

SUMMER 1998  
NUMBER 594

# AMAZING STORIES®

Cover Story

## Recensions

by Diane Duane

## The Island of the Immortals

by Ursula K. Le Guin

## Please Don't Play with the Time Machine

by James Tiptree, Jr.

VOLUME 70 ISSUE 2 • WOC36001

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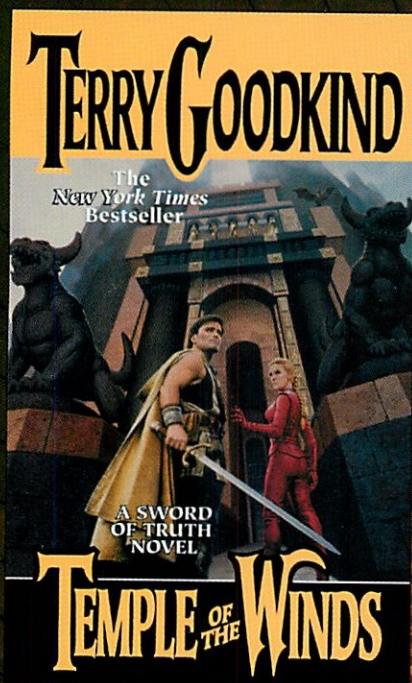
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Commentary from  
Gregory Benford  
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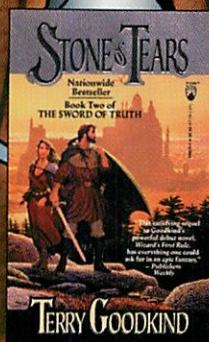
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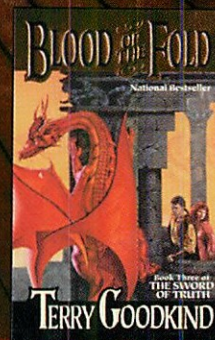
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# AMAZING STORIES

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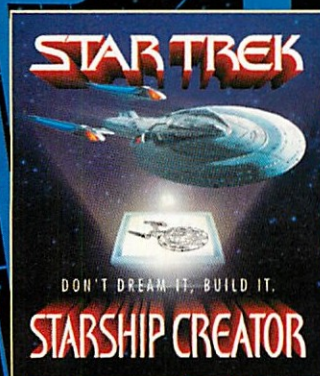
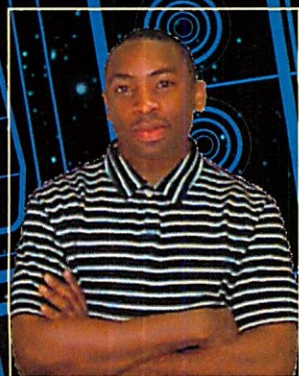
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Dispatches

# First Issue Feedback

"This strikes a fine nostalgic chord for me."

## Already I'm Hooked

To the editor:

I'm 14 years old, which means I was about 10 or 11 and hadn't yet been introduced to Sci-fi when *Amazing Stories* stopped printing. But in the last year and a half, as I have been sucked into the parallel universe that makes up the world of imagination and futuristic dreams and fears, I've seen many posters and pictures of the old magazine covers, heard the mag mentioned in reviews and books. I wondered what happened to it.

A few days ago I was in a bookstore near my home and came across *Amazing Stories* no. 593. And bought it. I haven't done anything yet but read the Editor's Note and the reprinted letters (which were very funny, by the way), and already I'm hooked on the magazine.

Please keep printing! Give me a few days each month in my own sci-fi world just like you have the last few generations! Why should the last of the Gen-Xers have to suffer through life without science fiction? Apparently you guys are some of the few people who think we shouldn't!

EMILY MILLER  
via email

## Met His Expectations

Editor, *Amazing Stories*:

I would like to thank you for the rebirth of *Amazing Stories*. Like the phoenix, *Amazing Stories* has risen, and will continue to amaze and entertain us. It is somewhat difficult to imagine that the magazine, first published in 1926 by my uncle Hugo Gernsback, is still alive and well. Hugo would never have believed that this publication, started so long ago, would reach into the new millennium.

I thoroughly enjoyed reading the first issue. The stories are excellent, and the publication itself reflects the attention to detail that Hugo always insisted on.

"Science fiction," Hugo said in an address to the M.I.T. Science Fiction Society many years ago, "must first and foremost deal with futures." You have met his expectations, and I suspect you will

succeed in making *Amazing Stories* the marvel of the new generation, for they are, without a doubt, our future.

PATRICK G. MERCHANT  
Johnstown, PA

## Write from Love

Dear Kim,

Bruce Sterling's "It All Started by Being Amazing" [in issue #593] is a knowledgeable and most heartening statement of ideals and hope for the future of ambitious, realistic science fiction. It shows that Sterling belongs to the serious-minded rogue elephants of the field, who write from love, need money only to keep on writing and thinking about their art and craft, and care for little else in the way of corrupting rewards.

As another such rogue elephant trying to swim in the sea of commerce and do good work, I applaud your publication of such a statement. Genuine SF can make money, by offering what you can't just manufacture; but you think of the money last. As Fred Pohl once said to me, "When I chased the cash, I never got it; but when I did what I love most, the money found me." Not only is Bruce Sterling a Clarke figure with a better haircut—he's almost James Blish. Hurrah!

GEORGE ZEBROWSKI  
Delmar, NY

## Electro Corrections

Dear Mr. Mohan,

I'd like to point out a few errors in the Electro Games article in the first new issue of *Amazing Stories*.

First, *Klingon Honor Guard* and *Star Trek: TNG: Birth of the Federation* are both being developed and published by MicroProse, not Interplay. Also, *Falcon 4.0* will not be a DVD-only product. It will ship on an ordinary CD-ROM disc.

I would, of course, be more than happy to provide accurate, completely biased information regarding *Birth of the Federation*, should you wish to grace us with more coverage.

Congratulations on the resurrection of *Amazing Stories*. It looks great.

JEFF HOLZHAUER  
Producer, *Star Trek: Birth of the Federation*  
via email

## Destined for Success

Dear Kim,

Yesterday I opened my mailbox to find the first issue of *Amazing's* latest and most auspicious incarnation smiling up at me. Congratulations, Kim. What you've achieved is eclectic, electric, and destined for success. Let me also salute your art director, who has two of the best eyeballs in the business.

JAMES MORROW  
State College, PA

## Shiny and Bright

Dear Kim:

The first issue of the latest *Amazing* incarnation arrived today. It is, well, astounding to see the magazine come stalking back from the dead yet again, shiny and bright. And interesting to see that this time around you have revived the logo that was on the magazine when I first discovered it in 1948. It was fun having the archaic comet-tail back last time, but this strikes a fine nostalgic chord for me.

ROBERT SILVERBERG  
Oakland, CA

## Suitably Stunned

Kim—

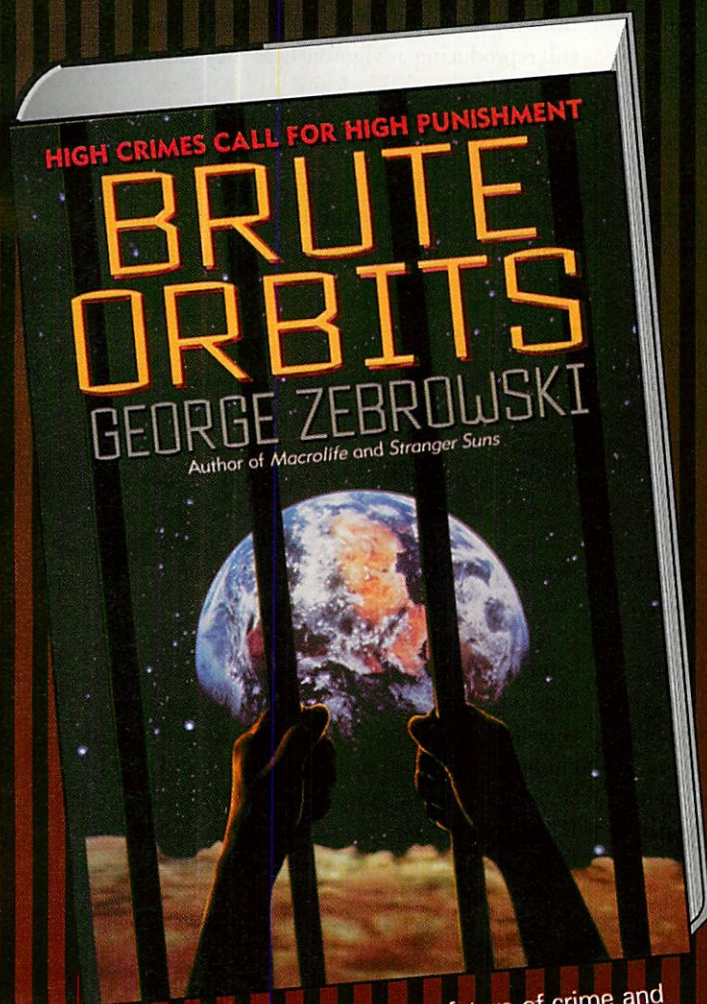
Just received a copy of the first issue of the reborn *Amazing*, and I'm suitably stunned! A beautiful magazine, full of design brilliance and finely chosen fiction. Loved the mix of old and new. Many congratulations, and wishing you a continuation of this feat!

PAUL DiFILIPPO  
Providence, RI

*We want to hear from you. Tell us what you think of the magazine, and what we can do to make it even better. Write to Dispatches, Amazing Stories, P.O. Box 707, Renton WA 98057-0707, or send email to kmohan@wizards.com. We reserve the right to edit letters for brevity or content.*



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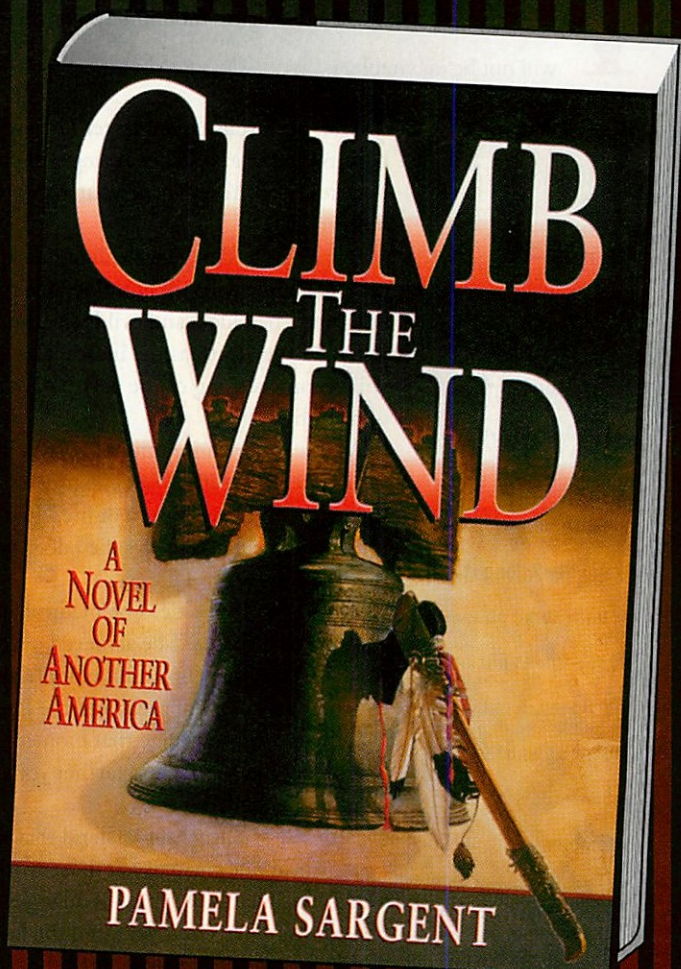


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# You Might Live Forever

**T**HE FIRST IMMORTAL HUMAN BEINGS ARE LIVING AMONG US TODAY. YOU MIGHT BE ONE OF THEM.

Men and women alive today may well be able to live for centuries, perhaps even extend their lifespans indefinitely. For them, death will not be inevitable.

## July 1939

With so many inventors, and groups of inventors today claiming their ability to construct a practical space ship, given the funds, we wonder how long it will be until some philanthropist does put up the money. A million is a lot, but what is a philanthropist if not a gambler?

*"The Observatory by The Editor," B. G. Davis*



The immortals will not age. They will not become feeble and sickly. Aging will be stopped, even reversed. You may be young and vigorous forever.

Accidents and violence will not disappear, of course. People will still be vulnerable to poor judgment, bad luck, and evildoers. But death from old age, death as the inescapable end of life, will become a thing of the past, a dark memory of primitive days.

As the American immunologist William R. Clark put it, "Death is not inextricably intertwined with the definition of life." Just because human beings have always died does not mean that they always will die.

Time is on your side. The medical and biological advances that will be achieved over the next ten to twenty years will undoubtedly allow you to live long past one hundred; and the longer you live, the more knowledge that biomedical scientists glean, the farther and farther your life span will be extended.

Very few scientists understand that immortality is within our grasp. Even those working in the fields of cellular biology, molecular genetics, and life extension have not yet faced the fact that current research has already opened the path to human immortality.

## Immortal Cells

In the 1970s the American cellular biologist Leonard Hayflick discovered that most types of human cells have a natural limit to the number of times they can divide, or reproduce.

Some types of cells, such as those that produce

red and white blood corpuscles, can divide millions of times. Others, such as most nerve cells, do not reproduce at all. If a cell's Hayflick limit is fifty, for example, it will divide fifty times and then become senescent. It withers and dies.

When enough of our cells die, we die.

But some cells have no Hayflick limit. Barring trauma from outside, they are immortal. They can be killed, but they do not age.

The "lowly" bacteria are immortal. They can be killed—by starvation, radiation, lack of water, or being eaten by another organism. But they do not age. Bacteria keep on dividing forever, until some outside agency kills them.

Cancer cells are similarly immortal. They keep on dividing and dividing, endlessly, unless they are killed or their host dies. "HeLa" cells, taken from the tumor of Henrietta Lacks in 1951, are still reproducing as vigorously as they did nearly fifty years ago.

Human ova and sperm cells also show no Hayflick limit.

Why can some cells keep on going and going like the pink bunny in the TV commercials, while others curl up and die after a certain number of divisions?

## Telomeres

Some biogerontologists (scientists who study aging) believe the answer lies in our telomeres.

Inside the nucleus of every cell in your body are the long strands or filaments called chromosomes. Human cells have forty-six chromosomes, except for the sex cells, which have half that number. The chromosomes contain DNA. And DNA makes up the cell's genes.

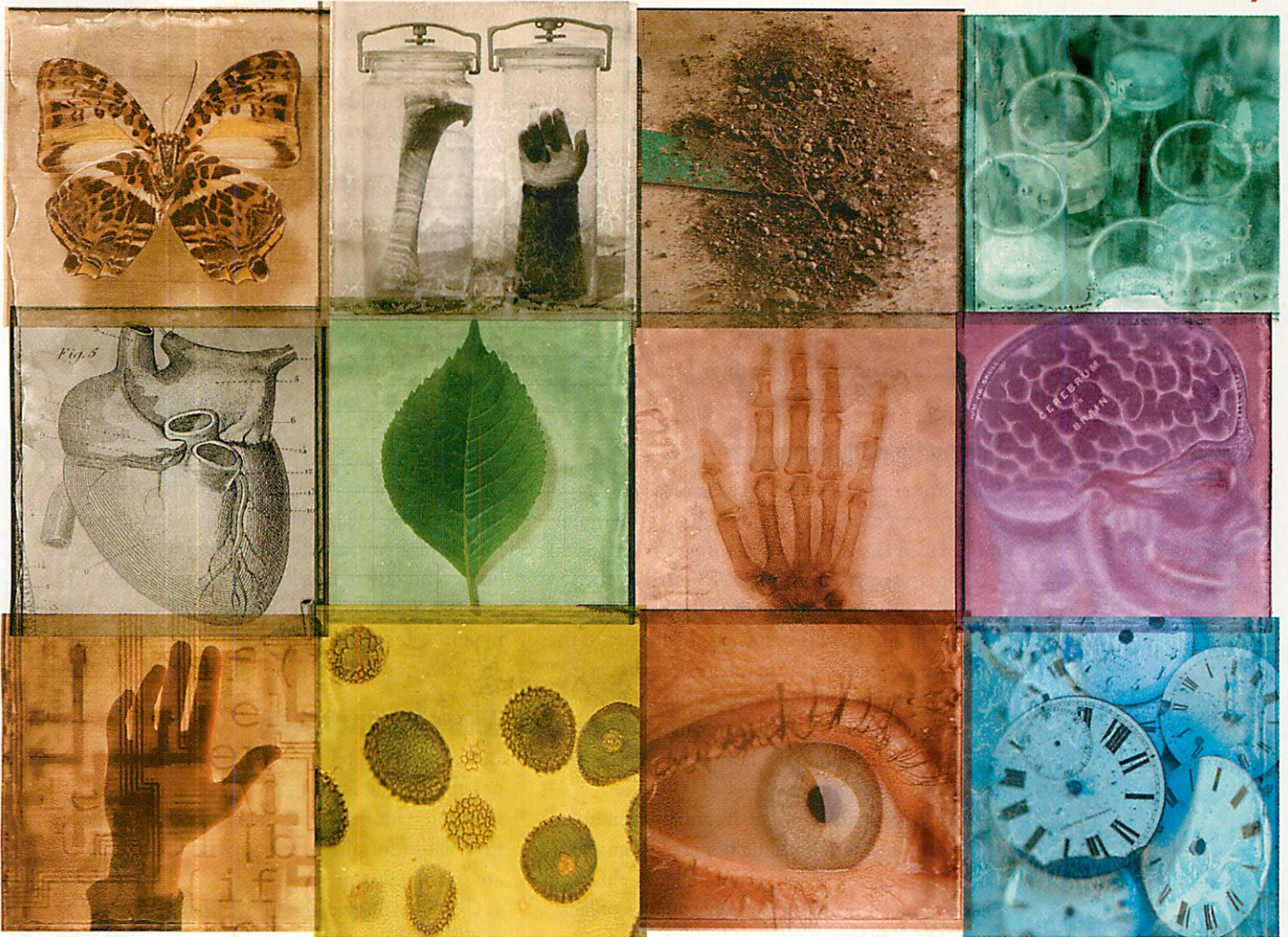
At the tip of each spindle-shaped chromosome is a sort of cap, called a telomere. Telomeres somewhat resemble the aglets on the ends of shoelaces. The telomeres keep the ends of the chromosomes from sticking together, and from sticking onto other chromosomes. Bacterial DNA does not have telomere caps, and tends to loop itself into a ragged circle, like a snake swallowing its tail.

Telomeres keep the individual strands of DNA in our cells from looping or connecting to one another. They also play an intriguing role in cellular aging. Some researchers believe that telomeres are a sort of cellular clock that sets the rate at which the cells age and eventually die.

Each time a cell divides, its telomeres shorten. When the telomeres become short enough, cell division stops and the cell soon dies. But cancer cells regrow their telomeres after every division.

Michael Fossel, professor of clinical medicine at Michigan State University, says quite clearly,





"Telomeres [are] the clocks of aging." He and other researchers believe that telomere shortening is responsible for cellular aging and, eventually, cellular death.

Most biologists do not accept so simple an explanation. And yet . . .

In January 1998, researchers announced that they had extended the life span of human cells "indefinitely" in a laboratory experiment in which telomerase was added to the cells.

Telomerase is the enzyme that essentially builds new telomeres. Cancer cells produce plentiful telomerase. Normal human cells do not—even though they have the telomerase gene in their DNA. In normal human cells, that gene is suppressed, deactivated.

The researchers, from Geron Corporation and the University of Texas Southwest Medical Center, inserted an activated telomerase gene into the cells. The cells reproduced well past their Hayflick limits, giving powerful evidence that telomeres have a decisive influence on cellular senescence and may indeed be "the clock of aging."

Writing in the prestigious journal *Science*,

biologist Titia de Lange, of Rockefeller University's Laboratory for Cell Biology and Genetics, commented, "The doubt [about telomeric influence on aging] has now come to an end with a report . . . describing direct evidence for a causal relation between telomere shortening and cellular senescence."

Many researchers are interested in finding how to prevent cancer cells from producing telomerase. If a telomerase "off" switch could be found, it will become possible to stop tumors before they grow large enough to be troublesome.

The fact that normal cells possess the telomerase gene but do not employ it may be a warning signal. Activate that gene, and the cell may start runaway cancerous growth.

The goal, then, is to control telomerase production well enough to remove the cell's Hayflick limit and allow the cell's owner—maybe you!—to live forever. Without causing cancer.

## MORF4

Meanwhile, researchers at Baylor College of Medicine in Houston have cloned a gene that



## September 1950

Earth's only hope of  
defending these monsters  
from space hinged on the  
courage of a newspaper  
man and the girl he loved.

*Editor's introduction to  
"The Squares From Space"  
by P. F. Costello*





## August 1931

According to this author, danger seems to lurk even in the highly efficient work of the Health Bureaus and Medical Research Laboratories. It is some hundreds of years now since there was a very serious plague in civilized countries, and as research continues to develop and to get better and better results, the dread diseases may sometime be wiped out entirely. And therein lies another danger, for the less fighting the human system is called upon to do, the more susceptible it must become to the dangers caused by the invasion of foreign elements. The story touching on germs brings us to another important question: What form is future warfare likely to take?

*Editor's introduction to  
"The Superman"  
by A. H. Johnson*



makes some types of human cells live more than twice as long as they would normally.

It may also cure cancer.

When added to cancerous cells, the MORF4 gene (Mortality Factor from human chromosome number 4) stops the cells from reproducing. The tumor stops growing and becomes senescent. A mutated form of MORF4, when added to normal human cells, allows them to keep on reproducing far beyond the normal limits of their lifespans.

Another road to immortality? Don't bet against it.

## Human Growth Hormone

One protein that seems to have a measurable effect in extending lifespan is human growth hormone (hGH), also known as somatotropin.

Human growth hormone is secreted by the pituitary, a tiny gland located at the base of the brain. The pituitary is known as the master of the endocrine system, because it regulates the secretion of hormones by the body's other ductless glands, such as the thyroid, adrenals, and gonads, which, in turn, secrete the hormones that regulate the body's metabolism.

Human growth hormone has many vital functions, ranging from building bones and muscles to strengthening the immune system and helping to heal wounds. Dwarfism is a consequence of lack of hGH, and abnormally small children are treated with it to help them to grow closer to normal size.

While growth hormone is secreted in large amounts by adolescents during sleep, in adulthood its production diminishes, often as much as ten to fifteen percent every ten years in men. Women maintain higher levels until they reach menopause; then their hGH production rapidly declines. Researchers have not missed this obvious hint that the slowdown in hGH production may be related to aging.

Low levels of hGH are associated with loss of muscle leanness and accumulation of fat. Worse, as the individual's weight increases, hGH levels drop more, setting up a negative feedback loop. Injection of hGH improves muscle strength and leanness, apparently helping the body to build protein instead of fat.

Dr. Daniel Rudman of the Medical College of Wisconsin tested hGH's antiaging possibilities with a group of male volunteers in their 60s and 70s. Half the volunteers received no hGH injections; they were the control group. The others received hGH injections three times a week for six months, so that their hGH levels were

returned to the amounts they had as young men.

While the men in the control group showed the normal deterioration of muscle, bone and organs expected for men of their age, those who received the hGH injections not only stopped aging—in some ways their aging was reversed.

They put on new muscle mass. Their skin increased in thickness by almost ten percent. Internal organs such as the spleen and liver also gained mass. Some of the deteriorative effects of aging had been stopped and even turned around.

To make certain these effects were due to hGH, the researchers stopped the injections. The "youthful" group began to age normally once again.

It is far too early to be certain, but if there is a single elixir of youth, human growth hormone might be it. Still, hGH needs to be tested over long time spans, and its possible side effects must be tracked down. It is known, for example, that overly large doses of hGH can cause or aggravate hypertension, lead to diabetes, enlarge the heart, and adversely affect the joints.

## Where We're Heading

Between hGH, telomerase, MORF4, and other possibilities such as organ regeneration (not to mention nanomachines or cryonics), the avenues toward immortality are many and the roadblocks are coming down.

Commenting on the future possibilities of various therapies for aging, molecular biologist John Medina, of the University of Washington School of Medicine, puts it this way:

"What this means is nothing less than a bombshell. There are active researchers in the field today who think that we may soon have protocols that could double or even treble normal human life spans."

Doubling or tripling your "normal" life span means you will live to the age of one hundred fifty or two hundred twenty-five, at least. And by that time, biomedical research will have uncovered another century or two of life-extending techniques for you.

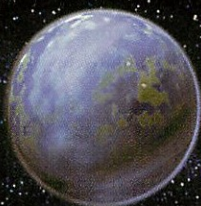
While scientists are quick to point out that it's a long way between extending the lifetimes of cells in a Petri dish and extending the human life span, such work is a major step toward the day when aging is banished and death itself becomes an option rather than an inevitability.

## The Repercussions

Science is constantly creating new opportunities for us, but new opportunities always generate new problems for society. These social problems inevitably fall into the hands of our politicians.



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## The Observatory



### July 1950

The time had come when mankind's lone defender was a metallic figure named Two: a robot suffering from a sore conscience!

*Editor's introduction to "The Metal Martyr" by Robert Moore Williams*

### July 1950

There was simply no reason for a spy to be spying...which was why Martha's job made no sense until Roger caught her taking a bath!

*Editor's introduction to "The Eyes Are Watching" by Walt Sheldon*

### July 1950

All you need in making a killing as a vacuum-cleaner salesman is a virgin planet and a little dirt.

*Editor's introduction to "Cosmic Cleanup" by H.B. Hickey*



What can politicians do about biomedical knowledge that will extend

human life spans?

Their first instinct, prompted by religious zealots, will be to ban it. It's new, it's something that's never been done before, therefore it must be wrong—perhaps evil.

After all, what was the immediate reaction to the news that a sheep had been cloned? "Ban it!" cried the presidents of the U.S. and France, as well as the Pope and many others. "The scientists are trying to play God!"

The Clinton administration wants to pass a law outlawing human cloning.

But while many people are justifiably wary of cloning humans, the offer of virtual immortality will be too powerful to sweep under the rug. Right or wrong, good or bad, no matter what the eventual consequences to society, most people do not want to die. Most people will leap at the chance to extend their lives indefinitely, and to be youthful and vigorous for centuries. Or millennia.

The politicians' second instinct will be to control the research. Write laws and set up bureaucracies that keep the scientists on a tight leash. Control the purse strings for research so that only compliant scientists can receive government funding.

Again, the pressures to push such research forward as rapidly as possible and make its results available to everyone will be overwhelming. We are talking of life and death here, and the basic animal drive to stay alive is far too powerful to deny or even delay.

No matter how expensive it may be, no matter how it warps our society, people will want to extend their lives as far as they can.

What happens to Social Security, Medicare, the insurance industry, and our whole society when people live to be two hundred years old? Remember, by the time they get to that age, scientists will undoubtedly have found out how to extend our life span even farther, and to maintain youthful vigor indefinitely.

Instead of nibbling at the edges of institutions that were created when the average life expectancy was sixty, politicians should understand that many of today's voters are going to live for centuries. Or longer.

And these will be vigorous, active men and women, not shuffling old folks. They won't need retirement homes, they'll need jobs or other ways of generating income.

The insurance industry will concentrate on annuities that can provide very long-term dividends. Retirement will be a thing of the past, but education and retraining for new careers will become more important than ever. Lifelong education and the entertainment industry will merge.

## The Long Perspective

One great advantage of a world in which human life spans are measured in centuries is that it will finally allow us—or force us—to tackle the truly long-term problems that we face.

Today, most people hardly ever think about the long-term future. Why worry about global warming if it's not going to have any real impact until after I'm dead and gone? Who cares about budget deficits? Or population growth?

The long-term problems of our environment, of our race relations, of government deficits, of the economic disparities between rich and poor... people who live for many centuries will not be able to ignore these problems or pass them on to future generations.

Immortality will bring not only wisdom, but responsibility. It will also bring us starflight; taking centuries to reach the stars will no longer be a barrier.

The human race will end its adolescence and attain true adulthood at last.

Live long and prosper. ☸

*This article is taken from Dr. Bova's new book Immortality, published by Avon Books in August.*

### about the author

*Author of more than ninety futuristic novels and nonfiction books,*

*Dr. Ben Bova became involved in the space program two years before the creation of NASA.*

*He lectures on topics ranging from the craft of writing fiction to the search for extraterrestrial intelligence.*

*In his various writings, Dr. Bova has predicted the Space Race of the 1960s, solar power satellites, electronic books, the discovery of organic chemicals in interstellar space, virtual reality, video games, the Strategic Defense Initiative, international peacekeeping forces, and sex in zero gravity. He is President Emeritus of the National Space Society and a past president of the Science Fiction and Fantasy Writers of America.*



### about the illustrator

*A Seattle-based photographer, Tom Collicott works in both the fine and commercial arts.*

*Originally from New Jersey and educated in Rochester, New York, Tom has been working in Seattle since 1982. During his career he has received awards from Communication Arts Magazine, Print Magazine, AIGA, Seattle Design Association, the Addys, and the Art Director's Club.*







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# To Know the Morrow

## Predicting Our Futures

**W**HEN DOLLY THE SHEEP PROPELLED cloning onto the front pages in 1997, few pundits recalled that the issues had been thoroughly depicted in science fiction (sf) decades before.

I found amusing the shock many people felt when a foreseeable future finally arrived. As an identical twin, the widespread moral revulsion at a process nature itself uses seemed displaced to me, until I realized that most people had thought that a "science fictional" concept meant it was somehow unreal.

In orthodox literature this is the common, unspoken assumption; the realistic present world, so soon to be the stuff of nostalgia, enjoys an automatic, unearned privilege.

Throughout this century, conventional literature persistently avoided the gathering prospect of a conceptually altered tomorrow, retreating into a realist posture of fiction of ever-smaller scope. Putting personal relations first, the novel of character came, in a classic debate between Henry James and H.G. Wells, to claim the pinnacle of orthodox fiction. James won that argument, surrendering the future to the genre that would later increasingly set the terms of social debate.

The future is all we have left, as the cliché goes, so we anxiously peer ahead to chart

that shadowy land. Science fiction has framed our futures more than any other art, climbing from gaudy youth to a sobered scientific maturity. Yet as it has come to dominate our thinking, its very concept of what the future means has altered profoundly.

As change has accelerated over the last two centuries, literature has expressed anxieties and anticipations about it. In



**Science fiction has framed our futures more than any other art, climbing from gaudy youth to a sobered scientific maturity.**

Mary Shelley's seminal novel, *Frankenstein* was the scientist's name—yet most people remember it as the monster's.

Potentials have so often been dramatized as threats in the mass media that few can see beyond this shallow cliché. The paranoid plot style of mass entertainment means that much future imagery is framed as menacing, despite centuries in which scientific and technological progress has emancipated far more often than it has hobbled. To avoid this habit of thought

requires some acquaintance with the literature that takes ideas seriously.

Few writers claim that science fiction is a literature of prediction; Ray Bradbury even affirms that his job is "to prevent some futures, not predict them." Warnings can be more useful than road maps.

After all, the science-fictional shotgun blast into tomorrow is bound to hit some targets. H.G. Wells, the Shakespeare of the genre, fired off more speculative rounds than anyone, and indeed helped bring about the tank with his 1903 story "The

Land Ironclads." Churchill remembered this tale during World War I and began the research that led to its battlefield use.

War was a favorite ground for prediction, with Wells and others foreseeing correctly that the twentieth century's first half would be a slaughterhouse, complete with nuclear weaponry delivered by air. Wells even coined the phrase "a war that will end war," later used in World War I propaganda. Invasions of England across the channel were such a

staple of the many future-war novels that one wonders why the Germans faltered in 1940.

The sudden, startling end of strategic warfare, rung in by nuclear weapons, was itself anticipated by Robert Heinlein in his 1941 story "Solution Unsatisfactory," whose title reflects the impossibility of carrying on nation-state business as usual. Wells lived just long enough to see the bomb arrive, proving the point of his many sarcastic fantasies. Hiroshima's legacy of existential anxiety informed much sf of the next two decades, culminating in Walter Miller, Jr.'s *A Canticle for Leibowitz*.

At this level, sf has been remarkably able at anticipating our culture's swerves. Modern unrest has been ever-present in conventional literary fiction from Kafka onward, but getting the nuances of modernity required more subtle thinking. Anyone could guess that the automobile would free us of our local preoccupations, and futurists could see coming freeways and urban sprawl—though usually too late to actually do anything about them. The genius of sf was to look deeper, glimpsing changes in teenage sociology and the growth of an unanchored, hot-rod generation—backseat sex and Bonnie & Clyde.

Tellingly, the many socialist utopian novels of Wells have dated badly, and he is most remembered for visions that we now know are decidedly implausible, as in *The War of the Worlds* and *The Time Machine*. Much sf does not intend to predict, any more than pulp artists of the 1930s expected women to wear space suits with brass bras.

But the desire to influence



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the future by first imagining it is central to the field. Edward Everett Hale's 1869 story "The Brick Moon" envisioned manned artificial satellites. Science fiction had played out this idea in great detail by the time Arthur C. Clarke anticipated the huge impact of global communications satellites in 1945 (without patenting the idea, alas).

Most sf advocates have hailed each predictive bull's-eye as though the authors were using rifles, when in fact the

watched by all humanity on television. Though visionaries such as Heinlein incorrectly depicted the first moon rockets as built by private capital, in fact such companies did build the Apollo-era hardware; the money was first laundered through the government, though.

Some authors even saw that a US-USSR rivalry would be necessary to launch the Space Age. Large ideas needed big causes to drive them, a lesson we should not forget. Nothing grand is done offhandedly.

**Wells is most remembered for visions that we now know are decidedly implausible, as in *The War of the Worlds* and *The Time Machine*.**

genre sprays forth a shotgun blast of what-ifs. Heinlein anticipated the water bed and remote-control waldos. Wells and others foresaw nuclear weaponry, mass bombing, and space travel. Indeed, ever since Jules Verne's cannon-propelled expedition to the Moon, sf has used space as a metaphor for the endless frontier and the opening of the human prospect. Verne correctly set his cannon very near Cape Canaveral, arguing that the U.S. would probably lead the world in technological innovation, and southern Florida was energetically useful for launching, since one gained there the most centrifugal boost from the Earth's rotation. His choice of cannon over rockets seems to have come from a novelistic desire to link space with military means, another prescient shot.

A half dozen authors foresaw the first moon landing

Science fiction has a love of the large—a reaction to Jamesian sitting-room drama. Changes in everyday life, which most concern real people, sf uses as background verisimilitude, not the focus.

While early optimistic sf thought automation would yield an easy cornucopia, by the 1950s Kurt Vonnegut's *Player Piano* saw how marginalized some people would become, a persistent problem. Few authors have seen any solution to this predicament, other than republics of leisure that inevitably run into the trap of bread-and-circuses distractions—an uncomfortable resemblance to many aspects of our present, with our exaggerated sports and entertainment that increasingly infiltrates politics and even science.

Rudyard Kipling predicted transatlantic air express in "With the Night Mail." Even the pulp-era death rays found

their vindication in the laser beam, but in our lives lasers read CDs and serve as tiny, smart servants bearing information, not death.

Still, the genre did a conspicuous pratfall over computers. Well into the 1960s, writers clung to the image of a monolithic single machine worshiped by attentive mathematicians, missing the personal computer revolution.

Worse, starting in the 1930s they assumed that robots would confront us with the most profound puzzles of human identity. Science-fictional robots were humanoid with advanced intelligence. Few imagined robots as routine monomaniac factory laborers, bolted in place. This meant that the issues of artificial intelligence were acted out by metal men, missing many of the deep conceptual problems the field confronts today.

Specific social prediction is usually folly, but as early as 1886 Robert Louis Stevenson's *Strange Case of Dr. Jekyll and Mr. Hyde* foresaw the Freudian view of our minds as driven by shadowy ids, shakily masked by our egos. Much modern social thinking hangs from such theories of our inner selves, and sf took several blind alleys in exploring such themes. Psi, the genre name for mind communication, ran rife through stories of the 1940s and 50s, hanging upon the thin thread of some dubious experimentation. Much of this now appears as a staple in TV and film sf, but is scorned by genre sophisticates. Such dead ideas now appear in what sf aficionados dismiss as "sci-fi," an ironic term lost on the conventional world.

Much sf social thinking has

been dystopian, written to help avoid future pitfalls. Orwell's 1984 captured a crucial problem of the century, the rise of technologically enhanced tyranny, while Huxley's *Brave New World* warned us of the perils of the Biological Century still to come. The larger public often absorbs such sf thinking by unnoticed osmosis, as the genre shapes our vision of possible futures. We might never have had a space program without the desire for it stimulated by sf, which tied so many otherworldly images of the boundless prospect to futuristic narratives, even those to which space was not the centerpiece.

Perhaps those fictions most pertinent to our future depict the confused political landscapes. These anti-Orwellian political and social cacophonies see unmoored futures, with values permanently in flux, a vision probably too unsettling for the conventional literary audience. Greg Bear's *Queen of Angels*, the novels of Bruce Sterling, Neil Stephenson, Greg Egan, Paul McAuley, and the fading, stylish dystopias of cyberpunk all speak to a future that looks not merely unmapped, but nearly unknowable.

These and many other practicing sf authors are part of the present Golden Age of the genre, crowned by narrative sophistication and a high level of informed scientific understanding, particularly in the "hard sf" faction. These future visions follow on John Brunner's groundbreaking *Stand on Zanzibar*, whose 1968 metaphor of a jammed world remains one of the most reliable guides to the next century. Indeed, social thinkers such as Isaac Asimov



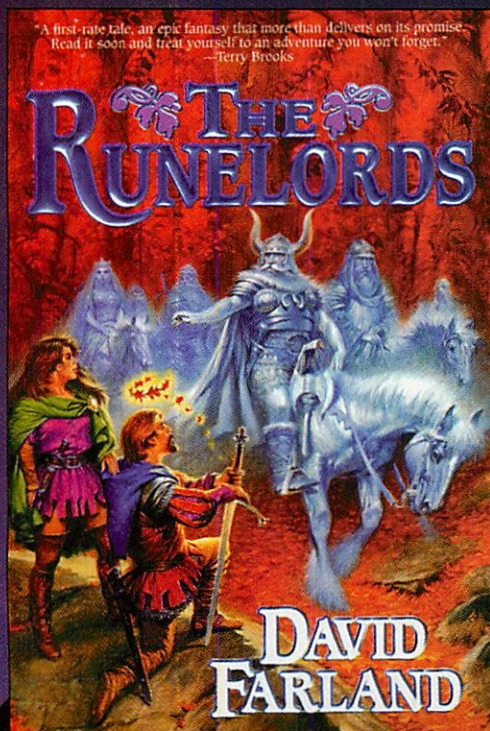


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pointed to population crush and environmental damage as the growing threat to all humanity, and especially to its dreams, long before this became fashionable in the mainstream world.

Statues in parks are typically erected to those who solved problems, not to those who merely foresaw them. Conventional literature, when it timidly ventures into the future, usually cowers before the easily seen dangers and then dodges into aimless nostalgia for an imaginary past

of the mid-century.

Indeed, the fading welfare state seems now a direct consequence of the utopian impulses of innumerable novels from the turn of the century. It has been the destiny of the twentieth century (soon to be called the TwenCen, no doubt, as language compresses under cyber-pressure) to act out the rather mechanical ideologies of the nineteenth. Fascism, communism, and socialism have all come a cropper, with the apparent, still-standing winner the

tone of much earlier thinking. Mundane literature has carried an unspoken agenda, assuming that the present's preoccupations stand for eternal themes. Even early sf presumed that elites should rule and that information should flow downward, enlightening the shadowed many. Wells was welcomed to speak by the Petrograd Soviet, the Reichstag, Stalin, and both Roosevelts, a company that never doubted their managerist agenda.

To sf today, such mechanistic self-confidence now seems quaintly smug. The genre looks to more vibrant metaphors, while cocking a wary eye at our many looming problems.

Science fiction writers are less interested in predicting and thus determining the future precisely because they do not believe that linear, programmatic determinism is the right angle of attack. They see themselves more as conceptual gardeners, planting for fruitful growth, rather than engineers designing eternal, gray social machines.

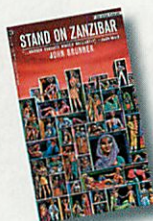
What does this portend for the next century? Clearly the TwenCen (see how it catches on?) has been the century of physics, just as the nineteenth was that of mechanics and chemistry. Grand physical measures still beckon. We could build a sea-level canal across Central America, explore Mars in person, use asteroidal resources to uplift the bulk of humanity. Siberia could be a fresh frontier, better run by American metaphors than the failed, top-down Russian ones.

Biological analogies will probably shape much political thinking to come. We will gain control of our own reproduction, cloning and altering

our children. Genetic modification is surely a dynamist agenda, for the many mingled effects of changed genes defy detailed prediction.

Though the converging powers of computers and biology will give us much mastery, how such forces play out in an intensely cyber-quick world will be unknowable, arising from emergent properties, not stasist plans.

