced an irrepressible qualm of pure loathing, a slither of revulsion climbing up and down the spine.

"I suppose," I called, wanly attempting optimism, "we could scarcely go down there any better guarded than we are."

"No doubt," Barnar boomed glumly.

"Ah, look there now friend! We're close! Hammer in some pitons —let's string some rope to hold by!"

Convergent tunnels had broadened to a mighty gallery which was

flooded with an ever redder light. Now another Forager ran to port of us, two more to starboard...and now we ran amidst a thundering flux of Foragers, an outsurging armada of rampant titans. We knelt, and drove into the tough chitin the pitons used to dog spike valves. I paid line off my coil, and strung it between these spikes for hand- and foot-holds.

"There!" I shrieked. "There's the foul hellgate itself!"

The Nestmouth framed a ragged oval of ruby light. It was a hole in the hell-sky—to exit it seemed a plunge into thin air. A rushing moment later, and the yawning portal framed a vista: far below spread the subworld plain, threaded with red rivers, and looking strangely empty and quiescent, compared to other parts of it we'd seen.

We flung ourselves down and gripped our ropes. "Hold on!"

"I am!"

The Forager erupted from the Nest-mouth, and dove down the vertiginous subworld wall. We clung to our ropes, jouncing and jolting against the rough carapace. All the plain and all its stony sky, revealed to us in crazy, shaken glimpses, dispread around us its vile grandeur. Both hell-floor and hellvault shocked us out of our expectations. The rolling plain was all but denuded. "Behemoth's scoured it clean as bone!" cried Barnar—but we cried out indeed when we looked above us.

"By the Crack and by all that crawls from it!" I yelled. "Look there! What Thing looks down on us?"

For this part of the subworld's stony sky was giganantically inhabited by a monstrous crimson eye, socketed in the earth-bone and staring immensely down. Its pupil was a ragged fissure of utter blackness faintly measled with stars, while within the scarlet hemisphere of its half-translucent ball, pearly shapes of cloudy tissue writhed, or languidly convulsed. But most hair-raisingly, the orb *attended*, turned torpidly to focus here or there. It was framed in a gasketing of ophidian scales that merged with the stone. And unceasingly it bled tears that ran in branching, impossible rivers across the hell-

ceiling, and down the hell-walls near and distant, to weave in red rivers through the plains' rolling denudation.

Indeed, the only things abounding on those plains were Foragers. Their multitudes tiny with distance, everywhere they rushed in broad fronts or phalanxes. As we surged down onto the plain ourselves, and the mountain-rook we'd emerged from fell away behind us, we saw how poked it was with Nest-mouths like our own, and how these bled a ceaseless stream of demonkind's nemesis.

THE END

OF
PART ONE



WHAT IF MAN WAS AN ENDANGERED SPECIES...

The year is 3000. Earth's Voyager Probe has long since back-fired and the most powerful military force in the galaxy now controls the planet. Nearly wiped out by the alien Psycho Empire, the remnants of mankind are scattered in hiding — struggling to survive...until one man decides to take them on.

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MUSIC IN THE PARK

Laurie Tashiro

Illustrated by Bob Hobbs

I was alone, and it was safe to climb the pole

I touched a carefully polished, brilliantly red apple, one of several pieces of fresh fruit filling a pottery bowl occupying the center of my father's kitchen table. I'd given Mom that bowl for Christmas the year before she died. This was the first time I'd seen it used.

"Your father doesn't like fruit." I heard the echo of my mother's voice, firm in its belief and sure of her authority. "I don't buy what he won't eat."

Now that she was gone, he'd taken to eating fruit. Maybe he'd always liked fruit, but being more interested in peace than veracity, kept his mouth shut. Maybe he just liked keeping some things secret, stopping short of sharing everything.

I learned a lot about my father in the years following my mother's death. During her life she'd stood between us, like an interpreter, a filter or a wall. Now our communications were direct, not inhibited by my mother's need to have each of us love her best.

I had arrived home a few days early for a cousin's wedding, hoping to spend some time with my grandmother and a favorite aunt. However, everyone was caught up in last minute details, trips to the airport and so forth; I found myself alone.

Rather than hang around the house, I set out walking, needing to reacquaint myself with my home town. When I was a kid there had been a five-and-dime, a drugstore with a soda fountain, and two small department stores on Main Street. Beavers had specialized in ladies' fine clothing and hats. My grandmother had dozens of their beautiful creations, each stored in a round, black Beavers' box all tied up with black silk ribbons, and carefully stacked according to season in her

closet. I don't know which I found more fascinating: the feathered, flowered and veiled hats or the seductive, beribboned boxes they came in.

Beavers was long gone, as was the drugstore soda fountain, the sweet effervescence of a lime phosphate or a chocolate cherry Coke forever lost to thirsty children just back from hours of exploring and fort building in the nearby woods. Now, Main Street was a scruffy lineup of empty store fronts, their Kraft paper-shrouded windows testimony to the slow, downward spiral the town had entered.

The dimestore that stood on the corner for all the years of my childhood, providing hours of distraction and entertainment, had burnt down last winter and was replaced by a grassy, well-kept empty lot. Passing by, I remembered that one of the local cops had received a citation for bravery in recognition of his early morning sprint through the burning building. He was credited with saving the lives of the renters living above the store. I knew the guy. He had always been a dork, straight through grade school and on into high school. I doubted if his one act of intelligence and courage had turned him into John Wayne, or even Bruce Willis.

As I strolled through town, I made a list of all the things that had changed. Stores gone, even a whole block of buildings missing, replaced by a huge discount grocery store with the required acre or three of parking. I walked past Jamie's old house. Tears surprised me as I paused to look the place over, wondering if his mother still lived there. Jamie'd been dead almost 15 years, killed in a one-car accident just three years after we'd graduated from high school. An accident brought on by one too many beers



and the constant drowsiness that comes from working two jobs. His sister had sung Neil Young's *Long May You Run* at the funeral. The line "When I last saw you alive" clung me for a long time.

Music. For me, music is the key to all my memories. Music draws me and defines my life like nothing else. Songs are my way of keeping track of the important events in my life. I can tell you what was on the car radio when I received my first kiss. I remember how *Pomp and Circumstance* blared as we marched from college into the real world. And I know all the Kingston Trio's songs by heart; they were my mother's favorite group. She always had either the radio or the stereo on. That old stereo was a big as a coffin. My father got rid of it shortly after mother died, preferring what he called "splendid peace and solitude."

I could have continued down Third Street, but that would have sent me past Frank's house. Another dead friend, a suicide. I remember seeing him on his last leave home, all tall and handsome in his dress fatigues, ribbons and medals and patches decorating his uniform, making him look important and brave. Country Joe and the Fish had been in town. Frank asked me to go with him. A real date, he'd said. We got as stoned and loose as anyone else. Several months later, I heard he was home for good; he'd made it back unscathed. I'd meant to call him but I was busy getting my own career started. And then he was dead, and we all wondered what we should have said or done to keep him with us.

When I last saw you alive.

I'd only lived in this town for eighteen years and then left for college, returning for brief visits and command appearances. In that relatively short time I'd acquired enough painful memories to last me a lifetime. How do people manage to live in the same place for sixty, seventy, eighty years, watching deaths, suicides and divorces accumulate with grim inevitability? I much preferred my way, living in a huge city where I don't know too many people, and didn't have to share in anyone else's sorrow or watch their suffering.

I changed my route to go past the park. Maybe someone I knew would be pushing a kid on the swings, or watching a toddler in the wading pool. Drifting through the tree-shaded picnic area, I heard tinkling music reminding me of the ice cream man who used to come around, his circus-like song calling to every child to run beg a nickel from their mom. I walked deeper into the park, past the fenced swimming pool, silent and empty until one o'clock, past the deserted wading pool, the unused swings and slides. I could hear music, a gay, tummy tune reminiscent of an old-time merry-go-round; something new in the old town.

The sound was coming from the top of a tall, steel pole capped with a large wire structure that looked like an ornate Victorian aviary. As I stood listening, the happy calliope tune segued into harsh organ music filled with dissonant chords. Stepping back, I tried to see what was in the mesh basket at the top of the pole, but the angle was too sharp, and the basket shaded in the bright sky. I could see only shadows. As the music grew louder and uglier, I looked towards the park attendant's booth. Maybe she could turn the thing off before it broke itself; but the booth's shutters were closed. Something had to be done to stop the avalanche of sharp and flat notes wildly tumbling from the sky. Circling the pole, searching for a way to shut the music off, I was clutched by unreasonable panic.

Abruptly the cacophony ceased, replaced by the jaunty sounds of a player piano. I stood still, consciously slowing my breathing, thinking how my father often said if you leave things alone, most times they'll straighten themselves out. His hands-off attitude had applied to everything from our cranky washing machine to his only daughter.

Turning to leave, I noticed a police car cruising the perimeter of the park. The cop probably took me for a pervert since I was an adult, alone in the park without the obligatory child. I sailed a disarming half wave in his direction, and went off to have lunch with my aunt.

Returning to my father's home late in the afternoon, I joined Dad in the back yard where he was filling bird feeders. I listened to him explain what the finches liked to eat, and how he kept the squirrels out of the bird's food. Finally he wound down.

"When did the town get the fancy sound system for the park?"

With his attention still on the squabbling finches, he asked, "How's your Aunt Laurine? She say if your cousin Bobby is going to make it back from Seattle for the wedding?"

"Laurine's fine, Dad. We had a nice lunch, and talked about a lot of things but Bobby's name didn't come up. I don't know if he'll be there or not.

"This morning, I was sort of touring the town, seeing what's left and what's changed. Didn't see anyone I knew. But in the park I heard music coming from the top of that steel pole they put up. First pleasant music, like from the circus or an ice cream truck; then it turned weird, like the background to some old Lon Chaney movie. What is that, Dad?"

Without taking his eyes off the birds he said, "Just the air raid siren. There's one over on the other side of town on top the fire station. You remember, they use them to warn people a tornado is coming. Guess they don't do that in Chicago. Remember 1965, when the big oak by the Red Owl got torn up? Boy, that was some mess to clean up. Lucky the tree missed those big plate glass windows. Could have been worse."

"I remember. We were on our way to church when you spotted it, and backed up the entire length of our street at about 50 miles an hour. Then we all ran down into the basement, and stood in the corner where the shower is now until the storm passed."

We watched a couple of sparrows splashing in the bird bath. Whatever was in the park, it wasn't an air raid siren. But if he wasn't going to talk about it, well, he just wasn't.