Despite our rather dark impulses to control the shadowy future landscape, to know the morrow, it will be even harder in the science-fictional worlds to come. ☛



**Stand on Zanzibar, a 1968 metaphor of a jammed world, remains one of the most reliable guides to the next century.**

when matters seemed clearer. Margaret Atwood's *The Handmaid's Tale* depicted a poorly thought through near future, flatly unbelievable, built of genre clichés no sf writer would deploy.

Alas, the past looks easier only in 20-20 hindsight. We hear much whining as the millennium approaches, but by any clear-eyed assessment of the century its first half was far worse, and we have learned much. Still, our greatest predicaments stem from ourselves, puzzles answering to sf's great proposition, *If this goes on...*

What to do?

Luckily, the unexpected can be expected. SF has been aware of its power to induce self-fulfilling prophecy, a force never more potent than today, and probably stronger still in the future. The giant apartment blocks now eroding in many cities are monuments to utopian thinking of visionaries

eighteenth century ideals of free speech, free votes, and free markets.

We have come a long way from unblinking wonder at technology and from the top-down social engineering doctrines that accompanied the brooding optimism of a century ago. Science fiction now more often employs the self-organizing principles popular in biology, economics, artificial intelligence, and even physics. Virginia Postrel, author of *The Future and its Enemies*, argues that the essential political differences today are between stasists and dynamists. Science fiction sides with futures run not by Wellsian savant technocrats but by the masses, innovating from below and running their own lives, thank you very much.

This gathering belief in dynamic change driven by freedom and information flow contrasts with the oddly static

## about the author

Gregory Benford is a professor of physics at the University of California, Irvine, where he has been a faculty member since 1971. Benford conducts research in plasma turbulence theory and experiment, and in astrophysics. He is a Woodrow Wilson Fellow and a Visiting Fellow at Cambridge University, and has served as an advisor to the Department of Energy, NASA, and the White House Council on Space Policy.

He is the author of more than a dozen novels, including *Jupiter Project*, *Against Infinity*, *Great Sky River*, and *Timescape*. A two-time winner of the Nebula Award, Benford has also won the John W. Campbell Award, the Australian Ditmar Award, and the United Nations Medal in Literature. His newest novel is *Cosm*, recently optioned by 20th Century Fox for film.



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4000 Ångström glimmered on the pile at the left side of the table. In the pile were scripts, scrolls, shards, spools, cassettes, a large leaf. On the right side of the table was a funnel of luminous wire. Beside it was a spider holding two pieces of pumice. The owner of the table sat before a scanning lens and read:

—relief quirked Captain Herring's thin bronzed lips as the quantameter lights steadied on the control spectra. The blurry outlines of the cabin came back to sharpness. Safe in Ur-time! Captain Herring straightened his thin, bronzed shoulders. There was a faint *plop!* as they passed Planck's constant. *Ocarina III*, intergalactic space-tramp, had made it again.

Smiling under his thin, bronzed mustache, Herring reached down for the lever to release himself from the anti-grav cabinet. Nothing now to do for weeks but paste up his collection of recipes, he thought, his thin, bronzed ears twitching in anticipation. Then he froze. The anti-grav lever felt odd. It felt like an ankle.

Space-torque, he thought. Better take it easy, old boy. He wobbled the lever. It still felt like an ankle. He fumbled for the fail-safe. That felt like an ankle too. Gathering them in his thin, bronzed fingers, Herring reached down. Another ankle! He yanked it up.

"By Arcturus, it *is* an ankle!" Herring grated. "And that dainty chain looks like an unknown high-tensile molybdenum alloy!" Gingerly, Herring bent to read the inscription on the locket attached to the slim, warm joint. He had just made out the words *If you can read this you're too damn—* when something jabbed him in the inguineum.

Instantly the ice-hot reflexes that had carried him through many a rhubarb with the radioactive Khurds of Wey sent him five meters into the control panel.

"Come out of that, you!" he rasped, gammator at the ready.

Nothing happened. He tried it again in Lower Martian and was working up to Glottic when the owner of the ankles hoisted itself over the rim of the grav cabinet.

"*Do* stop spluttering," it said. "I thought you'd *never* get up. What kind of heap is this anyway? Ten gees to get off a filling platform and you sitting on my eyelashes." Gurgling irritably, it began to preen itself.

Captain Herring looked the thing up and—more or less—down; in Ur-time it was difficult to tell. He who had faced a thousand alien forms of life from the musical brain-slugs of Ech to the flaming crystal cannibals of Utr Nadr was unnerved. This is the worst yet, he thought, choking.

"By the laws of intergalactic navigation," he ground out, narrowing his thin, bronzed eyelids, "you—whatever you call yourself—are a stowaway. You are, I trust, familiar with the regulations governing the disposal of stowaways?"

"Ah, stow it, Buttons," said the Thing composedly, picking at its toenails. Herring shuddered; they were an icky pink. "The way you flow this pig you need some ballast. What do you use for fuel, Saniflush?"

"Kerosene," Herring blurted. "I mean, Hexadinitrobetametadiolya—"

"Hiccups, eh?" said the Thing. It uncoiled itself from the cabinet. "We'll soon fix that."

"Now look here!" Herring barked. "Ignorance is no excuse. You've got to go. Courtesy of the spaceways and all that, but there's only room for one on the *Ocarina*. When I count to three, I'll pull the trigger. One!"

The Thing paused in its undulant advance.

"What are you going to pull?" it asked interestedly.

"The trigger," Herring grunted, his thin, bronzed lips set in a lethal line. "Two!"

"What trigger?"

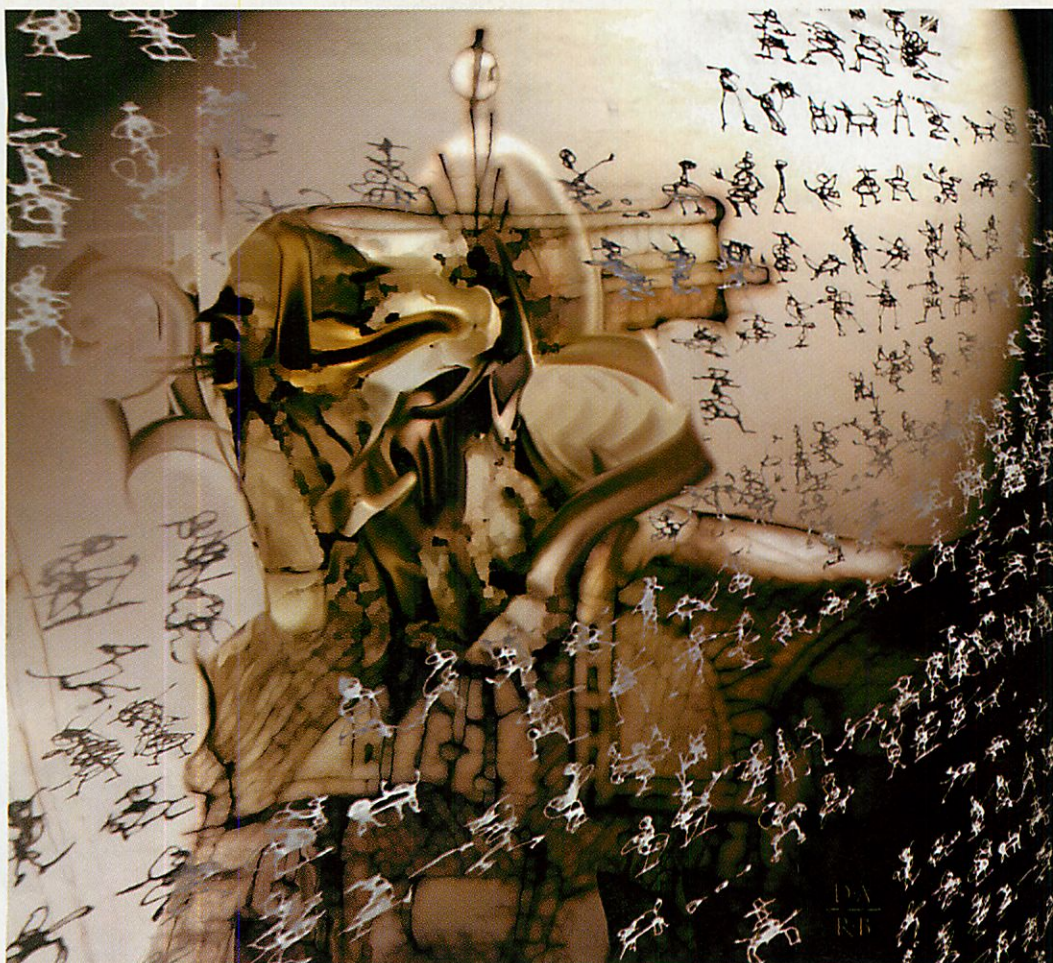
"If you have a god, pray! Thurr—"

"You do realize that's a box of penuche you're holding," the Thing murmured.

"EEE!" shouted Herring, and he pulled. Then he glared incredulously at his hand. It was indeed the

ILLUSTRATION BY RICK BERRY  
AND DARREL ANDERSON





## about the author

Alice Sheldon, who wrote science fiction as "James Tiptree, Jr.," won three Nebula Awards and two Hugo Awards for her short fiction in a five-year span from 1973 through 1977. She did most of her writing starting in the mid-1960s, when she was finishing research for her Ph.D. in experimental psychology following a long career in government service. Wishing to remain anonymous, she chose a pseudonym (Tiptree) off a jam jar, and, because few women were writing science fiction then, she picked a male first name to be less noticeable.

Her stories started to sell immediately, whereupon she took "Please Don't Play With the Time Machine" out of her files of writing she had done in the 1950s (mostly non-sf and unfinished) and revised it. The final draft dates from 1968. It was rejected a few times and then retired—but resurrected a few months ago by Virginia Kidd, the agent for her estate, who thought *AMAZING* Stories might be a good place for it. The result is this—the first publication of Alice Sheldon's first science fiction story.

Alice Sheldon died in 1987. A final collection of stories, letters, and essays will be published in 1999 by Tor.

## about the illustrators

Award-winning illustrator Rick Berry is not only an accomplished painter, but a genuine pioneer in the field of digital art, credited with creating the world's first digital fiction cover illustration.

Darrel Anderson, longtime friend and collaborator with Berry, is a world-class digital artist with numerous illustration and film credits.

An example of their work together can be seen in the dazzling special effects of TriStar's Johnny Mnemonic. For more information, visit their website at [braid.com](http://braid.com).

box of penuche he had tucked behind the control panel to munch in the long space-night. He dashed it furiously to the floor, which happened just then to be the ceiling. Mass being constant in free fall, the box sailed into the fuse-clips with a solid *bonk* and the lights went out.

"Oh, dear," cooed the Thing in the darkness, "it looked so good. Dense, though. Who made 'em?"

"I did," muttered Herring, groping for the fuses. In the darkness he could hear the Thing groping too.

"Oh, here's one!" it trilled, and began chewing loud and wet. "What's your name, Tiger? You make smashing penuche."

Suddenly it was snuffling on his neck. And elsewhere.

"Red," he gulped, wildly clutching at his thin, bronzed flight-shorts.

"Reddy baby," the Thing mumbled sloppily through the penuche, "don't you really know what I am, Reddy dear?"

"Wha—what are you?" Herring squealed, his thin, bronzed toes curling and uncurling as he struggled in the dark. To die like this, he thought, trapped in my own control room by a Thing from the abyss—

"Why, Reddy-Beddy," it tongued in his ear. "You poor deprived engineer! I'm a w\_\_\_n!!!"

"Great Lorenz!" Captain Herring gibbered faintly.

"The old t-tales are t-t-true!" Then he passed out.

On *Ocarina's* control panel the quantameter was clicking. Googol minus eight, googol minus seven . . . googol minus six . . .

## Under the violet lamp

the reader lifted one mandible and let it sag. He laid down the page, picked up one of the pumice stones, and bit into it. Savoring the rich cadmium creme filling, he selected a small one-time tape and reversed its polarity to stick it on the manuscript.

"Dear Being: Thank you for permitting us to inhale your emanations. We regret they are non-isomorphic with our needs. Due to the large input received it is not possible for us to comment live but we suggest that further study of the style and content of our send, say for about three cycles, would help you. We enclose a convenient species-null subscription form."

He placed the manuscript in the illuminated funnel, where it dematerialized while he plucked out a leaf at random from his pile and centered it under his lens. At that moment his lamp winked three times. He laid down his work and stretched hugely. Then, unfolding three meters of thorax from his Formi-balm Komfort Kase, the editor twitched out his light and flew away. ☹







*A short story featuring the STAR\*DRIVE™ campaign setting for TSR's ALTERNITY® science fiction roleplaying game, written by the author of the first STAR\*DRIVE novel.*

STAR\*DRIVE™

# Recensions

*In every story told by the sesheyans, the Hunter wins. And in some versions of the tale, victory is realized before the kill is made. . . .*

B Y D I A N E D U A N E

**T**HE DARKNESS UNDER THE TREES WAS very green. High above the hidden uppermost reaches of the forest canopy, the rich violet sky might still burn amethystine with Corrivale's fierce light as starset came on: but under the trees, dozens of meters deep in layer after layer of leaf and giant fern and tight-wound tendril, the twilight glowed as dark as jade. Under one of those trees, a huge old meresh, a sesheyan sat by himself, his hind claws dug into the mold for purchase and his wings hunched up a little behind him as he bent over his work.

He was writing in a longbook. The strips of the book, about a forearm long, were made of stripped inner membrane from the galya vine—the thin membrane, not the thicker, tougher one which would be used for more permanent writings. For a scribe he was using a sharpened quill from a traight. Where the quill scratched, after a moment the residual sap trapped in the wet galya parchment would react with the air and turn dark. The sesheyan wrote slowly, in the way that galya forces on less

certain scribes, who cannot be sure what they have written until a moment or so after writing it. As he wrote he spoke the words: a habit that had made his people laugh at him once . . . but no longer, seeing the results his words usually had.

"This is how it has been," he said, under his breath. "I do not say that this is how it will be: such judgments are restricted to the Three themselves, and one suspects they are sparing with them, since their Universe is not only malleable to their will, but terribly literal-minded."

He paused long, considering the Invocation and the slightly heretical interpolation: and then he spoke again, slowly and softly, as he wrote.

"Tal the Hunter is the one of the Three who ranges among the woods and between the worlds, pursuing the things that crawl and writhe in darkness, hunting them into the deepest shadows, where they lie in wait to do us hurt. He is a busy Power, a stern one and somber, and even the wind goes quiet where he walks: for when Tal's anger rises, then great stillness is advisable, and a posture calculated to avoid his confusing you with the source of his anger."

ILLUSTRATION BY BRIAN DESPAIN



*... Now where there is the Hunter, you may be sure there is also Grome.*

The sesheyan stopped, looked at what he had written, scratched out a word: a moment later the blot of his scratching-out appeared, and he wrote another word and waited for that one to become visible. Then he went on.

"Now, like many who are great, the Hunter sometimes takes himself very seriously: for the safety of our people is in his care, as he reminds himself hourly. It should not be said that Tal has no sense of humor. But perhaps he has little time to spare for it, in a world so full of wickedness, where great powers visible and invisible are ranged against his own.

"The Trickster, though, has humor enough for both of them, and wit enough to be wicked . . . though not in the way of the dark things. If he finds the Hunter somewhat humorless, and makes fun of the way all his eyes are always looking in only one direction, well, perhaps that is understandable."

He stopped again, corrected another word. As was normal enough, the long, thin leaf of galya parchment was slowly becoming a tracery of graceful cursive longbook writing, here and there broken with the neat black blots where one word had been exchanged for another: silvery-dark chains of words, here and there strung with an oblong of jet. He sighed, wishing he could be neater: then went on.

"The two of them are often at odds. Often enough the Mother has found the two of them standing before her and pointing at one another, each claiming that the other one started it. How these arguments are resolved, no sesheyan knows: but the fall storms that break out without warning, violent enough to bring the greatest trees crashing down and even to part the upper canopy and let the sky show through, those storms were called by our fathers' fathers 'the Brood-Mother's Admonitions': and maybe they should know.

"These days, of course, such names and phrases are not so readily heard—for some temporal powers do not acknowledge the sway of the celestial ones. They only reluctantly allow the Three's names to be named, lest our people should remember how once those names were spoken freely under the sky of Sheya, without any Company having any say in the matter. Should anyone produce a concrete instrument of worship—a Staff, a Hunter's claw-mark, even so much as a crown of leaves—then swift is their punishment. The Company allows verbal observation: they think that mere breath can do them no harm.

"And so did the Hunter, once upon a time. Do you know the tale? Then hear how it once came to pass. . . ."

"WELL," SAID WR443 66UAE, "if you think you can catch him . . ."

"I know I can," Kiel said.

They sat briefly in silence in the little windowless office in the big faceless building on Endomar, considering one another. Kiel knew what old letters-and-numbers here was thinking: that he seemed an unlikely character

to be able to do the Company any good. Still, Kiel's record spoke for itself. Seven or eight or ten systems' worth of work, now: fifty or sixty successes, each buttressed with glowing testimonials from any number of other smaller companies.

The trouble was that they were still dealing with the overromanticized image of the bounty hunter—distasteful name: Kiel preferred "asset recovery specialist" or something equally ambivalent and low-key. But the very idea of someone slinking around in sleazy dives and dangerous places and making perilous apprehensions was, in its way, a kind of disguise. No one expected a bounty hunter to look like Kiel: that was one of the reasons he was so successful. There was no point in fancy ships, or anything of the kind. You used scheduled services, you moved quietly so as to avoid notice. Then you dropped out of notice . . . and shortly thereafter, you caught what you were pursuing. That was the way Kiel conducted his business.

Kiel's feelings about taking a commission from VoidCorp were slightly mixed. Nothing to do with ethics, of course. But word got around when you did too much work from them. People started assuming that you were routinely doing something covert—and out here in the Verge, where policing was spotty or nonexistent, you could suddenly find yourself with big problems.

Still—just this once, it couldn't hurt. The price they were offering was generous, and Kiel thought that the work required would make a nice change of pace.

"He's gone to ground on Grith," said WR443 66UAE. "And that doesn't mean he'll still be in Diamond Point—if he even stopped there at all."

"You're not sure?"

WR443 66UAE looked embarrassed. "Our own operatives lost him at Miyashi. The only fast way out for him would have been a one-jump to the Corrivale system—and for a runaway Employee, Corrivale means Grith." WR443 66UAE made a face.

Kiel supposed he could understand why. VoidCorp had all but owned the planet Sheya and all its people for most of a century now. The Company was emphatic about the benefits it had brought to its planetful of Employees since then: education, steady work, a life far removed and far improved from the state of feudal barbarism in which it had found them. The idea of non-Employee sesheyans was infuriating to them. The discovery of a colony of thousands of them on Grith, some years back, had been more maddening to them still. That the Concord should have confirmed those sesheyans as free . . . Kiel could only imagine the fury that must have caused the Company, way up there in the upper reaches of the corporate-hierarchical alphabet. It was certainly a situation he could turn to his own advantage. He wouldn't need to work again for several years after he finished this job.

## • RECENSIONS •



## *Grome is his great enemy, whom he has pursued since worlds first began.*

"Exactly what kind of recovery are we talking about here?" Kiel said.

WR443 66UAE shook his head. "It's not a recovery."

Kiel opened his eyes at that. "Just a neutralization, in other words."

"We need to send a message," said WR443 66UAE.

Kiel stood up. "Then use the Grid," he said.

WR443 66UAE merely looked at him. "We'll triple the offered basic fee," he said.

Kiel did not sit down just yet. "You have people who specialize in 'neutralizations,'" he said. "You should be sending one of them, if you don't want this fellow back."

"All the available operatives are either busy with other things, or known on Grith," WR443 66UAE said. "If any of them are seen there, our target will go so far into the woods that he'll never be seen again."

"Would have thought that would be a good thing," Kiel said. "He would stop being a problem for you, anyway." He sat down.

WR443 66UAE shook his head. "We don't just need him to be discredited. We need what he's been selling to be neutralized as well . . . the only way it can be: by the purveyor's death. Word gets around that he's dead, then no one's going to believe that his mumbo-jumbo 'gods' or their fake relics are any good either. Just as well. There's too much of that old superstition still lingering on Grith. Better for them to get rid of it and come into the twenty-sixth century, finally."

"Not so much 'them' as 'him,'" Kiel said. "Devlei'ir."

WR443 66UAE gave him a dirty look. Kiel was not an Employee, to be cowed by the threat of a superior's chastisement: but the look was meant to warn him. "Damned parasite-spouting shaman," WR443 66UAE muttered. "It's a pity we can't—" He stopped himself. "Never mind him. All his media access hasn't done him any good. One lone voice in the wilderness shouting that sesheyans should be 'free'—free of *what*? Good jobs, child care, the opportunity to travel space freely? Time will prove him wrong—and we've got plenty of it. What we do *not* have here is patience to endure this Mornuur character subverting our Employees with his fake religious 'artifacts.' It's not just sedition, it's *fraud*."

"So you just want me to find him and see that he has an accident of some kind," said Kiel.

"You find the idea distasteful?"

"It's simply not my area of specialization," Kiel said. "Let's say it will require some extra preparation. But it's doable."

"How much more will you need beyond the basic fee?"

Kiel kept his face still. Plainly this was a serious commission, and one that would bring Kiel a whole lot of corporate goodwill if carried out: something he could turn to his advantage later. "Ten percent over," Kiel said. He didn't need it, but the moment you turned down money that a company offered you, they started to get the idea that you would work cheap.

WR443 66UAE simply nodded. "We'll need proof," he said, "for our own files: holo or solids. And the body has to be found. Before identifying characteristics are gone, that is."

Kiel nodded. "That might mean suborning some of the local police," he said. "On Grith, that's going to mean Hatire: and Hatire fundies are the dickens to buy."

"Religion again," said WR443 66UAE, making the disgusted face. "Wish we could just get rid of it altogether. Spend what you have to: we'll reimburse you."

"All right," Kiel said, and stood up again. "I'll take care of it for you."

"When can you leave?"

Kiel thought about that. "There's a scheduled service out of Endomar the day after tomorrow: I'll catch that, and contact you after we make starrise. After that, not until the job's over. You have all the account information—make sure the funds are transferred before tomorrow evening local."

"It'll be handled as soon as you leave."

Kiel nodded and left.

"... NOW WHERE there is the Hunter, you may be sure there is also Grome. Grome is his great enemy, whom he has pursued down the forest-corridors of the worlds since worlds first began. Grome is the Ruiner, the power who is behind every failure and loss: he is the Snatcher, the one who lies in wait in the shadows for the young and vulnerable: he is Auwah Strangle-Vine, and Druiin, and VoidCorp, and Lathu the Eater, and many another. When he rises, always the Hunter wars him down: but it is never easy.

"There came a time when things were quiet in Heaven, and such times always make the Trickster itch for something to shake the imperishable peace of the Lands-Within. All the Gods were in residence: the Mother was there, and the Hunter was there, was resting from his long labors against Grome. The great sword-spear Amse, with which Tal hews down trees whose time has come to fall, lay at rest in its place in the sky—that long dim curved line of pale fire that those who Journey-Above-Trees can see, and that was sung of before any journeyed.

"The Trickster looked long at great Amse in that time, and the sight of it irked him. He began to think what a fine thing it would be if Tal should awaken one morning to find the sword-spear gone. And suddenly a plan came to the Trickster's mind.

"Very quietly within the next few days, the Trickster slipped away to do an errand. No one noticed, or if they did, it was the Hunter, commenting sourly how much quieter Heaven was without the Trickster than with him. And perhaps the Brood-Mother sighed, hearing once again a tired old complaint that would not go away.

"Then word came of trouble among the Eriengro'mei, who are some of Grome's servants, the ones who war against the Woods at the heart of the Worlds,

## RECENSIONS



## *So he turned his mind to the undoing of what he had done. And because*

and gnaw at the roots of the Mother's oldest trees—trying to lay all skies bare and make Heaven unbearable with burning fire, as all too many of the Worlds are which the Mother has not been able to properly roof over. The Eriengro'mei were biting trees down and devouring them, even as the forest-destroyers do here in our own world, saying that this is a 'renewable resource'; but how does one renew the grandeur of a tree two thousand years old, mighty in its growth, cut down in its prime . . . just because it can be 'replaced' by a sapling half a meter tall? . . . Either way, the trees were falling, and their unhoused spirits flocked thick among the tree-shadows of Heaven, crying out to Tal for vengeance: and Tal went for the sword-spear—

—and found it was not there.

"None of the hosts of Heaven knew anything of what had happened. The lesser spirits crowded together, and Heaven rustled with their wings as if a great wind tossed the branches, as all sought Amse the Great: but it was nowhere to be found.

"Now Tal's suspicions were immediate. He blamed the Trickster, and would have laid violent claws on him. But the Trickster cried out to their Mother, and she spoke sternly to her sons. 'Stop this unseemly noise,' she said. 'Are you idiots, to squabble so? Without Amse the Great, how will we stand against Grome? Resolve your quarrel, and find the Sword-Spear quickly: or it will go ill with you.' And she glared meaningfully at the Trickster.

"The two of them went away together, looking at one another suspiciously: but when the Mother says 'resolve your quarrel,' it is wise to do so: She holds the storm in her claws.

"The Hunter, though, could not refrain. 'I know you are at the bottom of this,' he growled, 'as you are of every ill deed.'

"'You were always hasty of judgment,' the Trickster said. 'If judgment is the word for it.' And shortly they would have been at blows again: but they quelled themselves as the thunder rolled, and a gust of the Brood-Mother's annoyed wind tossed the branches of Heaven overhead.

"'It is true,' said the Hunter then. 'Ever you were the cleverest of us. But if you cannot make a plan to save us, then we are shent indeed: for Grome is not meant to be master of the Worlds. The Worlds will be upturned, and all weathers will change for the worse. Therefore, wise one, prove your wisdom, and make us a plan.'

"Now the Trickster was amazed at this sudden access of good sense in the Hunter: but indeed it ran together with his own way of thinking. He knew in his heart that the power of the Sword-Spear in Grome's claws was too terrible a reversal to allow for long: though such a reversal, as a temporary thing, was a source of amusement to him. Given enough time, Grome would destroy all certainties, lay bare all forest floors, and finally enthrone a chaos in which even the Trickster's own briefly malicious upturns of circumstance would be lost.

"So he turned his mind to the undoing of what he had done. And because any scheme was better than no scheme, he soon found one.

"'My counsel is this,' said the Trickster. 'Let us go into Grome's realm, among his minions, and spy out where they have taken the Sword-Spear.'

"'But no one can go there but the Eriengro'mei, who are his slaves,' said Tal.

"'Then we will disguise ourselves as his slaves as well,' said the Trickster.

"Now Tal raged at this, and said he would never do such a thing, for all his dignity would be gone. Yet the Trickster spoke him fair, insisting that only so could the Sword-Spear be saved out of Grome's claws. And above everything, the wind tossed the boughs of the great Trees, and in the thunder could be heard the Mother's voice, saying, 'Are you two fighting *again*?'

"So it was settled. 'Now we must busk us to look like the Eriengro'mei,' said the Trickster: and this Tal the Hunter liked even less. For Grome hates freedom, and in token of this all his slaves go with their wings bound and only one eye unmasked, and their mouths bound as well, save when their Master allows their jaws to be freed to sing his praises. 'The Gods will say I have no sense of self-esteem if I let such a thing be done to me,' Tal said, more quietly, for the thunder was still rumbling. The Trickster would have said, 'They say that anyway . . . '—but he forbore.

"And finally it was done as the Trickster had said. They bound their wings and their eyes in filthy rags and cloths such as the Eriengro'mei use, and made their way to the country where trees fell. . . ."

STARFALL TO STARRISE is one hundred twenty-one hours: so Kiel had a restful four days or so aboard the ship to consider his plans. He looked over the solid images of the wares that his target, the sesheyan called Mornuur, had been selling. They were pitiful enough, and there was no question in his mind of any sesheyan genuinely being deceived by them. "Claws of the Hunter," little mummified talons—genuinely withered tissue and bone and chitin of claws: but from what? He had to wonder if somewhere, sesheyans were harvesting the bodies of their own random dead for these relics. That was something that the Company would have to look into. Doubtless in time it would: a company ruthless enough to attempt to kill its parent culture for business reasons would hardly hold back from damaging a planet full of renegade aliens as badly as it could. Kiel sometimes wondered why Grith was still in its orbit and undamaged when VoidCorp hated its sesheyan population so vehemently. Mere concern for the human Hatire population would not have stopped them.

But that was no problem of Kiel's just now. He would go to Grith as a tourist—they had plenty of human

## • RECENSIONS •



*any scheme was better than no scheme, he soon found one. . . .*

tourism, mostly wealthy travelers from first-world systems who wanted to experience firsthand the ancient mystery of Grith's rain forests. Most of them never got farther than the sesheyan-run settlement at Redknife, where they might do the rounds of the interpretative centers, and then hire a guide to take them a few days' travel into the "impenetrable jungles." After several days of unbroken forest gloom, giant bugs, prepackaged food, and very minimal comforts, they usually returned quickly to civilization, bearing holos of identical dark, tree-filled landscapes and sesheyan guides in suitably threatening or exciting poses, all their eyes gleaming in the dim firelight, their wings spread, talons all on show. If they had not taken such holos themselves, they would buy them in Redknife before they left. And they would go home and spin tales of pirate cities in clandestine forest clearings, and meetings with dangerous native crime lords or mystical/charismatic figures like Devlei'ir, not one of which they had so much as set eyes on. *Oh, well: every life needs a little romance. . . .*

But meantime Kiel would have to make some discreet inquiries. Kiel had started the business on Endomar before taking ship, and had continued it aboard, spending an altogether obscene amount of money researching the "canned" Grid data the ship had brought with it from its last drivesat download before Corrivale. When the ship made starrise at Grith and he arrived on the ground five days and a few odd hours later, he was able to check into a hotel in Diamond Point and do more serious work on the Grid there, verifying the information that VoidCorp had given him on Mornuur (many of Kiel's past successes were due to not blindly trusting the information that his temporary employers gave him). Mornuur had hitchhiked a ride with a driveship carrying data and other smaller "hitching" ships from system to system: he had made starfall here about two weeks ago, paid off the freighter captain who had brought him, and had headed straight for Redknife.

Kiel followed him there in his tourist guise, festooned with solid imagers and map chips and hot-weather smart-fabric clothing bought at the most overpriced of the travel outfitters in Diamond Point, clothes that would immediately slot him into the category "more money than sense." In Redknife he checked into the least objectionable of the tourist accommodations, then spent several days patronizing the local bars and establishing his bona fides as a tourist with money to spend, someone vitally interested in sesheyan culture: a dilettante liberal with a burning urge to take home some really meaningful souvenirs. None of the pre-shot holos, none of the packaged stuff: something a little clandestine . . . maybe even something religious.

When the first sesheyan hinted to him that such things might be available if the price was right, Kiel was careful not to seem too eager. He didn't want to do anything illegal—he didn't want to get anyone in trouble.

After all, such things were illicit in some parts of space, weren't they? His source persuaded him that there was no such problem here: this was, after all, a protectorate of the Concord, its people genuine natives—brought here by a mysterious alien race some thousands of years ago—and here religious rights and the indigenous culture were protected. Much reassured, Kiel made an arrangement to meet a sesheyan who would supply him with the very thing he was looking for: ancient artifacts, possibly dating back to the time of the old aliens who had brought the first sesheyans to Grith. Even one artifact that was said to have belonged to the Hunter himself. . . .

Kiel kept the appointment he had made in a clearing some kilometers into the forest from Redknife. And that was how he wound up tied hand and foot and neck, lying on the ground much later in some far less identifiable glade in the depths of the equatorial forests of Grith, with gigantic bugs crawling all over him, dirt in his mouth and leafmold in his hair, and a very large knife at his throat: and a sesheyan at the other end of it who would say nothing but, "Spy . . . be ready to die."

"THEY WERE a long while on their way. But finally they came to Grome's realm, and the country of the Eriengro'mei which lies on its far outskirts. The nakedness of the sky burnt their eyes by day: and night, when it came, was no consolation to them, for the Sword-Spear, or its mirror of Heaven, was not there. By day they made their way with pain among the masked and wing-bound slaves of Grome, and studied to crouch as they crouched, and whisper as they whispered. 'This is bitter,' said Tal: and again and again he would have stood up straight and shaken off the foul wing-bindings, freeing his eyes, so he could cry his name. But this he could not do, for in that realm no creature has a name, only numbers and letters assigned by a contrivance or machine: and every word spoken must be seen to be the will of their terrible Master, or the creature speaking it is swiftly snuffed out.

"Then word came to them that the great lord Grome would show to his slaves the Sword-Spear by which he would soon begin to throw down the forests of Heaven, and maybe the World Tree itself: and Tal and the Trickster made their way to this meeting.

"Thousands and hundreds of thousands of the Eriengro'mei gathered there. It was a terror to the Trickster and also to Tal to see the great wing-bound and blinded masses of them, all gathered there to their fell master's will, all mighty but, in themselves, impotent. The two travelers crouched among them, though Tal found this hard. And finally after long waiting, Grome came out. All his people bowed down, like creatures with no wings or pride: and Tal and the Trickster bowed down too, though Tal growled under his breath.

## • R E C E N S I O N S •



## *Then Grome held up the Sword-Spear, and Amse the Great glittered in*

"Then Grome held up the Sword-Spear, and Amse the Great glittered in the naked light of no-trees, a glance of dreadful and predictive fire. Grome saw this, and wondered at it, taking it as a sign of his greatness to come, and the weapon's acceptance of him as its new master. But Tal only grinned, and bowed low.

"Grome called his people up in their dozens and their hundreds. To all of them he would say: 'Who are you?' Every one would reply, 'I have no name but the one you give me.' 'That is the right answer,' Grome would say. His slaves would bow low, and the next group would come. Of each group, the one who bowed lowest would be allowed to touch the Sword-Spear in token of his fealty.

"Then it came time for the group in which Tal and the Trickster lay hidden to come forward. Grome held the Sword-Spear high, and they all prostrated themselves: but Tal alone, wing-bound and masked, with only two eyes bared and those looking forward, Tal crawled on his mighty belly toward Grome: and Grome looked down with pleasure on this great and abject slave, and said, 'Who are you?'

"'I have no name but the one you give me,' said the prostrate form.

"'That is the right answer,' said Grome: and he held out Amse's butt to the crawling shape, who put up a claw and grasped it.

"'Then give me my right name now!' cried Tal. And the dark fire broke out, and all who had not earlier thrown themselves down now did so, with renewed and more emphatic intention: for Amse knew his master, and woke in his hands. Even the wind went quiet then: for at such times it is important to do nothing that will distract Amse's attention, or his Master's, from their intended target.

"There befell destruction such as had not been seen before or since, except perhaps where VoidCorp has been recently. And the Hunter said only one word more all that while, 'Death': and brought it about in quantity as he came back into his own...

THE ENSUING SEVERAL days turned into a nightmare for Kiel. It had to be several days, according to his watch; he could not tell from the lighting around him, for in this depth of the forest, night and day looked nearly alike to him. His captors fed him, but only grudgingly. Kiel was aware of conversations taking place over his head—not hard, for short as sesheyans were, they were all taller than a human lying on his side on the ground. Any attempt to right himself had been punished by blows that made his head ring. Entreaties to be allowed to handle sanitary matters were ignored—with malice, he thought. After the first day and a half, he knew that his expensive expedition clothes would never be the same, no matter how "smart" the fabric was.

There was always a sesheyan near him. He

could never tell if it was the same one, or whether his guard changed: here in the deep forest sesheyans did not go clothed, as they did in the cities, partly for protection against the ravaging fire of Corrivale, and partly so their human employers or coworkers could tell them apart. He could occasionally tell what they were saying: though he had naturally taken a speak/hear course before coming here, it had not taken local dialects into account, and the dialect here was so thick he could make practically nothing of it. Additionally, when sesheyans spoke in "stave," the semipotic form of their language most favored by them, it was even harder for him to understand: there seemed to be hundreds of periphrases and idioms that he could not translate. One set of concepts did keep coming through, though: "kill," "die," "death." The concepts appeared in numerous verb and adjective forms that he quickly learned to distinguish, inevitably in conjunction with the impersonal pronoun that they used to describe him.

Kiel was awakened by one more repetition of the concept, quite late one night—the third night, he thought; it was becoming harder to tell without checking his watch. He looked up to see the eternal sesheyan sitting by him, at a safe distance, his wings a little hunched over his shoulders, eyeing him. It was always hard to tell what all those agate-like eyes were doing, but the front ones, anyway, were bent on him in a considering kind of way.

"Death," the voice said softly.

Kiel groaned—originally as a kind of opening gambit, but at the moment as more of an expression of sheer misery. It surprised him; he had not intended to sound quite so uncontrolled.

"Yes," the sesheyan said after a moment, in perfect Standard with a surprisingly cultured accent. Its eyes glinted wickedly as it bent its head down toward him: and it exposed all those many sharp teeth. "It is an ugly word, isn't it?"

"Especially when personalized," Kiel said.

"Well, what else should it be, as regards yourself?" said the sesheyan. "For you came here to, shall we say, depersonalize one of them. No, of course the word used would have been 'neutralize.' Or, your employer being what it is, the phrase might have been 'to cancel his contract.'"

That was certainly the phrase that had been used on the formal agreement that Kiel himself had received. "When are you going to kill me, then?" he said.

The sesheyan looked at him. "Well, this is a question which has been the object of some debate. All of our people here want you dead. They know why you came after young Mornuur. And the arrogance of the way in which you went about it has infuriated many of our people in the organization here. The automatic assumption that we did not watch out for our own: or that we would be unable to spot someone with so blatant and careless a cover... there

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## *the naked light of no-trees, a glance of dreadful and predictive fire.*

are few ways to more thoroughly infuriate one of my people than to impugn his intelligence: and you have done so to a fair number of us since you came here."

He fell silent, and Kiel lay there sweating. "The entity I was chasing," he said at last, "was selling not just religious artifacts, but fake ones. Don't you think your people need protecting from that kind of thing?"

"More arrogance," said the sesheyan calmly, stretching his taloned hind legs out in front of him and appearing to idly study the claws. "Do you think our kind are so benighted that we don't know the Hunter to be a god, or at worst a legend, and therefore certainly no more corporeal than a corporate body?" The jaw dropped again, showed more teeth: an ironic expression. "Do you think we don't understand symbolism? Though doubtless VoidCorp thinks not, to judge by its present policy. They erred greatly, to make concrete objects illegal to our poor enslaved brothers on Sheya, while leaving them words. Even when those words are only recitations of ancient traditions." Still more teeth showed. "Especially when the traditions are so clear about what happens to the Hunter's enemies: those who try to steal his attributes, or render them worthless..."

"But those claws," Kiel said, desperate to make himself understood, since it appeared he was going to die. "They *are* worthless. They're fakes. How many claws can the Hunter have? How long could they possibly survive?"

The sesheyan bent a little closer to Kiel, and flexed all the claws on one limb, favoring them with that same half-idle regard. "He can have at least this many," said the sesheyan. "For every one of us who chooses to be, *is* him: and they can last as long as we choose to fight the enslavement of our ancient homeworld, and all the people on it, by a power which does not accept his power... to its eventual confusion. It does not do to interfere with the Hunter. In every story, he always wins."

There followed a long silence. "... But which version of the story am I in?" the sesheyan said, shaking his head: he chuckled softly. "Times change. Versions change: roles change. Often enough a new recension of some ancient tale supplants the old: does this happen accidentally, or on purpose? Are the Gods' claws seen in this, or merely the restless storyteller's? I had not thought to find an answer to that old question. Not this way: not at an enemy's hands." He looked at Kiel for a while. "But if the Gods will not scruple to disguise themselves even as our enemies..."

Kiel began to get the feeling, there in the green darkness, that two personalities were working opposite sides of this argument, or maybe three. "And if we *do* kill you," said the sesheyan, "they will send more effective operatives, who will genuinely do us damage here, in this one safe place—this place where, for the moment, by the Concord's grace, we are free. The Concord having spoken to VoidCorp in a mighty chorus of dreadnoughts, the only

speech that great powers understand—it would be foolish of us to throw away such an advantage, so cheaply purchased." He paused. "I am sorry to upset your feelings about your professionalism," said the sesheyan, "but the kind of bounty hunter you represent—sanitary, Grid-based, using the scheduled services—can make little headway here. You little know how transparent the doings of humans on this world are to us, or how carefully we watch who comes and goes. Sooner or later, our own parts of this world will truly be our own again, with no need for usurped technology to guard it. Meanwhile, we use that technology to our own ends. Your masters are still apparently unsure how well we do so. And that suits us. Disguise, even as a fragmented colony of noble savages, has its advantages."

"So kill me and be done with it."

"It is of course an option. So"—and the sesheyan laughed suddenly—"would be letting you go: for they know you've been a while in our hands, bounty hunter. If you come away with no result, they will know that we willingly let you go. They will, therefore, think that you are on our side: or otherwise irrevocably contaminated. No, you will do no more work for VoidCorp, and you will harm no more of our people." He was chuckling. "One way or the other: for my people are off nerving themselves to that very end, right now."

Kiel lay very still, suspecting that he was at one of those junctures where anything might happen, and the more certain he was of the result, the less likely it was to resemble anything he expected.

"Your death might be satisfying in a small way, in the short term," the sesheyan said quietly. "But even my people sometimes fail to see that there are other balances to maintain: a longer view, the more complex choice. Many worlds lie before us: though our way seems troubled and hemmed in for now, some day it will not be: in those days we will have much to answer for, if we are ruthless now. And for myself... now I find myself wondering whether the tale in which I find myself is the right one."

He looked at Kiel. "And whether it might change..." Once more he flexed the claw in front of his face. "Whether the Hunter's claw is mine indeed..."

"I'm not sure I follow half of what you're saying... but if it would get me off this planet," Kiel said, with emphasis, "I'd dress up as the damn Hunter myself, and VoidCorp be damned."

The sesheyan bent his head low toward Kiel and turned his head, so that every one of his eyes looked at him in turn.

"Why, I believe you would," the sesheyan said. "And so it has been, and will be. So I believe. But as for the rest of it... even the Hunter has occasionally dressed another part than his own." That jaw dropped again.

For several moments the sesheyan was silent. Then he leapt up from the tree stump where he had been sitting.

"Lie still," the sesheyan hissed, "and for your

## • RECENSIONS •



... But now the tale is done, and like tales everywhere, it may repeat itself.

life's sake and all sakes you believe in, make no sound till I come again."

IT SEEMED TO take a long time. There were no stars to judge the minutes or the hours by: only the everlasting green gloom. Kiel stretched his every sense to hear any sound that might make sense in this deadly greenness. Far away, he thought he caught the mutter and hiss of sesheyan speech—and the word for "death" was there. He lay down again, desperate, breathing every breath and thinking how sweet it was, now that his betrayal was sure, and his last breath would come soon.

It was odd how the air here smelled of fennel. . . .

His senses had grown keen enough that he finally heard the sesheyan coming before he saw him. "Now," said the voice, "quickly." And someone cut his bonds.

He could hardly move. The other pulled him roughly to his feet. "Look now," said the sesheyan, and the hilarity in his voice was growing. "Here is a *beishen*. As protective overgarments go, it is effective enough, but this one is not of the best quality, I am afraid. Just as well: its smell will disguise yours. Put your arms in it: I will do the side fastenings. You will have to hold your arms so, to pretend the wings are there. No, higher. Yes, it is painful, but your life lies on it: do not let the angle fall below this." The sesheyan pulled at his arms: Kiel moaned with the pain of strained muscles and returning blood flow. "Hunch down so that the drape of the bodycover also covers your feet, and will not reveal them with your steps. Lower than that—yes, that way. For all sakes, do not straighten up. Fortunate it is that you are small as humans go."

More soft rustling. "Now here is the helmet. Yes, it is tight for a human, but no one will think to look beneath it. Many of our people wear such all the time—the damage of exposure to Corrivale's light, for those who must work for the humans in Diamond Point, has made even the sweet twilight of the forests too painful for them." Here only the voice grew bitter. "But we are told that such damage is a small price to pay for free access to starflight: we should show gratitude to those who have gifted us with such technology. Now: can you moan?"

Kiel had no trouble in doing that. The blood trying to push its way back into his legs made it come very naturally.

"Good, and you hobble well. Now lean on me. You are an elder of our people, passing through from the cities, making his way into the gloom for the last time."

The leaning was what came hardest for Kiel: the trusting. Kiel the bounty hunter had long grown used to depending on himself, on whatever weapon he might have been carrying, and on nothing else. But now he was crippled and almost completely blind, being guided through an alien forest by an enemy whose motives he could not understand. When the dim glow of the firelight in a clearing

showed through the filtrate of the helmet, and he saw the sesheyans all sitting there around it, well armed with both edges and energy weapons, and fingering them all thoughtfully, he could do nothing but moan again, and this time it had much more to do with fear.

"Yes, uncle," said the sesheyan escorting him. "Hard it is under trees for those of us aged and infirm: the Brood-Mother only knows when an end to troubles will come: yet each looks out for the other, and our own take care of our own: how else, when such ill example lies all too near to our sight?"

There was a mutter of agreement from the sesheyans under the trees, and Kiel moaned again, more fear. Each time he let it out, the next time it seemed to get easier. He was ashamed, but at the same time he would not have let go of the arm of the sesheyan he was holding for anything.

They walked through the encampment; they walked out the far side. "Another kilometer or so," said the sesheyan in the softest of whispers, "and we will be where we must be. Do not stop moaning: their ears are keen."

It was not a problem for Kiel. He was actually surprised when they found themselves, suddenly, in a clearing above which actually showed a patch of distant rich orange sky, away high up as if at the top of a chimney: and sitting in the middle of the clearing, a rough little shuttleship that brought its engines up to idle at the sight of them.

The sesheyan helped him to the ship. Its door slipped open, the sweetest sight that Kiel could remember seeing. But before he got in, he turned to the sesheyan.

"You are Devlei'ir," he said.

There was a long silence. Then the other said: "I have no name but the one you give me." And Devlei'ir burst out laughing, in the soft hissing laughter that sesheyans used.

"They hate you," said Kiel. "Perhaps more than any other on this planet who opposes them."

"But I am only an old storytelling shaman, one of a barbaric and backward people," said Devlei'ir, still working on getting the better of the last of his laughter. "If they hate me, it is because I have mastered their idiom: and they cannot master mine." He laughed easily; it seemed difficult for him to stop. "And here." He pressed a data solid into the human's hand. "They will need their proofs. We will see about a body, as well. Mornuur will sell no more Hunter's Claws to VoidCorp's slaves on Sheya, or the other sesheyans working on Company business elsewhere among the worlds. Others may come another time, of course, purveying other wares."

"Words . . ." Kiel said, understanding, if belatedly.

"Only when the concrete is not a more effective distraction," said Devlei'ir, "from the abstract, which matters more. Fare you well, O Hunter! Rare enough for us both: to be on the selfsame side, and not to kill one another: closely enough we escaped it, this time under Trees:

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## Do not say that you have not been warned: for what are tales for, otherwise?

next time who can say which side will come out the better?"

And a few seconds later he had taken wing, and was lost among the tree-shadows: a myth, a shadow, gone. Kiel threw himself into the ship, which at least had a human pilot. As the little shuttle's door closed, he pulled off the helmet and chucked it out of the way, then swore wholeheartedly for two minutes or so.

"Where you going, mister?" said the pilot, looking at him in extreme bemusement.

"Diamond Point," said Kiel, stripping off the worn and odoriferous *beishen*. "The Grand Hotel. And then *anywhere* that doesn't have sesheyans."

The ship lifted up out of the clearing: in its backblast, the branches of the trees, level after level of the canopy, tossed as if in a great wind.

THE SILENT FIGURE sitting under the galya tree now paused, scratched out a number of words in the longbook, and started again, on a new line.

"Then the Trickster laughed at Tal the Hunter. 'You have Amse the Great back, and those who stole it are put down, but there is no denying that you bowed down to Grome,' he said: 'And now all the Gods will laugh at you.'

"Yet the Hunter's eye was calm. 'Ah, but I did not bow down to Grome,' said Tal. 'I bowed to Necessity.'

"The Trickster thought long, and then finally bowed down too: for even the Gods bow to Necessity, who walks in cloud and darkness above them, above all forests, above all starlight, and beyond the stars themselves.

"And even so it was only much later that the Trickster wondered just who had been tricked. For the Hunter's way with him had been uncharacteristically calm and cool. But he soon enough wrote off the experience as unlikely to be repeated: and as for the Hunter, if he had been speaking to the Brood-Mother beforehand for advice on how to handle the most wayward of her sons, who can say?

"... But now the tale is done, and like tales everywhere, it may repeat itself. Do not say that you have not been warned: for what are tales for, otherwise?"

MUCH LATER, his reader, the one whom he trusted to look at these rough efforts before he went to speak them before his people and the people at Diamond Point, put down the longbook and chuckled. His look, though, was monitory.

"There are going to be those of our people," he said, "who may think this blasphemous."

"What?"

"Remaking the Gods' stories of themselves, in your own image. Word has spread quickly enough of what you did."

Devlei'r chuckled. "But how else have they given us their stories? Word of mouth, it has been, since earliest times. How would they give us their stories so, then, and not


expect what happens when words are spoken to happen to them as well? If they had wanted their images to be immutable, they would have found a way to make them so. If they have not... then we are intended to use our freedom to express theirs." He dropped his jaw a little in a faint smile. "And who is to say that they cannot change those stories without our help?"

"You dare greatly..."

"No trees have fallen on me of late." The smile grew broader. "But I will change my own story as I will. And if mine changes... theirs too will: if only in the style of the telling. Content..."—he shrugged his wings—"that is another matter: one for tomorrow."

Devlei'r closed the longbook and put it away in a pocket of his *beishen*; then went off into the great silence of the forest, his friend following. And behind them, the wind sank to a whisper and went still. 🦉

### about the author



Diane Duane has been writing fantasy and science fiction for twenty years, in many forms—novels, short stories, television, audio and radio, computer games and comics—and presently holds the curious distinction of having written for Star Trek in more different formats than anyone else alive. Her debut novel, *The Door into Fire*, and its sequels, have achieved the status of cult classics: her "Young Wizards" series of young adult novels continues to garner awards, and has recently expanded into adult fantasy with *The Book of Night with Moon*, its sequel *On Her Majesty's Wizardly Service* (to be published in the U.S. next year as *To Visit the Queen*), and the forthcoming *The Big Meow*.

"Recensions" is set in the same universe as Diane's most recent novel, *Starrise at Corrivale*, which is due out in October. More information about this book (and numerous others) can be found at the "Owl Springs Partnership" website that Diane shares with her husband, fantasy writer Peter Morwood, at [www.ibmpcug.co.uk/~owls/index2.html](http://www.ibmpcug.co.uk/~owls/index2.html).

### about the illustrator



From the age of six, Brian Despain had one goal in life: to be a Jedi Knight. When he got to college and found out that wasn't offered as a major, he took the next best thing: art. Six years later he was unleashed into the world, where he continues to cause irreparable damage. Brian lives outside Detroit with his girlfriend Halima, doing art and spending his spare time teaching their cat, Roswell, how to yo-yo.



# THE ISLAND OF

BY URSULA K. LE GUIN

*Life exacts a price from the one who is living it.  
But the price of eternal life is borne by more than  
just the one who is immortal.*

S omebody asked me if I'd heard that there were immortal people on the Yendian Plane, and somebody else told me that there were, so when I got there, I asked about them. The travel agent rather reluctantly showed me a place called the Island of the Immortals on her map. "You don't want to go there," she said.

"I don't?"

"Well, it's dangerous," she said, looking at me as if she thought I was not the danger-loving type, in which she was entirely correct. She was a rather unpolished local agent, not an employee of the Interplanary Service. Yendi is not a popular destination. In many ways it's so like our own plane that it seems hardly worth the trouble of visiting. There are differences, but they're subtle.

"Why is it called the Island of the Immortals?"

"Because some of the people there are immortal."

"They don't die?" I asked, never quite sure of the accuracy of my translomat.

"They don't die," she said indifferently. "Now, the Prinjo Archipelago is a lovely place for a restful fortnight." Her pencil moved southward across the map of the Great Sea of Yendi. My gaze remained on the large, lonely Island of the Immortals. I pointed to it.

"Is there a hotel—there?"

"There are no tourist facilities. Just cabins for the diamond hunters."

"There are diamond mines?"

"Probably," she said. She had become dismissive.

"What makes it dangerous?"

"The flies."

"Biting flies? Do they carry disease?"

"No." She was downright sullen by now.

"I'd like to try it for a few days," I said, as winningly as I could. "Just to find out if I'm brave. If I get scared, I'll come right back. Give me an open flight back."

"No airport."

"Ah," said I, more winningly than ever. "So how would I get there?"

"Ship," she said, unwon. "Once a week."

Nothing rouses an attitude like an attitude. "Fine!" I said.

At least, I thought as I left the travel agency, it won't be anything like Laputa. I had read *Gulliver's Travels* as a child, in a slightly abridged and probably greatly expurgated version. My memory of it was like all my childhood memories, immediate, broken, vivid—bits of bright particularity in a vast drift of oblivion. I remembered that Laputa floated in the air, so you had to use an airship to get to it. And really I remembered little else, except that the Laputans were immortal, and that I had liked it the least of Gulliver's four Travels, deciding it was for grown-ups, a damning quality at the time. Did the Laputans have spots, moles, something like that, which distinguished them? And were they scholars? But they grew senile, and lived on and on in incontinent idiocy—or did I imagine that? There was something nasty about them, something like that, something for grown-ups.

But I was on Yendi, where Swift's works are not in the library. I could not look it up. Instead, since I had a whole day before the ship sailed, I went to the library and looked up the Island of the Immortals.

The Central Library of Undund is a noble old building full of modern conveniences, including book-translatomats. I asked a librarian for assistance and he brought me Postwand's *Explorations*, written about a hundred and sixty years earlier, from which I copied what follows. At the time Postwand wrote, the port city where I was staying, An Ria, had not been founded; the great wave of settlers from the east had not begun; the peoples of the coast were scattered tribes of shepherds and farmers. Postwand took a rather patronizing but intelligent interest in their stories.

"Among the legends of the peoples of the West Coast," he writes, "one concerned a large island two or three days west from Undund Bay, where live the people who never die. All whom I asked about it were familiar with the reputation of

ILLUSTRATION BY DONATO GIANCOLA



# THE IMMORTALS



DONATO 25



# THE ISLAND OF THE IMMORTALS



the Island of the Immortals, and some even told me that members of their tribe had visited the place. Impressed with the unanimity of this tale, I determined to test its veracity. When at length Vong had finished making repairs to my boat, I sailed out of the Bay and due west over the Great Sea. A following wind favored my expedition.

"About noon on the fifth day, I raised the island. Low-lying, it appeared to be at least fifty miles long from north to south.

"In the region in which I first brought the boat close to the land, the shores were entirely salt marsh. It being low tide, and the weather unbearably sultry, the putrid smell of the mud kept us well away, until at length sighting sand beaches I sailed into a shallow bay and soon saw the roofs of a small town at the mouth of a creek. We tied up at a crude and decrepit jetty and with indescribable emotion, on my part at least, set foot on this isle reputed to hold the secret of ETERNAL LIFE."

I think I shall abbreviate Postwand; he's long-winded, and besides, he's always sneering at Vong, who seems to do most of the work and have none of the indescribable emotions. So he and Vong trudged around the town, finding it all very shabby and nothing out of the way, except that there were dreadful swarms of flies. Everyone went about in gauze clothing from head to toe, and all the doors and windows had screens. Postwand assumed the flies would bite savagely, but found they didn't; they were annoying, he says, but one scarcely felt their bites, which didn't swell up or itch. He wondered if they carried some disease. He asked the islanders, who disclaimed all knowledge of disease, saying nobody ever got sick except mainlanders.

At this, Postwand got excited, naturally, and asked them if they ever died. "Of course," they said.

He does not say what else they said, but one gathers they treated him as yet another idiot from the mainland asking stupid questions. He becomes quite testy, and makes comments on their backwardness, bad manners, and execrable cookery. After a disagreeable night in a hut of some kind, he explored inland for several miles, on foot since there was no other way to get about. In a tiny village near a marsh he saw a sight that was, in his words, "proof positive that the islanders' claim of being free from disease was mere boastfulness, or something yet more sinister: for a more dreadful example of the ravages of udreba I have never seen, even in the wilds of Rotogo. The sex of the poor victim was indistinguishable; of the legs, nothing remained but stumps; the whole body was as if it had been melted in fire; only the hair, which was quite white, grew luxuriantly, long, tangled, and filthy—a crowning horror to this sad spectacle."

I looked up udreba. It's a disease the Yendians dread as we dread leprosy, which it resembles, though it is far more immediately dangerous; a single contact with saliva or any exudation can cause infection. There is no vaccine and no cure. Postwand was horrified to see children playing close by the udreb. He apparently lectured a woman of the village on hygiene, at which she took offense and lectured him back, telling him not to stare at people. She picked up the poor udreb "as if it were a child of five," he says, and took it into her hut. She came out with a bowl full of something, muttering loudly. At this point Vong, with whom I sympathize, suggested that it was time to leave. "I acceded to

my companion's groundless apprehensions," Postwand says. In fact, they sailed away that evening.

I can't say that this account raised my enthusiasm for visiting the island. I sought some more modern information. My librarian had drifted off, the way Yendians always seemed to do. I didn't know how to use the subject catalogue, or it was even more incomprehensibly organized than our electronic subject catalogues, or there was singularly little information concerning the Island of the Immortals in the library. All I found was a treatise on the *Diamonds of Aya*—a name sometimes given the island. The article was too technical for the translatomat. I couldn't understand much except that apparently there were no mines; the diamonds did not occur deep in the earth but were to be found lying on the surface of it, as I think is the case in a southern African desert. As the island of Aya was forested and swampy, its diamonds were exposed by heavy rains or mudslides in the wet season. People went and wandered around looking for them. A big one turned up just often enough to keep people coming. The islanders apparently never joined in the search. In fact, some baffled diamond hunters claimed that the natives buried diamonds when they found them. If I understood the treatise, some that had been found were immense by our standards: they were described as shapeless lumps, usually black or dark, occasionally clear, and weighing up to five pounds. Nothing was said about cutting these huge stones, what they were used for, or their market price. Evidently the Yendi didn't prize diamonds as we do. There was a lifeless, almost furtive tone to the treatise, as if it concerned something vaguely shameful.

Surely if the islanders actually knew anything about "the secret of ETERNAL LIFE," there'd be a bit more about them, and it, in the library?

It was mere stubbornness, or reluctance to go back to the sullen travel agent and admit my mistake, that impelled me to the docks the next morning.

I cheered up no end when I saw my ship, a charming miniliner with about thirty pleasant staterooms. Its fortnightly round took it to several islands farther west than Aya. Its sister ship, stopping by on the homeward leg, would bring me back to the mainland at the end of my week. Or perhaps I would simply stay aboard and have a two-week cruise? That was fine with the ship's staff. They were informal, even lackadaisical, about arrangements. I had the impression that low energy and a short attention span were quite common among Yendians. But my companions on the ship were undemanding, and the cold fish salads were excellent. I spent two days on the top deck watching sea-birds swoop, great red fish leap, and translucent vane-wings hover over the sea. We sighted Aya very early in the morning of the third day. At the mouth of the bay the smell of the marshes was truly discouraging; but a conversation with the ship's captain had decided me to visit Aya after all, and I disembarked.

The captain, a man of sixty or so, had assured me that there were indeed immortals on the island. They were not born immortal, but contracted immortality from the bite of the island flies. It was, he thought, a virus. "You'll want to take precautions," he said. "It's rare. I don't think there's been a new case in the last hundred years—longer, maybe. But you don't want to take chances."

After pondering a while I inquired, as delicately as possible, though delicacy is hard to achieve on the translatomat, whether



there weren't people who *wanted* to escape death—people who came to the island *hoping* to be bitten by one of these lively flies. Was there a drawback I did not know about, some price too high to pay even for immortality?

The captain considered my question for a while. He was slow-spoken, unexcitable, verging on the lugubrious. "I think so," he said. He looked at me. "You can judge," he said. "After you've been there."

He would say no more. A ship's captain is a person who has that privilege.

The ship did not put into the bay, but was met out beyond the bar by a boat that took passengers ashore. The other passengers were still in their cabins. Nobody but the captain and a couple of sailors watched me (all rigged out head to foot in a suit of strong but gauzy mesh which I had rented from the ship) clamber down into the boat and wave goodbye. The captain nodded. One of the sailors waved. I was extremely frightened. It was no help at all that I didn't know what I was frightened of.

Putting the captain and Postwand together, it sounded as if the price of immortality was the horrible disease, *udreba*. But I really had very little evidence, and my curiosity was intense. If a virus that made you immortal turned up in my country, vast sums of money would be poured into studying it, and if it had bad effects they'd alter it genetically to get rid of the bad effects, and the talk shows would yatter on about it, and news anchors would pontificate about it, and the Pope would do some pontificating too, and so would all the other holy men, and meanwhile the very rich would be cornering not only the market, but the supplies. And then the very rich would be even more different from you and me.

What I was really curious about was the fact that none of this had happened. The Yendians were apparently so uninterested in their chance to be immortal that there was scarcely anything about it in the library.

But I could see, as the boat drew close to the town, that the travel agent had been a bit disingenuous. There had been hotels here—big ones, six or eight stories. They were all visibly derelict, signs askew, windows boarded or blank.

The boatman, a shy young man, rather nice-looking as well as I could tell through my gauzy envelope, said, "Hunters' lodge, ma'am?" into my *translatomat*. I nodded and he sailed us neatly to a small jetty at the north end of the docks. The waterfront too had seen better days. It was now sagging and forlorn, no ships, only a couple of trawlers or crabbers. I stepped up onto the dock, looking about nervously for flies; but there were none at the moment. I tipped the boatman a couple of *radlo*, and he was so grateful he took me up the street, a sad little street, to the diamond hunters' lodge. It consisted of eight or nine decrepit cabins managed by a dispirited woman who, speaking slowly but without any commas or periods, said to take Number Four because the screens were the best ones breakfast at eight dinner at seven eighteen *radlo* and did I want a lunch packed a *radlo* fifty extra.

All the other cabins were unoccupied. The toilet had a little, internal, eternal leak, *tink . . . tink*, which I could not find the source of. Dinner and breakfast arrived on trays, and were edible. The flies arrived with the heat of the day, plenty of them, but not the thick fearsome swarms I had expected. The screens kept them out, and the gauze suit kept them from biting. They were

small, weak-looking, brownish flies.

That day and the next morning, walking about the town, the name of which I could not find written anywhere, I felt that the Yendian tendency to depression had bottomed out here, attained nadir. The islanders were a sad people. They were listless. They were lifeless. My mind turned up that word and stared at it.

I realized I'd waste my whole week just getting depressed if I didn't rouse up my courage and ask some questions. I saw my young boatman fishing off the jetty and went to talk to him.

"Will you tell me about the immortals?" I asked him, after some halting amenities.

"Well, most people just walk around and look for them. In the woods," he said.

"No, not the diamonds," I said, checking the *translatomat*. "I'm not really very interested in diamonds."

"Nobody much is any more," he said. "There used to be a lot of tourists and diamond hunters. I guess they do something else now."

"But I read in a book that there are people here who live very, very long lives—who actually don't die."

"Yes," he said, placidly.

"Are there any immortal people in town? Do you know any of them?"

He checked his fishing line. "Well, no," he said. "There was a new one, way back in my grandpa's time, but it went to the mainland. It was a woman. I guess there's an old one in the village." He nodded toward the island. "Mother saw it once."

"If you could, would you like to live a long time?"

"Sure!" he said, with as much enthusiasm as a Yendian is capable of. "You know."

"But you don't want to be immortal. You wear the fly-gauze."

He nodded. He saw nothing to discuss in all this. He was fishing with gauze gloves, seeing the world through a mesh veil. That was life.

The storekeeper told me that you could walk to the village in a day and showed me the path. My dispirited landlady packed me a lunch. I set out next morning, attended at first by thin, persistent swarms of flies. It was a dull walk across a low, damp landscape, but the sun was mild and pleasant, and the flies finally gave up. To my surprise, I got to the village before I was even hungry for lunch. The islanders must walk slowly and seldom. It had to be the right village, though, because they spoke of only one, "the village," again no name.

It was small and poor and sad: six or seven wooden huts, rather like Russian *izbas*, stilted up a bit to keep them from the mud. Poultry, something like guinea fowl but mud-brown, scuttled about everywhere, making soft, raucous noises. A couple of children ran away and hid as I approached.

And there, propped up next to the village well, was the figure Postwand had described, just as he had described it—legless, sexless, the face almost featureless, blind, with skin like badly burned bread, and thick, matted, filthy white hair.

I stopped, appalled.

A woman came out of the hut to which the children had run. She came down the rickety steps and walked up to me. She gestured at my *translatomat*, and I automatically held it out to her so she could speak into it.

"You came to see the Immortal," she said.



# THE ISLAND OF THE IMMORTALS



I nodded.  
 "Two radlo fifty," she said.  
 I got out the money and handed it to her.  
 "Come this way," she said. She was poorly dressed and not clean, but was a fine-looking woman, thirty-five or so, with unusual decisiveness and vigor in her voice and movements.

She led me straight to the well and stopped in front of the being propped up in a legless canvas fisherman's chair next to it. I could not look at the face, nor the horribly maimed hand. The other arm ended in a black crust above the elbow. I looked away from that.

"You are looking at the Immortal of our village," the woman said in the practiced singsong of the tour guide. "It has been with us for many many centuries. For over one thousand years it has belonged to the Roya family. In this family it is our duty and pride to look after the Immortal. Feeding hours are six in the morning and six in the evening. It lives on milk and barley broth. It has a good appetite and enjoys good health with no sicknesses. It does not have udreba. Its legs were lost when there was an earthquake one thousand years ago. It was also damaged by fire and other accidents before it came into the care of the Roya family. The legend of my family says that the Immortal was once a handsome young man who made his living for many lifetimes of normal people by hunting in the marshes. This was two to three thousand years ago, it is believed. The Immortal cannot hear what you say or see you, but is glad to accept your prayers for its wellbeing and any offerings for its support, as it is entirely dependent on the Roya family for food and shelter. Thank you very much. I will answer questions."

After a while I said, "It can't die."

She shook her head. Her face was impassive; not unfeeling, but closed.

"You aren't wearing gauze," I said, suddenly realizing this. "The children weren't. Aren't you—"

She shook her head again. "Too much trouble," she said, in a quiet, unofficial voice. "The children always tear the gauze. Anyhow, we don't have many flies. And there's only one."

It was true that the flies seemed to have stayed behind, in the town and the heavily manicured fields near it.

"You mean there's only one immortal at a time?"

"Oh, no," she said. "There are others all around. In the ground. Sometimes people find them. Souvenirs. The really old ones. Ours is young, you know." She looked at the Immortal with a weary but proprietary eye, the way a mother looks at an unpromising infant.

"The diamonds?" I said. "The diamonds are immortals?"

She nodded. "After a really long time," she said. She looked away, across the marshy plain that surrounded the village, and then back at me. "A man came from the mainland, last year, a scientist. He said we ought to bury our Immortal. So it could turn to diamond, you know. But then he said it takes thousands of years to turn. All that time it would be starving and thirsty in the ground and nobody would look after it. It is wrong to bury a person alive. It is our family duty to look after it. And no tourists would come."

It was my turn to nod. The ethics of this situation were beyond me. I accepted her choice.

"Would you like to feed it?" she asked, apparently liking something about me, for she smiled at me.

"No," I said, and I have to admit that I burst into tears.

She came closer and patted my shoulder.

"It is very, very sad," she said. She smiled again. "But the children like to feed it," she said. "And the money helps."

"Thank you for being so kind," I said, wiping my eyes, and I gave her another five radlo, which she took gratefully. I turned around and walked back across the marshy plains to the town, where I waited four more days until the sister ship came by from the west, and the nice young man took me out in the boat, and I left the Island of the Immortals, and soon after that I left the Yendian Plane.

We are a carbon-based life form, as the scientists say, but how a human body could turn to diamond I do not know, unless through some spiritual factor, perhaps the result of genuinely endless suffering.

Perhaps "diamond" is only a name the Yendians give these lumps of ruin, a kind of euphemism.

I am still not certain what the woman in the village meant when she said, "There's only one." She was not referring to the immortals. She was explaining why she didn't protect herself or her children from the flies, why she found the risk not worth the bother. It is possible that she meant that among the swarms of flies in the island marshes there is only one fly, one immortal fly, whose bite infects its victim with eternal life. ♣



## about the author

*Ursula K. Le Guin has written poetry and fiction all her life. Her first publications were poems, and in the 1960s she began to publish short stories and novels. She writes in various modes including but not limited to realistic fiction, science fiction, fantasy, books for young adults, screenplays, and essays. Among the honors her writing has received are a National Book Award, five Hugo Awards, five Nebula Awards, the Kafka Award, and a Pushcart Prize.*

## about the illustrator

*Donato Giancola has created more than 200 book cover and card paintings for the science fiction and fantasy market since beginning his professional career five years ago. After graduating from Syracuse University in 1992, he moved to New York City to immerse himself in the world of art.*



## Amazing facts

THE FEBRUARY 1949 ISSUE of *Amazing Stories* was adorned by this painting from Robert Gibson Jones, depicting the plight of one of the characters in "The Insane Planet." The author, Alexander Blade, had twenty stories published in the magazine during a career that spanned a decade. That might be considered quite a feat, except that "Alexander Blade" was actually several different writers. In the 1940s and 1950s, stories from regular contributors were sometimes printed under publisher-owned pseudonyms, known as "house names," to inject some variety (or the appearance of it) into the Table of Contents. *Amazing Stories* used more than a dozen house names during this period.



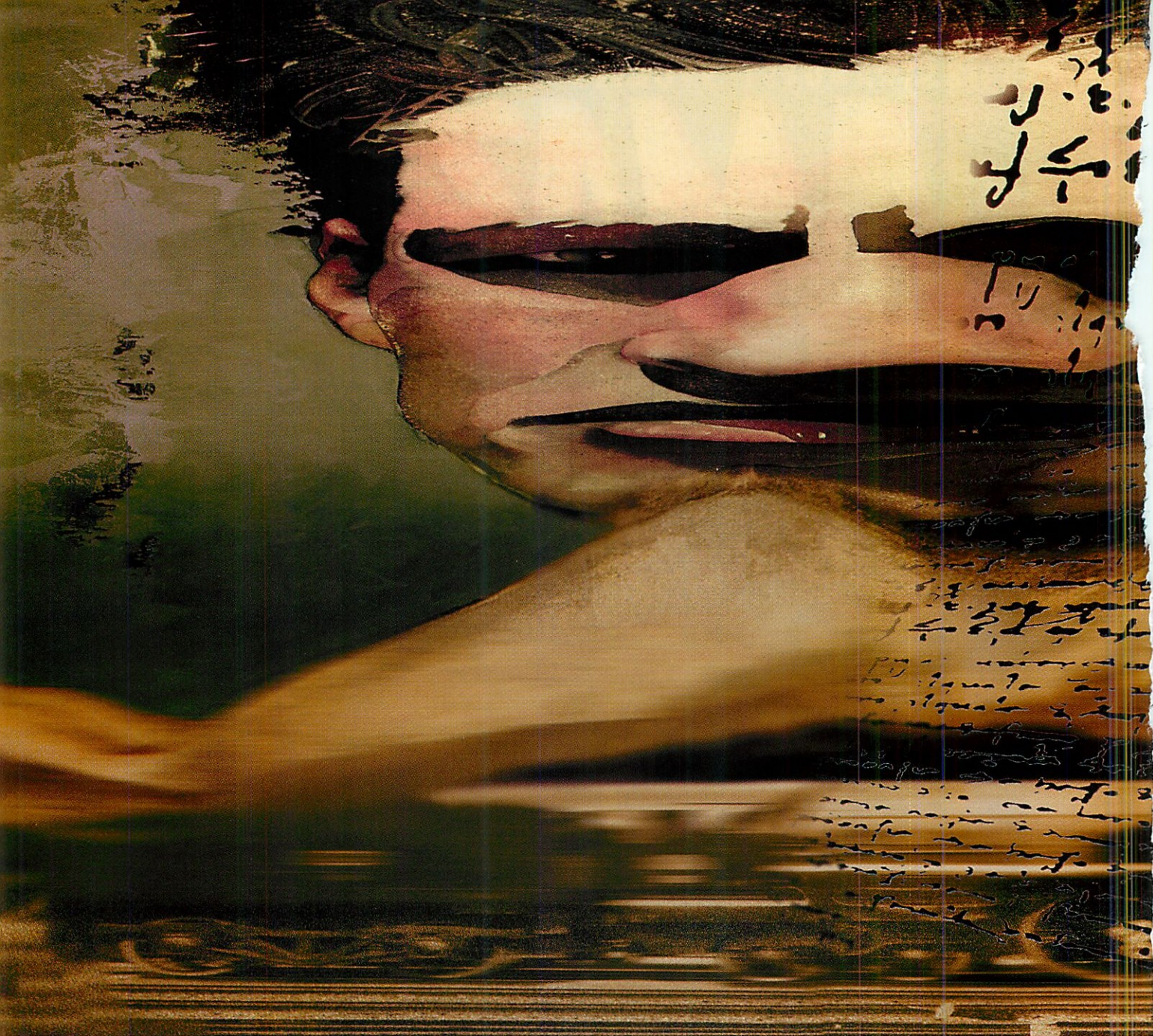
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# AMAZING ANC STORIES

FEBRUARY 25

**The INSANE PLANET** *by* ALEXANDER BLADE  
**A WORLD WHERE EVEN TREES WENT MAD**





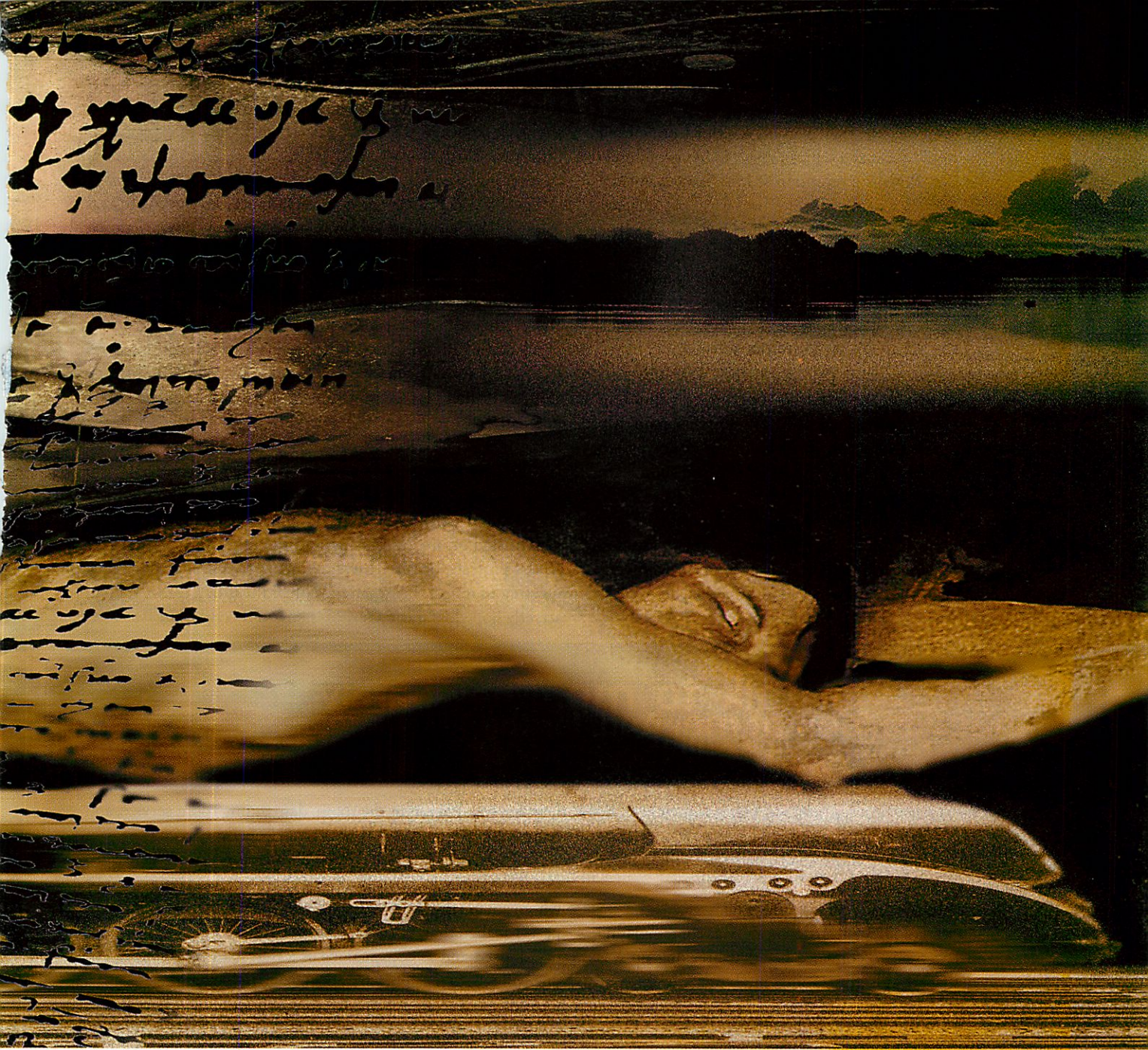
BY  
KRISTINE  
KATHRYN  
RUSCH

# GOING NATIVE

*We are changed by every journey we take. Does it matter, then, how we choose to travel?*

ILLUSTRATION BY  
JOHN VAN FLEET AND  
KENT WILLIAMS





**“god, could  
you find a  
duller way  
to travel?”**

asks my leggy companion, the luscious Ruth. She has this weekend off, and she insisted on coming with me on my assignment. It’ll be fun, she said, and then followed that up with, How can I know what you’re doing unless I come along with you on occasion? I listened to the logic of that, and now I find myself trapped in a 5-by-6-foot moving room with a woman who finds train travel passé.

Me, I’m afraid that the Amtrak trip up the mountain will be the best part of this assignment. I work for eight online editors, and all of them called me last week to ask for an article on the annual TVS convention. Such a uniformity of requests has only happened once before in my career, and that was when a woman I sat beside in grade school, tormented in middle school, and dated in high school was inaugurated as President of the United States. Suddenly my memoirs had value.

Somehow, I doubt that this essay has the same sort of import.

I also had my doubts about bringing Ruth to kooksville and now, when we’re still two hours away from our destination, I know I’ve made the Wrong Decision. She is lying on the bottom berth, her bare feet against the dirty plastic wall, her skirt pooled around her waist, and she is not thinking of sex.

Neither am I.



"I mean, we've been on this train for *hours*. How did people travel like this?"

They made love, they ate, they read books. But I do not tell Ruth that. She would see it as a slap, an insult to her great intelligence. In real life, Ruth is a receptionist for a lawyer, but she prefers to call herself a paralegal. She uses legalese, mispronouncing most of it, and pretends that she knows as much as someone who has a law degree.

I've never told her about mine. But then, why should I? It would ruin the sleazy nature of the relationship, the fact that I'm dating her for her deliciously man-made breasts and she's dating me because I know the secrets of the universe.

She believes that's because I'm a journalist. The old-fashioned print kind, even though what we print is done online. I'm paid by the download, which is why I'm on this train trip instead of, say, investigating the latest bombing in downtown Seattle. No matter how idealistic you start out, you soon learn that it's paranoia that sells.

Which is why we're on a train instead of teleporting. There are no teleportation stations in this part of the Cascades. Rumor has it that the first teleportation technician who ventured into this part of Oregon was shot. Whether he lived or died depends on which rumor you believe.

the Teleportation Victims Society (whose acronym is TVS, but which is known in newsrooms nationwide as TVSo?). I should've known I was in trouble when I tried to explain this little joke to Ruth and she'd stared at me blankly, not even threatening to smile.

The TVSo's meet every year in Harbor, Oregon, which used to be a 1990s survivalist camp between Bend and Klamath Falls. The area's only attraction, or so I could glean before I arrived, is that it has no teleportation station, and none is planned. If someone wants to travel in that part of the Cascade Range, they either have to go to Bend, fifty miles to the north, or Klamath Falls, over sixty miles to the south. Then they have to take whatever ground transportation is available. Amtrak still serves this part of the country, partly because the sparse population can't justify the teleportation system and partly because the tracks have existed for nearly two hundred years. It's the only form of public transportation between those two stations, and mostly it's used by the low-income folks who can't afford the cost of speedier travel.

I insisted on taking the train all the way from Seattle, over Ruth's protests, because I wanted my experience at the annual meeting to reflect the experience of all the other TVSo's. I had secretly hoped I'd meet a few of them on this ride, but Ruth has

**No one will talk to me. They barely manage to look at me. And, for the first time, I worry about how I'll pull this assignment off.**

Ruth knew we were heading into no man's land when she decided to come with me, but the closer we get the less I believe she actually *understood* it. I think she thought we'd look at the crazy yokels and then go home.

I think I thought she could handle anything.

Check that. I think I knew, deep down, she was contemplating marriage, and I wanted to convince her that breaking up was her idea. But that's hindsight. Going in, I was simply concerned about the lack of sex.

"Once," I say, gazing out the window at the snow beside the tracks, "this was the fastest way to travel in the whole world."

"Yeah." She flops an arm over her eyes, missing the deer that stand by a group of trees, staring at us. A 19th-century vision in the 21st. "Sad, isn't it?"

I'm not sure. I'm enough of a romantic to enjoy the view. I'm enough of a romantic to wish that she'd enjoy it with me.

THE ASSIGNMENT, IF YOU LOOK AT IT HISTORICALLY (one of the few things I've retained from law school is a sense of historical perspective), is a perennial: Go look at the fringe and report back to the masses. Around the turn of the last century, that meant going to carnivals and fairs to examine the bearded women, the two-headed chickens, and the stillborn fetuses that looked like fish. In my grandfather's day, a reporter on this beat might go to see the mysterious Area 51, thought to be a repository for Unidentified Flying Objects (things so familiar they were known by their acronym UFO) and for the little green men who flew them. Me, I get assigned the annual meeting of

kept me sequestered in the room, demanding room service, and not paying for it in the way that I had hoped.

Still I manage to sneak to the club car once, and there I see exactly what I expect—a group of tired, smelly people, most of whom are too drunk to look at the magnificent scenery whizzing past. I realize that, in my new khakis and bomber jacket, I am overdressed and as conspicuous as a rich man in Olympia. No one will talk to me. They barely manage to look at me.