"Dad, I'm going in and take a little nap before Mary Jane comes to get me. She's got some sort of ladies night with the old gang planned, and I might be out a little late. Don't both-

er to wait up. But please, leave the back light on."

"You and your lights. You learned that in the big city, I suppose. No need to worry. Nothing bad is going to happen here. And when are you going to spend a little time with your old dad? Seems like all you do is run off with this friend or that and eat out. Eat, sleep and party. Is that what you do at home, too?"

"No, Dad." I kissed his cheek. "At home I mostly work. That's why it's such a treat to be here. Don't let me sleep past five. We'll talk while we wait for Mary Jane, and I'll tell you all about my exciting life in the big city, okay? Please, don't forget the light. I hate coming home to a dark house."

Shaking his head, he smiled and went back to his birds. I napped lightly, dreaming so much it didn't feel like sleeping. I saw myself back in the park, climbing that steel pole. I'd hooked my fingers over the edge of the basket at the top, and was just pulling myself up for a look when my dad's knock woke me. His voice came from the other side of the door. "You said you wanted to get up at five, and it's five."

"Thanks, I'm awake." The dream was still vivid, as was the sense of anticipation I felt as my fingers scrambled over the bottom of the metal basket. I could almost see inside. Almost see what was making the music. If I'd told Dad quarter after five, perhaps my curiosity would have been satisfied then.

The next day was my cousin's wedding, beginning with a high mass at noon. I even went to Communion to please my dad. Lunch and a garden reception behind the church followed. It was a beautiful day and when the festivities finally broke up, the family went over to the bride's mother's house to open gifts. I begged off, having had my fill of twenty questions asked by amateur therapists masquerading as concerned relatives.

Since it was much too fine an evening to sit in the den and watch TV, I changed my clothes, stuffed some money in my pocket, and started out walking. Drifting past the new fast

food place, I realized I was hungry. Rather than eat their homogenized glop, I headed out to the truck stop on the edge of town for some home cooking.

The doofus from high school, lately our local hero, was having pie and coffee. Nodding in recognition, I headed for a booth. Maybe it was his newly won celebrity, or maybe he had gotten older and bolder. Anyway he followed me, carrying his coffee, and slid into the booth across from me.

"Hey, Mary Beth. How you been? How's life in the Windy City?"

"Hey yourself, Bruce. Dad sent me the clipping from the paper where the Sheriff's Association gave you a citation for bravery, for saving all those folks from the dimestore fire. Pretty impressive." I never liked Bruce. But I pasted a smile on my face, thinking this is the punishment that comes from having decent manners.

"Yup." He leaned both elbows on the table. "That was quite the fire. Those folks would have all burned to death, if I hadn't been on patrol that night, and seen the smoke."

"They ever decide what started it?"

"Well, that's still under investigation. 'Fraid I can't talk about it." He smiled smugly and sipped at his coffee.

"That's a pretty fancy music system they've got at the park. The Rotary donate that?"

"There's no music in the park. I bet you're thinking of the air raid siren. That's always been there, Mary Beth. You haven't been gone so long you've forgotten the kind of tornadoes we get around here? Last spring one stripped the roof right off Vanderleugh's barn. I hear insurance paid to fix it."

"No, Bruce." I felt safe pushing the doofus. "I was in the park Friday morning, before the attendant got there. I heard music, first like at the circus and then ugly organ music. I saw you riding by in the police car. I even waved at you. You must have heard that music, too."

As his self-important little smile disappeared, he shifted his eyes finding something of overwhelming inter-

est out in the parking lot. "No music, Mary Beth. Must be those city nerves of yours acting up." Bruce skinned out of the booth. "Well, got to get back to work. Ever vigilant, you know."

Ostentatiously he settled his gun more comfortably on his hip and strutted out. I watched him drive away, remembering the time in high school when two of the football players had hung him by his ankles from the auditorium balcony. He could use a little dangling again.

As I walked back towards the park, a fat, harvest Moon slowly rose in the east, casting tangled shadows around the play equipment and under the trees. Scattered mercury lamps shed pools of blue light, contributing another, colder, layer of shadow.

This was a small town, my hometown. Without a thought I strode into the park. Approaching the pole, I heard the soft strains of a lullaby. Pausing to hear better, waves of peace and contentment rolled over me, cocooning me, urging sleep, restful sleep. I leaned against a tree, just listening, my mind calm and empty, feeling completely at peace.

I don't know how long it was before I shook my self back to awareness. What was I thinking? I couldn't sleep in the park. Anyway, I wanted to see where the music everyone denied existed was coming from. There were rungs up the side of the steel column, just like on a telephone pole. I jumped, catching the lowest one, congratulating myself as I pulled my body up and reached for the next; all my weight training and after-work exercise paying off.

A minute later I was hanging off the top rung, stymied. The structure was much wider than the pole, forcing me to lean back, like a rock climber grappling for an overhanging ledge. Determined to see into the cage, I got one hand hooked over the edge without completely letting go of the pole. I wrapped my legs tightly around the pole as it began to sway, like a ship's mast. I could feel sweat running down my ribs, the muscles in my legs burning and quivering. I should climb down, now, while I still had some strength left. Looking down and then

back up at my goal, I let go, arching back, reaching for the edge.

The touch of a wet cloth on my face woke me. I was back at my father's house, his anxious face hanging over me. Gently I pushed him away, and sat up. "I'm okay."