And, for the first time, I worry about how I'll pull this assignment off.

AT THIS STAGE OF ARTICLE RESEARCH, I ALWAYS WORRY about how I'll pull the assignment off. Even though what I write is dictated into my wrist-top, edited on a larger screen at home, and emailed directly to my editor, what I do is really not much different from the work Mark Twain *did* almost two hundred years ago. He ventured out into places unknown and reported back.

Ernest Hemingway did that, so did Ernie Pyle, and Peter Arnett. The great journalists thrived in times of war. When there is no war—or no war America is interested in—we are stuck with perennials. And no journalist ever became famous by risking his life at a TVSo? convention.

I simply want to go in, find a few things that are amusing, see if I can discover the secret behind the victimology, and return to home base with all parts intact. I know that, by Sunday evening, I will have a story. I'm just not sure if it'll be the kind of story Hemingway would have dispatched from Spain.



In fact, I know it won't be the moment the train pulls into Harbor, Oregon.

WHEN RUTH AND I GET OFF THE TRAIN AT THE SMALL white station nestled against a snow-covered ridge, we are greeted like visiting royalty. I made no secret of my job as a journalist, but it's really Ruth they want to see. It seems, on the e-slip she sent with her fee, that she listed her employment as she always does.

A paralegal and a journalist. We are a dream couple for the TVSo?'s.

I am not the only journalist in this place. Every major television reporter, radio commentator, vid producer, and holotechnician is here to record the loonies in action. I am one of the few print people, and the only one with enough awards to make me semifamous. Every TVSo?' wants to tell me his story, to introduce me to little Jonnie or Suzy or Uncle Billy, and to show me what makes them different.

When I get off the train, I realize I am not ready for this. The grasping hands, the slightly desperate gaze. I insist on going to the hotel before meeting people, and Ruth gives me her I-can't-believe-you're-doing-this look. That's when I realize she's not upset about the location or the people. She's upset that I want to leave them. Now that she realizes what sort of people we'll be dealing with, she not only relishes the attention, she believes she can give them advice. She doesn't realize how dangerous the situation can be. She's with a group of people who might take her seriously. I grip her arm and follow our host to the Compound, our hotel.

The Compound was the former survivalists' camp, and looks it. The outbuildings are made of wood hammered together by people who clearly didn't know what they were doing. The main building, where the restaurant and gift shop reside, was once a ranch-style house, built in the mid-20th century, complete with front-facing garage. The building had been added onto, once during its survivalist camp days—that was evident by the concrete bunker in the back—and once by the hotel, the brass and wood facade that tried to make everything upscale.

Our room isn't really a room. It's cabin number 8. A plaque on the door tells us that it had once been used by the house's original owners as a storage shed, and was remodeled into a cabin when the camp started in the early 1980s. The plaque tells us proudly that eight people lived in this space; I'm wondering how Ruth and I will manage for a weekend.

The room is square, with an area carved out for a bathroom with an ancient shower and plastic tub. The sink has motion detectors instead of computer controls, and the toilet actually has a handle for flushing. Ruth is charmed, but I wonder if that will last into the middle of the night, when one of us stumbles in there and initiates the gurgle and grunt of the ancient plumbing.

We unpack, and then Ruth wants to reenter the fray. I'm more interested in checking out the dining facilities. The reconstituted chicken I had on the train didn't last me long.

Outside, we see several blue and white signs, pointing to various cabins. Most signs are hand-lettered and made specifically for the conference: Registration is to our left; Legal is to our right; and Testimonials is straight ahead. Other signs show us the way

to improve our Education, covering everything from Technological Secrets to the History of Transportation. Many of these, I know, are ongoing programs, and I will check them out through the weekend. It's the guest speakers I am most interested in, and those are going to be the hardest events to see.

IN THE REGISTRATION LINE I LEARN THAT THE TVSo?'s aren't all low-income, poorly educated folks like the research had led me to expect. The man in front of me is a doctor from Philadelphia who has documentation on "differences" and is willing to call it up on his wrist-top right there in the frigid Oregon mud. The slender, pretty woman behind me is a reasonably well-known vid personality whose career went into a decline, she says, after she teleported sixty-five times in one month. I talk to both of them at some length. Ruth has left me alone in line while she went on to the lodge for drinks.

She has been gone a long time.

I draw the same sort of crowd I drew at the train station. I am uncomfortable, used to being the observer, not the observed. Everyone wants to tell me a story; everyone wants me to know how teleportation changes people, how it creates differences where there were none before.

Some of the stories are just silly, like the vid personality's. She claims she lost a little bit of charisma each time she teleported from one place to another. Some are strange, like the woman who has me examine holograms of her now-estranged husband, a man whose eye color changed in the space of one afternoon from green to brown.

The rest are merely sad. Many are from people who claim that their spouses are no longer the same people they married, and they blame public teleportation. Others show evidence of medical conditions they claim were caused by teleporting, and still some have tales of close loved ones who died soon after traveling in a teleportation device.

I have read the literature; I am familiar with all variations on these stories and more. I even know their origins.

I ask the eye color woman why she believes her husband's eyes were the only thing to change.

"I didn't say they were the only thing, now did I?" she says angrily.

I turn away, afraid to follow up.

THE FIRST BIG BREAKTHROUGH IN TELEPORTATION occurred in the late 1990s when a team of Austrian scientists successfully completed a transfer on the subatomic level. The physics of the breakthrough was too complex to explain to the layman in the popular newspapers of the day, so many journalists attempted (unsuccessfully) to put the discovery in layman's terms.

I have tried to hunt down the origin of the example used for the laymen and have been, to date, unsuccessful. I suspect either one of the scientists got exasperated with the journalists' stupid questions and used the example to explain, poorly, what was going on, or a journalist attempted to translate what he thought he understood into language that he thought other people would understand.

Their experiment, said the news organizations of the day, was as if the scientists had made a red ball disappear from one



room and then reappear in another room—although what was teleported was not the ball itself, but the *quality* of redness, which was then transferred onto another ball.

It is not what we experience. We experience the teleportation first imagined in pulp fiction stories of over a hundred years ago. Our bodies literally disassemble in one location, are transferred to another location, and are then reassembled. There are documented cases of malfunctions, most dating from the early days of the technology and almost all of them having to do with apes who arrived dead. These deaths were not pretty or simple: they had to do with parts being reassembled in the wrong order, rather like taking a puzzle apart, then trying to put it together by placing all the corners in the middle. Those details were resolved long before any human stepped onto a teleportation pad. The things we must worry about are simpler: power failures and computer malfunctions, both of which can get us lost in mid-transfer. This problem is greatest in Third World countries, with devices built out of scrap metal, most likely by the operator's Uncle Ralph. Teleportation is not sanctioned in those countries, or is done purely at the user's own risk. Here and in other "approved" countries, every device is scrutinized, overhauled, and replaced more often than anything else in our technologically advanced society.

This is what the literature tells me. It is what exists in all published reports, the meetings before Congress, and in several teleportation companies' legal databases. I know there can be problems—we all do. The problems are called "acceptable risk," something we all assume when we step on a teleportation pad, or even when we walk out our front door. What varies from person to person is how acceptable some risks are.

It is the idea that we can be disassembled and reassembled that unnerves people the most. A large number of people (actual estimates vary, depending on the reporting agency) refuse to use teleportation, allowing other forms of mass transit to remain in business. Most of these people are not TVSo's. They simply don't like the idea of being taken apart and put back together without it being necessary, and are not willing to sacrifice their original unity for the sake of instantaneous travel.

Others cannot imagine traveling any other way. Frequent teleporters receive a discount on each trip. "Frequent" is defined in the industry as anyone making more than ten trips per day. I have only hit the ten-trip-in-one-day milestone once, and it left me feeling disoriented and unnerved—not, I hasten to add, because I was disassembled so many times, but because, after five different teleportation stations, I lost track of my surroundings. Later I learned that frequent travelers set their wrist-tops to remind them of their location and their purpose for being there upon arrival.

I have read all the literature, examined all the records, and while I still feel a twinge of nerves when I step on the platform, I prefer the instantaneous shift, the delight at being in Manhattan one moment and Rome the next. It is not different, my grandmother once told me, from that frisson of fear she used to feel whenever an airplane's wheels left the ground or whenever a train went over a particularly high and narrow bridge.

It is human nature to worry about the accidental, the unexpected, the unknown. It is also human nature to magnify those things into problems so strange as to be somehow plausible.

THE TVSO'S HAVE THREE BANQUETS AT THEIR WEEK-END meeting, and I have bought tickets to all three. Ruth does not want to eat at the banquets. In fact, she soon makes it clear that she does not want to spend time with me. She says my attitude is too cynical, my remarks too cutting. She is already right. I am already thinking in the tone I've decided to take for this article, a tone that my brain established while part of it tried to concentrate on the seriousness of the vid personality's loss of charisma.

The first banquet is on Friday night, and there I am happily surprised. The food is excellent: free-range chicken, brought in from a nearby ranch, local vegetables grown and stored here, marinated in local wine, mixed with spices grown in the chef's own herb garden.

Nothing was shipped in: no risk of teleportation tainting the food. And somehow it does seem fresher. Or perhaps the chef, a world-renowned man who refused to allow me to use his name in this article, has simply lived up to his spectacular reputation.

The speaker that night is a transportation historian who is, believe it or not, duller than he sounds. He reads his speech off the TelePrompTer modification in his contact lenses, probably much as he does in class, which forces him to stare straight ahead. That, combined with his monotone, makes him seem as if he's teleported one too many times.

The diners at my table, which is toward the back, immediately deduce the problem and begin whispering, as I imagine his students often do. We introduce ourselves and tell each other why we're here.

The woman to my immediate left looks like a Hollywood grandmother, which is to say that she's round, gray-haired, and jolly. She confides that she went to see her grandchildren on her only teleportation trip, and instead of arriving in Pittsburgh as planned, she arrived in Philadelphia. The teleportation operators claim she simply told them she was going to Philly, but she claims that they punched in the wrong destination. I take mental notes, knowing that what is at stake here is more than a simple trip. She lives on a fixed income, and she scrimped to afford the teleport. She could not afford to then go from Philly to Pittsburgh and back home. She missed a trip, and probably several meals, for that one abortive visit.

This is a problem I can get behind. It is not magic woo-woo incantations in which she claims that she suddenly ballooned in size because her protons expanded or that she got skin cancer that should have belonged to someone else. This is the kind of operator error we all worry about. I have had nightmares about getting on a teleporter in Portland and ending up in Beijing.

The woman next to her confides that there is a lawyer in the legal section who is trying to get enough contacts to initiate a class action suit for just that sort of problem. The grandmother thanks her, and then asks her, whispering politely of course, why she's here. The woman, who is in her mid-forties, has the prettiest lavender hair I've ever seen. She flushes a nice shade of pink that somehow complements the lavender and admits that she would rather not say.

I am beginning to think I've hit a lucky table. Imagine someone who has come to a TVSo? convention who is unwilling to admit why she has come. It is almost antithetical to the purpose of the conference.



I make a mental note to pull her aside later, then I ask the man to my right why he has come. "Reporter," he says tersely, not whispering. "Just like you."

He gets shushed by the people at the table behind him, who, believe it or not, are engrossed in the teacher's speech. At that point I surface briefly, realize the man has droned on for thirty minutes and hasn't yet reached the invention of the automobile. I signal a waiter for more coffee.

The woman to the reporter's right bursts into tears when I ask why she's here, and we get shushed again. I get an odd sense that the tears are fake. Still, we dutifully lean forward after she dries her eyes with her linen napkin.

"My baby," she whispers, and stifles a sob. The entire table behind us glares at us with angry eyes. We glare back, then lean as close as we can.

"My baby," she says again, "was a boy when he went into the device."

Suddenly I don't want to hear any more, and neither, it seems, does anyone else. The reporter hands her another napkin, and makes sympathetic noises, but as quickly as he politely can he rises and makes his way to the men's room.

teleportation companies. I hear the familiar litany of successful lawsuits—there aren't many, and most are nuisance cases much like the grandmother's of the night before—but the audience is attentive and asks polite questions.

In the afternoon, I poke my head into Education and see the historian. I don't run away, although I'm tempted. I walk slowly, pretending I had ventured into that area by mistake.

Ruth is nowhere to be seen. She did show up in our room the night before, long after I was asleep, and I thought I smelled brandy, but by that point I didn't really care. I wonder idly who she has found to entertain herself with and how she can use him to further her career. The thought, though accurate, is uncharitable, and I then wonder when I stopped thinking with fondness of Ruth's tendency to exaggerate and began to be annoyed by it. Probably around the point when her manufactured breasts became her most fascinating feature.

That night's speaker is an expert in teleportation technology, and I am assured by almost everyone who's been here before that he makes the historian look glib. I am sorry to give up the free-range chicken, but I cannot bear another two hours trapped in those uncomfortable wooden banquet chairs.



**"Do you believe," one woman asks, "that everyone who has been in a teleportation device is still human?"**

Ten minutes later, when he has not returned and the speaker is rhapsodizing about the uses of airplanes in World War I, I excuse myself. The corridor outside is empty, but I find a new convention going on at the bar.

"Now I know why they keep inviting him back," says one woman to a gale of laughter. It seems that this is the fifth year the historian has spoken on Friday night, and this year he is actually *more* interesting than he has ever been before.

One of the conference organizers overhears, and says rather stiffly, "We invite him so that you all have an historical overview of the problems we face."

"Oh," the laughing woman says, "but don't you think that teleportation is a little different from, say, a Model T?"

"No," the organizer says, and I realize that this is one of those dangerous people to whom the phrase "sense of humor" has no meaning at all. "It is all a manifestation of our need to make the world smaller. Once everyone thought that instantaneous travel would solve all our ills. They didn't realize that it would cause more problems than it cured."

"Do you believe," one woman asks, "that everyone who has been in a teleportation device is still human?"

The conference organizer does not respond to that question. It is too touchy. Most of the people here have been in a teleportation device. If the organizer answers no, that would mean he believes none of us are human. I don't believe that. I believe we're very human, although the more I see, the more I wonder what side of humanity we actually belong to.

THE NEXT MORNING, I WANDER OVER TO LEGAL AND listen to lawyers pontificate on ways to collect damages from

I go into the restaurant, where I've had two delicious breakfasts, and cast about for a table. It seems to have a lot of patrons, considering a banquet is going on in the next room.

Ruth is at a table near the window. Even though it is dark, I can make out the ghostly shape of the nearby mountain, snow-covered and shiny. She waves me over.

She is sitting with the lawyers. They have asked that no other tables be filled around them, and so far the restaurant has been able to comply. Ruth, it seems, has been spending her time with the entire legal wing of this conference and learning "a whole heckuva lot."

I sit down and listen for a while. This seems like an informal version of the panel I had attended in the morning. I order a steak, and when it arrives one of the attorneys, an overweight vegetarian who consumes way too much wine during the evening, informs me of the many ways that beef could kill me. Since I have heard this lecture before, I add a few insights of my own, all the while chomping heartily on my dinner.

Finally they ask me why I'm here, and I tell them that I'm a paid observer of human nature.

"He's a journalist," Ruth says, breaking my cover.

They eye me as if I'm the slimy species, and I explain that I'm a practitioner of New Journalism almost a century after New Journalism was introduced. It is my way of gaining legitimacy among the illegitimate: pretend to a literary value that I don't really have.

The New Journalism comment seems to have silenced them, so to break the ice—and to make my dinner worthwhile—I ask them what they really think about teleportation technology.

"It makes lawyers rich!" one of them says, and the others



laugh. But I press them, and finally a dark-suited man next to Ruth says, "I used to laugh at these folks, and then questions started coming up, questions I couldn't get answers to."

One of the female attorneys nods, and still another, the overweight vegetarian, says, "Yeah, like why is there a ban on kids under the age of three taking teleportation?"

"It's not a firm ban," a New York lawyer says. "You can get around it with a doctor's permission."

"Yeah," the vegetarian says. "Why a doctor? And what does he give permission for?"

"I've never seen any instances of babies traveling. They don't allow it, with or without the doctor," the woman says.

"But I met a woman who says her baby—" I start, and they all shake their heads sadly, silencing me.

"She's here every year," the vegetarian says. "I checked the story out. She doesn't have a kid. I don't even think she's female."

They chuckle again, and the joviality is back. No matter how I push them, I can't learn what the other questions are. The vegetarian promises to tell me if I come to the bar later. When I do just that, he's passed out in a pile of corn chips. I vow to try to find him the following day.

THE NEXT MORNING, AS THE SPEAKERS ARE SETTING UP, I go to the Technological Secrets area. It's in a wide auditorium with holographic capabilities. My mind boggles just at the thought of seeing strange machinery in life-size and 3-D.

It takes me a moment to find a speaker who'll talk to me, who doesn't try to get me to wait until his presentation. I tell him about the lawyers' collective unease about the baby ban.

"You ask the teleportation stations, they'll tell you it's because babies are too fragile for most kinds of travel. Like they'll ban an infant from a jet." The guy I'm talking to is six feet tall and has a honking nasal voice. I'm glad I had elected

it's damned hard to prove. They tell me they'll help me when I can show damage caused by inferior parts. I can show damage. I just can't make a credible link."

Later that day, I check his statements with a few other technology wonks. They agree that the problem with public teleportation is that it's *public*. The system used by the President and other heads of state is state of the art, so protected that nothing can go wrong. The system used by the rest of us . . . well, these guys would have us all believe it's held together by spit and glue and pieces manufactured just after the turn of the century.

It makes me think of all those bans on teleportation travel to Third World countries. If our technology is bad, what is the technology like that was hammered together by someone's Uncle Ralph? The very idea raises images of those poor puzzle-box monkeys with the corners where their middle should be.

Of course, when I get back home and call the various teleportation manufacturers, they all give me the company line and swear teleportation is the safest form of transportation since walking. Even that can go wrong, I say. Think of potholes. Think of missteps, twisted ankles and tripping over small children. But the manufacturers don't find me funny. When I get belligerent, forgetting for a moment that this is supposed to be a puff piece and not investigative reporting, they transfer me to their legal departments, who remind me of libel laws and how careful I need to be in questioning their companies.

THE FREE-RANGE CHICKEN IS GONE BY THE THIRD banquet, but the speaker is delightful. He's a comedian just starting out, and he proves to me that the TVSo's have a sense of humor, since most of his jokes are aimed at them, and they laugh uproariously. I don't. I feel vaguely embarrassed, mostly because I know I would have laughed if I'd been watching this guy in any other setting but this one.

As I head out, I look for Ruth. She's still surrounded by her

**I keep thinking of those banned babies, and Uncle Ralph, and inferior equipment, and the way that the sheet rock in my condo flakes.**

not to stay for his presentation, even though he seems nice enough. "But it's really because of the stress to the body."

"I thought there is no stress."

He looks at me as if I'm the dumbest thing he's seen at this conference, and given what I've seen, I'm almost insulted. He holds up a glass of water. "You can't teleport crystal either," he says. "Sometimes it shatters. And it shouldn't. I mean, they perfected this at the subatomic level, or so they say."

"You don't think they did?"

"Between you, me, and the wall," he says, "I know they perfected it. The problem is that they don't use the right equipment to teleport people. It's like building a house. We can build a damn fine house with everything correct. But we hire contractors who want to make as much money as possible, and they do it—have done it—since time immemorial by using inferior parts and charging the same as they would for good parts. I try to tell the lawyers that, but it's not glamorous, and

lawyers, and when she sees me, she waves me over. She puts a hand on the overweight vegetarian's arm and informs me that he has hired her as a paralegal. I pull her aside, remind her that jobs aren't always that easy to come by and that she'd better check his credentials. She frowns at me, asks me if I think she's dumb or something—a question that I decline to answer—and then stalks off. I gather from that whole exchange that she's not taking the train home, and I turn out to be right. My wish has been granted. She has forgotten thoughts of marriage and believes that our breakup is her idea. I find that I regret the whole plan, not because I wanted to marry her, but because I had hoped that I would at least get to try all parts of train travel, from meal to sleep to sex. We had neglected sex on the way there, and I was hoping for a bit on the way home.

Instead, I spend the next week finding a way to ship her clothes cheaply without using teleportation technology, since the vegetarian likes to keep his office "pure."



I am beginning to understand the sentiment. My moment of hesitation as I step on the teleportation platform in Bend—I see no point in train travel all the way to Seattle if I'm not going to be able to have nookie in transit—lasts nearly three minutes, and customers behind me get angry. But I keep thinking of those banned babies, and Uncle Ralph, and inferior equipment, and the way that the sheet rock in my condo flakes like someone's untended dandruff, and I find myself more and more reluctant to travel in that instantaneous sort of way. After all, why am I in such a hurry? I'm a journalist, for god's sake, a man who makes his living off observing, and observation is something that can't be rushed. I am proud of my observation skills, and proud of my capability for contemplation that makes them possible.

But what I've been observing since I got back is my own reflection in the mirror. There's a line down one side of my face, an instant wrinkle that really doesn't look like a laugh line or something that would naturally occur as I age. It looks more like a fold or a crease, something incorrectly ironed in, as if a section of me were miscut and hemmed wrong.

I never noticed the wrinkle before getting on that teleportation station in Bend. I have been obsessed with it ever since. And I believe, I really believe, that my obsession is a product of the TVSo? convention, but not for the reason that you'd think. It's not that I suddenly believe the teleporter has given me a new wrinkle. It's just that I find the idea of a wrinkle induced from the outside better than the idea that I'm growing older. It's easier to believe in the fiction. It's nicer.

It takes the responsibility for that particular line off me.

Or at least, that's what I tell myself. Because I do need to teleport on occasion for my job. Journalists observe, yes. But they must observe in the right places. And when my editor tells me to get to London yesterday, I do the next best thing. I get there two minutes from now, new wrinkles be damned.

But I find that I do examine mirrors more, and I wonder, when I think something particularly cruel, like most of my thoughts about Ruth lately, if I've become less than human. Is humanity something we can lose, little bit by little bit, like the vid personality and her charisma? And if so, how can we tell it's gone? Is it replaced by paranoia, by worry, in equal degrees? And am I, in worrying about this, showing signs of latent TVso?ism?

I don't know. But I do suspect that my recent desire to take the train to the far reaches of the United States has less to do with my unfulfilled sexual fantasy than it does with my desire to avoid a technology that I may have learned to fear. Then I remind myself of the history of this form of paranoia; I know that being a reporter from the fringe requires an ability to cross over into that land and appear to be a native. I'm simply afraid I've taken it too far. Going native requires residency in kooksville, and while it only takes an instant to reach that particular destination, it takes years and expensive psychotherapy to get out.

WHEN I TURNED IN THIS ESSAY, I THOUGHT OF ASKING for a bonus, a sort of combat pay to compensate for the wrinkle, for the increased harassment as I take an extra minute of other people's time while I hesitate before stepping on a teleportation platform.

But my editor vid-conferenced with me this morning, wanting to discuss what he calls "proper compensation." He says my article (this thing you have finished reading, without this coda) has given him an idea. Teleportation has overtaken other forms of transportation so much that his younger readers have probably never ridden a long distance on a train or in an automobile, or flown in a plane. He wants me to do these things, and report back about my experiences, as if I have gone to yet another frontier, even if it is a part of the past.

He asks what I want to do first, and reminds me this will be on the magazine's expense.

"A ticket on the Orient Express," I say.

"Ah," he says. "You'll title it 'Strangers on a Train'?"

I'm thinking not of Patricia Highsmith and Alfred Hitchcock, but of luscious, willing blondes with breasts the size of helium balloons and the ca-thunk, ca-thunk of the wheels on a track suggesting a rhythm that no teleportation device can hope to match.

"I hope so," I say, and I realize this is the kind of fringe I like. "I certainly hope so." 🍷



## about the author

*Kristine Kathryn Rusch has retired from her post as editor of The Magazine of Fantasy & Science Fiction and has turned her complete*

*attention to fiction writing. Her most recent fantasy novel is The Fey: Resistance; her most recent sf novel is Alien Influences; and she has also published a crime novel called Hitler's Angel.*

*She spends most of her time in a large room overlooking the Pacific Ocean, typing. Occasionally she gets up to visit with her husband or feed the cats.*

*She had a stint on jury duty recently, during which she assured her fellow jurors she would write about them only if they were interesting (they were) and watched in shocked disbelief as the plaintiff's attorney in a civil case fell asleep and snored in the middle of the trial. She has since concluded that she made the right decision when she dropped out of Pre-Law.*

## about the illustrators

*John Van Fleet graduated from Pratt Institute of Art and Design in Brooklyn and was later made a Visiting Professor at Pratt and taught several classes in illustration. His most recent projects include The X-Files Movie graphic novel and several "Season One" adaptations for Topps Comics. Upcoming is a two-part Batman book for DC Comics.*

*Kent Williams has done extensive work in graphic novels and comics. His work has seen print in numerous national and international publications, including Playboy, Omni, and The Learning Channel magazine. Among his awards are three medals from the Society of Illustrators and the Best of Show Award from Illustration West 32. He is currently writing and drawing a graphic novel titled Kokoro to be published in 1999.*







BY WILLIAM BARTON  
AND MICHAEL CAPOBIANCO

m

ARINER 4 EMERGED FROM THE COLD

*What do Mariner's  
photographs mean?*

*That depends on  
whose eyes are doing  
the viewing.*

and dark of Mars' shadow, pictures snapped, measurements made, and began to look for home. After a moment, its sun sensor locked on a huge brightness, dominating the sky; then it began searching for hard-to-locate Canopus. Finally, everything in order, it waited for the signal that would allow it to relay the contents of its primitive tape recorder, twenty-two pictures composed of forty thousand numbers each. At zero hours, eighteen minutes, thirty-three seconds Universal Time on July 15, 1965, it received the requisite signal and duly began to transmit, one number at a time.

BRUCE MURRAY, JUNIOR MEMBER OF THE MARINER 4 television team, sweating intensely, took a deep breath, then another. Some kind of glitch appeared to be developing in the image. Something unexpected. . . . The room swam around him as he stepped back. The smell of chalk seemed to clog his nostrils.

On the beaver board in front of him a bizarre earth-tone color-by-number painting was half completed. The top was mostly dark red, but halfway down, just above the stapled strips of still uncolored numbers, was a bright ochre region, its border curving down slightly. The bright region was patterned. Very patterned. And the pattern that was emerging was very unlikely indeed.

He turned and looked pathetically at the two Bobs. If they screwed this one up, it wouldn't just be his head. JPL, which had never truly recovered from the deficits of the Ranger program, would lose its grip on the unmanned space effort. They'd probably all end up in wretched Texas, working for the oil industry.

"We've got it!" said Robert Leighton, gangly arms sprawling across the worktable. As principal investigator of the TV experiment, he, perhaps, had the most to lose if this went belly-up. But the look on his Lincolnesque face was one of exultation. "There's clearly some kind of terrain visible. We're seeing the surface of

THEMATIC  
TORUS  
IN SEARCH  
OF A CUSP

ILLUSTRATION BY  
JEFF BRICE





Mars." His voice was firm, no sign of hesitation. He was going to go for it, no matter what.

Bob Sharp, Murray's immediate supervisor and friend, looked up from his notepad, shaking his crewcut head, frowning balefully. "I thought you just stretched the image. . . . Did you apply some other formula to the numbers?"

Murray put down the piece of chalk and wiped his fingers against his pants. "No. Honest, Bob. You saw the formula. We just tried to get rid of the glare." He tore himself away with difficulty and went to the row of small open windows. A cool July day was coming to an end. High-pressure cell sitting on L.A., accumulating poisons, as usual. He took a slow breath of smoggy Pasadena air, looked out across the Caltech campus, dimly lit by the last colorless light from the twilight sky, bursts of leaves picked out by occasional street lamps. Deserted-looking, but that was because everyone was over at Von Karman. Waiting. He sighed. "This *must* be it. But damn it, how are we going to—"

There was a knock on the door and Frank Colella, JPL's burly press liaison, came in. "Christ, guys, they're getting surly out there," he said, a goofy grin on his face. "Bergman's threatening to talk to the President personally to get the pictures released." He did a double-take at the Mars drawing. "Hey, that looks pretty snappy. Can't I let them in for just a—"

"This isn't anything, Frank," said Leighton, gesturing at the picture. "We're just experimenting here. The reprocessed image will come out of the film converter in about half an hour. If that goes okay, we'll be ready for show-and-tell with the reporters."

"So what should I tell 'em?" asked Colella. "They keep reminding me about Ranger 6, asking whether the tape recorder anomaly is responsible."

Leighton shook his head. "Tell them that the first picture was . . . overexposed. And that we'll have the second picture out before midnight."

Sharp stood and ran a hand along the back of his neck. "Give them some ice cream from the machine. Our treat. That should cool 'em off a little."

"Yeah, good idea. But hurry up, okay, guys?" Colella said, shutting the door behind him.

"All right," said Murray, turning back to the image. "What do we have, then? Look at these lines. Are they real?"

Leighton came up to the picture. "Don't know, Bruce. There's no way in hell a simple stretching algorithm's going to produce this kind of thing." He tapped the board. "If we assume this is the limb of Mars, then everything we're seeing should be foreshortened. Look at this line, the way it curves. That strikes me as a reasonable shape for a, um . . . straight line coming around the globe."

Sharp held up the Lowell map, pointing to the region labeled Elysium. "Bob, forgive me, but even Lowell didn't put any canals there. What kind of feature could that be, a 'straight' line? It must extend at least a thousand miles. Some kind of rille? We *have* to come up with a geological explanation."

Murray gave in to the prickly feeling growing in his shoulders and back. "Bob, that line's just the beginning. If the collection of shapes at this nexus has any reality, we'd have to postulate some kind of geometric fracturing process."

Sharp nodded. "Sure, Bruce. Mud fractures. The patterned terrain of the Arctic. Things like that."

Leighton fixed him with a cold glare. "But not this big."

Murray laughed, not quite the sound of hysteria, not yet, noise echoing in the big room. "No," he said. "Robert, there *is* no geological explanation for this stuff. Hell. Maybe Lowell was right."

Sharp worked at his slide rule. "At one and a half seconds per picture element," he said, "we'll have picture number two in about four hours."

Murray was staring at the picture again. *Hey!* a voice was saying in his head. *Hey! Wake up!* Mists of fatigue and anxiety seemed to part before him. Hell. He began to smile, inadvertently. Canals and cities? This was just the beginning. . . .

By now they were all smiling broadly, walking around the room, chuckles breaking out. "Maybe I should give Pickering a call," said Leighton. "The press boys are going to have a field day with this."

"That's an understatement, Bob," Sharp said. "Cover of *Life* Magazine, here we come. . . ."

THE ROCKET SCIENTISTS WERE SITTING IN THE FRONT seat of a 1959 Ford Fairlane, painted white like all government motor-pool cars, in the parking lot of the new Burger Chef on Route 1 in Woodbridge, Virginia, some twenty-two miles south of their destination in the District of Columbia. It was a roasting-hot summer Sunday, too hot to be eating dry, breaded hamburgers and greasy french fries, heat hardly ameliorated by a steady breeze that rustled the leaves in the few trees the builders had left behind, down by the little creek, sun burning through the windshield out of a hazy, blue-white sky.

The rocket scientists scarcely noticed any of these details, absorbed in their pictures, nor did they notice two teenage boys sitting in the shade behind their car. Two swarthy fat boys, gorging on burgers and sucking on sludgy milkshakes, one of them very tall, quite fat in a roly-poly, bottom-heavy sort of way, the other shorter, in better shape, though not much better. Black hair, beady black eyes, blending into the landscape under the trees, watching the men in the car.

The older of the two men, beefy and handsome in middle age, had the first of the pictures, the one taken from a slant range of 10,500 miles, propped on the car's flat steering wheel, edges tucked under the horn ring. There were already a few smudges on the glossy print, places where it'd been touched by greasy fingers, but the salient details were still there. The planet's limb. The dark, straight-edged line of the canal. A few shadowy geophysical details. The . . . spot.

His eyes kept going back to that. To the hidden geometry of its shape. To what it almost certainly meant. The other pictures were better, much more revealing, but he kept coming back to this one. To the first one, the one with the bright horizon of Mars outlined against the black of interplanetary space.

This was the one.

The younger, thinner man, speaking in crisp, educated German, said, "I'm telling you, Werner, we have to act



immediately. Doctor Wiesner is speaking to the President even now."

Von Braun nodded slowly, almost to himself. "I know, Krafft, but . . ." A pause, still savoring the picture. For God's sake. A city on Mars. . . . He looked over at the other man, into earnest eyes. "Johnson has always been on our side. Much more so than Kennedy was. He backed us up when Jerry opposed our decision to go with lunar-orbit rendezvous. Backed us up every time. We can trust Johnson to make the right decision."

"For the love of God, Werner." Ehricke reached out and tapped the picture with a forefinger, leaving a tiny dot of french-fry grease right next to the city. "You know what we're going to have to ask for."

Another nod, more or less aimed at the picture. "You think they might still be alive? Waiting for us?"

A shrug, rather American, one of the many alien mannerisms they'd all picked up since coming here twenty years ago. "The occultation signal gave a maximum surface pressure of no more than sixty-five millibars. Life?" Another shrug. "It'll have to wait for Mariners 6 and 7."

Number 5, cobbled together from backup equipment, was already targeted for uninhabitable Venus. What a waste. "Well. If nothing goes wrong, we'll have the Saturn V ready for its first test launch in less than two years."

"You still serious about going 'all up'?"

"Why not? It'll save a lot of time and money."

"If nothing goes wrong."

"Just remember, Krafft. Four *neins*."

That got a thin smile. "Right. And if our fine friends at Rockwell pull their thumbs from their collective anuses, we might be on the Moon by the summer of 1968."

"Maybe." Von Braun reached into the folder and pulled out picture number four, the one with the structure inside the crater, the last one received before they had left Huntsville a wearying eleven hours earlier. "What do you suppose they wanted with a single building large enough to show on the scale of this image?"

Ehricke said, "Who knows? What do you think Johnson will say when we tell him how much money we want for NERVA?"

A soft chuckle. "Four billion dollars? He'll find it somewhere." A sudden brightening in those sharp blue eyes. "My God, Krafft! There are cities on Mars! *Cities!*"

Ehricke said, "Maybe he'll just tell Field Marshal Ky to look after his own welfare. . . ."

"Maybe so, Krafft. That wouldn't be such a bad thing. This Vietnam business. . . ." He tapped the photograph and smiled. "I think this will buy us the Apollo applications budget, though. We can turn the S-IVb orbital lab into an interplanetary life-support module. We'd already planned to support three men in it for six months without resupply. . . . Mars? No problem at all. . . ."

A shadow fell on them through the car's open window. It was the shorter of the two fat boys, the other right behind him, looking over his shoulder. "Yes?" Von Braun said in oddly accented English.

The boy, speaking in a thick, heavily accented, halting sort of German, said, "Hello. My name is Bill. *Wilhelm*, I think. *Ja*."

The two boys were staring, not at the two men, but at the pictures. Ehricke reached out and took them back, put them away in the folder.

Von Braun smiled. "We say *Willy*. Wilhelm was the Kaiser's name." He glanced at Ehricke and shrugged. "My name is Werner. This is my friend Krafft. We're pleased to meet you, son. Your German is, um, quite good." Execrable, of course, but a surprise out here in the . . . wilderness.

Ehricke said, "Maybe we'd better be a little more careful. . . ."

The boy said, "My father took four years of German in college, back in the forties. During the War. I've been . . . fooling with his old books. My father was in the signal corps. He spent the whole war in Alabama. When I heard you speaking German I was . . . curious." Curious, but his eyes were on the folder where the pictures had gone.

Von Braun was taken aback at the boy's level of sophistication. *Fooling?* However bad this boy's accent, self-taught from old college textbooks. . . . He said, "Really? He should consider himself lucky. Me, I spent the war shooting guided missiles at London."

"*Werner!*"

"Oh, stop it, Krafft. This is just a boy. A nice, smart boy."

"Still. We'd better be going, Werner. We have to be at the Executive Office Building by three. And all the way up into the Maryland hills by nightfall."

A sigh. "I suppose so." He reached out and shook the boy's hand. "Nice meeting you, son." Funny. You expect a boy to have a nice, open face, but this one looked just a little bit like a young Hermann Oberth. The taller one was sleepy-eyed, but they both had a look of . . . what? They looked like they recognized him. Like they knew what was going on. That was it. Too damned smart.

Von Braun started the engine, listening for a moment to its clicking, undermaintained valves, then put the car in drive and rolled off toward the blacktop highway. Out the rearview mirror, he could see the boys watching them go.

THE AIR IN CAMP DAVID'S LOG-ENCLOSED PORTICO was pleasantly cool as Bill Moyers stepped out. Even this far into July, Maryland's humidity would occasionally relent, making the Catoctin mountain retreat clement at night. Moyers sighed, shook out his arms to loosen his sweat-damp shirt, listening to the katydids start up, clack-clack-clack-clack. Not many lightning bugs this year.

This business of the Mars probe had brought back all his college sophomorisms, given rise to mental debates that he thought had been put to rest when he'd signed on with LBJ.

What had Pope Paul said? *Vidimus et admirati sumus*. He wished he could talk again with Dr. Martin, his old theology professor, about the significance of intelligent life on the red planet. Billy Graham, whose voice he could occasionally hear from inside, was no substitute. Perhaps the President had known something like this was going to happen. Graham and John Steinbeck, the closest thing the President had to philosophical advisors, had been invited weeks ago. Maybe that's why Moyers was here as well. LBJ's favorite sounding board.





They'd been rushing around like headless chickens ever since Stevenson had died of a heart attack on a London street on Wednesday. No sign of emotion from the President, just more appointments stacked on the absurd schedule already in place. This was the man's first respite in weeks, and even so he had spent the afternoon on the phone rounding up support for the education package.

Moyers heard a car coming up the gravel driveway, already past the security gate, saw the lights wheel around and go out. Must be Von Braun already. Drove all the way from Alabama, he was so excited. Just got in a car and went, couldn't even wait for morning to requisition a plane. He remembered the pictures of the man when he'd been taken, broken arm at an improbable angle, handsome face calm. An asset to be recovered, just like the gold and the paintings. Spoils of war.

Moyers turned and went in, back into the unpleasant warmth. He guessed that an air conditioner would be out of place in this rustic setting, but nonetheless wished for one. In the large room the old man called his bar, the discussion was still going strong. LBJ and Steinbeck were standing athwart the large fireplace, drinks on the mantle under the picture of Lincoln. Reverend Graham was seated on the overstuffed chair in the corner. Servants were scuttling in adjoining rooms.

"You sure you won't have a coke, Bill?" asked the President.

"Well, maybe I will have one now, sir."

"Help yourself." The President turned his attention back to Steinbeck. "Now, John, I can't believe that you think a few lines on a photograph will have such a profound effect on people. No matter what's going on in outer space, they still have to put food on the table, still have to kiss the wife and go off to work every morning. It doesn't hit 'em in the pocketbook, and that's where they think."

Steinbeck, remarkably even uglier than LBJ, and in the same sort of way, grimaced, loose folds decorating his face, insufficient mustache crooking. It was a smile. "Where were you, Mr. President, on October 30, 1938?"

Johnson frowned, took a sip of bourbon, and set the glass back. "Nineteen thirty-eight? I hadn't been in Congress much more than a year. . . ." His brow furrowed eloquently, and the strain that had been accumulating from the Vietnam situation showed clearly. The last chance to back out had probably passed. "Oh." He smiled wanly. "Yes. I got a flood of mail from my constituents about that. Half wanted Welles hanged. The other half wouldn't believe it wasn't true."

Graham spoke, projecting his elegant voice easily across the room. "I think there's little difference between 'Martians' and 'devils' in most people's minds, Mr. President. I've had to deal with suchlike outbreaks of hysteria among my parishioners from time to time."

Steinbeck nodded. "Hysteria. Exactly the right word."

There was a noise in the adjoining room, and two casually dressed men were ushered in by Johnson's personal secretary. "Werner," said the President, striding across the room and shaking his hand. "And this is?"

"Krafft Ehricke, Mr. President. He works with me at MSC. Krafft is the man largely responsible for the design of the Atlas missile."

Stepping away from the mantelpiece, Steinbeck put out his

hand and said, "John Steinbeck, writer." Shook hands with them both. "This," he said, gesturing, "is the Reverend Billy Graham. So. Y'know, I lost a dear friend to one of your V-2's. Vicissitudes of war, of course."

Von Braun looked directly into the writer's face. "I'm very sorry to hear that, Mr. Steinbeck. It was an unfortunate—"

"Call me John. So. What in the hell are we going to do about those Martians?"

"First things first," said LBJ. "Werner, Mr. Ehricke, what'll you have to drink? Betsy'll be happy to mix something up for you."

"I'll just have a glass of ice water," said Von Braun, "if that's all right, Mr. President."

"The same," said Ehricke.

Moyers observed the two as they took their drinks and tried to make themselves comfortable. Von Braun was stiff and formal, as always, looking just to make a speech and be off, no doubt. The other man, slender and wolflike, was full of nervous energy, unwilling to sit.

"Well, Mr. President," said Von Braun slowly. "You have undoubtedly seen the pictures. Have you seen the fifth yet? We've . . . been on the road, unable to—"

Johnson, nodding, said, "Uh-huh. More of the same. Don't need much more proof, I reckon."