He was silent for a moment, hands stuffed in his pockets. "Bruce found you unconscious in the park and brought you home. Mary Beth, what happened?"

I swallowed, wishing for a glass of water. "I'm not sure. Nothing. I'm okay."

We were silent; he standing apart from me, myself looking inward, searching for the specifics of something I'd seen. Something as elusive as a shooting star.

With all the authority he could muster, like I was sixteen years old again, he said, "It's time for you to go back to Chicago, Mary Beth. The wedding's over, and you've a job to get back to."

"I'm in no rush. This is my first vacation in two years." I tried to sound reasonable, keeping any hint of truculence out of my voice.

"Then stay if you want. But keep out of the park, Mary Beth. Just stay out of the park."

I nodded slowly, knowing I was lying.

There was nothing else to do in my hometown. My friends all had lives that kept them busy. Even my father had a daily schedule that he followed: coffee with friends at the truck stop in the morning, lunch at the senior center, and a nap followed by a light dinner. He liked the Chinese spare ribs I cooked for him, but I don't think he cared much for the turkey enchiladas.

Two nights later, I headed back to the park. I felt silly dressing all in black. Maybe I'd seen too many movies. I'd even found a navy-blue ski hat left over from my tobogganing days, the itchy wool covered my blonde hair nicely.

I walked down empty sidewalks, staying under the overhanging limbs of old maple trees, keeping to their deep shadows. The Moon was hidden, and the air damp with the threat of late

night thunderstorms. I reached the park and pulled the ski mask over my face. Hiding behind some bushes and feeling both foolish and tense, I watched the surrounding houses and streets carefully for a full half hour by my watch. A few cars passed. By ten o'clock even that light traffic ceased.

The entire time I waited, I could hear it; soft, almost inaudible chords. It might have been the wind in someone's garden chimes. But the tones where too varied, carrying a deliberate melody. I bided my time and kept watch. At a quarter to eleven, a police cruiser glided slowly past. Nothing else moved. The neighboring houses were dark. Fog gathered over the warm water of the swimming pool, drifting in wisps and misty clouds between the slides and swings.

By eleven-thirty, I was sure I was alone, and that it was safe to climb that pole. I crouched and crept swiftly, and just as quickly the tempo of the muted music increased, almost out of the range of my hearing. But I heard.

I heard, and as I remembered that pole, I felt. Never had any music so completely mirrored my feelings; listening to one note follow another was like listening to myself breathe, like listening to my own heartbeat. It was as if that music matched my soul, passion for passion. All the love and the disappointment, the yearnings I never identified even in my deepest meditations were sounded out. This music was more perfect than humanly possible, more caring than God. It reached inside me, and something came close to breaking.

This time I was more careful. As I reached out and back, I kept my feet firmly wrapped in the steel rungs. Cautiously, I drew myself up and peered over the edge, looking into a large cage. For one nearly eternal moment I saw my mother, vital and strong with her long blonde hair hanging loose, like it did before she got cancer, and the disease first took her beauty, and then her life. Reaching up, I fumbled with the cage door, wondering why, why she remained a prisoner when she could so easily have escaped. In a shimmer of rainbow light, my mother disappeared, and Frank stood in front

of me, darkly handsome in his sharp-cased uniform. Finally, the wire door swung open. Hanging on with one hand, I reached to touch him. The creature surged towards me in hot waves of brilliant color. Overwhelmed, I put my hands up to shield my face, and fell.

"It was lonely. You can't imagine how alone," I said, certain I had done the right thing in releasing it.

Seeing my father's anguish made me want to reach out and touch him, offer some sort of comfort. Lines and creases I had never noticed scarred his face. A stubble of gray covered his cheeks, like moss on an old oak tree.

He was quiet for a long time, staring at the carpet as though he could see through the Earth to the other side of the universe. "We talked about it, all of us. But none of us could do it. We couldn't give it up. Jack Peters, he saw his wife Betsy. She's been gone near five years. Said she talked to him once. Remember little Timmy Cross, drowned in the river when you kids were, what, five? His parents saw him. I thought in time, maybe I'd see your brother. That I'd get a chance to tell him how sorry I am, take back some of the things I said. That I never wanted for him to be a soldier. We loved it, and took good care of it." His clasped hands hung between his knees. He would not look at me.

"But love isn't enough, Dad. You can't hold on to something like that forever." I could still see its golden eyes in a sharpened, pale face, before that tidal wave of joy knocked me from my perch, tossing me into a sandy play area. My entire body felt bruised. I was lucky. I could have easily been killed.

Finally he raised his eyes to meet mine. "Why don't you go to bed, Mary Beth? It's been a long day. A long day for all of us. And would you lock the garage door on your way? And leave the back light on."