"You know what the Russians are thinking right now, don't you, Mr. President?" said Ehricke, his eyes gleaming.

"Well, the last I heard, Mr. Kosygin is threatening to deal with us in Vietnam."

Ehricke shook his head. "Vietnam is nothing compared to what is going to happen on Mars. Architecture means life. Life means struggle."

"Come now," said Steinbeck, cocking an arm. "I think we'll have a common cause now. External to our political dialogue."

Graham cleared his throat. "Heaven knows the godless Communists will stop at nothing to annex—"

"That's bullshit, Billy," said Johnson suddenly. "Mars is an awful long way off. There'll be no annexing in my lifetime, or yours either."

Ehricke folded his arms, thinking, Given these men's ages, that's not such a long time. . . .

"It is true, Mr. President," said Von Braun, sitting on the arm of a cloth couch, "that we've just taken the first steps off our own world. Nonetheless, there are precautions . . ."

"Can we beat 'em there with a manned mission?" Characteristic Johnson, direct and to the point.

Ehricke's eyes seemed to brighten.

Von Braun looked pensive, rubbing his big chin with one hand, a soft whisper of sprouting stubble. "It depends, I think, on their will to trifle further with what is, really, a rather short-blanket economy."

"And *our* will to divert resources from war to space," injected Ehricke.

Von Braun gave him a sharp look. He said, "The Saturn V will, of course, be ready for its first test flight by some time in 1967, and, if all goes well, we'll be on the Moon by 1968. If you'll proceed with funding the Apollo-Applications Orbiting Lab, possibly in place of the Air Force's MOL . . ."

Johnson glowered a bit at that.

Ehricke said, "Now might be the time to begin funding Project Voyager."

The President said, "The Mars landing probe?"



"Yes, sir," said Von Braun. "We can have a large automated laboratory derived from the lower stage of Grumman's Lunar Excursion Module on the surface of Mars by 1971. That will tell us everything we need to know in order to proceed with a manned expedition."

"When?"

"Well, the Rover 1 nuclear engine, the seventy-five thousand-pound thrust model, will be ready for flight testing no later than 1969. If we initiate development of the two hundred thousand-pound Rover 2 . . . maybe it could be ready by 1977."

"Are you telling me we could be ready to go to Mars in 1977?"

Von Braun became slightly worried-looking.

Ehrlicke suddenly whispered, "Yes. 1977."

Von Braun said, "Well. We might want some time to test all the new hardware in a real space environment. On the Moon, perhaps. . ."

"When?"

A shallow sigh. "Certainly no later than 1981." Sixteen years, twice the amount of time they'd allotted for Apollo. Four presidential terms.

There was a long silence, then Johnson said, "All right. Let's do it."

Moyers felt an incongruous surge of hope. A change was taking place in his boss. Years were dropping away from the man as he watched. Ever since the dismal day Kennedy had been shot, he'd seen a growing resignation and automatonlike obliviousness in him, especially apparent in his frequent public appearances. Even Johnson's brazen, some would say uncouth, wit had become subdued.

He was tired, of course. No man could perform on such a rigorous schedule without growing weary. But Moyers had speculated more than once about the man's vital spark being slowly extinguished. The LBJ he saw now across the room was more like the cocky fighter for lost causes he had been once upon a time.

Maybe this was a turning point of sorts.

KOROLYOV WAS SITTING IN COMRADE EYEBROW'S Kremlin office at last, slumped in an expensive leather chair, exhausted from having been awake most of the night. Meetings and then more meetings. The summer sunlight was slanting steeply through the window, sun high in the sky though it was yet early in the morning, and he could feel his heart beating slowly, very heavily in his chest. The pills they'd been giving him to combat the high blood pressure weren't doing much good. Only making him bloat, making him painfully constipated. Work and then more work. The wattled creases of his neck felt sticky with old sweat, making him wish he'd taken the time for a quick sponge bath.

Brezhnev sat back in his old black chair, rocking slowly as he went through the glossy black and white pictures one by one. Korolyov had been surprised to see them so soon, but they'd come, apparently via courier, from America, in the morning's diplomatic pouch.

Pray that he sees. Khrushchev would have been gibbering by now. . .

Khrushchev, sitting in his dacha, wondering just what went wrong, probably surprised to be alive. . .

Brezhnev looked up from the photos and stared across the shiny, bare desktop at him. Eyes in shadow, heavy and dark. Finally, he said, "You don't look good, Academician. Pale. Are you sure you're all right?"

Korolyov knew the answer to that one. Knew what the doctors had been telling him, but . . . "I'll be fine, Comrade General-Secretary. I'm a little overtired just now."

A slow, serious nod, as if another man's exhaustion actually meant anything at all. "You should take better care of yourself, Academician." He tapped the overlapping photos. "Your talents are . . . valuable."

There. A hint.

Brezhnev said, "What are the chances that this is a hoax?"

A hoax? From America's ingenuous, spy-movie-infatuated leadership? Their pet Germans maybe, but . . . "I think the pictures are genuine, Comrade General-Secretary." Said flatly, without affect.

Brezhnev stared down at them for a while longer, then said, "We'd know better if your people hadn't lost Zond II."

Korolyov felt his heart go thud, once, very hard, then steady down again. He said, "Well. The Babakin Design Bureau and its subcontractors . . ." No. That wasn't the right tack. He said, "We can only try again. The root of the problem lies in the nature of our budget review process. That and its size, relative to the budgets of our American counterparts."

Brezhnev tapped the pictures again. "This Jet Propulsion Laboratory has had few real successes, despite its large budget."

And it was true very few of the Ranger moon probes had worked. Korolyov only said, "Until now, Comrade General-Secretary." He thought he could see the shadow of a smile on Brezhnev's face just then, for just a moment.

Brezhnev said, "I was impressed by the 'first' you managed with Voskhod II, Academician. The 'space walk' went well."

Not really. Leonov had almost been killed, trapped outside his spacecraft. Still . . .

"When can we expect the flight of Voskhod III?"

"In October, Comrade General-Secretary. The Americans are planning to do an eight-day Gemini mission next month. Voskhod III will orbit two men for approximately twelve days." No sense telling him the Americans were planning a two-week mission for December, beyond what the Voskhod could manage without reducing the crew to a single cosmonaut.

Brezhnev nodded, looking down at the pictures again. "And then?"

"In March, we plan to orbit Voskhod IV with a female crew. One of the women will make a space walk." No more than a publicity stunt, of course, but . . .

Brezhnev glanced at him. "I hope you give her a better spacesuit than the one Leonov wore."

Korolyov's heart bumped again. "We think we've solved that problem."

Another nod. "And then?"

"If the final budget is approved, Voskhods V and VI will be atop Chelomei's new booster, equipped with the *Polyot* maneuvering stage. We will launch them sequentially, to rendezvous in orbit."





"When?"

"In August 1966, perhaps."

"Won't the Americans be doing something like that this coming December?"

Korolyov could only nod.

Brezhnev pushed the pictures across the shiny desktop between them. "Academician, I've just finished reading your status report on the lunar program. A year ago, you were telling us the first mission could be accomplished in 1968, just ahead of the Americans. How did the landing slip all the way back to 1971?"

Korolyov sat up straight in his chair. Sat up straight and looked the man right in his fathomless black eyes. "General-Secretary Khrushchev kept everyone in line. Since then . . . Director Chelomei is building his own moonship. And now Academician Glushko has withdrawn his engine designs. We've had to go to Kuznetsov for new engines, and two years have been lost in the process." He sat back again and sighed. "As of last week, I felt the earliest possible test flight for the N-1 launch vehicle might come no earlier than the summer of 1969. . . ."

By which time, the Americans would certainly have landed on the Moon.

Brezhnev said, "And as of *this* week? As of today?"

A slow nod. "I spent most of the night on the phone, chatting with Director Chelomei."

Brezhnev's famous "eyebrow" went up slightly. "And?"

"I'm prepared to drop the Soyuz project. Chelomei is prepared to drop his entire circumlunar venture. We'll use one N-1 vehicle to place one of Chelomei's Almaz manned orbital transports in lunar orbit, where it can remain for up to four weeks. A second N-1 will be used to carry an uprated lunar lander. With the weight saved by leaving out the Soyuz, we can increase the crew complement of the lander to two cosmonauts."

"This will be more expensive than the previous plan."

A nod. Roughly twice the original projected mission cost.

"And what does Glushko say about all this?"

Korolyov leaned forward and fanned out the photographs, admiring their astonishing clarity. These pictures were, really, better than the ones Zond II had taken of the Moon on its way out, before its radios failed. He said, "Academician Glushko knows we won't be going that far with his hydrogen rockets, however more efficient than the N-1 they might have been. He feels his efforts would be best spent by beginning design studies for a nuclear-thermal engine at this time."

"Will doubling your budget be enough? Trebling it?"

Korolyov shook his head slowly. "No, Comrade General-Secretary. It may be that I will require ten times the current amount to give you what you want."

Brezhnev seemed taken aback. "You need thirty billion rubles?"

Korolyov felt a small amount of satisfaction warming his cold, stuttering heart. "That is, in fact, what NASA would have been getting"—he reached out and tapped the glossy photo on top of the stack, the one with the planet's limb outlined against black space—"before they found cities on Mars. What do you suppose will happen now?"

Brezhnev said, "Do you think we could win *this* race?"

"If we want to."

LATE EVENING, AROUND NINE P.M., THE summer sky deep, deep blue overhead, first few stars shining through the darkening sky. Two fourteen-year-old boys sprawled on the front steps of a house near the top of the first hill on Greenacre Drive, concrete still quite warm, reradiating the solar heat it had absorbed throughout the long day. Mosquitoes bobbing about in the filtered light from inside. Little clouds of gnats swirling. Cricket noise. Cars. People talking. There was a baseball game going on in the field behind the houses across the way. All their friends. None of them interested in this odd business.

Mike kept looking up at the sky while they talked, watching the stars pop out in order of magnitude.

Bill was sprawled facedown across the steps, fiddling with the books. They had the *Evening Star's* front page spread out on the concrete, showing the grainy-looking photo of Mars, the planet's fuzzy limb against a black sky. Next to it, a book that belonged to Bill's dad, *Mars, the New Frontier*, by Wells Alan Webb, Fearon Publishers, 1956. And Larry Ivey's centerpiece map of Mars from *The Reader's Guide to Barsoom and Amtor* that Mike had gotten from the *ERBdom* fanzine people.

Long day. Crazy day. First that bit about the two Germans in the car down by the Burger Chef, trying hard to understand what they were talking about, some kind of science fiction nonsense . . .

But, thought Bill, I recognized the driver. I've seen him on TV. Read those articles he and Bonestell did for *Collier's* ten years ago, the issues my father saved. . . .

Mike kept talking about the pictures they'd had, the black-and-white glossies, speculating wildly, fruitlessly, about what it might mean. Then dinnertime. His father coming home with the paper. Then the evening news and the announcement from JPL. Walter Cronkite more or less babbling on TV, face aglow with delight.

The banner headline on the *Evening Star* read, "CITIES ON MARS?" The article below covered almost half the front page. Mike was trying to read it right now, picking through the wealth of useless details and gushy journalese.

"Okay," he said. "Here it is: '...the large dark area in the lower left-hand corner of the picture appears to be a large mountain, possibly volcanic in origin. On older maps, this area is usually known as *Nix Olympica*, meaning 'the Snows of Olympus' in Latin. The picture is centered at latitude 35 north, longitude 172 west. . . .'"

Bill opened the Webb book to the frontispiece map, "Martian Canal Network, redrawn from Trumpler." Above it was another map made of spidery lines, "Air Communication Network," to which you were supposed to compare it. "All right, there it is. *Nix Olympica*." He smirked then, and said, "Snows of Olympus. Somebody guessed right."

Mike got out the Barsoom map and smoothed it flat. Ivey had drawn the features of Barsoom superimposed over some old canal map of Mars, shadowy features dim behind crisp black ink. "Thirty-five and one eighty-eight. . . ." He ran his fingers in from the edges of the map, one on the left edge, one on the top, and stopped when they met.



Long silence, then Bill said, "I don't believe it."

"No. Me neither. But it's Gathol, all right." Gathol, the city on the mountain, where Gahan was Jed and Princess Tara his bride. Tara of Helium, mother to Llana of Gathol, daughter to the incomparable Dejah Thoris...

Ridiculous. And yet.

Mike read, "... the regularly shaped, cross-hatched area, situated inside what appears to be a large volcanic caldera, indicated by an arrow on the photograph, is believed to be the work of intelligent design, possibly the ruins of a large city..."

"Ruins." Bill pulled the paper apart and turned to the inside pages, where there were more photos. Hazy images of what appeared to be canals, a few of them glimmering with what might be water, most of them dry. Places that just had to be cities and... He said, "The pictures those German guys had were a lot clearer than this." He tapped the picture of another big crater, the one down by *Solis Lacus*. "This is the one where they said there was a big building. You can hardly make it out here." No more than a flyspeck.

Mike moved his finger around on the Ivey map. "Nothing. Maybe it's the Air Plant..."

"Maybe."

Another long silence, then Bill said, "Burroughs probably knew about Lowell's hypothesis in 1911. Probably sited his cities according to Schiaparelli's maps. This isn't even a coincidence."

Mike shook his head, pushing the papers aside, shutting the books. "No, it isn't. We're just dreaming now, being goofy, but..." He stood up, stretching, swatting at flying insects, brushing them away from his sweaty face, looking up into a now almost-black night sky, a sky freckled with bright stars. "But there are cities on Mars. Real cities..." This last almost whispered.

Bill looked up at him, at the stars beyond, and suddenly wished that he knew the sky a little better. He said, "I was looking through those brochures I got from NASA last spring, just before I came over tonight. You know, the one on Project NERVA, the atomic rocket thing, says the first expedition to Mars could depart on November 17, 1984."

Mike looked back down from the sky, face serious, eyes dark, and said, "Nineteen eighty-four?" A long, slow blink. "We'll be thirty-four years old then."

Bill nodded and said, "Which one is Mars? Is it still up?"

Mike seemed amused, a little aggravated, seeing him look up at the wrong part of the sky. Bemused, because this boy who actually seemed to understand how nuclear rocket engines worked, and could draw crude schematics of their innards, couldn't be bothered to memorize the constellations, nor tell east from west, or, for that matter, be bothered to do enough homework to pass his junior high school math classes.

He said, "It's still up. Let's go look at it." He clattered through the screen door, then reappeared with his small pair of black binoculars. They went back through the carport, past the rust-orange VW beetle, and up the incongruously steep hill that cut Mike's back yard in half. Through the dark forest detritus under the trees Hylton had left, and into his neighbor's fenceless back yard. Bill glanced back and saw Mike's

father silhouetted in the kitchen window, looking out at them, he guessed.

There, above the roof of the little Cape Cod on the next street, the whole of the western sky could be seen. It was mostly dark now, a little tinge of indigo in the northwest. Heat lightning flickered somewhere on the horizon.

And there, like two crookedly placed jewels, stood both intense Venus, almost setting, and, well above it, very much dimmer, ruddy Mars, surrounded by early spring constellations about to disappear. "That's Regulus to the left of Venus," said Mike, proud of his knowledge. "Mars is in Virgo."

They stared at the little featureless dot in silence for perhaps five minutes, trading the binoculars back and forth, fighting the impulse to raise their hands in supplication, raise their hands and be swept away through the trackless immensities of interplanetary space, to the other deserts and dead seabottoms that were, it seemed, waiting for them after all. 🌌

## about the authors

William Barton (right) and Michael Capobianco (far right) were born six weeks apart in the fall of 1950. They met some years later in the Marumco Elementary School library in Woodbridge, Virginia, when each realized the other had recently checked out a copy of Edgar Rice Burroughs's *The Gods of Mars*. This led to a long succession of outdoor fantasy role-playing games into which they dragged all their childhood friends. At age 13, having created their own complex worlds, they began writing a novel called *The Venusians*, which, though never finished, probably kept them out of one kind of trouble or another (and also kept Barton out of college, since he never did another lick of homework).

After high school, Capobianco went off to the University of Virginia, while Barton embarked on the working life, early marriage, and parenthood common to academic sluggards. During those years, Barton did manage to write a number of successful science fiction novels, beginning with *Hunting on Kunderer*, published on the "blue" side of the very last original *Ace Double* in 1973. For his part, Capobianco eventually started a software gaming company called *Not-polyoptics*.

In the mid 1980s, following various marriages, divorces, career changes, and whatnot, the two decided to have one last try at collaborating on something. After struggling over the carcass of *The Venusians* for a while, they set out in a new direction, leading to the industry-startling debut of *Iris* in 1990. What followed was unexpected success, including the SFWA presidency for Capobianco and, for Barton, a Special Citation for Excellence from the Philip K. Dick Award, for his novel *Acts of Conscience*, and a Hugo Award nomination for his story "Age of Aquarius."

## about the illustrator

Jeff Brice graduated from college with a bachelor of fine arts degree in painting. Since then he has graduated again into the realm of technology, getting deeply involved with digital art more than a decade ago and becoming one of the most widely published computer illustrators in the nation. His work has been seen in magazines as diverse as *Wired*, *Popular Science*, *Newsweek*, and now *AMAZING Stories*. To learn more, visit his website at [www.jeffbrice.com](http://www.jeffbrice.com).





# GOOD WITH SECRETS

From the author's upcoming novel, *Dark Genesis: The Birth of the Psi Corps*

B Y J . G R E G O R Y K E Y E S

## Author's Introduction



*Psi Corps. From the first mention of this group on Babylon 5, I was intrigued. My interest soon became genuine affection. Not because the members of Psi Corps were stylish villains—though that didn't hurt—but because, like*

*everything else on Babylon 5, they were more complex than that. Behind their black uniforms, badges, and smug arrogance it was clear that they had a reason for existing, that they were the products of a history. As time went on we got tantalizing glimpses of that history and of the social forces that made the corps necessary. We came to understand that the Corps didn't simply exist merely to present our friends on Babylon 5 with problems, but that they had their own story—good, bad, and ugly—and that it was a story we wanted to hear.*

*I was more than delighted to be asked to help tell that story.*

*How would we react today if faced with indisputable proof that there were those among us who could know our every thought, our every secret sin, the combinations to our safes, the passwords to our encrypted files? Would we allow such people to remain anonymous, to be our doctors, lawyers, senators, to pass among us unknown? I doubt it very much. Within days there would be a hundred bills proposing the registration and regulation of telepathy—proposing, in essence, the Psi Corps. Most voters would demand*

*such an organization, endorse it, and then try to forget it existed. But when you create an organization dedicated to the systematic control of a group of people—and give it all the tools it needs to do that job—it's a very bad idea to take your eye off it. . . .*

**I**n 2115, two graduate students at the Harvard School of Medicine began a study to test for the existence of Metasensory abilities. They wanted to fail—they began the project as a joke, a sendup of the multitude of similar studies done in the twentieth century. Due to that plethora of fruitless studies, they had every reason to expect that they would fail.

Unfortunately, they did not. Somehow, in the intervening century and a half, telepathy had become real.

The academic community, quite naturally, reacted with skepticism. Some in the general public did not. The study was openly discussed on a popular talk show, and within hours the killings began. This early wave of violence was to be expected, and with few exceptions the killings involved unbalanced individuals who probably would have committed their crimes anyway, triggered by some other excuse.

But the study was replicated, its findings confirmed—again, and again, and again. As the academic community accepted the truth, so did the public, and murder began in earnest. Across the globe, individuals, organizations, and even nation-states refused to tolerate even the thought of sharing the uni-

*verse with telepaths. And they took steps to remove the problem, permanently.*

Not all telepaths would take this lying down, of course. Among those who rejected the role of victim was one Desa Alexander, better known to her friends—and enemies—as Blood. She would take matters into her own hands, and she was the first of six generations of telepaths who carried the name of Alexander. . . .

From the start, telepaths proved to be a political hot potato, and politicians scrambled to ride the wave of paranoia to its peak. The most successful of these was Senator Lee Crawford, who fought and won the battle to have telepaths detected, registered, and regulated, for the good of the average citizen, for the good of telepaths—and of course, for the good of Lee Crawford. As head of the Metasensory Regulation Authority, Crawford controlled the fate of countless telepaths, and he had telepathic eyes and ears in every key segment of society—business, the courts, the military. He also managed to control and suppress one of the most disconcerting facts about telepaths—evidence that proved telepaths were the result of extremely sophisticated genetic engineering.

But engineered by whom? For what purpose? That was the one worrisome piece of information Crawford did not control, and these answers could cause it all to blow up in his face. For Crawford, this was a puzzle that had to be solved. For his younger aide, Kevin Vacit, it would become the mission of a lifetime.



# Solar System Today, 18 January 2148

*Interplanetary Expeditions* spokesperson Ezinma Roberts today reported the successful completion of an eighth experimental station on Mars, near Syria Planum. The IPX station was built to explore the Martian permafrost and refine the process of creating arable soil. "This takes us another step closer to the permanent colonization of Mars," Roberts proclaimed, "but we're still a long way off. Making a home for humanity on another planet will require the sustained will of the entire world."

"Kind of—as they say—a stuffed shirt, are you not?"

Kevin Vacit glanced sideways at the speaker, a young woman in her mid-twenties seated to the left of him on the plane. In the right frame of mind, he might have summoned a mild admiration for her bronze hair, startling jade eyes, and generous lips. At the moment, he felt instead a mild irritation.

"Officer . . . Davion, is it?"

"*La meme*. That is absolutely correct. Ninon Davion, at your service."

"Yes. Well, Ms. Nina Davion—"

"*Ninon*. Use your nose, you know? *Ninon*."

Suppressing a sigh, he tried another tack. "I'm attempting to read, Ms. Davion."

"And I'm bothering you?"

"You are . . . distracting me."

"What you are reading—it is important?"

"It is entertaining."

"Ah. As I am not, I suppose." She lifted the corner of his book and peered at the title. "*The Demolished Man*. Yes, it sounds very entertaining." She shrugged, looking away. "It is true, I suppose. They told me this trip would be no fun at all. I said, *no one* can be no fun at all, but *they* said—"

"Who is 'they,' Ms. Davion?"

"Now you ask me a question? Yet how can someone so unentertaining as myself provide an amusing answer? No, no—please. Go back to your book. I will sit here, silently."

He blinked. "Thank you."

He tried to read a few more lines, then closed the book. "Do they really say those things about me?"

She hesitated a moment. "You are speaking to me?"

"Ms. Davion, you know I am."

She turned back to him. "Well, they say you are very efficient, very serious, very dedicated—"

"And is there something wrong with that?"

"No, no, of course not." She rolled her eyes. "But look, have you ever been to San Diego before?"

"No, I can't say that I have."

"Neither have I. And what do you intend to do there?"

"I intend to solve the problem that you and I have been sent to solve."

"And?"

"And what?"

"I've heard San Diego is a beautiful place. Food. Wine.

Tijuana a very short trolley ride away . . ."

"You do understand, Ms. Davion, that we are on a mission involving EA security? At the highest level?"

"I'm afraid that the level of security is so high that I have no idea why we are going there," she replied. "I certainly hope *you* do. I am just—as you say—the 'muscle.'"

"For muscle, you certainly talk a lot."

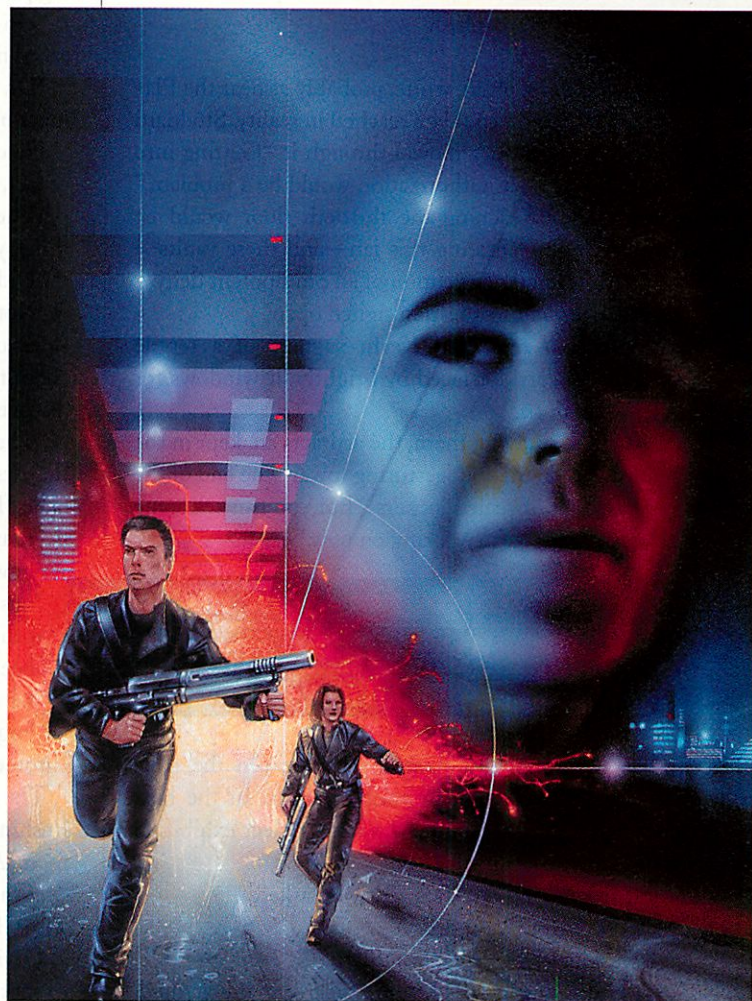
"Well! I was keeping silent until you—"

"Sorry. You're right. Look, I promise to debrief you when we reach San Diego."

She placed her hand on her chest. "Sir! I apologize for my opinion of you. You are very forward indeed!"

He actually felt his face warm. He was blushing.

With a little frown he returned to his book, silently cursing Lee Crawford, who had surely done this to him on purpose.



cover art by Bruce Jensen

Phillip Stoddard, the head of research for Interplanetary Expeditions, fingered his rusty beard and addressed them with a sort of benign amusement. "I don't really understand what all of the fuss is about," he said. "When the incident was reported, we imagined an officer of the Authority would drop by, but to have Senator Crawford's own aide here—maybe you fellows know something I don't."

Kevin smiled briefly. "That's always possible, I suppose. But the MRA always takes the death of one of its own seriously. That, coupled with the security breach in—" He stopped.



"Doctor, is this a safe area?"

"Hmm? Yes, of course. The security breach was in lab 16, where the artifacts are housed. But that turned out to be nothing."

Davion cleared her throat, and, to Kevin's vast surprise, her words came out very crisp, very professional. "Nothing? Yet it coincided so closely with Mr. Raskov's death."

"Look, I know you guys are paid to be suspicious—but you aren't *serious*, are you?"

"We would not be here otherwise," Davion said.

"Well, look. The autopsy confirms Mr. Raskov died of a stroke, and as for the security breach, that must have been some sort of glitch."

"I'm sure it was," Kevin soothed. "But we have to check it out, you see. Orders. Anything involving the artifacts—"

"Of course. Would you like to see them?"

"Very much so," Kevin replied.

Lab 16 was spacious, clean, white, probably as near the Platonic ideal of "lab" as could be reached in reality. Stoddard talked about security as they moved through it. "Getting into the IPX building without authorization would be a problem," he informed them. "Reaching the thirtieth floor would be essentially impossible. Entering this lab—and these vaults—would require the direct intervention of an omnipotent deity."

As he spoke, the vault in question sighed open.

What was within reminded Kevin vaguely of a reptile house; a dark, cool corridor faced by brightly lit windows for the first thirty feet or so.

"When we aren't studying them, the artifacts are kept in the vacuum vaults," Stoddard said, gesturing toward the end of the corridor and a series of sealed lockers. "But you can see some on the tables, the ones we're working on now."

**With a growing sense of disquiet, Kevin surveyed the rest of the artifacts on display.**

Kevin peered through the nearest window. On the table rested a rough torus mottled by raised bumps. In the next window there was an essentially cylindrical object exhibiting several knoblike protrusions.

"And these were found on Mars?" Davion asked.

"Yes, buried in Syria Planum."

"What have you discovered about them?"

"Nothing new, I'm afraid. They are clearly manufactured, though the method of manufacture isn't obvious. They don't seem to be cast, or riveted, or welded together. They are made of highly organized alloys, some unknown. Some pieces, despite their appearance, are permeable to visible light while others are almost opaque even to neutrinos." He smiled broadly. "In other words, we still don't know a damn thing about them except that they are of alien manufacture."

Kevin nodded, still staring. He was struck by an odd and impossible sense of familiarity.

"And the breach—"

"As I said, it must have been a glitch. None of the artifacts

are missing—EA security catalogued them independently and prior to us, so I can prove that—nor have they been disturbed in any way."

"Yet the security system registers that there was a break-in."

"A ghost, perhaps. Nothing the cameras recorded."

"Well." With a growing sense of disquiet, Kevin surveyed the rest of the artifacts on display. "I think I would like to see Mr. Raskov's quarters now."

They broke the security seal and entered Raskov's room. It was a jumbled mess, clearly the product of a disorganized mind.

"The quarters have been sealed since his death?"

"Other than to remove the body, yes."

Kevin paced about as Davion conducted her inspection, taking photographs from various angles, opening drawers.

"Do you have any idea what you're looking for?" Stoddard asked mildly.

"Dr. Stoddard," Davion replied, "I wonder if you don't have more important things to do."

He colored slightly and drew himself up. "Yes. As a matter of fact, I do. Buzz my link if you need me." He left.

When he was gone, Davion smiled. "He *is* hiding something, you know."

"Did you scan him?"

"Not a deep scan, no. But his surface thoughts showed some agitation and nervousness. Especially when he was talking about the artifacts. *Most* especially when he said that they had discovered nothing new."

"That's interesting." He shuffled through some papers on the desk. Among them was a sketchpad, which he flipped open. The first ten pages or so were landscapes, impressionistic, drawn with pencils and pastels. Halfway through the book, however, the theme abruptly changed. First came numerous sketches of insects—a dragonfly, several beetles, many others Kevin did not recognize. On the second page was a beetle done in pastels—a species he *did* recognize, though he didn't know its name—one of those iridescent green bugs that looked almost as if it were made of colored chrome. It was very well rendered.

The rest of the notebook was filled with similar drawings. Pushing through the loose papers on the desk, he found a few more. And then another notebook full.

"Was Mr. Raskov an entomologist, professional or otherwise?" he asked.

Davion shrugged. "I still have my briefs on, when it comes to that. There was nothing in the record you gave me to indicate it." She peered over his shoulder, her body just touching his. "It seems a recent interest. You see? He has dated his drawings."

Kevin flipped back through. While the landscapes had been done over a three-month period, the bug sketches had all been done in three days—May 3 through 5.

"He must have drawn almost nonstop, those three days."

"The security breach in the lab was May 5. Raskov died on May 5."

"So you think he became so obsessed with bugs that he had a stroke?" Davion said.



"I don't know. A stroke is one of the easiest things to fake."

"You think he was murdered for an abrupt interest in bugs?"

Kevin tapped his finger on the pad. "Let's finish up here. I want to interview Mr. Raskov's supervisor."

"**H**e was one of our most professional business telepaths," Freda Noy said. Her nearly round face pinched into a broad suggestion of sorrow. "It was such a terrible thing. Did you know him?"

"I did not," Kevin replied.

"Nor I," Davion added. "But can you tell us what friends he might have had here?"

"Not many, the poor man. He kept largely to himself. Telepath, you know." Her olive skin darkened a shade. "Oh, dear, I didn't mean—well, of course you know."

"Actually," Davion said, "Mr. Vacit is, of course, not a telepath. I am, but I take no offense. Many who work outside tend to be introverted. It becomes tiring, trying to *avoid* learning other people's secrets."

Kevin felt a certain inward appreciation. Davion played her bad cop part very well; she kept their interviewees off balance with consummate skill.

People were worried by teeps, anyway, and by making certain her role was clear, she cast Kevin, by contrast, as the one the normals could identify with, perhaps even confide in.

Now if only he could play *his* part better . . .

"Ms. Noy," he said softly. "I have here a record of the transactions Mr. Raskov monitored from the early part of May, and I thank you very much for providing it. There is only one I don't really understand—Kuchinsky-Behn?"

"Oh. It's a small biotech firm out of Canada."

"Part of the larger Tangent conglomerate?"

"I believe so, yes."

"The principals of the meeting—Kuchinsky of Kuchinsky-Behn, and Roland Hammerstein from this firm? Is Mr. Hammerstein available?"

"Oh, no, I'm sorry. Mr. Hammerstein has been reassigned to the Sandakan office."

"Perhaps later, then. But you have a transcript of the meeting?"

"Oh, of course. Would you like a copy?"

"Please."

Turning to her computer, she called up the file, printed it out, and handed it to him.

"Thank you, Ms. Noy. That will be all for now. I'll probably want to speak to you again."

"And of course, I'll be happy to be of what help I can."

"We'll show ourselves out."

Back in the hall, with no one around, Davion put her smile back on. "I have decided you will take me to get something to eat, Mr. Vacit," she informed him.

"Ms. Davion, we have much to do. If you need something, I'm sure they have a dining room here, or you can order room service—"

"Look at the time, Mr. Vacit. Six o'clock. Worktime is over, I believe, and you will find no one else here to interrogate. Now, please, you don't want me to confirm those rumors about you, do you? I had hoped to be able to laugh in their faces—tell everyone that it only took a French key to unlock the wit

lurking inside you."

"Ms. Davion, I'm working on what is proving to be a difficult matter. I am not, by training, a detective, and yet I am being asked to do the job of one. I—"

"You are frustrated. Your mind is as tightly wound as your ass. Unwind the one, and the other will uncoil as well. So said my grandfather, a very wise Andorran man. Really, I must insist—for the *good* of the investigation."

He nodded in sudden understanding. "For the good of the investigation."

**O**utside, strolling down a sunlit walkway, he glanced at her. "Okay. What didn't you want to say in the building?"

"You can be a bit thick at times, can't you, Mr. Vacit?"

"I suppose. I'm sorry it took me so long to catch on. So what was it?"

"I don't feel in the mood for conversation just yet. As I remember it, you've agreed to take me to dinner."

"I thought we'd just established that that was only to get us out of the building."

"Oh, no, I meant everything I said. And I think Italian will do quite nicely."

"Ms. Davion, I have no idea why you've become so fixated on this quest to 'unstuff' my shirt, but I assure you—it isn't at all appropriate."

Davion showed her dimples. "Not bad, for Italian wine. It has a certain primitive vitality."

"We could have found a French restaurant, I suppose," Kevin replied steadily.

She made a face. "I do not eat 'French' food when I am abroad. It is too brutally disappointing. With Italian, the potential for disappointment is so much smaller."

"Ah."

"You do not like food, do you?"

"I eat it. It keeps me alive."

"As I said. You do not like it."

In response he took another bite of his cannelloni. "Oh, my God," he said. "Delicious. It makes me want to sing." He put his fork back on the plate. "Now, will you *please* tell me what you discovered back there?"

She rolled her eyes—yet again—and set her glass down. "You are so determined not to enjoy yourself. Here you have the company of a *very* beautiful woman—"

"Yes, I do."

She stopped, clearly surprised. "Really? You find me beautiful?"

"Of course. But you work for me, and—"

"Ah. And I am like the food, *n'est ce pas*? Very well. Two things. First, do not bother to read the transcript of the transaction Raskov monitored—it is a fake."

"Really."

"Really. The second thing is this what's-his-name—Hammerstein—wasn't really assigned to the Sandakan office. She doesn't know *what* happened to him, and she's more than a little worried about herself."

"About her job?"

"Her life, I think."

He picked at his food, avoiding Davion's challenging eyes.



"So we have a teep who monitors a business deal. It was a secret transaction, probably illegal, and they killed him."

"I think so. But we cannot prove any of it. We cannot prove the transaction is a fake. We likely will be unable to find either of the principals to subpoena, but if we do they will simply quote the forged transcript. A simple scan will show they are lying, but of course such information is not admissible in court."

"Spectral evidence," he murmured.

"Say again, please?"

"Nothing. But what has this to do with the security breach in lab 16?"

"Perhaps nothing. A coincidence."

"I have very little faith in coincidence."

"Or anything else, it seems," she mused. Her green eyes flickered devilishly. "I believe after dinner I should like to have a walk on the shore."

"Fine. I hope you enjoy yourself. I'll be in my room, trying to work this out."

"Take your shoes off," Davion said. "Get your feet wet in the surf." She was doing just that, playing tag with the edges of the breakers, shoes in hand, slacks rolled to her knees.

"I'm allergic to seawater."

"Yes, I'm sure you are." She came back to him, and to his alarm and discomfort, took his arm.

"You have an interesting mind, Mr. Vacit. Did you know that?"

"So I've been told."

"Oh, really? What was her name? Should I be jealous?"

When he didn't answer, she squeezed his arm. "Ah. A secret. Another secret. You are a man of secrets, Kevin Vacit. You are made of them. I do not even think a telepath could pry them out of you."

"Have you tried?"

She laughed. "Yes, of course. I'm trying right now. But I haven't scanned you. That's what I mean—I don't think I could. Certain normals have the equivalent of blocks—nothing telepathic, just a kind of order, of discipline. Your mind hums like a clock, Mr. Vacit. I would not dare try to scan it for fear of being pinched by a gear."

**Her green eyes flickered devilishly.**

**"I believe after dinner I should like to have a walk on the shore."**

"Aside from the fact that such would be illegal," he reminded her.

"Besides that, yes. I like my job, and would not care to lose it."

"You do, don't you? And you do it well. I hardly recognize you when you are working."

She laughed and kicked at the spray. "I'll take that as a compliment. Two compliments from Mr. Kevin Vacit in a single day. Quite an accomplishment, you know." She let go his arm and ran back out into the surf. "I love the sea. It is very alive. I love the feel of it. All the little voices."

"Voices?"

"Well, not voices, actually, just a sort of . . . something. I suppose only a telepath would notice it. There's nothing to read there, of course, nothing intelligent—though I should like to scan a dolphin some day. No, it's just a kind of . . . loud quietness."

"But telepathic? You get impressions from non-Human life?" He knelt and ran his fingers in the water.

"I do not think it is my imagination. I suppose everything living must have a mind, in a way. I can sense animals, of course. Not understand them, really, unless it's something simple like hunger or fear. The ocean I don't understand at all, though I touch it and listen very hard, but something is there. It is." She considered him. "Poor normals. It must be like missing a sense of smell, or something."

"Yes," Kevin said absently. "Yes, it must. Thank you, Ms. Davion."

"What for?"

"The evening. And perhaps the solution to our puzzle."

"I don't understand," Dr. Stoddard said. "You've already seen them."

"I have. I wish to see them again. It's about the security breach."

"I've explained about that."

"Oh, yes, I know. Would you care to explain why the records of the hour during the breach were erased?"

"What? They weren't erased."

"Oh, yes, they were. Very professionally done, but when I had my own people go over them again, with finer analysis, we found evidence of it."

"But nothing's missing. Nothing was disturbed."

"No. No, I think that's correct. Tell me, Dr. Stoddard, what does one need to enter these vaults?"

"The right key codes. The right retinal prints."

"If someone entered the right key codes, but without the retinal prints, what would happen?"

"An alarm would go out."

"And that would register as a security breach."

"I . . . yes."

Kevin nodded distractedly. "Let me tell you what happened, Dr. Stoddard. On May 1 or thereabouts, you asked Mr.

Raskov to do you a favor, one somewhat outside his function as a business telepath. You had developed a suspicion about the Syria Planum artifacts, and on a lark you decided to test your hypothesis. You brought him in here, and he touched one of the artifacts."

"Why? Absurd."

Kevin ignored him. "Two days later, Mr. Raskov was contacted again, this time to monitor a business deal. He was chosen because the deal concerned the artifacts, and what he himself had discovered about them. Rather than expose another telepath to that discovery, you chose to use the one you had already tainted. This meeting was a secret negotiation—perhaps to sell technologies, perhaps to position certain stocks for what you think may be coming soon—and by 'you' I mean both yourself and IPX, Dr. Stoddard."

Stoddard was turning pale. He wasn't good at this.



"In any event, it wasn't easy, but knowing what to look for, I was able to trace a flow of funds, so I can prove this part of my story, too.

"When Mr. Raskov conducted his monitoring task, perhaps someone grew concerned. He may have looked drawn, fatigued, as if he hadn't slept in several nights. He may have said strange things, acted a bit unstable. Maybe he even demanded to touch the artifact again. Our records show he had a strong artistic—and somewhat romantic—streak. You probably refused. He lifted your key code from your mind and tried to break into the lab the night of May 5. He didn't succeed, of course, but that was alarming enough that someone here—perhaps you, perhaps a superior—thought it best that he quietly expire. And so he did."

Stoddard was still pale, but managed an insincere smile. "I don't believe you can prove *any* of that."

"I don't care if I can. Open this door. I want to see one of the artifacts."

"You don't have clearance."

"Of course I do. I have presidential clearance. I've shown it to you once. Do you want to see it again?"

"No."

"Then open the vault."

With obvious reluctance, he did so, and gestured for them to enter.

"No, you first, please."

Stoddard stepped in, and they followed behind him.

At his nod, Davion removed her gloves. She went to the strange torus, hesitated for an instant, then touched it lightly with her fingertips.

She jumped back as if stung. "Oh, my God, yes!" Her green eyes were the size of coins. She stepped forward again, tentatively, and touched it again. Her face worked through a variety of strange expressions before she removed her hands.

"It is—it's very faint, you understand. My reaction was from the strangeness, not the intensity. But yes. This thing—I can feel it, as if it might be alive."

Stoddard looked as if he were very close to tears.

"Some men are coming up, with guns," Davion said suddenly. "He signaled them with some kind of silent alarm on his link."

"How far do they have to come?"

She stared at Stoddard until a sweat broke out on her forehead. "A few floors."

"Five minutes or so?" He shrugged. "Dr. Stoddard, by that time our own team will have the building secured. You didn't think I would accuse you, here, without adequate preparation? You've played a violent card for no good reason."

Now Stoddard started to cry in earnest. Tears ran down his face.

"There, there," Kevin said, without any actual sympathy in his voice. "It isn't as bad as you think. Stand your troops down so we can avoid any unpleasant little firefights, and I'm going to explain to you how you're not only going to avoid prosecution, but retain your position as well. Do you understand? Is this getting through? The only difference is that you will no longer be dealing with Kuchinsky-Behn, or anyone outside IPX. Anyone, that is, save *us*."

Stoddard's eyes were beginning to clear. "But Raskov—"

"Died of natural causes. Though I will insist that the Authority receive very high compensation for what was obviously a work-related accident. Am I clear on this?"

"Yes."

"Stand them down."

Stoddard went to a wall phone, punched in a number. "Code 4. Cancel," he said.

"There," Kevin said. "You see what happens when you jump to conclusions?" He looked back at the artifact. "Organic technology. It's been tinkered at for centuries, with no results. Do you really think you can reproduce it?"

"I—I honestly don't know."

"But it seemed worth the risk."

"Yes."

"Next time—when you want to take a risk—come to *us*. I think you will find it much less dangerous, and much more profitable, than any alternative. Do you understand this?"

"Yes, Mr. Vacit."

"Ms. Davion, will you walk Dr. Stoddard outside?"

"My pleasure, Mr. Vacit."

When they were gone, he regarded the artifact for a long moment. "Who made you?" he murmured quietly. He reached his fingers out and touched the surface. For a moment he felt the

**"There," Kevin said. "You see what happens when you jump to conclusions?"**

most profound wonderment he had ever known, a surge, accompanied by that nagging feeling of familiarity. And insects, beautiful, creatures of starlight and mist, seemed to dart behind his eyes.

He withdrew his fingers, and went to join the others.

**H**e had just removed his shoes when the knock came at his door. It was Davion, of course.

"Ms. Davion—"

"Now, now, Mr. Vacit. I have come to congratulate you."

"No need. It was you who gave me the solution."

"Ah, *oui*, but you put it all together so prettily. The biotech firm. The drawings. Wonderfully done—and I had begun to suspect you had no imagination. And your bluff—about our forces already being in the building—magnificent."

Somehow, as she was talking, she had slipped in the door, was standing very close. He could feel her breath on his face.

"Ms. Davion," he said gently, "I really—"

But she stood on tiptoe and kissed him, very lightly, and it felt like lightning jolting through him.

"Really what?"

"I really don't think you know what you're getting into with me."

Her smile went away, and her gaze crystallized on his.

"I'm very good with secrets, Mr. Vacit," she whispered. "Very, very good with secrets."

"You'd better be," he murmured, drawing her near and gently pushing shut the door. 🚪



*The weight of the world is on Izzy's and Audrey's shoulders.  
Trouble is, that weight is getting lighter all the time, and  
"You are what you eat" is taking on a whole new meaning.*

# CRANE FLY



Hot on her *zafu* on the twenty-seventh day of a nine-year solitary meditation retreat on Sonoma Mountain, Empty Kettle, a.k.a. Audrey Hamisch, Ph.D., noticed a strange glint on her little patch of wall. Random? *Not on your life!* She had spent twenty-six days doing nothing but watch things gush across her mind—and every mother's son of them came from *somewhere*.

Call it *karma*—that's what Doshin Roshi called it. Even scratching your nose was the consequence of the entire history of the great cosmos and the origin of all future history, said Doshin Roshi.

Go ahead and try to do something meaningless! Just you try it!

Empty Kettle scratched her nose, then quickly refolded her hands, palms up, left on right, thumbtips a tickle apart: the Mudra of Receptive Awareness. For twenty-six days, dawn to dusk, she had watched the shadows tilt on this patch of wall. Sitting cross-legged on her *zafu*, eyes fixed, brain not quite so, she had calculated the precession of the equinox to within an error of plus or minus four percent—a mathematician's compulsion. But this infernal glint...its angle relative to the season and time of day was not within the predicted range, and Audrey couldn't think how to account for it. No mirrors here, no goldfish bowls, no atmospheric anomalies.

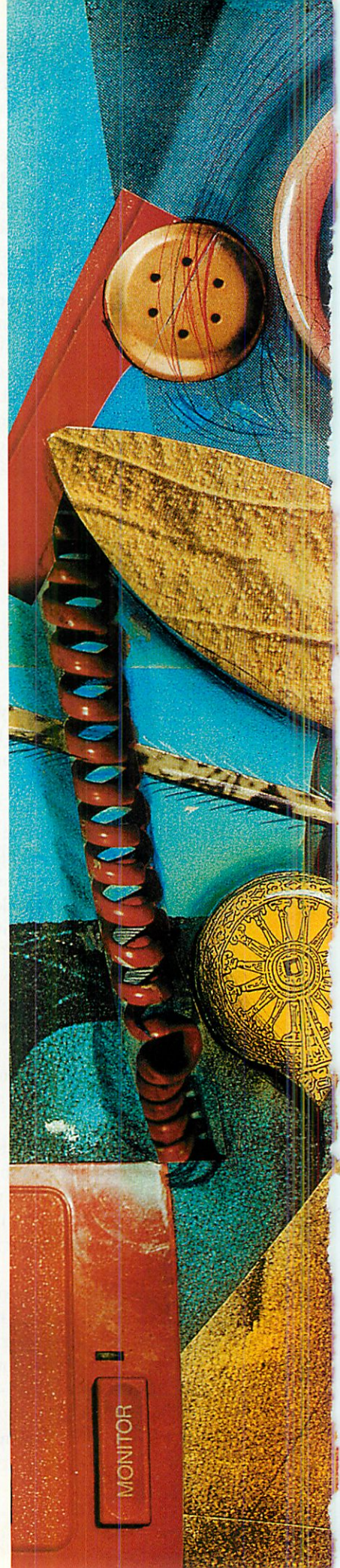
Could it be a sign, then, of the longed-for consummation, Annutara Samyak Sambodhi, Supreme Unconditioned Enlightenment? A Zenned-down version of herald angels?

"Not on your life!" Doshin Roshi told her through the little doggy door in her meditation hut through which she received food, spiritual instruction, and donation envelopes. "Don't give me this slanted-light crap. If you want to find your True Home, you've got to leave this whole illusory world behind."

That was fine with Hamisch. Audrey Hamisch didn't want any part of the illusory world. Damn Willy! Damn him! Don't think about damn Willy! Maybe Doshin Roshi would fall in love with her, though; he wouldn't want to own her. Maybe he would like the way she meditated. She would try harder.

Concentrate! Concentrate!

ILLUSTRATION BY JANET WOOLLEY











No dice. Resuming her seat, Audrey could not help observing that although all the shadows were inclining with the rising sun, one thin line of light remained at a constant angle. So

this is how a mathematician goes nuts!

Audrey shook herself, shifting slightly on the meditation cushion. Which is when she began to hear voices. They came from the glint near the mopboard:

"Face it, the nuclear thing has not worked out. They're scaling down. There's not going to be any Armageddon."

Breathe! Just breathe and concentrate! The Surangama Sutra talks about this—disembodied voices; it's a sign of spiritual advancement....

"We never should have kissed, gag. The equations wouldn't have gone to chaos."

Breathe! Breathe!

"Had to, dear Wimple! I love you! That's in the equations too, don't forget. They determine the location of everything this side of the crab nebula, don't they? Well, that includes your lips and mine!" The glint rippled, lousy with innuendo. "Remember: nothing is truly random, sweet Wimple. It's in the equations—nonlinearly is all, with sudden jags and bursts at unsuspected values. This is an adventure, a test, a furnace in which to purify our love."

Audrey tried to steady herself by counting her breath, one to ten, then back again, but she kept losing count.

"Out here we are, gag, my love, trapped in a glint in a wretched dimension full of poor little humans, and we'll never get home, not with the power we two alone can generate against this massive earther bio-emanation!"

"True enough!"—meditatively—"If we had, say, two more to copulate with, there'd be no problem."

So much for signs of spiritual advancement, thought Audrey Hamisch. Fourteen, fifteen, sixteen...

"Oh, what'll we do, gag, my leafy cabbage, my oil well, my nasal douche?"

A crane fly skittered across Audrey's line of vision, now fluttering wildly, now rappelling off the unevenly papered wall. Its shadow fell across the glint, a vibrant penumbra like the shadow of whirling fan blades.

"Here's a thought, Wimple: we can get them to give up eating. Their sort can't stay alive without eating things. We just get them to stop eating, and then they all kick off, and the bio-emanation recedes, knocking the fourth equation into recursive stasis, and zingo! Tongue on tongue again!"

"Done, my sycamore, my redwood!"

In the corner of the ceiling, through a biological mechanism of which she had no experience, Audrey saw a large, black spider dismantle its web by sucking the silk back in through its anus. A tick that had been insinuating itself into Audrey's bare ankle suddenly disengaged and was lolling on the hem of her robe. The cat outside her cabin stopped its yowling.

"Oh, gag, I do feel sorry for them..."

"Quit it, Wimple. It's the Hostage Syndrome. You start to feel for the poor slob and before you know it—zingo!—you're peeping out of their sick little claustrophobic

galactocentric perspective. Don't you want to go home?"

"Well..."

"All right then! Here's our point of entry, Wimple. I'll drill; you infect."

"I suppose..."

Audrey felt as if someone had put a vacuum cleaner to her mind; Gag and Wimple were working fast, cataloging victims, following the line of implications and associations that were Audrey Hamisch's world back and back, like reference librarians at a microfiche. Amazing, the networks of associations unfolding, the universe from the grain of sand, a web of sensitive interdependency that Gag and Wimple could pluck apart and starve to death with only Audrey's mind for a launch pad!

No, nothing is truly random, she thought. Being known by me or even being known of by me has become a death sentence. The Pope and the President, the Lubavitcher Rebbe, and half the citizens of Chicago were in there right alongside her mother and Willy and Doshin Roshi.

On the windowsill, a chrysanthemum that had been leaning toward the light suddenly drooped away.

The latch over the doggy door swung open. A small piece of light blue paper popped in and fluttered to the floor. The latch slammed shut. Audrey didn't have to read Doshin's note. She knew what it would say: "Cut off worldly thoughts! No eating until further notice."

Gag giggled. "I haven't had this much fun since the Manhattan project," he said. Gliding toward Wimple along the twinkle, he bussed her.

"That's the limit!" Audrey said out loud. She quickly gashoed—the Japanesque salute—and uncrossed her legs. The left one was so numb she had to use it like a stump as she made for the door. She hobbled toward the community house, careful to avoid the languorous clusters of birds sunning themselves on the dirt pathway. As she emerged from a small grove of bay laurels, their leaves curled in against the sun, Audrey ran into the tenzo, the workaholic community cook, who was throwing a rope over the limb of a live oak tree.

"What's the point?" he said

Zen students in black robes were ambling about bumping into things. "Roshi says don't eat. Purify ourselves. Nothing exists. This tree doesn't exist. This wall doesn't exist..."

Her leg had recovered circulation. She bounded into the community house, grabbed the telephone, and dialed Izzy. She didn't pause, she didn't think—the numbers tumbled out of her fingers. She wasn't even sure that they were right, but, after all, they must have come from somewhere—nothing was random.

"What the hell are you doing?" Doshin Roshi peered out of his office, half-glasses perched on his nearly nonexistent nose, a bubble in rising bread dough, a snail en route to his fontanelle. "You have nine years to go."

"Eight years, eleven months, and three days, Roshi, to be exact. You better go check out the tenzo, though; he's on the pathway getting ready to hang himself."

"This isn't Zen." Doshin Roshi shook his head and hurried outside.

"Hello"—at the other end of the phone line, a sardonic voice—"Galactic Diet Center, Izzy speaking."

"Izzy! So you know!"



"You bet I do, doll. I got a little twinkle over my bed. You too?" Izzy was just being polite. Audrey could tell that he was on to everything. Izzy's tough little mind had feelers all over the psychic universe. He knew exactly what was over Audrey's bed, and who was in it.

"Are you in traction again, Izzy?"

"Full body cast, kid. They excavated a couple of vertebrae. I've been on my back for three weeks. I saw the twinkle just before you got it up where you are. In fact, it's diffused all over the northern hemisphere. Thousands of people are seeing it, but who would notice? You, me, my bastard son Willy at the University of Chicago"—Damn Willy!—"a handful of sci-fi nuts, and the Swedish ambassador maybe!"

Izzy had a thing about the Swedish ambassador. Ever since he had had to enlist his aid in warding off an invasion of trans-dimensional aliens by getting Fay, Izzy's one and only, to sneak in as the ambassador's masseuse, Izzy had been slightly jealous. Every so often Fay would egg him on, making some remark about Sven's incredible quadriceps or the way Sven's torso reminded her of a braided Easter bread.

"Izzy," said Audrey, "there's a noise on the line." It sounded like a wrecking ball demolishing a brick wall. It took Audrey a while to notice it, because she always felt like a wrecking ball was demolishing a brick wall when Willy's name was mentioned.

"No, that's just Fay. She's hacking this thing off me."

"Can she do that?"

"Hell, you can do anything with the right chisel. Look, I have to be mobile if we're gonna put a shade over this twinkle. I think my back's okay. You just get your buns to Buffalo on the next plane, savvy?"

"Do you think we can stop this thing?"

"If not, what's the difference?"

"You're a real consolation, Izzy."

"Hey, by the way, how's your Zen going?"

"Everything is aces, Izzy."

"That's my girl. Hey, Hamisch, one more thing..." He paused.

"What's that, Izzy?"

"I'm glad you still feel like you can call me."

"Your son is a schmuck, Izzy."

"Yeah, I know it. But he loves you, Hamisch."

"So he says."

"Why don't you call him?"

Audrey rolled her eyes. "Gee, Izzy, I understand that Fay is learning Swedish—izzat so?"

"Okay, okay! But one more thing, Hamisch—eat!"

She couldn't. She had no appetite whatever. I'm a crane fly, she thought, grabbing the keys for the community truck off a pegboard near the phone. Kids call them "mosquito eaters." Actually, the adult crane fly doesn't eat anything at all. It just flies and dies.

It was snowing in Buffalo. It was snowing hard. News helicopters were taking aerial footage that looked like blank paper. Audrey's plane was the very last one allowed to land at Buffalo International Airport. Ground transportation was a nightmare. There was so much snow they ran out of places to pile it. They

were loading it onto boxcars and sending the trains south till it melted and they could come back for more. Plus, Audrey's cab driver, with whom she was stuck for two hours, was in a foul mood. Like almost everyone else on earth, he hadn't eaten for more than a day.

Audrey wasn't so cheery herself. Emblazoned on her mind was the image of Doshin Roshi standing under the live oak as Audrey ran to the truck. The tenzo sat on Doshin Roshi's shoulders, his legs wrapped around the Zen man, kicking him. Doshin had to hold him up if he was going to keep enough slack in the rope to prevent the cook from being strangled by it. "Help me!" cried Doshin, but Audrey kept running. "God-dammit, this isn't Zen!"

Her legs were cold. When she left the monastery, she had just thrown a coat over her robe. Now she was drawing herself up practically into a fetal position in the back of the cab. Hugging herself for warmth, Audrey felt a crumpled piece of paper inside one of the large sleeves of her robe. It was a letter containing Willy's analysis of her flawed character. It had come a few days after she'd nixed his marriage proposal. Perversely, she took it out, smoothed it, and read it again.

### My Dear Audrey:

A colon! Can you believe it? He used a goddam colon, like in a letter from the bank. And what's this "My Dear" stuff, anyway? Already it's patronizing!

If you are reading this letter it means you are not staring at your navel, and I am sincerely grateful for your precious attention. I am a sentient being, too—ever think of that?

*Ever think of it! Have I thought of anything else for the past year and a half? Oh, Willy, Willy, Willy! Goddam all men! I'm starving to death, the whole world's starving to death, and I'm still thinking of it! Goddam all men! Did you have to devour me? Couldn't you have given me a little, I dunno, breathing space?*

In the middle of your "saving all sentient beings," you seem to have forgotten old boyfriend Willy. Your trouble is that you don't really care about anybody but yourself. You constantly hold yourself back. You are incapable of having a good time, or any kind of time, because it's too much of a strain for you to turn your eyes around and focus on the real world instead of on your own claustrophobic little Audrey mind.

How about *us*?

Izzy says don't send this, but screw him! I love you too much not to! I love you, dammit! I love you! I love you! Write to me. Call me. Marry me. I love you!

Your Willy

"Damn him!"

"You're gonna pay this, y'know." The cabby peered into the rearview. He pointed at the meter—*click, click, click*—with a finger that trembled like an arrow shaft in the target. "You're gonna pay every cent of this. Don't think you're not. It ain't my fault there's a snow storm."





"But marriage!" She gripped the headrest of the empty seat in front of her. "Where did that come from? It's out of control."

"Nobody wants to marry you, lady! I'm just telling you you're gonna pay what you owe me."

The roads were littered with stalled and overturned cars, and there were fistfights everywhere, grown men rolling in the snow while they pummeled each other and shouted obscenities. Twice, Audrey had to slide burlap under the wheels and help push the cab out of a snowbank.

Every so often, in the gleam of a hubcap or the glint of a storefront window, she saw it. She had seen it on the airplane as well, in the clouds and on the wing tip. A sparkle from a flight attendant's eyeglasses, a sheen on the handle of the onboard toilet . . . it could be anywhere. Audrey heard the strange giggling inside the ray, the sliding up and down, vaguely sexual.

At least whenever she saw it she knew that Izzy was there. That phenomenal mind of his, like psychic penetrating oil, a WD-40 mind, lubed in wherever an alien presence hit the earth. And whoever saw the thing, Izzy saw, from inside.

It was a bleak Buffalo six o'clock when Audrey reached Izzy's place. He opened the door just before she rang the bell.

"I hate him," she said.

"I know all about it. How was the food on the plane?" He was unshaven and, judging from the way he stood, in pain. Inside the apartment a radio was blasting polka music.

"You know what, Iz? They served it!" Audrey stomped in and peeled off her coat, stiff with ice. "They actually served a meal. Nobody ate a thing. Nobody even looked at it. But they served it just the same. Then they ran their carts up the aisle and collected it, everything, untouched. It was crazy."

"Tell me about it!"

"Where's Fay?"

"Oh, she left me. Don't worry. She'll be back. It wasn't the Swede. You know, with some women, you take away the chance to cook supper and they don't know who they are anymore. She just had to leave."

"Smart woman—men stink! So you haven't been able to eat either?"

"I think they've somehow communicated directly with my internal organs—and on the subject of stink, you can get used to men's stink, y'know, Audrey. Men and women aren't all that different. Hell, most of the extradimensionals I run across can't even tell the one from the other!"

"Your son is a rat; let's drop the subject, yes?"

"Whatever you say, beautiful!"

*Beautiful!* Audrey grimaced. *Oh, let it go!* Izzy was from a whole other generation, wasn't he? You couldn't exactly apply contemporary standards to the chauvinist pig—besides, Izzy was, well, Izzy! "I know what you mean about the internal organs. The hunger is there, but I don't want to eat. Nothing feels like food anymore. There's a Zen koan, 'A painting of a rice cake does not satisfy hunger.' I could no more eat anything right now—and I mean *anything*, Izzy—than I could eat an oil painting."

Izzy put his arm around her and took Audrey into the kitchen. It was the most convenient place for Izzy to talk to

people when his back was this way. The visitors could sit down and, in more normal times, have a cup of Joe while Izzy stood up, balancing his head on top of his touchy spine and leaning on one of the variety of things there were to lean on in the kitchen: the refrigerator, the sink, or the old telephone booth he was trying to make into an orgone box.

"Listen," said Izzy, "we gotta make tracks. The biosphere is rotting from the bottom up. Everything bigger than an aphid is gradually dropping dead, and the smaller the quicker. Besides which, I can't afford to miss any more work. My sick days are all used up, and the foreman has been on my case since September."

Izzy set up tool and die machines for a living, though he seldom worked in any one factory for more than a year or two, due to the bad back. Once, in the Willy Wonderland days, Audrey had asked Izzy why it was always in *his* bailiwick that aliens tried to burgle our dimension. "It's the fingertips," he had said. "The ones I sliced off at Paragon Revolute in Rochester and burned up at the Wurlitzer plant in Tonawanda. Because of that and my fabulous brow"—the single continuous ridge of dark hair running across the bottom of his forehead—"they think I'm one of their own."

"But this time they're using *me* as a gateway!" Audrey sat herself down at Fay's white enameled kitchen table. There was a sparkle on the pewter sugar bowl's lid; Audrey closed her eyes. "Why me, I don't know; I've got all my fingertips and two separate eyebrows. But they came in through my mind. They used my brain to compile their little mailing list."

"What exactly are they trying to accomplish by cauterizing our appetites? I don't get that they want anything we have."

"They want to go home, Izzy. They actually want to get out of here. This is just some convoluted way they've dreamed up to accomplish it."

Gag and Wimple were bathing in a sparkle from Audrey's gold molar as she spoke to Izzy, who was leaning on the sink. "she understands us!" Wimple cried.

Izzy filled a glass with water and handed it to Audrey. "Here," he said. "I know this feels like adding a quart of Pennzoil, but you'd better drink it anyway." He poured himself a glass, and they both downed the stuff, even though the act of swallowing revolted them. As Izzy's glass tipped at his mouth, Gag flashed from the rim.

"control yourself, wimple!" Gag said urgently.

One would say, if Wimple had been human, and if she had had lips and a handkerchief and a hand with which to hold it, that Wimple looked away, pressing a tear-soaked handkerchief to her trembling lip. *Mutatis mutandis*, that was the sense of it. "I can't help it, gag! the poor things move me."

"This is bad. I'm going to get things going a little faster before you pull the gun out of the puppy's mouth."

"This is the President of the United States . . ."

the President said over Izzy's radio.

" . . . As most of you know by now, a strange disease has been afflicting our citizens as well as the peoples of other nations and even pets, domestic farm animals, and creatures in the wild. There is no cause for alarm."



"Well, that's a relief." Izzy dug a fist into his lumbar and leaned backward so far that he seemed to be trying to catch a glimpse of his hamstrings the hard way. Audrey stood and dug her knuckles in alongside his; he sighed his thank-you.

"This is what gets me," she said. "For some people the aversion to eating comes through suggestion: you should have seen Doshin Roshi's Zen zombies, and now this with the President! But with you and me, Izzy, and the birds and the spiders and who knows who or what else, it's straight from the guts. Looks like they're hitting us from outside and inside at the same time!"

"Naturally! It's like when you get angry. A kajillion things happen at once on all different levels—a little higher . . . oh, that's lovely, lovely!—your heart beats faster, your muscles tense, your mind starts narrowing and churning out thoughts. Maybe your lips curl back, and you show your teeth. A kajillion different things happen, but all you're doing is one small thing at the middle: you're getting angry.

"Somehow these guys are hooked into our world like a hormonal system is hooked into a person. They wiggle one valve and everybody in France starts stinking and sweating, the sky over Buenos Aires turns yellow, and the President of the U.S. of A. hits network radio. Meanwhile, they're bouncing and twinkling all over kingdom come, and you can no more locate them than you can shake the President out of the radio."

"... There is no cause for alarm . . ."

the President was saying. He was so accustomed to speaking other people's thoughts that he was entirely unaware that the present ones came from an alien entity named Gag.

"In fact, as my science advisors have counseled me, most of you will find that although this malady seems to be diminishing your desire or your ability to eat the sorts of fare you're used to, nevertheless, as the infection runs its natural course, you will begin to find an ample source of appetizing and attractive food perfectly close at hand, namely, in your very own body."

The President's voice suddenly became indistinct. "There's something wrong with the radio," Audrey said. Then, "No, there's not. It sounds like his mouth is full. Is he eating something?"

"Yes," said Izzy. "His tongue and lips!"

Gag giggled. Wimple sighed. Audrey started running her tongue over her lower lip in a different way.

Izzy grabbed her. "Get in the phone booth," he said.

"What are you talking about?"

"Get in," he said, "It's not finished, but we gotta work fath." Izzy's speech was starting to disintegrate, and Audrey knew why: his tongue, like her own, had turned into a slab of red meat filling his throat and mouth. He shoved Audrey inside the booth and got in himself, adrenaline preempting back pain. Izzy slid the double-hinged glass door shut. "I wath trying to make an orgone bokth of thith phone booth," he said as a thick blue vapor started to fill the booth, "bud id turnth oud to have other virtues, Hamisch, if you catch my dthrift."

Audrey peeled her white knuckles off the ledge below the telephone. Inside the booth, it felt like a prolonged earthquake—

with the earth, by turns, above, below, or aslant. "Where are we?"

"Someplace where my back doesn't hurt," said Izzy.

"What is this thing?"

Izzy had wedged himself into a corner and was furiously dialing the old, black rotary phone, the receiver cradled between his ear and shoulder. There was nothing outside the booth but phantasms of flashing light, as if the world had become a frantic series of afterimages. About them thundered a million tape recorders running backward—or something like that.

"Son of a gun!" Izzy shot a disgruntled look at Audrey. She caught it but failed to respond, because she was busy reciting her Buddhist Dharani for the Prevention of Disasters.

"Have you got a quarter?" Izzy pulled his pockets inside out and shook them: lint, two red plastic hollow-wall anchors, a bent staple, and a pistachio.

"Got a what?"

"A quarter! I need a quarter, dammit!"

She fished around in the sleeves of her robe and found a few coins, toll booth change from the trip to the airport in Doshin Roshi's truck. She handed them to Izzy. Humor him. What could it matter with death so near?

"Thanks a million, doll!" He steadied himself against the constant tooth-rattling vibration and dropped a quarter into the coin slot. Nothing happened. He banged the phone with his fist. It rang twice, and the noise and vibrations stopped.

Audrey sighed. The insane turbulence outside had dimmed to the level of TV fuzz. "There," said Izzy. "We've got all the time in the world now, and you don't have to eat your mouth."

"What is this thing? What's going on?"

"Well, remember when we blew Brkjss and his sleazy mind-eaters back to their own dimension?"

"Sure, Izzy. How could I forget? The transdimensionals made *pi* go screwy, your asshole son moved in with me, and you gave me the proof for Fermat's Last Theorem."

"Yeah, the proof and the counterexample, don't forget. Well, that's not all I got from the 'Unlimited Ones.' When they squeezed out through Bobby Vinton's glissando, they left a little something behind."

"What do you mean?"

"Listen." Izzy started to thrum his fingers on the glass door. "Sven got the same beeswax," he grumbled, "but that noodle press wouldn't know an intergalactic computer if it rubbed his famous quads with jalapeño butter."

Audrey had to concentrate to hear it. If she hadn't had years of practice as a mathematician studying patterns, and practice as a Zen student studying, well, just studying, she would have missed it entirely. Every time Izzy's ring finger lifted, it made a very slight sound. It was the sound of the skin on the tip of that finger disengaging from the glass, like a tiny clucking of the tongue. Yet in that sound there was . . . information, a pattern of tiny pulses.

"That's incredible," Audrey said. "What is it? Where is it? How is it stored? Is it in your finger? Can you make out what it says?"

"I don't understand it at all," Izzy said, "but sometimes when I listen to it, I get ideas. It sounds like specs sometimes, like a die setup at the machine shop. Sometimes these ideas, I







don't know what they are at first. Like this phone booth—half Superman and half Dr. Who, yes?—I thought it was going to be an orgone box, the Wilhelm Reich thingie, but one thing led to another: tap, tap, tap!" He thrummed on the booth door. "The way I see it, this little baby is an interdimensional feeler gauge."

"The thing you use for spark plug gaps?"

"That's it. It's very thin, very slick. It slips right in there between worlds, between thoughts. Hamisch, we're not in anybody's universe right now. We're out in the hallway, so to speak."

"What are we going to do?"

"We gotta find those twinkle guys, Hamisch," Izzy said. He was still thrumming and thrumming on the glass. Suddenly he stopped.

"I just got an idea," he said. "Let's go knock on some doors. Give me some single-digit non-negs off the top of your head, Hamisch. Give 'em to me in groups of ten."

"Anything you say, boss." She started reeling off numbers. Izzy dialed them. The first call netted so intense a blast of sound that they thought it was light at first. Izzy hung up quickly. Sometimes the response came from a wall of the booth, vibrating like a speaker; sometimes it came in the form of an odor or a sharp memory image shared by both Izzy and Audrey. Once, they started spontaneously singing pop hits from the fifties, translated into an alien language of clicks, spits, and guttural rumblings; themselves the speakers now, they were having such a good time that Izzy had difficulty hanging up.

Another time, Izzy slammed the receiver down almost as soon as he had dialed, and when Audrey asked what was up, he said simply, "It was me."

"What's the use?" Audrey complained. "At these odds, we can phone numbers till doomsday and never hit a lead."

"Wrong," said Izzy. "First off, we've got till doomsday, remember? We're in between everything that's got an end."

"Yeah, but I'm still starving, Izzy, and by this time everybody on earth has chewed themselves to death. We've got no place to go back to."

"Maybe yes, maybe no. Anyway, Numero Dos is that the odds are actually very good. Nothing in the human mind is random, Hamisch. 'Random' is just a dodge to lubricate the old gray matter."

"A placebo!"

"Right! Those freaks joyriding our twinkle picked you for a highway, babes: they must have left some kind of tracks in there, some kind of rut that your wheels can slide into. If you just relax and spread your lobes, I bet we get that number in a jiffy."

"You're a sexist pig, Izzy, but okay. Savvy. Six-six-six, six-eight-nine, three-three-two-seven."

Izzy dialed.

"Hello," said Wimple. "who is it?"

"'Hello'? 'who is it?'" Gag glared at Wimple, his xylem erect and quivering, axial plasm shaking like jello (except no xylem or plasm). "what the hell are you saying, wimple?"

"I'm talking on the telephone," she stated coldly, with

malicious precision, hardly looking at him, so to speak. "hello," she continued into something like a telephone, which was actually a confluence of time streams and probability matrices eddying in a pattern homologous to the surface of an involuted sphere.

"Paydirt!" howled Izzy, putting his hand over the mouthpiece. Then, into the phone: "Hello, this is Izzy Molson here. To whom am I speaking, please?" He motioned Audrey to the phone. She leaned against Izzy and pressed her ear next to his at the receiver.

Gag grabbed the 'phone' away from Wimple. "none of your goddam business who!"

"gag," Wimple fumed, rising to her full height of 1097 Hubble units of negative time, "you offend. truly, you do. hand me back the telephone right now."

"Are you still there? Hey! Are you still there?" Izzy yelled, lips straight on to the mouthpiece, brow to the receiver.

"wimple," Gag shouted, "are you crazy? honey, you're going native. you're getting sucked in. please, listen!"

"hand me the phone, gag. i like the creatures. they move me."

He levered the infundibular stream back into Wimple's extremity, extracting, in his anger, an even root of negative two. (The closest way to say it in a quasihuman context.)

"I'm wimple," Wimple told Izzy. "gag and i are destroying all the human beings so we can go home. what you must think of us!"

"It stinks," said Izzy, "but we understand. Just where is it that you come from, Wimple honey?"

"kansas."

Izzy covered the mouthpiece. "This is not what it sounds like," Izzy whispered to Audrey. Her jaw hung like a dead yo-yo. "I've seen this before. They get a little creative in lifting these words from another life form's argot. She just means a faraway place, *kapeesh*?" Audrey nodded—might as well.

"Well, how did you get here, Wimple dear?" Izzy crooned into the telephone.

"it was just one of those damned things," Gag cut in. "you scummy star ash don't know it yet, but there are four non-linear equations in five variables that locate everything this side of the crab nebula, both where and when. well, it so happens, one of them went to chaos at the exact point-instant that wimple and i were doing..."

Gag hesitated.

"I think they would call it a 'french kiss,' " Wimple interjected.

"yeah, well—zingo!—here we are and here we've been, imprisoned in a twinkle since about the pleistocene epoch."

"About eight hundred thousand earth years!" Wimple blubbered. "and all we want is to be ho-ome!"

"If you earthers would just go missing,"—Gag now—"the fourth equation would be zonked back to recursive stasis, and we'd be..."

"on each other's tongue again, gag!" sighed Wimple.

"damn you earthers!" Gag concluded.

"Gag, Wimple, bubelehs, listen," Izzy said. "How do you usually travel? I mean, do you go in a spaceship or what...?"

"It's none of your business!" Gag cut in.



Said Wimple: "we copulate."

"HONNNNEY!" Gag blushed infrared.

"But that's it," Wimple told Izzy. "That's how we get from place to place—isn't it, gag, sweet?"

"HONNNNEY!"

Audrey got on the line. "Why can't you copulate back to Kansas?" she said.

"There aren't enough of us," Wimple said. "You can't get so far by two-ing. Now, if there were four or five of us, we might be able to generate enough heat to get home."

"I should think so," Audrey whispered to Izzy.

Izzy swallowed hard. "Gag, Wimple, how about doing it with us?"

The phone went dead.

"Shit! Have you got another quarter?" Izzy looked Audrey straight in the eye.

*The nerve, she thought, after what he just said!* She bit her tongue, however—noncarnivorously—and found a quarter. "It's my last."

Izzy dropped it into the slot and again dialed six-six-six, six-eight-nine, three-three-two-seven.

A voice came on the line, but it was not Gag's or Wimple's.

"This had better be good," said Doshin Roshì.

"Roshì!" Audrey howled. "Where are you?"

"Where do you think I am? Where you should be, in the zendo, meditating! Can't you see that this is it? Every sentient being on the planet is fasting to death. If you don't find your True Home right away, you'll never get enlightened."

Audrey said to Izzy, "He doesn't sound like he's eating his mouth."

"What time is it over there?" Izzy asked the Zen master.

"Day and night are the same to me—but it's about two-thirty p.m., give or take. What zone are you in anyway?"

"We've gone back a little in time," Izzy told Audrey *sotto voce*. "Willy—excuse the French—told me this might happen; it's like the heat of evaporation, when water takes up a couple of extra calories to turn to steam. This gizmo absorbs a few hours every time it takes off. The President hasn't gotten on the radio yet."

"Roshì, how's the tenzo?" Audrey had to know.

"He's on the *zafu* right next to me, looking at me like I was a crazy man. We gotta stop talking like this. I've had a lot of samadhis, but this takes the cake. Next time, use a regular telephone, okay? And meditate! Ten-four! Over and out!"

As Izzy clicked the handset into its cradle, he and Hamisch heard Doshin Roshì's fading voice—tinny, antlike: "This isn't Zen. Not on your life! I'm damned if this is Zen..."

"Sometime you have to teach me how to do that, Hamisch." Izzy's face was a study of bubble-blowing abstraction.

"To do what?"

"To meditate. Zen. All that. Seems like a pretty good idea."

"Have you gone out of your mind? We're stuck here between everywhere and everywhere else, the whole goddam world is starving to death, and in a few hours everybody will start gnawing themselves from the outside in. Plus I'm out of quarters. Plus you just propositioned a creature from Dimension X and offered up my body into the bargain for a little *menage à quatre*, you filthy-minded greaseball. And now you want to make small talk about the Path to Enlightenment! If I weren't sharing a phone

booth with you, I'd kick you in the balls and split."

"You're beautiful when you're angry, you know that, doll?"

Audrey shoved Izzy aside and started to yank open the phone booth door. His head struck the phone—the handset jumped out of its cradle and dangled at the end of its black spiral cord.

There was Gag's voice: "hello? hello, earth swine? hello?"

Audrey took it. "Hello! Earth swine here! Hello!"

"Well, we'll do it," Gag said grimly.

"Do what?" But Audrey already knew. She winced in advance, like a motorist careening over a cliff.

"If you're still willing, we'll *four* with you." In the background they could hear Wimple giggling.

"We'll do it!" Izzy said, still rubbing his bruised head.

"The hell we will!" said Audrey.

"We've got to save the world," said Izzy.

"Won't you help us go home?" begged Wimple.

"This is all wrong!" Audrey smeared her cheek against the glass of the telephone booth as she sagged sideways. "This is no way to save the world! This is no way to go home! You don't know what you're asking!" Actually, Audrey didn't know what they were asking either, but she thought it wasn't much like the salvation that Doshin Roshì taught her on her solitary *zafu*.

"Don't do it, Audrey!" an old woman's voice boomed from the ceiling.

"Mother, get off the line!"

Then thundered the radio, from the phone booth light fixture:

"This is the President of the United States. As most of you know by now, a strange disease has been afflicting our citizens as well as the peoples of other nations and even pets, domestic farm animals, and creatures in the wild. There is no cause for alarm...."

Again, under the awning of that famous brow, Izzy fixed Audrey with his trademark eye-to-eye. In that look, Audrey saw Gag and Wimple sparkling off the sclerotic coating of Izzy's left eye, whirling between her and Izzy like two specks of dust.

"C'mon," said Izzy. "We've got to."

What else could she do? All sentient beings were at stake—for real—and only Audrey could save them, Audrey Hamisch, Empty Kettle, Mrs. Hamisch's little girl! Who'd have thought it? If saving the earth meant "copulating" with a glint of light, so be it!

She let go. She fell into Gag and Wimple's glint and into Izzy's eyes. Breathing out, she felt all at once as if she were a pelican and her breath were blood. Like the legendary pelican, she was feeding her babies with it, and her babies, she saw, were all the creatures on earth. They were all there in the psychic dustbin Gag and Wimple had vacuumed.

Feeding them, Audrey too felt nourished, as the crane fly grub was nourished once—and Audrey likewise! That was before the days of skinny skittering, of looking for love, of wall-gazing, of running on empty; the days when everything had fed her, the sky, the mud, the sound of laughter, the warmth of the cradle, her papa's embrace. She was so tired now of *zafus* and of love withheld! The more she bled, the more she was fed. Tears flooded her eyes.





But save them *all*? What about Willy? *Damn Willy! Damn him!* The imprecation ripped out of her like a radio jingle wedged in the mind, but now she saw that, in fact, it was a love song! It was an ancient joke! *Damn all men!* It was a monkey painting the bars of her cage. It was tribesmen beating the river to make it rain. And that's what Willy's little critique had been too: a lover's groan or a lover's slap or baby groping for mama's breast or a man flailing in dark water or reaching down a well for a fallen child.

Write to me. Call me. Marry me. I love you!

Your Willy

*Damn him!* Damn the infantile lout, the Narcissistic ninny, for hounding her from the *zafu* with guilt, then hounding her back onto it in fear. *In fear! In fear of what?* she thought. Gag was all around her, Wimple all around her, Izzy—*impossible!*—all around her and in her and out of her. *Fear of losing this center, she thought, this eye, this single heart separate from the others, safe from the others, even from Willy, fear of losing me, myself, alone, in control—but now...* Now, for the sake of all sentient beings, she had decimated her center, her eye, her single heart, merging it with three others, two of them as alien to her as logarithms to a turnip, and the third, old One-brow, barely less so.

Oh, where are you, Audrey Hamisch? Where are you now, my sweet self? What has become of you in this transdimensional soup?

"Hey! That's the way!" Doshin Roshi bellowed from the phone booth hinges. "This is good, Empty Kettle! This is very, very good! Definite progress, my girl!"

"Outta here, you peeping Tom!" cried something where Izzy used to be.

"Ha, ha! Now this is what I call Zen!" Doshin Roshi dwindled to a bead of sweat, a rub, a memory—and gone.

Willy, thought Audrey, seems like you're the only one who's not in this crush with us. Where are you, Willy? I love you! Say what you like! Do what you like! So will I! But I love you! Like hail on a hot sidewalk, her fears sizzled, steamed, vanished.

"I almost hate to go!" said Wimple.

"This beats hell out of Armageddon," Gag sighed.

Gag and Wimple opened their mouths, such as they were. Their tongues touched. They were gone.

Out in the hallway between worlds, Izzy and Audrey watched the light show, like sparks under the blanket on a dry winter night. They collapsed against opposite corners, letting their breath calm and their sweat dry.

Izzy, brash Izzy, who had seen more worlds than Detroit had ball bearings, irreverent, fart-lighting, nose-thumbing Izzy, Izzy the wit, the charmer, the cockeyed mechanic—couldn't quite look at her now. "Listen, don't tell Fay about this when we get back."

"Will we get back?"

"It's a cinch, Hamisch. Everything's back to normal. My sacrum is killing me, and I could eat an ox—you won't tell her, will you?"

"What's to tell?"

"That's the way I see it."

"Gag and Wimple called it copulation, but, hell, Izzy, it's only being what we are!"

"What we are?" Hamisch, I think you're ahead of me on this one. Is it Zen? Waddaya mean, 'what we are'?"

"The same! We're all of us the goddam same! In and out of one another like smoke and clouds! I love it!"

"Yeah, well, it don't do my back much good—hey! What are you doing with my phone?"

"Strum your fingers, Izzy. I'm calling Willy—collect."