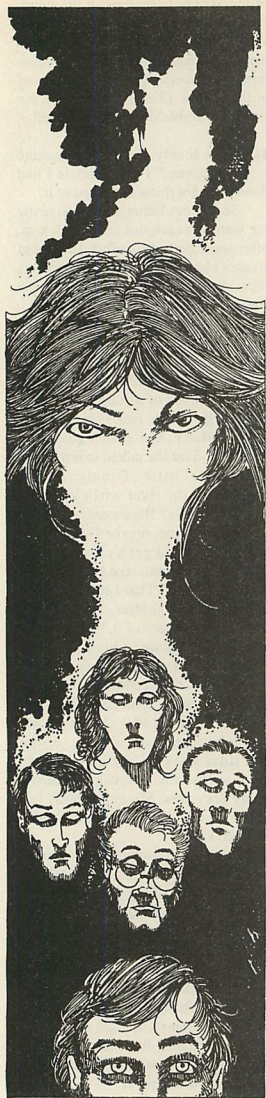
I stayed in town awhile longer, spending time with Dad until his hints about my job escalated into a formal invitation to leave, and get on with my life. He'd be fine. Just fine. And I'd try to get home a little more often. I want to go back to the park. ■

SNEAK THIEF

Don D'Ammassa

Illustrated by Bob Hobbs

She was a thief, and she was very sneaky



Although I consider myself a competent observer, I was totally unprepared for the unique threat posed by Heather Angeli.

I remember the day she moved in. It was a humid Saturday morning in August. Jennifer, Alice, and I were sitting on the front steps, drinking lemonade and hoping for an ice-cream truck. Westwood, the only rooming house in Managansett, managed to trap heat with remarkable efficiency. Only air conditioning would have made it bearable inside, and if any of us had been able to afford such a luxury, we would have been living elsewhere in the first place.

Alice was alternately enticing me toward yet another suicidal chess game and enlightening us with a no-doubt accurate analysis of the demographic reasons why the Masai culture in Kenya could not survive absorption by the Kikuyu. I listened closely enough to nod at appropriate places without actually following the argument. Although I admired Alice's sophistication and insight, she was at least in her late fifties while Jennifer, on the other hand, was twenty-five, attractive, and available.

Our landlady's battered Volkswagen pulled up to the curb, followed closely by a taxi, distracting me from a surreptitious examination of Jennifer's tanned knees. A young woman emerged from the cab, painfully slender, skin unusually pale for this late in the summer. Her eyes were dark with long black lashes and she walked tentatively, as though unsure of her footing. I suspected immediately that she was recovering from a long illness; she had the look of someone who hadn't been out in the sun for weeks, perhaps months.

Jeri Kaplan, who managed Westwood, introduced us.

"Heather, this is Alice Henneberg, our most senior tenant, and Jennifer Lee, our newest. Until today anyway." Alice smiled and nodded while Jennifer stood and offered her hand, which Heather accepted after a momentary hesitation. It wasn't rudeness, exactly. She seemed to be confused by social cues, uncertain of the proper response. When her head turned in my direction, I realized that behind that pallor, framed by the fine, shoulder-length black hair, lurked a face of truly appalling plainness.

"And this is Alex Clausen, our writer in residence." Since Heather's arm had dropped back to her side, I simply nodded and smiled noncommittally. To be truthful, I felt a mild revulsion toward the young woman, and while vaguely ashamed of my reaction, I was reluctant to actually touch her.

"Heather is taking the empty apartment on the second floor," Jeri explained. "I hope you'll all make her feel welcome."

Room 202 had been vacant since Paul Caldarone picked up stakes and moved on. We made polite noises of welcome while the taxi driver grumbled impatiently in the background. I offered to carry her bags upstairs and she nodded so casually, as if expecting no less, that I was mildly offended.

Upstairs, I made a hasty excuse and left while Jeri was apologizing for the poor ventilation, hurrying back outside into the comparatively cool air.

"Another inmate in the asylum." Jennifer sounded less than enthusiastic as she leaned back against the railing to let me pass. Her shorts rode high on her thighs, but I still couldn't spot

the tan line. She had extraordinarily good legs, perhaps her best feature, slender but well muscled, probably because she spent so much time playing racquetball.

"Poor girl looks like she's been sick," Alice suggested. In my absence, she'd started another game of chess, this time playing both sides.

I was about to organize a walk down to the corner for ice cream when I was forestalled by the arrival of another Westwood tenant, Henry Davidson. I always felt overwhelmed in Henry's presence, physically at least. His hobby was bodybuilding, and he worked out religiously both at home and at the gymnasium and racquetball club down near the Scituate border. I'm an active if not an athletic person, but I must confess to an irrational feeling of inferiority in Henry's company. The man positively radiated physical fitness. In his presence, colors seemed brighter, sounds crisper, life rich and full of potential.

"Hello, people. What's new?"

Alice gave him a brief account of our new neighbor.

"Sounds good, having a young girl around." Henry quickly realized his mistake. "Another one, I mean." He nodded to Jennifer, who smiled politely. There was some unresolved conflict between the two of them, and although neither spoke of it, the coolness was hard to miss. Which left the field open for me.

But there was a new player in the game.

I'd expected Heather to have a minimal impact on our lives, but she made her presence felt very quickly. The following morning, she told Alice about her recent recovery from a grave but unspecified illness. "I just need some peace and quiet, till I get back on my feet."

Henry, more enthusiastic, accompanied her on increasingly lengthy walks around town "to help get her strength back." Sometimes he ran errands on her behalf when she wasn't feeling up to the challenge. I never quite understood the nature of their friendship, which was not overtly sexual in any discernible fashion. On the

other hand, I once caught them sunbathing in the small yard behind Westwood. Henry appeared to have dozed off but Heather was sitting upright, slowly running her fingers along his arms and legs, tracing the curves of the muscles, then echoing the motion on her own body. The systematic, almost clinical way she did it made me very uncomfortable and I slipped away before she saw me.