Slowly, slowly, the glass phone booth walls unfogged. There was Izzy's kitchen, his fridge, Fay's enameled table, the sink full of dishes, the window exotically edged with frost crystals, and beyond it, outside, sunlit snow. A doughnut truck trundled by—"KOFFEE AND"—the kind that stopped outside factories for the noontime trade. For a moment—"Hello?" Willie was saying at the other end of the line—Audrey thought she smelled powdered sugar and coffee.

It smelled good. ☼

## about the author

*Astonished at an early age by paradoxes of perception and by the uncertainty of knowledge, Eliot Fintushel spent the summer of his tenth year passionately reading pre-Socratic philosophers. Twenty-five years and two suicide attempts later, he took up the practice of Zen Buddhism.*

*Somewhere between the ages of ten and thirty-five, he also took up writing. His first sale to a major magazine was "Ylem," which appeared in the October 1994 issue of Asimov's and immediately marked him as an author to watch. He has published a number of other pieces, including several from the Izzy series to which "Crane Fly" belongs.*



## about the illustrator

*Janet Woolley has been working as an illustrator in Europe and the U.S. for more than twenty years, and was the winner of the Society of Illustrators Gold Medal in 1989. She is currently Visiting Professor of Illustration at Central Saint Martins College of Art in London. Her graphic work has appeared on book covers and in dozens of newspapers and magazines, including The New York Times, Rolling Stone, Time, and Sports Illustrated.*

## Amazing facts

VIRTUAL REALITY SEVENTY YEARS AGO? *Well, no. This Frank R. Paul painting for the December 1927 issue of Amazing Stories was designed to attract the reader to "Below the Infra Red" by George Paul Bauer. In his typical fashion, editor Hugo Gernsback took great pains to explain the technology in a blurb on the contents page: "... the great mass of shining apparatus not only changes the attunement of the optic and auditory organs, but raises the vibration of the entire physical body to such a degree as to enable the human body to pass into a higher plane."*



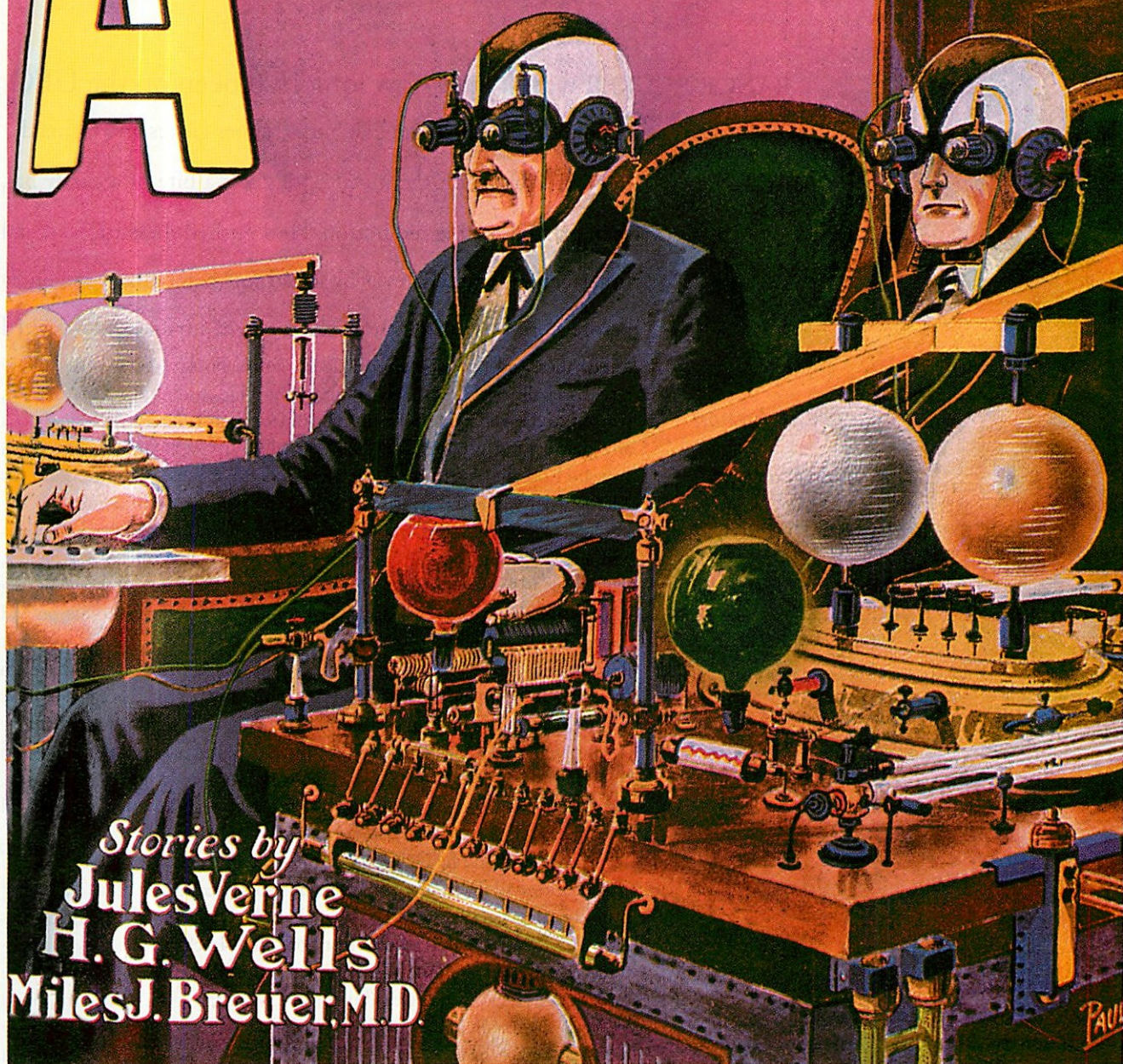
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# ENCOUNTER in Redgunk

BY WILLIAM R. EAKIN



RANGE DECKER wasn't sure how long he'd been on the UFO.

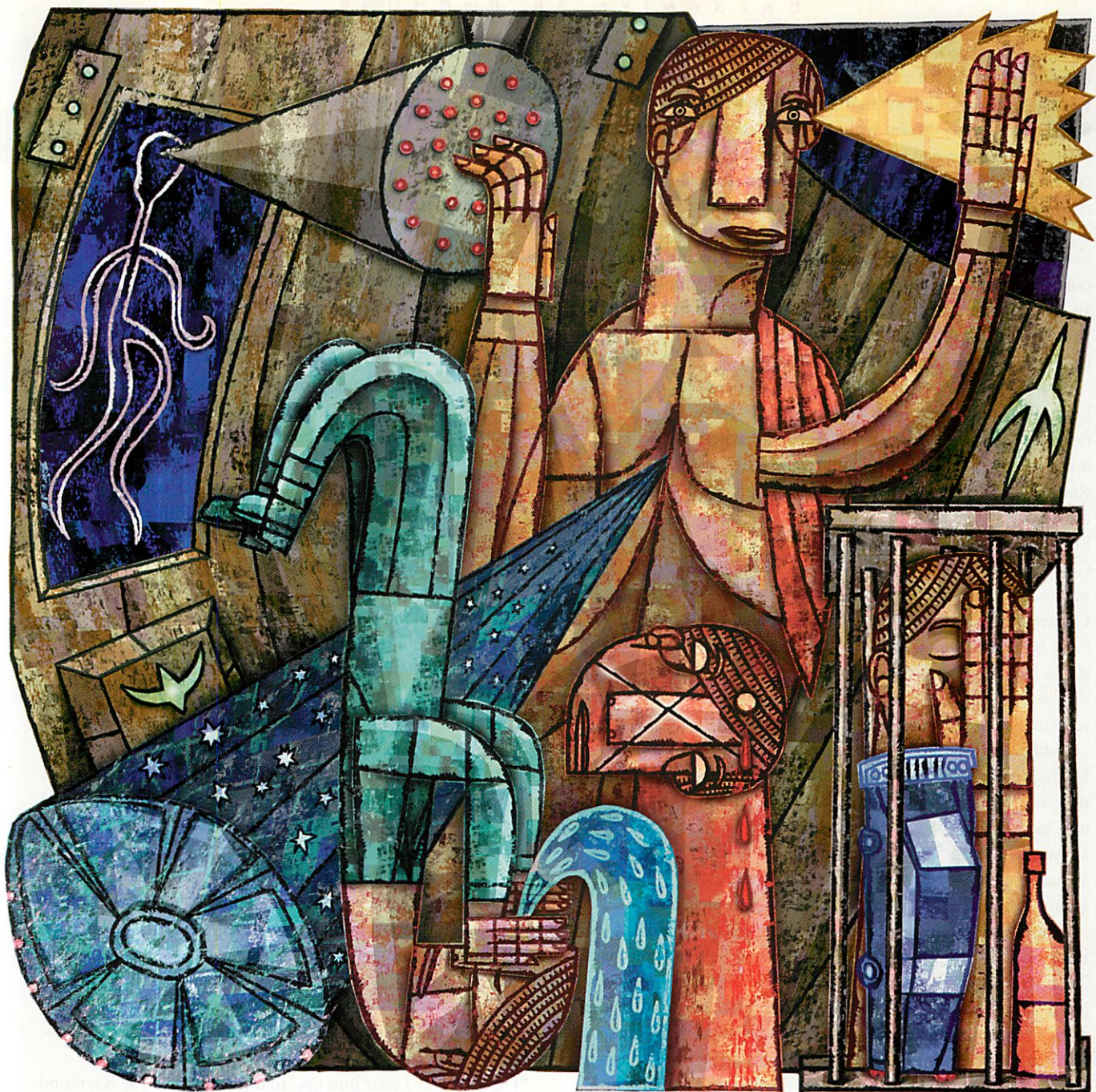
*The alien abduction  
of a damaged young  
man stirs up painful  
memories for some  
Redgunk folks....*

He only knew it smelled like burnt rubber gloves and formaldehyde. He sat up on the metal floor, took a bite of a candy bar, then pressed the big red button. He'd pushed the button several times before, and whatever he asked for materialized somehow before him. He'd eaten three chocolate candy bars, two malted milkshakes, and five tacos; he'd read six comic books, and now had every rare baseball card known to humankind. He thought of his Daddy, winced, and asked aloud for a hot dog. After all, it wouldn't do to leave out any major food groups. The hot dog piled up with onions and relish appeared on the floor on a large flowered Scott towel, like the kind his Mama used when she wiped his face, before she stopped coming to the kitchen, before she was gone altogether. He took a bite into the dog; it was real and juicy, and he had an image of baseball players, those T-batters, really, who played and played while he sat there just watching and wanting to play so badly, too, even while he sat on the bleachers getting fat on bad concession stand food. That was kindergarten. This was: a real nice hot dog, with the green simultaneously slimy and crisp kind of pickle relish that Mattie Stumbaugh used to serve at the picnics of the First Mount Zion Christian Church of Redgunk. This was: that strong, bright yellow smell of mild mustard, the kind of mustard that marks your face around the mouth for the rest of the day. This was: no taste of something plastic, just those good animal guts, some red dye and what he knew were called condiments. The stuff of life, and for real.

He chomped and he chomped and he thought only a moment of home and picnics and T-batters, and then he wondered, given that a hot dog could be made so real, whether if he thought hard enough about it, Miss May 1995 would materialize in front of him. He closed his eyes and pictured the foldout, the one with the little slip of lace across her thigh; he furrowed his brow as he often did when concentrating on a major problem or trying to remember something when Daddy asked about it, like how the milk had spilled all over the carpet or what happened to the cat and why there was fur all over the inside of the microwave unit. Sweat broke

ILLUSTRATION BY  
RICHARD DOWNS





out across his box-broad brow, and he pressed the button. The May issue appeared at his feet. *Oh, stupid, stupid me*, he said to himself; *I thought of the picture. Next time think of the girl.*

**R**EDGUNK, MISSISSIPPI, was all aflurry and would be for weeks, and Bobby Joe Raymond Thorton had to make extra trips to Uncle Joe's Corner Liquor Store just to be able to contemplate what had happened. No one, not even the mysterious night-walking Mummy known to be haunting Redgunk Cemetery, not even the fragrant puke-yellow dog that spent nights pissing on the garbage cans outside the Windy Pines Residence Home, not even Orin Carter, who stayed late cleaning up after the Christian Ladies' Auxiliary meetings at the First Mount Zion Christian Church of Redgunk, no one, not even the bats and the nocturnal rats and the opossum of this little town, had seen what had happened, but

everyone from the mayor to the frogs that sing to the stars out in the swampy backwoods knew that Orange Decker had been abducted by some danged UFO and carried off to the far parts of the known universe.

Of course, as you probably know, that was the explanation Redgunkers usually gave for disappearances, like the time Juanita Brisby took off to become a groupie and live a life of sin and degradation and general Dionysian revelry with that well-known rock and roll group called the Beer-Goozers, who were then in their surfin' phase and had just released their first skyrocketing-to-the-top-of-the-charts single "Surfin' Mamacita." But that was different, and everybody knew the ladies of the Christian Auxiliary had invented that story to hush a scandal that surely would have been heard of throughout the county even as far as Cornstuff. Orange's abduction was real, unless of course his Daddy had finally just got tired of him and took him



down to the kudzu woods outside Redgunk Cemetery and clubbed him to death and then made up the story about how the screen door was left swinging and there was a smell of singe in the air and some distant whining sound and places where last season's cornstalks had been scorched. In these parts, there was certainly a probability of murder, but if he'd made up the entire story, he surely would have included reference to some flying disk with flashing lights and little alien guys with big heads, but he made no such reference; Sheriff Dan Potter hadn't made any noises like there might be any local foul play and simply put out an all-points bulletin saying the boy was missing and that he'd possibly been ripped out of the county by a glowing object.

Now, when most people—not to mention hyperintelligent aliens from other planets or sentient beings from higher dimensions—when most people think of civilization and culture, Redgunk, Mississippi, doesn't spring right to their minds, but there is a good deal of fairly high-level thinking that goes on there in Blake County, of which Redgunk is the county seat, and most of the thinking goes on at Uncle Joe's Corner Liquor Store, in red pickup trucks out back. So no one was surprised at the thought that aliens had chosen Redgunk, Mississippi, as the site of initial close encounters. They were just surprised about Orange.

Bobby Joe Raymond Thorton was in back of Uncle Joe's store about a week after the abduction, and he said, "You know, I beat up that son of a bitch when we were in kindergarten. If I'd known he was going to go and be a real live abductee and maybe get on national news programs, I woulda—I don't know, talked to him nice, maybe."

"You never talked to nobody nice in your life, Bobby Joe Raymond Thorton." Bess Wewer's thin, middle-aged voice was like a screwdriver pressing into someone's flesh, but everybody loved her and she'd just been honored with performing the annual reading of the poem *Trees* to the ladies of the Christian Auxiliary, so she was high as a kite the night after the abduction and had gone to celebrate with some drinkin' and maybe a little rubbin' with Bobby Joe Raymond Thorton behind Uncle Joe's, and she was now sitting in the open cab of her own pickup and was still wearing the pastel and lace dress she'd sewn for the occasion, though she'd hiked her hem up onto the tops of her thighs to let her legs breathe. It was moistly hot.

"How the hell would you know?" complained Bobby Joe Raymond Thorton about her remark. "You were a year ahead of me at the Consolidated Schools of Blake County. You were off flouncin' around with the junior high boys from Cornstuff and never paid no attention to anybody younger than you. And there I was, virile and young and winnin' all the ball games and—and the hero of the whole damned school, and no wonder that boy Orange looked up to me and wanted to be like me and kept asking to wear my galdarned ball caps and did his damned best to keep up and smoke cigarettes in the bathroom and chase them girls through the Redgunk Cemetery. He wanted nothin' better in the whole damned universe than to be just

like me, and hauled off and made a fool of himself every time he tried to. Followed me everywhere—"

"Till you up and got yourself throwed outta there. And that was because you were fightin' and spittin' like some wrangled alley cat when you finally got to junior high school and got yourself throwed in the county jail and finally shoulda been taken down to the penitentiary in Cornstuff. Or just plain shot."

"A boy's gotta be a boy. You love me. Let's climb in the back and test the shock absorbers."

"Don't you ever think of nothin' but yourself for more than a minute?" She took a big, masculine swig of her sixteen-ounce Bud, belched, and whipped her little eyes at him. "Orange Decker has been taken out of the county, and probably by some strange lighted object, and maybe, Mr. Bobby Joe Raymond Thorton, he's bein' experimented on right now by large-headed beasts with rubber gloves and cold steel unnameable surgical equipment, and all you can think about is—rubbin' around."

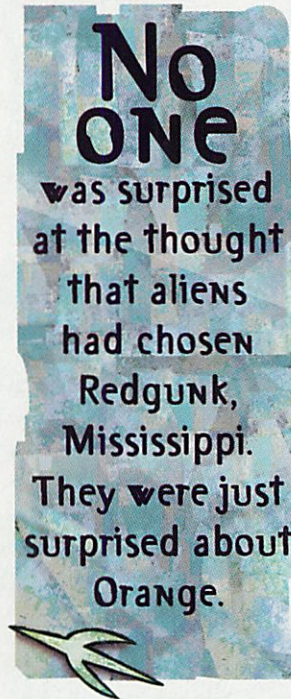
"I don't think it was aliens," said a voice, gravely like it had been taken out of someone's larynx and stomped on by animals in cleated shoes. A man came out of the shadows of the back door, the screen slapping to a shut. Uncle Joe, dilapidated from about seventy years of drinking and cussing, wore a sweaty undershirt and smelled of a day's worth of cigar and was drinking as much as he was selling, only he preferred fiery cheap whiskey to beer. He was known as the wisest man in Blake County, since he'd seen and done just about everything and had been to the Philippines in the big WW Two. "I think it was Buddhists, Bodhisattvas from another

world, who rather than comin' in some steel-and-glass kind of souped-up airplane, materialized from another dimension using powers unknown to human consciousness." A theory he'd picked up from cable television, no doubt. They all said "dimension" with a long, long "i."

"Another dimension," whistled Bess Wewer thoughtfully, who then took another slug.

"I'm just sorry I beat him up," mumbled Bobby Joe Raymond Thorton into the swirl of a drunk that was beginning to close down his normally rather small tunnel of consciousness. "I am sorry I beat him up." *And it don't have nothin' to do with his bein' abducted by aliens or boddi-whatevers but it stinks that I feel so bad and that I think about him and can't help thinkin' about him and . . . son of a bitch.*

ORANGE STRETCHED OUT his fat, hairy legs, smoothed the striped boxing shorts he'd worn on the day of his abduction, lay down backwards and tried to sleep. *Sleep time, Daddy would say; sleep time or no snacks this afternoon, and no Christmas candy canes. Good night, Daddy.* But he couldn't sleep, just like he always had trouble sleeping even as a child when he would wake up in the middle of the night to sneak through the silent house and slip onto the foot of the bed where his parents' toes poked up all crooked and callused and where there was the smell of summer sweat or winter heaters and





electric blankets burning dust, and where he could hear them snoring, Mama usually more than Daddy, that is until she was no longer there, when he was almost ten, before they took him out for special schooling. And he couldn't remember being in school, except that the boys played T-ball and then real baseball in the woozy heat of Mississippi summers; and he loved the boys and wanted to wear one of those uniforms with the big long socks, only the team from Redgunk couldn't afford them so they just wore shorts and T-shirts and caps that read *Uncle Joe's* because the old man had sponsored the team since some time in the 1940s, when he'd awakened to the realization that it was good advertising and would draw people over the line from Newman County and places like that. So Orange would have settled for the hat.

Orange tried to sleep and he tried to image the real Miss May into existence, not just the magazine, but since nothing happened he tried even more to sleep, and the more he tried, the more he thought about his Daddy, and about some vague image of a woman, and suddenly he was wishing for them—wishing was something he'd never consciously done before—and, more than wishing, he saw something, his Daddy, walking around in the mist of something like a vision. Now he just thought of it as a dream, only it was like reality and he was awake. It was as if he floated as an angel or an out-of-body spirit at the ceiling of his Daddy's living room, looking down on that greasy bald head of his.

From his vantage point he watched Oliver Decker remove every photograph he had of his children; and Orange could see or rather *feel* for the first time how the old man felt, how melancholy made Oliver want to rip his heart up and out of his throat: the melancholy of looking at the flat image of that smiling blond two-year-old, Orange's big brother, who was now getting up in the morning in a far distant place and driving himself to MIT and into the adulthood beyond; the melancholy of nearly hearing in the Kodak processing the laughter of little Sarah, who looked so much like Mama, even when three years old and singing in the potty, and who was now turned biochemist with streaks of gray in her hair; the melancholy of remembering his children leaving home and Redgunk and of seeing simultaneously how the species molded and produced its own precious children, fashioned them for maturity, and then made them go on into the biological swirl of the future where Oliver himself walked with even more of a limp or probably a cane in the next year or so on his way to where the old stepped aside for the new, on his way to the vast circle of forest and insect and atmosphere and decay and growth that his cells would become. Orange was shocked at himself for being able to feel these things, much less to feel these things through his father. The feelings were too . . . intense, complex. He was too young inside to feel them. They hurt. The aliens opening the vision to him would not let him stop feeling.

Orange had never thought of his Daddy having feelings. The fabric of the world seemed to rip open for Orange, almost like a

wound. It was as if the horizons of Orange's little sack of capacity to experience had been stretched, stretched beyond themselves into new and wildly powerful capability. He felt: his Daddy sensing how it took being a parent to feel real joy, the joy of looking into those baby-eyes in the photos, so unpretentious, unassuming, unpolluted by fear, never turning away but looking straight on, the joy of looking into a young soul thrown completely open like a blue sky. Orange felt and *knew* that real joy like this was always edged with the melancholy of mortality. Icarus spread false wings and flew to that highest part of the atmosphere, where they melted in that very moment of exultation. Orange felt this. Orange understood this.

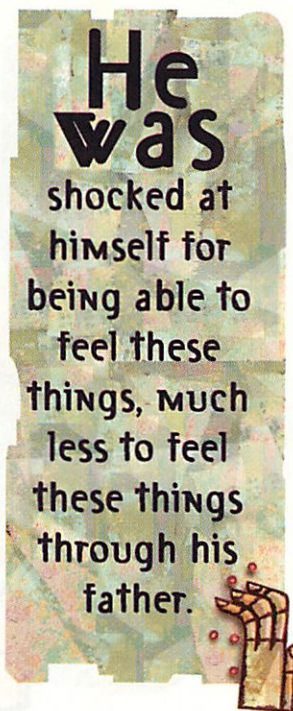
How had he known about Icarus? The aliens were messing with his head.

Now he understood why Oliver put away his photographs, because the old man couldn't bear it, and because it was easier to think of his children as the adults they were instead of little babies with pure sparkling potential he'd held in his arms and could now no longer play games with or carry on his shoulders or kiss good-night. Orange understood intuitively, as if he could see into the man's soul—and maybe it was just waking up and seeing as most people saw, if they only thought about it. Or maybe it was more. Maybe this little stretch to encompass the experience of one man was only the start of an opening up to experience all things.

Orange understood why Oliver removed the pictures, was removing them, in fact, at this very moment and especially the Wal-Mart photo of a twenty-six-year-old man smiling like a split orange and with the awareness to match. It was a painful image even before the abduction. Orange understood why Oliver moped around the house for some six hours until morning with the back of Maureen's antique piano showing its naked and slightly dusty wood, why Oliver looked out the window until the air got chilly and turned foggy and rainy outside, the fog hugging the Mississippi pines like knotted strands of rope, paper rope that ripped finally into sunlight by midday. Orange watched and understood then as Oliver went back into the bowels of the house, down into the closet again, and returned the photos to the piano and their rightful place.

Oliver, an aging computer consultant who did all his work by the phone system that connected places like Redgunk to the rest of the world, had raised the brightest little family in Redgunk, Mississippi. He and the woman he'd married. And the children were like sparks of intelligent-star, even Orange in his first few years.

*Dad?* Orange spoke, and he found himself standing beside his mother's piano. His father looked up, as if he'd heard the voice as a whisper of breeze in the attic. *Why did you ever move us to Redgunk, your beautiful, brilliant family?* Orange stopped himself from speaking the question out loud. He could see and feel too well the father's pain. And he knew that the brilliant children had done brilliantly anyway, and that the father's idea on a very small scale was true: that Redgunk and the Consolidated Schools of Blake County were a little better for their





presence, that bright and intelligent people were needed more here than wherever else they might have gone. They were needed here in the vulgar wild spinning of Redgunk just as saints were needed in the vulgar wild spinning of time and body. So he had lost a son, and his wife, too, because of that idea, and sometimes Oliver muttered to himself: *Damned red-neck sons of bitches in big gas guzzlers.* And sometimes he just blamed himself. It was hard to continue to believe in ideals under the pressure of the attendant emotions, when you lost a wife and a son's potential. Orange, under the veneer of his muted consciousness, had hated his father for this, though he had never consciously apprehended it. Now—now he saw his own hate. Now he understood.

And then the initial understanding and the vision itself closed as sleep split open and he woke from a dream he could only vaguely remember, woke to find himself in front of the red button, and for breakfast he ordered twenty-six pieces of bacon and seventeen pancakes in a big stack with lots of extra melted butter and more syrup than he'd ever been allowed to use at home. At first he savored the meal, as he'd always done, scarfing it down with all the violence of some wild orange beast in heat; but rapidly—much more rapidly than his normal appetite would be satisfied—he found the meal unsatisfying and empty. Somehow Orange Decker knew he'd come to this aspect of himself—the part that liked pancakes and baseball cards—for the last time; that what remained was someone, something, that could feel its way into his own father's breast, feel its way into the feelings of everyone, of every sentient being everywhere. The aliens had done something to him, or were in process thereof.

He hadn't seen any aliens, but whatever they were, they were okay. They gave him what he needed at the press of a button. For Orange Decker, the mental near-invalid, that had meant his favorite things: comic books and chocolate bars. He would only vaguely miss them. Now he noticed that it wasn't just a single red button; it was, rather, a panel of buttons suspended on a black wall, buttons that became more complex as the days wore on, so complex, in fact, that they lost their clumsy physical appearance and began to run invisibly one on one with the firing activities of his brain, a brain transforming and growing like a crystal.

**W**HEN UNCLE JOE finally went inside with his outrageous New Age theories to check on a customer and to lie down someplace behind the counter in a sweaty whiskey-sleep, Bobby Joe Raymond Thorton and Bess Wewer checked out the shock absorbers on her truck there under the open sky, then lay together with their beer breath and smoked. Bobby Joe Raymond Thorton's head was like the inside of a rotten melon and he had trouble seeing; but the few times the moisture cleared off he could spy outbreaks of stars like little crystal viruses swimming toward him.

He heard Bess's voice, too. "Someday you'll make somethin' of yourself," she was telling him, gabbing on and on in her mid-

dle-aged drone, and he would have beat her up if he could have moved. "But you first gotta make amends for all the crap you done through your hog-swill of a life; rippin' off the convenience store down in Marshall, I swear, you'd think you'd been born with rocks in your brain..."

He thought she added something else, then realized it was a voice inside his own head, since no one else could have known. *"And you shoulda been tossed in jail for a lot longer than you was, and even more for wreckin' into the Decker car—"*

"Good Gawd, shut the hell up—I was ten for Gawd's sake—"

"Ten and rippin' off stores and drivin' drunk—I can't fuckin' believe it. If you hadn't been a juvenile—!" And she said this word with a long "i" as well. "And if it hadn't been Uncle Joe's cousin presidin' on the bench... you woulda done real time."

And the voice inside him added: *"And maybe you woulda fried for killin' that lady and wreckin' Orange Decker's head."*

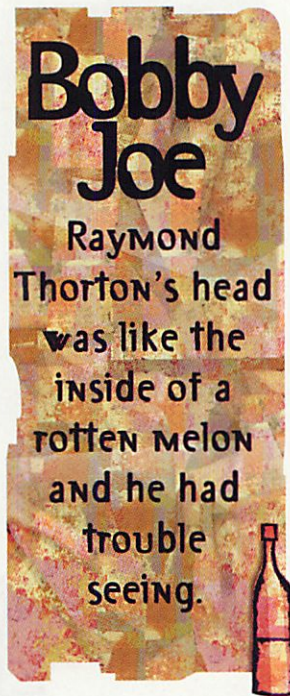
"Aw, they were strange to begin with—" he said out loud; she did not understand the comment it was so out of context and simply chalked it up to his stuporous drunk.

He squinted his eyes because the little crystal viruses were starting to spin and he felt a bit sick. "Wha' the hell they move to Redgunk for, anyway?" And his head was spinning: A flash, red glass flying; that's what he kept seeing and couldn't stop seeing, as the world started spinning. *And why the hell did this abduction-crap have to happen to Orange just as I about washed him outta my damned memory and hadn't had a thought about him in a year or better, about wreckin' his head and—. That old man shoulda left Redgunk right then, or before then, when I beat up the kid.*

So Bobby Joe Raymond Thorton was drunk and angry and hurt, again. And he had indeed run into them, Orange Decker and his Mom, he'd run them down with that big buffalo bulk of beautiful Buick—*mah' ole Daddy's Buick*—in a simple pure accident and all he'd had were just a few beers and some whiskey, and back in those days he was sure he could drive fine even drunk, he was sure when he was ten and could hardly reach the accelerator pedal that he could drive fine that way, feeling the big unharnessed power of that car. Fine.

And all he'd hoped to ever think about the accident was how it hardly put a dent in that beautiful blue Buick and that there were no witnesses, so that no one knew anything about how it happened or who did it, no witnesses, except Orange Decker and he no longer had the ability to think or say anything about it, and except his Mama, but she died without coming to, bleeding big sacks of blood into the fragile memory-storage places of her brain—*to hell with her and to hell with Orange Decker who don't remember jack shit about it anyway—and I'm real sorry about his Mom and his face and that kinda plastic surgery he had to go through—he always looked like an orange anyway, round-headed sumbitch! But damn it, it ain't fair to me!*

And they had called him that, "Orange Decker," and made more fun of him than usual when he came back to the Consolidated Schools of Blake County, Bobby Joe Raymond Thorton





making the loudest fun, as everyone would have expected. The Decker boy came back from that accident looking like a split orange and, in sharp contrast to the way things had been before, he was unable to answer any more of the teacher's usual questions than Bobby Joe could, *after being so damned smart in kiddygarden and fourth and fifth grade, and I suppose—I suppose that's the part that keeps drillin' drillin' into mah damned head, that he was so smart and then—*

And when Bobby Joe Raymond Thorton dropped out of school, sometime not too long after Orange Decker left on the bus to the Special Educational Institution in Newman County, when he got himself kicked out of school, he did so in part because of what he thought of as normal reasons, preferring to spend time drinking and hunting like any typical boy, but also because someplace deep down he hoped it would help him forget all about killing Orange Decker's Mom and about ruining that bright sharp-tack of a boy's brain. And that it might help him—stop drinking. Stop drinking. He'd been boozing a long time before that anyway—slugging the whiskey when he started that big Buick, *and me just ten. Just ten. What kinda universe would allow a ten-year-old boy to drink and—?*

Drunk and angry and hurt, again. How in hell was he supposed to know when he was just ten and he kicked his Daddy's Buick into raucous gear that it would slam into Orange Decker and his Mom, as if on its own accord, like it was planned from the start of the universe or something? What kind of fairness was that, that the universe was made so that such things could happen to a ten-year-old boy just wanting to feel a little Buick-freedom? And how in hell was he supposed to know in kindergarten or fifth grade when he beat up on Orange Decker those few times for what he considered quite normal reasons that he'd someday have to live through those little harmless events over and over again in his head, that something would happen so that all the things he'd ever done to Orange Decker, indelibly imprinted on his own brain, would rise up like sick memory plants, so that he could never forget not only that Buick striking metal and flesh, but Orange Decker himself and every little kindergarten scuffle, the smallest memories of which, like the big blue memory of the accident, fixed themselves onto his innards and would not let go: *Some kinda deevine punishment. Some kinda deevine punishment.*

*But—feelin' woozy—at least I made it to the friggin' eighth grade, yessir, without ever cheatin' much, even with all that heavy burden on my mind; I almost made it through eighth grade. Deevine punishment?*

*Woozy. Those stars twirling up there make me woozy. Wanna vomit.*

*Stars? Or lights like flashing neon saucers whirlin' around with no sense or with some crazy cosmic plan that none of us could know anyway, that no humans nobow can make damned sense of, cosmic Boddì-whatevers flippin' through dark sky, look like cigarette butts.*

*No, cloudy: can't see them stars no more. It's a cigarette butt; Wewer's. Flipped it outta the truck.*

"I feelin' sick," he said out loud to her.

"Maybe it's time we go home. Looks like's gonna rain. I'll drive ya."

"Naw, ah'll—"

"You're in no condition to drive, Bobby Joe Raymond Thorton. Let me take you to my place and I'll make you breakfast in the mornin'."

Bobby Joe Raymond Thorton sat up like a bolt of bright lightning imagining in her offer much more than he was willing even brain-dead-drunk to give her or any of the other ladies of the Christian Auxiliary, for that matter. "Ah make it."

"No drivin'," she snapped at him.

"Ah walk—"

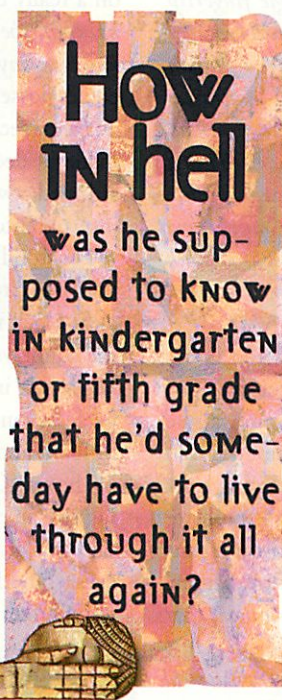
"Or crawl and vomit, you mean." He stood, tried to get out of the truck bed and fell to the pavement with a bloody thunk, then stumbled off into the settling mists of a much cooler night, and finally did stoop over to vomit just as he reached the edge of Redgunk Cemetery.

There was a mummy down in the Museum of Science and Egyptology in Redgunk, which was located in Uncle Joe's Corner Liquor Store, accessible to passersby for a buck and including the mummy exhibited next to an authentic stuffed alligator, a frog skeleton half covered by yellow formaldehyde in a big, cloudy jar, and a shrunken head. The mummy was far from Egyptian and, in fact, an old mannequin from Macy's, New York, wrapped up in knee bandages, but there were stories in Redgunk of boys seeing that mummy-man walking at the kudzu-edge of Redgunk Cemetery at night and of pies being stolen from windowsills by wispy fingers,

and of eyes staring through half-closed blinds at old women sitting in their slips in powdery, pink-flowered bathrooms. Bobby Joe Raymond Thorton was well known for taking young Redgunk girls to the cemetery edge to watch for that mummy through the night. Now, lying in a sticky pool of viscous beer-smelling regurgitation, Bobby Joe Raymond Thorton thought he saw him for real.

The skin of the being walking toward him from among the littered gravestones glowed as if it was covered with fireflies or as if its body was made of swirling bands of tiny stars. He thought at first he saw Orange Decker come back from the skies, and then he thought he looked into a mirror at his own soul. Whatever it was, it scared the shit out of him.

"**P**ERHAPS NO divine justice as you think of it." He'd said this out loud to himself and then said it again in an ethereal whisper to Bobby Joe Raymond Thorton who would hear it only with his skin as a cold, goose-pimplily breeze. Something startling and penetrating, like a virus, had run into Orange's system. It sparkled along the nerve endings and blasted through subtle nadi-veins into parts of consciousness he would have been unable to imagine as Orange Decker or as just about any human being. Lucidity, crystal clarity, the intelligence latent in childhood eyes now sparkled in his fingertips and in every cell. However they had done it, these beings,





the aliens of the UFO, had healed his ripped brain. Maybe these were the same beings who millennia before brought the crystalline swimming virus of consciousness to the first primates on the road to *Homo sapiens*. Orange thought of this, and thought: *No, no divine justice as you think of it, neither angels nor divinities nor daemons nor aliens. But something far more startling, far more subtle and sublime. Suppose—imagine beings with a greater capacity for sentience—not intellect alone, but sentience—normal, everyday cosmic beings who feel everything that any sentient being can and does feel in the whole of the universe, white Bodhisattvalike beings sitting outside time looking down into the mad swirl of phenomena and sometimes with a single fingertip touching and creating a point of stasis. Aliens beyond mortal ken, in a state that makes the difference between the most evolved human beings and the Orange Deckers, the difference between a St. Francis and a Bobby Joe Raymond Thorton seem comparatively minimal. Otherwise why would they have chosen me? And imagine with just a few short lessons moving from the behavior mod of mere body into the complexity of relearning and releasing the human mind—my mind—and what people have called soul. Only a soul that is much more powerful than anyone ever imagined. This is me, released, renewed, a powerful resurrection body of pure light.*

Bobby Joe Raymond Thorton thought he heard the light-beast saying these things and it scared him out of his ever-living gourd and he jumped up, drunk and all, and ran for all he was worth through the askew stones of Redgunk Cemetery, ran because all he needed was Orange Decker to come flying back from the heavenly spheres as some superhuman fire monster capable of consuming and destroying his mind and eating his brain and wreaking vengeance on his poor, misguided, friggin' life, as if—well, shit, I'll change, I'll be a new man, just don't hurt me don't break me don't rip my mind from my body and twist it into painful pretzels and tie me up and feed me to some prehistorical maniacal monsters of—of my own friggin' soul, and GAWD! I wish I'd gone down right then to Brother Orin at the First Mount Zion Christian Church of Redgunk and fallen on my knees and cried out Good Gawd in Heaven, I have killed a woman and I have smashed that boy's skull and been a hit-and-run driver and what the hell do you expect but that I should drink myself into the purity of numb no-feeling burning whiskey and great vats of beer and how the hell could I have stayed in school after all that, and why didn't they just string me up or fry me for that convenience store—twenty-five bucks and a pack of cigarettes? Friggin' A, man, how the hell am I supposed to—to live with it or get over it without some ten million years of punishment? Good Gawd, you can have whatever you want, whatever you want, whatever you need: my beer, my love life, my baseball hat. And then he ran, ran as fast as his sandman slogging legs would carry him, up and over a stone or two until he fell headfirst and rammed his own damned skull on a stone he knew too well, with MAMA and MAUREEN DECKER written in bold Roman letters. And then the Mummy—only it wasn't a mummy at all but some amorphous almost humanlike being of light that might come out of the chrysalis of a mummy—then the Mummy came at him and he expected this was the end he'd always expected but had tried to force down with booze and a good pump in the back of a pickup truck. And the Mummy—only it was Orange Decker grinning with that natural split-fruit grin—wrapped around him and he felt

the pulse pulse pulse of energy, the energy of a heart enveloping him and pumping something in and out of him, *as if some Boddi-whatever alien being is trying to—to—to friggin' hug me.*

And there was a moment of calm. Not divine retribution or vengeance or punishment. There was calm. It was early morning after the hot evening had changed into the cool mists of near-dawn. In the silence, frogs out in the swampy amorphous kudzu woods were singing with clear bell-tones to stars they only sensed through the wispy ropes of fog. *He's not trying to kill, absorb or eat me after all.* And there was lucidity, the kind a man has in those moments between waves of drunken nausea on a really bad drunk when he stares and sees *a little vomit on my chin, the rock of her stone, a little blood from where I've been knocking my own head against it.* The kind of lucidity a man could possess only by having his blackest memories washed out, his secret faults made clean, not made nonexistent but made healed by a fabric of fellow-feeling, not with the vulgar stripped away to make room for the sacred, but the sacred inserted into the natural vulgarity of a man.

He stood and saw that the mummy-light man was gone and that the circle of woods and fog ripped slightly. Beyond was clear black night, waiting for the sun and the rooster voices of the countryside that cushioned the outskirts of Redgunk, and a single star inset in the black, not like an ordinary star but like a peek beyond phenomena into something still and basic and brilliant and forgiving. In the years to follow, he would tell people he saw Orange Decker's UFO hovering over Redgunk, gazing like an eye and then disappearing into infinity. But when he said this and people like Bess Wewer listened, they saw in his eyes something calm, baby-eyes unpretentious, unassuming, unpolluted, a soul thrown open like a blue sky. ☸

## about the author

William R. Eakin lives with his wife Laura and three children, plus the horse, three dogs, and an incalculably large number of cats they've collected on a chunk of land named "the Thicket" (after the safe place in Bambi), where he's been inspired to create his "Redgunk, Mississippi." Redgunk tales can be found in a number of places, including six recent issues of *Realms of Fantasy* and the new *Rusch/Greenberg Year's Best Fantasy anthology*. He's also had other work in *The Magazine of Fantasy & Science Fiction* and *Non-Stop*. Bill also teaches and helped to edit a number of anthologies on the religions of the world.



## about the illustrator

Artist Richard Downs is an award-winning editorial illustrator who has worked for most U.S. consumer and trade magazines. In the cyberworld Richard is a frequent art contributor to websites and a consultant on CD-ROM games including *Riven*, the sequel to *Myst*. Richard received a BFA in illustration from Art Center College of Design in Pasadena, California, in 1984, and taught editorial illustration for six years at the school.

He lives with his wife Gwyn and their daughter Jillian in Nevada City, California.