Heather's health and appearance continued to improve, her frame gradually filling out. While Henry remained her most frequent companion, she gained enough self-confidence to take tentative steps toward the rest of us. The only lingering evidence of her physical problem was an awkward lack of coordination that betrayed itself in occasional small accidents, stumbles, a bottle of soda dropped down the stairwell, other minor incidents.

I didn't dislike Heather, but despite the healthy glow in her cheeks and some additional meat on her bones, she remained an unusually unattractive young woman. And a dull one as well. Our conversations, always brief, dealt with such compelling topics as the weather, how helpful Henry had been, what she had eaten recently, and so on. She was invariably superficial and colorless and I was puzzled by Henry's obvious infatuation. Alice abandoned an early attempt to teach her chess, Jennifer was unable to interest her in a shopping trip to Providence, and my occasional attempts at conversation were less than scintillating.

Temperatures continued higher than normal, but heat or no heat, I had to get some writing done. It was cooler after the sun fell, so I spent a late August night typing until almost dawn. The following afternoon, I carried the manuscript down to the front steps to work it over with a red pencil.

"Whatcha doing?"

The unexpected words spoken inches from my ear were so startling that I dropped part of the manuscript. When I bent to retrieve the loose pages, Heather squatted beside me and offered awkward assistance.

"Sorry. Didn't mean to scare you."

"That's all right. Here, let me take those."

She was holding two pages, and I saw her eyes move from left to right, obviously reading but with a puzzled expression as though the words held no meaning for her. "What is this?"

"It's a story I'm working on. Just a draft."

"Why?"

"Why? Because this damn heat makes it hard to work." I felt oddly disconcerted in her presence, and was already rehearsing excuses to go back inside.

"No, I mean why do you write stories?"

There were many answers to that question. I selected the one I thought she'd find most convincing. "Because I get paid to do it." Pause. "Sometimes," I added in a moment of honesty.

"Can't be much if you're living here." Her eyes strayed eloquently back to the front door of Westwood as she handed me the pages.

"There are other rewards. I enjoy the act of creation. I take my experiences and shape them into a new form that other people find entertaining."

"You give away a part of yourself? Why would you do such a thing?"

"It's not a gift; it's a kind of sharing. I don't lose anything in the process."

"Are you sure?" It was an odd question, spoken with great intensity, and I was still trying to think of an answer when she stood up and left without another word.

The first tragedy came almost one month following Heather's arrival. I hadn't seen Henry for several days, but we'd never interacted regularly and I assumed Heather was still his major preoccupation. I was dividing my own time between bouts of writing and an admittedly fitful pursuit of Jennifer. Although I would not have characterized her as beautiful, Jennifer was attractive and pleasant company and responded encouragingly to my cautious advances.

My most recent novel came back with an apologetic rejection, but I had

two major short story sales in the same week and, all in all, I felt pretty good about life. Until Alice broke the news about Henry's leukemia.

There had been no indication anything was wrong until Henry collapsed, apparently in a faint, during a strenuous workout at the gym. He recovered consciousness quickly enough but remained obviously shaken, and two of his friends overrode his objections and bundled him over to the emergency room in Providence for a quick checkup. They admitted him two hours later.

The next few weeks were a burden for all of us. Henry's few relatives had either died or fallen out of touch, and his acquaintances from the gym seemed to evaporate as quickly as his own formerly robust health. Those of us at Westwood who considered Henry our friend informally scheduled ourselves so that someone would be with him every day, but I have to admit that the speed of his decline was so depressing, I dreaded my turns at his bedside. To her credit, Heather spent more time with him than the rest of us, sometimes riding the bus with Alice, or driving in with either Jennifer or myself. She was still unattractive and uninteresting as far as I was concerned, but with color in her cheeks and a bit more flesh on her frame, I no longer felt actively repelled.

But she was definitely the most boring and ignorant person I'd ever known.

"You're not being fair." Jennifer reproached me. "She's not as dumb as you make her out to be."

"Come off it, Jenny. I don't mean to pick on the woman, but sometimes I think she might even be a little bit retarded. She thought Philadelphia was a state, remember? You're more intelligent asleep than she is awake." I realized I was overreacting and took a deep breath. "All right, I'm sorry. She might not be particularly bright, but she's been a better friend to Henry than I have, so I've got no business criticizing her."

Jennifer held her glare a few seconds longer, then allowed it to soften, reached over and patted my knee. We

hadn't slept together yet, but we were moving in that direction.

"Okay, so maybe there's some things she's not too bright about, but that doesn't make her stupid, does it? Alice taught her to play chess while they were keeping Henry company, and she's doing pretty well for a beginner. Maybe she just never had a chance to learn things until now."

Shortly before Henry's hospitalization, Heather had started keeping company with a young man her own age, Nick something or other; I never did learn his last name although I met him a few times. Nick struggled to survive on the meager income he earned working as a ballet dancer for the Rhode Island Performing Arts Company and several semi-professional troupes. Once it became obvious that Henry was never going to leave the hospital, Heather began to see Nick more frequently, although she never missed her turn at Henry's bedside. Tactfully, she never brought her new boyfriend along.

Henry died two evenings before Christmas.

I remember it well because it was the same night that Jennifer and I first made love. Neither of us ever spoke about the unpleasant coincidence of the timing, but it remained an unspoken barrier complicating our relationship, the first indication that we had peaked as a couple and were already sliding toward the downside.

We all attended the funeral, even Nick, although I doubt he'd ever met Henry. Clearly he felt like an interloper; I found myself sympathizing with his discomfort, and attempted to involve him in a casual conversation to break the tension. Jennifer and I followed the two of them through the cemetery; Alice had gone ahead with Jeri Kaplan.

The Managansett cemetery might have been pretty if it had been better maintained; there were none of those cheerless flat expanses so common elsewhere, but rather a series of rolling slopes dotted with gravestones placed randomly in the grass. I remember at one point Nick stumbled over a half-concealed marker. Heather turned and

caught his arm, steadying him effortlessly, displaying an agility I would never have expected from her.

At the time, I saw it as just one more bit of evidence that she was recovering her health. Later, the incident took on much greater significance.

The new year was less than joyous. Alice collapsed in upon herself and didn't visit with us as much as she had previously, although she still showed up in the first floor lounge from time to time for a game of chess. Heather acquired an insatiable taste for the game, and invariably won on those occasions when she browbeat me into playing against her. She even defeated Alice a few times, and her willingness to listen attentively while Alice lectured her on the economic interpretation of the American Revolution or the evolution of the social contract seemed infinite.

One afternoon she asked me how Alice ever came to know so much.

"I guess she just absorbs knowledge like a sponge. She's always reading or watching PBS."

"She really amazes me. I wish I could be like that."

It seemed a perfectly innocuous conversation.

"Heather really seems to be blossoming lately," I ventured one evening in March while Jennifer and I were watching a rented movie in her room.

"So you said yesterday, and the day before. Can't you talk about something else for a change?" Jennifer sounded annoyed and I realized my comment had been less than tactful. Our affair had not become stormy, but the clouds were beginning to gather. We'd been intimate enough to discover each other's rough edges, and while I felt that our relationship grew stronger with each hurdle passed, we did occasionally quarrel.

"I'm sorry," I replied. "She's a friend of yours, too, isn't she? I notice the two of you spend a lot of time at the racquetball club together."

"What's that supposed to mean?" Definitely angry now.

"It's not supposed to mean anything." I straightened up on the couch, surprised at her tone. She'd been irritable all day and I was starting to feel a little annoyed myself.

It might have turned into a serious argument, but just as we were rattling our sabers, there came a tentative knock on the door. Jennifer glared a clear warning that the subject was not closed as she uncrossed her legs and stood up to answer it.

Alice Henneberg stood just outside, her eyes glittering with unshed tears, hands clasped in front of her chest, the fingers of one hand squeezing those of the other.

"Please, Jennifer, I'm dreadfully sorry to bother you." Her voice was thin, brittle with near hysteria.

"That's perfectly all right, Alice. Why don't you come in? What's wrong?"

Alice shook her head and remained outside. "No, I don't want to impose. I just wondered if you might give me some directions." Her calm evaporated at that point and the tears flowed freely. "I don't seem to be able to find my room, you see." And then Jennifer's arms were around her and Alice was sobbing heavily, despairingly.

It was diagnosed as Alzheimer's Disease, and Alice was moved to a nursing home three days later.

Spring came and our moods lightened. Alice's absence was like a missing tooth; we kept worrying at the empty space with our mental tongues. Jennifer and I were back on good terms; the first flush of romance had faded, replaced by an easy intimacy that I found reassuring.

Heather and Nick had parted ways during the waning months of winter. He slipped on an icy staircase somewhere and broke his leg. Whatever had existed between them must have been even more fragile, because it failed to survive their separation.

Jennifer's brief animosity toward Heather vanished as well, and she finally engineered a shopping trip.

"It was like a kid in a toyshop, Alex. You should have seen her. Do you know that she's never worn make-

up in her life?" Jennifer made it sound like a form of child abuse. "I'm going to have to teach her everything."

I continued to earn a living with my typewriter, turning out a steady stream of sometimes saleable stories, making just enough to pay the rent and keep food on the table. Jennifer worked three nights a week at Foodworld running a cash register, so I set aside those evenings as dedicated creative time. I've never been troubled by writer's block, so adapting my work schedule was a simple task.

And then one evening, there was an unexpected knock on my door.

"Hi! Got a minute?" It was Heather, eyes downcast, wearing a patterned blouse with the two top buttons undone. She had filled out considerably during the past several months, and Jennifer's crashcourse in cosmetics had clearly been a success.

"Sure," I answered uneasily, swinging the door wide. "Want to come in? The place is a mess but I think we can find a couple of chairs that aren't completely buried in the clutter."

"I don't want to interrupt if you're busy. I know you've been writing; I could hear the typewriter from down the hall."

Heather took the seat I indicated and crossed her legs demurely. She had changed hairstyles recently, and health and physical well being had remolded her features. While I still would not have called her beautiful, there was no doubt that she had shed the pale ugliness that put me off when she first arrived. In the dim light, from the right angle, she actually looked rather pretty.

"No problem. I've reached a snag anyway. I usually take a break when that happens and let my unconscious sort things out."

"What's the problem? Maybe I can help."

I laughed, but her expression remained serious, and I was suddenly conscious of the fact that I might hurt her feelings. "All right, but you'll have to understand the background first."

My latest project continued the adventures of my recurring detective,

Victoria Sanders, and the critical scene depended upon one character's ability to copy a data file from the murderer's computer. Every time I wrote the scene, the murder came across as hopelessly inept or careless, and that conflicted with the way I'd drawn the character earlier.

"Couldn't the hero rig the computer so it made a copy of anything entered?"

I shrugged. "Not plausibly. Remember, he only has a few minutes of access before the critical scene, and the data hasn't been inputted yet, so he can't steal it until later."

"Could there be a modem? Nick had one on his PC."

I was surprised she knew so much about computers; maybe she wasn't quite as dumb as I had always believed. "Maybe, but there'd still be some kind of security system."

We talked about it for a few more minutes without finding a satisfactory solution, and I was genuinely surprised by Heather's mental quickness.

"Nick was always talking about computer stuff," she explained, "and I guess I picked up more than I realized."

I completely forgot to ask the purpose of her unexpected visit, a puzzle which didn't occur to me again until long after she was gone.

It was a few more weeks before I began to suspect that Heather was making a play for me. I suppose I should have noticed sooner, but my experience in such cases is pretty limited. Although I'm not exactly unattractive, I was rather self-absorbed throughout high school and college, and dated infrequently. When I did finally notice the change in her attitude, I have to admit I was flattered.

But I remained faithful in deed if not in thought.

When Heather stopped by my room that last Friday evening in June, she told me her toilet was backed up and asked to use mine. Considering my own recurring problems with Westwood's plumbing, I saw no reason to doubt her story. I never expected her to emerge naked from my bathroom, intent upon seducing me. Jennifer was home that evening, so even

if I had felt inclined to cheat on her, I would at least have locked the door first.

"Heather! What in the world—"

"I want to be with you, Alex," she answered breathlessly. "I want to share with you."

I raised my arms to ward her off as she approached, which was precisely the moment when Jennifer walked in. I can imagine how it must have looked, and I was caught so totally off-guard that I couldn't even speak. Jennifer didn't say anything either, just looked back and forth between the two of us and walked away.

I did make an effort to straighten things out. While I can't pretend that I was in love with Jennifer, I valued our relationship and wanted it to continue. But I never had a chance to explain. The situation changed too quickly.

Jennifer had been bothered by the sudden appearance of a rash earlier that month, and had finally gone to see an allergist. Less than a week after the night she stormed out of my apartment, her doctor administered a fresh battery of tests and sent her to a specialist. Fortunately, the rare degenerative skin disease was diagnosed early enough that they felt confident she would recover completely, in time, and they hoped to minimize the scarring.

Jennifer moved back to her parents' home in Vermont. She promised to stay in touch, but never answered any of my letters.

I began to see Heather more frequently, but neither of us ever referred to the attempt at seduction and our relationship was strictly casual thereafter. Heather did most of the talking when we were together; although I never saw her with a book, she seemed to have absorbed volumes of new knowledge and often reminded me of Alice. Now that she was fully recovered from her illness, she acquired an undeniable sexiness, and properly made up she was pretty enough to attract the attention of passing strangers.

Heather found herself a job working with a semi-professional ballet company in Providence, apparently

having demonstrated significant natural talent. If she'd been a character in one of my stories, it would have been a triumphant plot, the return from adversity and the transformation into a talented, competent adult.

But something about the story rang false, although I never suspected the truth until today.

Earlier this evening, I was working in the small sitting room which I laughingly refer to as my office. The chapter I've labored over for the past several weeks has been an endless struggle, each word resisting my efforts. I've thrown out paragraphs, even pages, without being able to force the words to flow. I haven't finished a short story in well over a month, and find it difficult to concentrate on what I'm doing. After two hours of frustration, I threw the latest version of chapter five into my wastebasket and decided to take a break and see if Heather was home.

She greeted me with her usual cheerfulness and invited me in.

"I thought we might open this?" I held up the wine bottle I'd snagged from under my sink.

"What's the occasion?"

I shrugged. "I don't know. If we have enough to drink, I might be able to think one up."

"Sounds good to me. Wait, I'll get us a couple of glasses."

When she disappeared into the kitchen, I wandered into her equivalent of my office, the small windowless room where she kept her television. Since the last time I'd visited, she'd made an addition.

A shiny new portable typewriter sat in the middle of the coffee table.

"What's this?" I pointed with one hand while accepting a glass with the other.

"It's called a typewriter. I thought you author types were familiar with them."

"I know it's a typewriter." My enthusiasm for this meeting wilted; silent alarms were beginning to clamor for attention. "What's it for?"

"Open the wine, will you?" She ignored my question while I poured us each a drink, perhaps to consider pos-

sible answers. "Mmmm, good." She sat down and placed her glass beside the typewriter.

"It's not really a secret, Alex, but I'm a little embarrassed about it. You see, it was so interesting listening to you talk about your writing, you know, how you create people and places and control events and everything. Well, I thought that was something I'd like to try too. I know I'll never amount to anything as a writer; I don't have that kind of talent, but I thought it would be fun."

I remembered Heather's illness before Henry nursed her back to health, how superficial her knowledge of the world had been until she'd subsequently revealed a sophistication that rivaled Alice's. Nick would never dance in the ballet again, but he might some day see his ex-girlfriend appear on a stage professionally, a girl whose physical appearance had improved as dramatically as Jennifer's had declined.

And then I looked at the sparkling new typewriter and the open box of paper set neatly to one side, remembering the thirty pages of typescript I had thrown into the wastebasket just before coming downstairs.

I am very frightened. ■



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