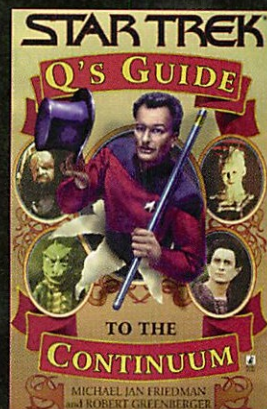
OLD FRIENDS, NEW HORIZONS

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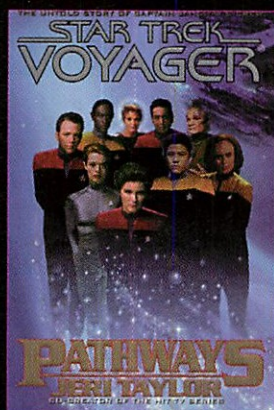
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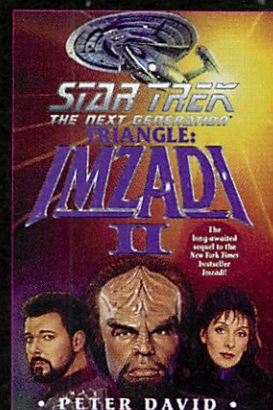
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A column designed to acquaint the ordinary person with science  
and other stuff that's really hard to understand.

# ASK DR. SCIENCE...



**October 1943** R. T. of  
*Spearfish, South Dakota*, asks:  
Dr. Science, what exactly is  
time?

Dear R. T.: Time is of the  
essence. We owe the discovery  
of Time to Ernst Essence, an  
apprentice brewmaster in  
Mosbach, Germany. Young  
Essence stumbled upon Time  
while searching for a cheap  
formula for export beer. This  
was at 3:49 p.m., October 9,  
1566. Before that, no one had  
to ask: "What time is it?"  
Everyone knew: 3:49 p.m.,  
October 9, 1566. Nobody had  
to buy a watch. Calendars  
were very small. (There was a  
lot more room for pictures.)

There were many advan-  
tages to living without the  
concept of Time. No one was  
ever too early, no one was ever  
too late. On the other  
hand, since Time  
and space

are one, it didn't much matter  
when you got there, since no  
one had anywhere to go.

Another thing was, you  
didn't have *Time* magazine. It  
was just "magazine" then.  
Nobody said, "I don't have  
time." You *knew* that. You  
didn't have to say it. Every-  
body *knew*. Those were the  
good old days. Except there  
weren't any then.

**August 1941** E. L. B. of *San  
Carlos de Bariloche, Argentina*,  
wants to know:

Dr. Science, can you name  
four great geologic ages?  
Dear E. L. B.: I certainly can.

**April 1998** W. B. of *Hay  
Springs, Nebraska*, would like  
an answer to this question:

Dr. Science, what happens if I  
go driving in my car, take it up  
to the speed of  
light, then turn  
on my head-  
lights?

Dear W. B.: You must think I  
just came into town on a  
wagon, right? This is one of  
those smart-aleck questions  
meant to throw Dr. Science a  
curve. I can assure you that  
won't work. Dr. Science has  
heard this one before.

In the first place, exactly  
what kind of car are we talk-  
ing about? Are we talking  
about a new, 1999 top-of-the-  
line Lexus, a lot of headroom,  
a nice back seat? Or one of  
those puppies you can't even  
get your foot in? Because, W.  
B., if you knew your basic Sci-  
ence, you'd know that the  
closer your car gets to the  
speed of light, the smaller  
your car is going to be. Start  
off with a pretty big car, you'll  
maybe be fine. Go for a cheap  
little number, whoa! things are  
going to get pretty tight in  
there. My advice: When you  
buy your car, get the SRP  
(Special Relativity Package)  
along with a good A/C.

A little practical note: If  
you're going to drive like this,  
your collision and personal  
liability are going to go way  
up, pal. The good news is, you  
hit somebody at that speed,  
who cares? Another good  
thing is—old "Sneaky Al"  
figured this one out, too—  
your insurance agent will be  
dead by the time you get back.

Never mind the headlights.  
What are you going to see  
out there?

**June 1928** E. D. of  
*Sawahlunto, Sumatra*, asks:  
Dr. Science, what can you  
tell me about wave particle  
duality?

Dear E. D.: Hey, glad you

asked. An electron is a parti-  
cle, only sometimes it acts like  
a wave. We think of light as a  
wave, only sometimes it acts  
like a whole bunch of parti-  
cles. What Dr. Science does is  
take this hard stuff and put it  
to practical use. Someone  
calls, my secretary says, "He's  
in the lab." They call over  
there. I'm in the office. Back  
and forth. This can go on all  
day! If you're smart, quantum  
physics can work for you, too.

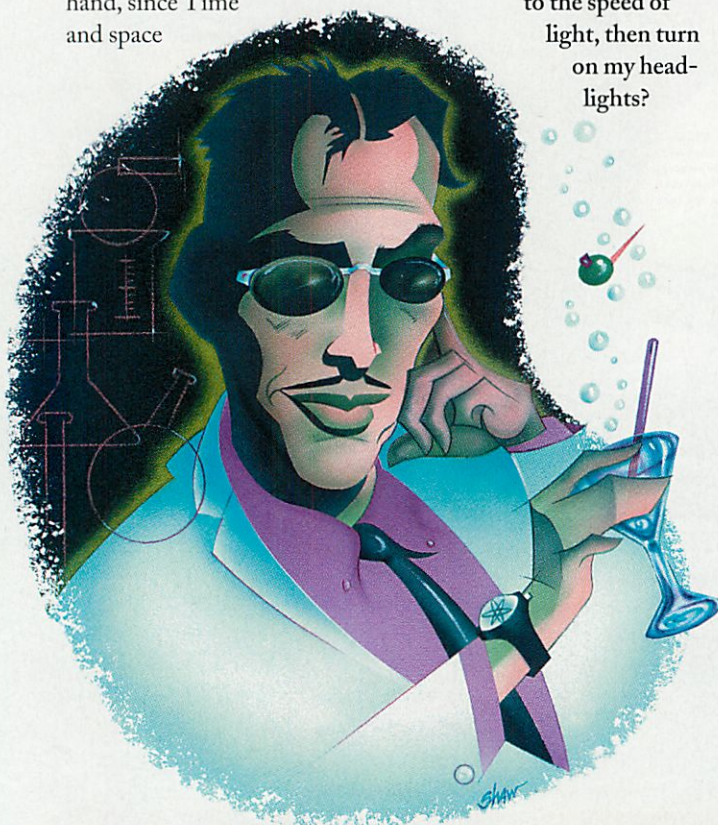
**February 1928** "Bobby" of  
*Sugar Creek, Wisconsin*, asks:  
Dr. Science, what do the  
letters RPM stand for?

Dear Bobby: I thought every-  
one knew RPM stood for  
really poor manners, speaking  
of which: Do you have an  
older sister, Bobby? The  
doctor is very lonely here at  
the Science place. 🍷

*All questions appearing in  
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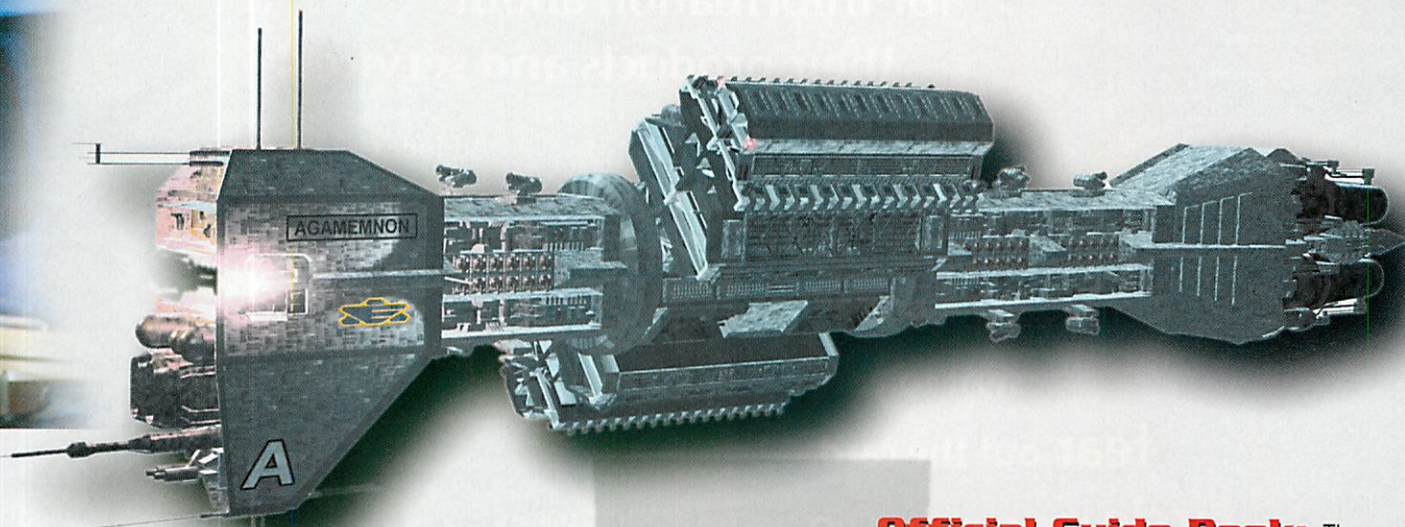
*We welcome your questions for this  
column. But please do not address  
your questions to Dr. Science himself.  
Dr. Science knows better than to open  
his own mail. Address your questions  
to Neal Barrett, Jr., Dr. Science's  
friend, at AMAZING Stories, P.O.  
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Mr. Barrett will see to it that your  
questions are slipped under Dr.  
Science's door.*

*Stan Shaw, often referred to as  
the "illustrator" by clients Village  
Voice, Slate, and Premiere,  
is naturally blurry. This is  
caused by his molecules  
moving in a peculiar motion.*





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**5**  
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**AMAZING**  
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# The Brave, New, Slightly Dysfunctional World of Internet Gaming

**Thanks to the mad god known as the Internet, humans are no longer limited to playing games with people in their own caves. Instead, playmates can be found around the globe at any hour. If you have the modem, somebody somewhere will have the time.**

**H**UMANS PROBABLY INVENTED games just moments after they realized they had nothing to do between hunting and sex. While games quickly diverged into the throw-the-moldy-elk-bladder type for the physically apt, and pebbles-vs.-twigs for the more intellectually inclined, the whole scene for *Homo sapiens* changed very little for the next 50,000 years. Oh, sure, the Greeks managed to invent the Olympics, and the Mayans turned basketball into an organ-donor program as physical sports grew into a wholly separate form of entertainment—but the rest of humanity's gaming population only had the invention of boards, dice, and cards as evolutionary high points as the millennia crawled by.

Well, now the computer has come along and revolutionized gaming once and for all—not so much because of all the cool, gory graphics and chess programs that can analyze a hundred thousand moves a second, but for a PC's ability to connect to other PCs. Thanks to the mad god known as the Internet, humans are no longer limited to playing games with people in their own caves. Instead, playmates can be found around the globe at any hour. If you have the modem, somebody somewhere will have the time.

Of course, like most good ideas, Internet gaming sometimes looks a lot better on paper than it does in practice. As was true of the Internet itself a couple of years ago, newcomers are just as likely to quit in frustration as they are to join the worldwide community of gamers. That isn't to say that net

gaming isn't worth the effort—just that some overly glamorous press and a blissful ignorance of the strange social dynamic of the Internet can lead a gamer to think the net is the ultimate playground... whereas it's really just a new playground, with its own set of rules and limitations.

If you are getting a little tired of testing yourself against programmed opponents, and are considering investing in a high-speed modem and some games that will let you meet and defeat the living, you might want to get a handle on what things are really like. Once you're prepared for the reality under the hype, the odds are a lot better that you'll be able to find a gaming experience that actually works for you, instead of a few nights of frustration and an expensive high-speed modem that'll never give you your money's worth.

## Are we there yet?

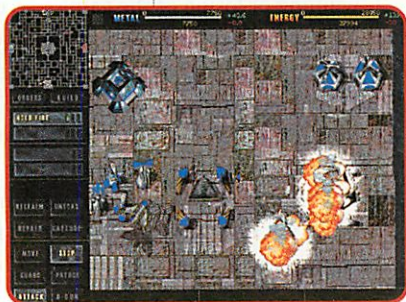
The first problem with net gaming is the technology involved; most of it is just not up to the stress that most games put on the smooth transfer of data. The popular media seems to be unaware that those demonstrations they cover of the next big Internet thing, especially games, are shown under completely ideal conditions. Perhaps these cheerleader preview pieces should carry the same warning as gasoline commercials: "Actual performance may vary."

If you are a big chess or bridge fan, then you really don't need much more than reliable email in order to have a great time. With net technology still in its relative infancy, the simplest gaming pleasures are usually the best. The trouble starts when you spy that incredible 3-D action game or flight simulator on the store shelf with a glowing red sticker on the box that reads, "Playable Over the Internet." If this dream game is going to push the limits of your new state-of-the-art PC, then odds are the word "playable" is being used fairly liberally.

The simple truth is that, regardless what Bill Gates and other visionaries might say, the Internet is just not yet up to doing all the things we'd like it to do. To begin with, not all Internet providers are created equal. That economical, unlimited-time provider that's been satisfying your email and surfing needs perfectly well up till now may be completely unsuitable for any real-time gaming experience. It doesn't matter how fast your modem is if your Internet provider is



► **FREE FOR ALL.** Many on-line sites offer users free play of bits like Total Annihilation.





## Electro Games

**For all you know,  
you could be  
playing *Red  
Alert* with a Third  
World dictator—  
and while that  
may not seem  
like an important  
factor as long as  
you stick to the  
game, it's amaz-  
ing how much  
you get to know  
about people  
when somebody  
starts to win  
or lose.**

### ▼ STRANGERS ON THE NET.

*You never know  
who's waiting to  
waste you under the  
Tiberian Sun.*



routing you through a rickety old main server that happens to be somewhere in the Falkland Islands. The time between you sending data and it arriving at a desired locale is commonly referred to as "latency," and if you plan on playing high-end games across the net, you should make sure yours is as low as possible.

If you go into a gaming situation with high latency, then you will either be rejected by smarter software or you will experience all sorts of odd gaming effects such as "lag" or "warping," in which your opponents suddenly shift across your field of view in the blink of an eye. While at first this might seem like some secret power that you haven't been told about, what's really happening is your computer suddenly getting back in synch with the rest of the people you are playing with. This effect can be so annoying that some gaming purists may actually ask you to leave a session before befouling it with your lackluster technical performance.

Unfortunately, even if you go all the way and get yourself a T-1 fiber-optic connection to the net (also known as a cable modem), you still might have to deal with the problems of the game server itself. *Ultima On-Line* was a great success commercially, but no matter how fast your connection was, you were going to be spending a fair amount of time staring at an unmoving screen. It seems Origin took a leaf from the AOL business manual, badly underestimating the maximum number of players they could comfortably handle at one time. While this problem is being fixed with the addition of new servers and software tweaks to improve efficiency, its existence not only demonstrates that performance issues can often be out of your control

on the net, and also that any games designed for Internet play—especially ones that are Internet-only, such as roleplaying games—should be considered works in progress. You simply have to accept that these games will go through nearly constant improvement, and downloading patches is going to be a fact of life.

If you're not confident of your own Internet technology, but are unwilling or unable to change it, then consider choosing a game that suits your hardware and be flexible about what you are willing to play. You may have come to net gaming in order to play sims such as *FreeSpace* and

*X-Wing vs. Tie Fighter*, but if your setup makes these games unviable over the net, perhaps you should consider less cutting-edge fare, such as war-games, or older, less demanding titles, like *Quake*.

## Self-Esteem Theatre

The other big shocker for new net players is the discovery of just how many dysfunctional personalities are out there in cyberspace.

For most people (before they join the Internet community), game-playing experience is based on up-close personal interaction with friends or acquaintances. After all, not too many people have taken their *Monopoly* games outside with them, stood in the middle of the street, and shouted, "Does anybody want to play with me?" As ridiculous as that scene may seem, that's exactly what you're doing when you go online in search of opponents. All you know for sure about the people you are playing with is that they seem to be interested in the same game you are. For all you know, you could be playing *Red Alert* with a Third World dictator—and while that may not seem like an important factor as long as you stick to the game, it's amazing how much you get to know about people when somebody starts to win or lose.

It's not exactly endearing when a person you don't know from Adam starts sending notes calling into question the species of your mother just because you are attacking his base. And it's not just the dreaded 12-year-olds using their dads' AOL accounts you have to look out for. The anonymity of the net allows even adults to display the worst aspects of their personalities without the smallest repercussion. In fact, a sizable percentage of gamers online use this forum to vent all the rage and powerlessness they carry around in real life on anybody foolish enough to win or lose against them. If you aren't prepared, a few bouts of this sort of treatment can really turn you off from the whole social gaming concept. A computer opponent may be unoriginal and easily tricked, but at least it doesn't think that raving about the joys of fascism is an acceptable way of distracting your opponent during a game of *Go*.

The best way to deal with this "personality problem" is to take everything with a grain of salt. You are out there to play, and have fun, and your ego ought to be strong enough to make the actual winning or losing of the game a secondary issue. Take the time to learn the ins and outs of a game, and if you are playing a complex flight sim such as I-Magic's *Warbirds*, don't let machismo keep you from staying in the beginners' area until you get the hang of things. Just because you are using a high-tech gadget to play with, it doesn't mean you can waive the right to be beaten for the first 20 games of anything... just like when your older brother



3:06 PM  
head out for anniversary  
gift for girlfriend



3:21 PM  
run into fellow player with Bajoran  
rescue deck



7:22 PM  
resign yourself to celibate lifestyle



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## Electro Games

Newer  
online RPGs  
are giving  
players the  
ability to opt  
out of the  
murderfest  
and get on  
with more  
classical  
role-playing  
fare.

was teaching you Ping-Pong. (And, just like an older brother, you are bound to run into a few people who are going to try to rub those 21-to-3 games in.)

In fact, hanging onto your childhood coping skills is a good idea all around. If you think of any online gaming area as a large hall, filled with gamers of various stripes and temperaments, you should do okay. Accept the fact that it's going to take a while to get the hang of any community. Keep a notepad at your side and write down the nicknames of the cool people you run across, the obvious cheaters, and the purely psychotic. After a couple of weeks you should be able to go to your favorite gaming site and quickly figure out whether it's going to be a good night or not. Also, many games with Internet capability are now using a password system for game entry—so you can give your game password to a select group of people and just wait for your gang to show up.

Unfortunately, for those of you who are interested in what is possibly the most innovative of online gaming, the graphic roleplaying games, social dysfunction has become endemic and difficult to avoid, no matter what you do or whom you make friends with. For those of you out there who grew up on the DUNGEONS & DRAGONS® game, online RPGs such as *Meridian* or *Ultima On-Line* seem comfortably familiar, to begin with. You start off with some archetypal high-fantasy style character and then wander the countryside looking for monsters to slay in return for treasure and experience. Survive long enough and even dragons will fear you . . . or at least, that's the theory. The reality is that many damaged individuals are roaming the virtual landscape using their extremely high-level characters to exterminate newcomers with all the grace and elan of Hitler checking out Polish real estate. These folks, who proudly call themselves PK'ers, standing for Player Killers, are torn fresh from the pages of *Lord of the Flies* (or perhaps *Nietzsche for Dummies*), and they consider random pointless murder to be the ultimate expression of free will.

The companies who have created these on-line RPGs, such as 3DO and Origin, have long embraced PK'ers as a cheap way of creating strife and conflict in their worlds—the logic being “Why spend good money on making up stuff for these people to do, when you can just encourage them to kill each other for hours at a time?” Since some of these online realities are pay-as-you-play ventures, people spending hours trying to get even with each other translates to big bucks. What this means to gamers at the moment is this: Don't rush out and spend good money on joining an Internet RPG if you are

thinking that it will be all joining up with a brave band to go on epic quests, because that just isn't happening yet for the most part. You are just as likely to be killed by another player as you are by the monsters. Oh, sure, you can still carve out a chunk of fun, there are heroic acts to be performed and good friends to be made, but be forewarned—it can be a tough, dysfunctional road starting out. Fortunately, gaming companies are starting to realize that this state of affairs is keeping their player base down to a small hard-core audience, with new people quitting almost as fast as others join. Newer online RPGs such as *Everquest* are giving players the ability to opt out of this murderfest and get on with more classical role-playing fare.

### Where to from here?

If all of this hasn't been enough to scare you off, then you just might have what it takes to go out on the net and play, play, play. The straight dope is that Internet gaming still isn't the simple point-'n'-click road to seamless fun that the hype may have led you to believe it is. Net gaming, like the Internet itself, is still under development, and it takes a bit of the old pioneer spirit in you to cope—but if you've got that, this is literally the most exciting and important evolution in gaming since the first bone was rolled. As great as modern computer games are in single-player mode, nothing compares to the human dynamic, and even a game you were preared to yank off your hard drive and give to your cousin can take on a whole new life on the net.

Of course, you need somewhere to start. I suggest the various on-line gaming sites, like Microsoft's Internet Gaming Zone, the Total Entertainment Network, or Mplayer, since they offer free play of many retail games (such as *Quake* and *Total Annihilation*) that you may already have. Most of these services offer premium pay-for-play mega-games like RPGs, flight sims, and spaceploitation. These sites each have a character all their own, and you should spend an evening or two just hanging around in chat rooms getting the feel of a place before you decide to jump in. Also, many of these areas have latency reporting systems that will tell you how fast your net connection is and what kind of games you can expect to play successfully with it. And, most important, sites like the Internet Gaming Zone and MPlayer offer player matching services where you can find a suitable opponent for your favorite game quickly and easily.

Another good place to start is the website of your current favorite game. Many companies, such as Blizzard and I-Magic, have created their own gaming areas, where you can indulge in the ultimate social gaming quickly and fairly easily.

To paraphrase *The X-Files*, the fun is out there. You just have to be prepared to work a little to find it. ☹

—additional reporting by cory herndon



▲ HELLO?  
HELLOOO...?

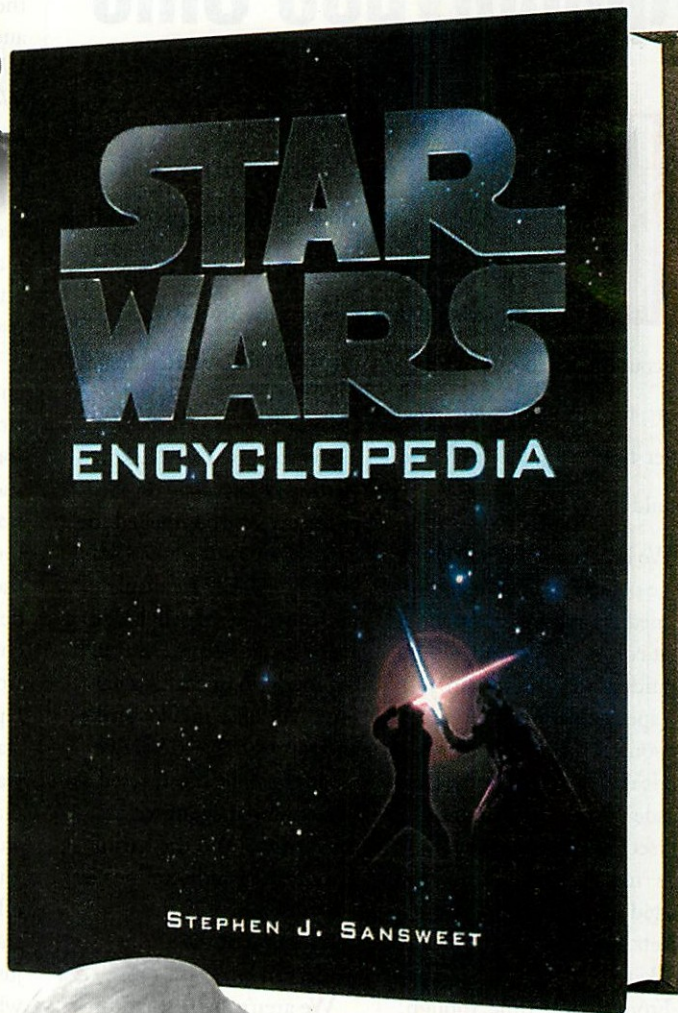
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lead to latent  
slow-downs, as  
Ultima On-line  
players will attest.





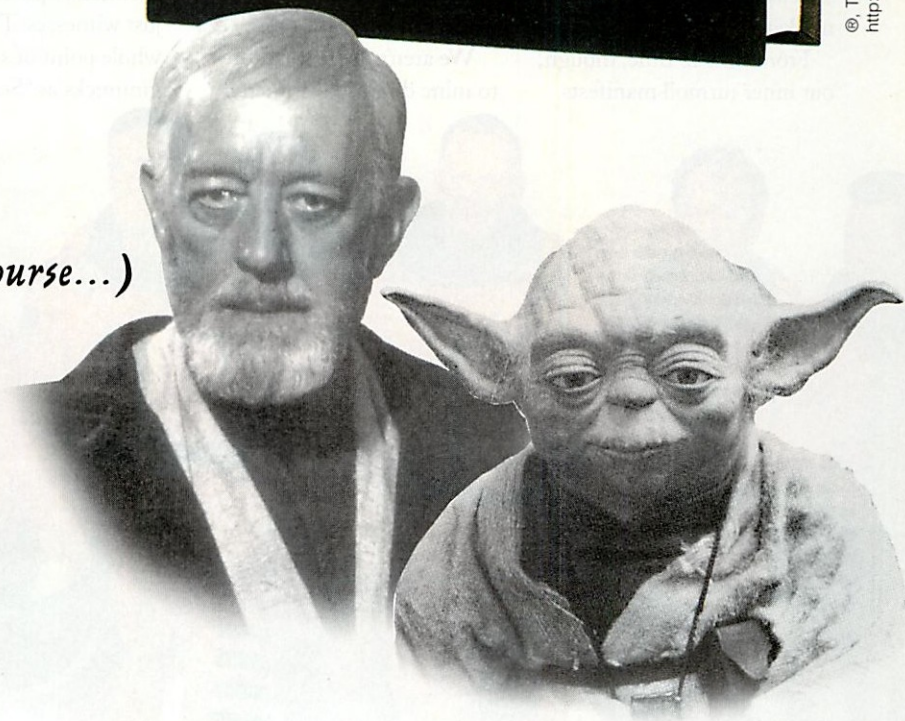
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# Apocalypse Chic

**D**EEP DOWN, WE KNOW WE DESERVE IT. For bulldozing old-growth forests and hawking cigarettes to kids in developing countries, for blighting the world's nutrition with Happy Meals and repeatedly populating our government with the worst sorts of scoundrels and ninnyes because they run such convincing TV spots, for Hiroshima and *The Jerry Springer Show* and countless other trespasses, we know we should be punished.

We lack the will to discipline ourselves, of course. The immediate rewards for rampant consumerism and the politics of self-interest are just too spectacular to abandon for something as ephemeral as ideals. So we maintain our facade of confident success, but secretly cringe at every sin—mortal or venial—committed in the name of safe streets and a booming stock market.

From time to time, though, our inner turmoil manifests

in a very public way. Like Arthur Dimmsdale on the pillory, we are compelled to expose our guilt-etched scarlet letters. Only we display these symbols of self-loathing at the local cineplex, through the medium of the disaster film. All those meteor strikes and rampaging radioactive iguanas can be interpreted as self-conjured agents of cosmic justice. And the karmic price for our indiscretions is now so high, only the destruction of the entire world can cover the tab.

We aren't the first culture to mine doomsday for enter-

tainment. The Babylonian epic of Gilgamesh, some four thousand years old, includes a flood that Irwin Allen could only dream of capturing on celluloid. But today's audience doesn't consider *Armageddon* an overt morality tale, the way, say, a 15th-century audience would view the Wakefield pageant "Noah." We're a more secular society, so our disaster tales focus on different elements than their more respected ancestors. If the marketing of these films is aimed correctly, their main attraction is the catastrophe itself.

Spectacle has always been an aspect of the cataclysm story, but filmmakers usually foreground it, especially in such effects-heavy productions as Tri-Star's *Godzilla*. A movie like this presents only the sketchiest, most thinly developed characters, but compensates by offering front-row seats to the Apocalypse, with cameras planted stalwartly at ground zero. In a way, these films attempt to place the audience inside the story, to bamboozle them with such amazing special effects that they can consider themselves participants, not just witnesses. That was the whole point of such lame gimmicks as "Sensurround,"

used to draw the groundlings to the awful 1974 film *Earthquake*. If the ticket holders don't care about the has-been stars chewing the scenery on the screen, make them think they're part of the action with a few well-placed air hammers.

While spectacle is clearly the selling point of disaster movies, they still possess a strong moral component. Though you won't find it trumpeted in the trailers or press kits, these movies can be viewed as pop morality primers. Through the characters killed off, we're warned about the possible price for our shortcomings. Conversely, the heroic survivors reassure us that mankind really does deserve its spot atop the food chain. It's usually no more complicated than that, with good guys and bad guys defined as bluntly as in the most simplistic Western.

Take *La Fin du Monde*, the 1931 film by the French director best known for the silent classic *Napoléon*. Even in its American release version, hacked by nearly half its original 105-minute running time and titled *End of the World*, Abel Gance's film is a powerful vision of civilization on the eve of destruction. When scientists spot a comet heading straight toward Earth, the population deals with the impending disaster in one of two ways: prayer or riot. The latter, particularly as depicted in the film's orgy sequence, made *La Fin du Monde* notorious in its day. (For the orgy, Gance reportedly locked a mob of smartly dressed extras in a soundstage stocked to the rafters

▶ **THE BOYS OF SUMMER.** Bruce Willis beads up an all-star cast to save the world from total annihilation.





with liquor, then filmed the disturbingly enthusiastic results.) Fortunately for the planet, the supplications of the devout seem to influence a higher power, which deflects the comet at the last minute—but not before floods and fires and general chaos are unleashed as warnings to the unrepentant.

The basic structure of *La Fin du Monde* has been repeated time and again in Hollywood, with one major casting change. God no longer plays the role of ultimate savior. That part now belongs to Science.

The scientists in Gance's story proclaim themselves the hope of mankind. Yet they can do nothing to redirect the comet. That sort of trick simply isn't in their pre-nuclear repertoire. By 1951, when George Pal produced *When Worlds Collide* from the SF novel by Philip Wylie and Edwin Balmer, the eggheads had the tools to take control of the situation. These learned men mention God now and then as they scramble to complete their space ark, but that's really just shorthand to let the audience know they're on the side of the angels. It's clear that Science, embodied in a sleek silver rocket, preserves humankind when the rogue star Bellus obliterates the planet. God is relegated to the role of approving observer.

Science continues its role as savior in such recent films as Touchstone's summer blockbuster *Armageddon*. In fact, large chunks of this overlong and incredibly noisy

epic could be adopted intact as advertising for NASA. If the world is supposed to learn a lesson from its close encounter with oblivion, that lesson is presented in *Armageddon* through lingering shots of children playing happily with toy shuttles: Science saved you, so worship it.

Not all science is benign in disaster films, not all scientists noble. In *When Worlds Collide*, a faction of scholars derides

fail to see the obvious conclusions reached by the NASA staffers. These corrupted scientists are the most dangerous, for they have the appearance of wisdom. Their apostate theories can lead the world to ruin or, worse still, cause confusion and undermine faith in Science.

In the subgenre of nuclear-related catastrophe films, scientists are more frequently black-shirted. In the original,

certain to perish, too. The military provides a large percentage of these heretics. The shrieking, borderline psychotic played by Martin Landau in *Meteor* is a typical specimen. (He, like most other four-star loonies in SF films, must have trained under George C. Scott's General "Buck" Turgidson from *Dr. Strangelove*.) As General Adlon, Landau dares to make weapons out of the

orbiting nuclear missiles designed to protect the Earth from space debris. In SF doomsday flicks, that sort of transgression will bring the roof down on you every time.

Most disaster films trot out similar scapegoats, those who embody the vices we would like to banish from decent society. In stories with mundane crises, these villains are easy to identify: greedy, dissolute subcontractor Richard Chamberlain cuts corners on the electrical systems

in *The Towering Inferno*, so he's singed and battered by an explosion, then dropped from the burning building's highest floors. That's a fitting end for the guy who did everything to start the fire but toss a match onto some oily rags.

With SF disaster films, where the threat is always on a much larger scale, the scapegoats are just a bit harder to identify because they are more symbolic. The most notable casualties in Tri-Star's surprisingly corpse-less *Godzilla* are the French commandos, who are stuck paying the bill for their country's irresponsible



## Science continues its role as savior in such films as *Armageddon*. In fact, large chunks of this incredibly noisy epic could be adopted intact as advertising for NASA.

the heroic scientists for their faith in untested theories. These skeptics lack the vision required of true acolytes of Science. The deficiency is grave enough to damn them to the fiery fate reserved for the masses; they can only curse their shortsightedness as the spaceship they said would never fly takes off toward the new world on spiffy 1950s-style fins.

The scientists on the president's advisory council in *Armageddon* are dismissed as underachievers. Co-opted by politicians and lost to the pursuit of pure research, they

Japanese cut of 1954's *Godzilla, King of the Monsters*, Dr. Serizawa ultimately sacrifices his life and destroys the radioactive menace. Yet it's clear that he is also a stand-in for all scientists who create weapons of mass destruction, the irresponsible researchers whose actions awakened Godzilla in the first place. Their crime is not acting against the best interests of Science so much as an inability to maintain a balance between research and morality.

Those outside the ranks of the anointed who attempt to pervert Science are all but



nuclear testing. The film, which is a tedious failure in just about every way imaginable, couldn't even get its moral subcontext straight; the commando's leader, played by Jean Reno, is allowed to live.

The entire city of New York is kicked around in scores of SF doomsday films, from *When Worlds Collide* to *Deep Impact*. Sure, it has a number of recognizable landmarks that make it a great visual choice. The Big Apple also represents urban inhumanity, rampant crime, and moral decay in the minds of the general public worldwide, despite Disney's attempt to push the porn shops out of Times Square. If you're looking for a concentration of villainy to wipe off the map with a single angry swipe, New York could fill the bill just about anytime.

Individual characters who embody mankind's failures—and thus make up the bulk of the body count when the catastrophe hits—are usually depicted as thoroughly nasty or obviously foolish. The small groups of representative humanity thrown together in such nuclear threat films as *Invasion U.S.A.* and the underrated *This Is Not a Test* tend to personify the Seven Deadly Sins. The audience knows that the wrathful cop, the loafer who refuses to help build the bomb shelter, and the greedy businessman who wouldn't let the government use his factories for arms production are all doomed. And because these characters are unlikable, the audience can remain distant and cheer their demise.

That's the best thing about these epic disasters—they tend to be quite selective in

who they wipe out. Sure, a toppled building may occasionally crush a faceless mob, and the particularly noble among the good guys can sacrifice themselves to save others. It's more often the case that the named characters denied access to the space ark or fried by the lava flow deserve their fate.

That isn't to say the underlying moral or thematic reason for a character's demise is

## We buy into these superficial fantasies because we know that the Apocalypse won't play out in a sanitized, Hollywood-approved way.

always clear. Read one way, the death of MSNBC reporter Jenny Lerner (Téa Leoni) in *Deep Impact* is a heroic sacrifice. She gives up her spot on the rescue helicopter so that a mother with a small child may escape the oncoming tidal wave. Faced with certain doom, she subsequently resolves all her personal problems with a single stop at the beach.

Read another way, Jenny Lerner can't be allowed to survive to the closing credits because she is an independent woman, without kids, who put her career ahead of helping her profoundly unhappy parents. Giving up her seat on the chopper is atonement, too, for stepping over her boss (who happens to be the woman with the kid) in pursuit of a story. Such ambition is clearly not welcome in the new world that will be forged in the fires of the disaster.

And there usually is a new world—"a morning after," to borrow the phrase from the saccharine theme song to another Irwin Allen chaos-

fest, *The Poseidon Adventure*. When the all-clear is sounded, scandal-free presidents such as Morgan Freeman in *Deep Impact* and Bill Pullman in *Independence Day* stand tall in the wreckage and announce that the country is grateful for its second chance, that we've all learned important lessons. The future is safe for Science and safe for the young, attractive, unquestionably heterosexual couples

who were spared a painful death. In fact, these couples make up a startling majority of our new world's population. In the case of the space ark in *When Worlds Collide*, the survivors are drawn from an even narrower demographic. Somehow, neither a single person of color nor anyone possessing the slightest ethnic appearance manages to make the final cut for salvation aboard the ark. It's like someone filmed Pat Buchanan's dreams.

Earlier I used the image of Arthur Dimmsdale revealing his symbol of guilt at the close of Hawthorne's *The Scarlet Letter* to describe the moviegoer's relationship to the disaster film. When you look at the content of these movies—their weak characters, their reliance on spectacle, and their vapid and reactionary moral codes—it seems more appropriate to draw an analogy to the Monty Python character Dinsdale Piranha, an ultraviolent thug who imagined himself pursued by a giant hedgehog named Spiny Nor-

man. Only a twisted mind would dream up such goofy weirdness as a way to make itself feel better.

Of course the ritualized, reassuring mayhem of the typical doomsday flick has more entertainment value than the reality of a nuclear accident or natural disaster. We buy into these superficial fantasies because we know that the Apocalypse won't play out in a sanitized, Hollywood-approved way. The deep tunnels meant to serve as refuge for the best and brightest will be supervised by Dr. Strangelove, with high government officials hiring lots of new and suddenly invaluable assistants from the pages of

lingerie catalogues. The unlucky masses will suffer horribly. Their torments will be assigned at random, with no distinctions drawn between the corrupt and the innocent. For even the slightest glimpse of what that might really be like, watch the British pseudodocumentary *The War Game*. Double-billed with the brilliant French Holocaust documentary *Night and Fog*, this relentlessly grim examination of a hypothetical nuclear attack on England would have Dr. Jack Kevorkian's phone ringing off the hook.

Fortunately, if a comet does hit the Earth or some head-case terrorist kicks off a full-blown nuclear skirmish, most of us won't be around to witness the aftermath. The light show might be impressive, if brief. And thanks to the efficiency of microwave ovens, we should even have time to pop a bag of corn between the first warning sirens and the moment the world fades to black.

Yet again, Science saves the day. ☛



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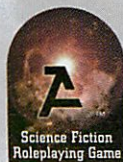
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*The table of life serves us all differently.*

*How well we are fed depends*

*on where we sit.*

BY UNCLE RIVER

**M**OST STRIKING. BUT, DEAR, WHAT DO YOU CALL IT?"

"The War Between the Haves and the Have-Nots."

"I see," I said. "The Haves want to keep their special privileges, while the Have-Nots want a fair share."

"Don't be foolish." That tone of derision would have terrified me once. She is a . . . well, Goddess is the term I use to myself. I don't have a better one. "Look."

I looked. I suppose Her art will never find favor with the popular taste of these times. It's not much like television. It does not lull as it stimulates. Rather, it bites realer than real, like some dreams, at the same time I feel detached, like a newspaper, or perhaps an old-time newsreel.

Ah, the sensory involvement! That's the paradox . . . and the risk. You always might fall in. I could smell garbage, rancid in damp sunshine, behind which six spring-wound, skinny young people giggled over arbitrary booty: the precision of a thousand-dollar wristwatch a boy with a fake-diamond nose plug picked at with a broken needle—sewing needle, not the other sort—till he popped the case and spilled the tiny machine's clean innards all over the grimy pavement.

I could taste fear, three blocks away, as police closed in on an only slightly older parolee, selected as scapegoat for the robbery not altogether arbitrarily. The cops could taste his fear too. It fed their nerves, allowed them to put up with their dangerous, thankless jobs.

And the robbers, a state-of-the-medical-art fifty-year-old couple one could hardly call victims in this instance. The watch, a mere trinket to them, carried insurance for far more than its replacement value. The law enforcement drama their wealth and prestige enabled them to command more than made up in martial excitement what the robbery itself cost them in momentary terror and lost dignity of wet underwear.

"What are they fighting for?"

WHAT  
DOES  
THE  
ALGAE  
EAT?

ILLUSTRATION BY TERESE NIELSEN



# WHAT DOES THE ALGAE EAT?

She kissed me, on the forehead, Her gift in pleasure at my gift of asking, of genuinely wanting to know. The kiss exploded in blissful white light, a rapture comparable to orgasm though it had no sex to it.

"The Haves want More, always More. The Have-Nots just want to destroy. Too bad the Gods have lost their names to power schemes and toys. Empty former clothing draped on such silly lies! People find it too difficult to see who eats what. I find this human distraction frustrating."

A good thing She likes me, I thought. I would not care to be the object of a Goddess's frustration.

"And him?" I pointed to the parolee, cringing now in handcuffs on the dingy back seat of the police car, while the officers strutted off excess adrenaline, terrorized an elderly shopkeeper who didn't understand English very well, called in the triumph of their irrelevant arrest.

"He's just food," She replied with a shrug.

"He looks human to me." The odor of his misery repulsed me, but it was a human stench, or at least animal, not machine in any case.

"Hmmm," She mused. She touched a finger to Her own brow. Regal more than strictly beautiful, I never knew quite whether Her appearance belonged to Her as my own body was a simple fact of my own mortal life. "Oh, it's real," She said once, patting an apparently solid and corporeal hip. "Of course, if you were someone else I'd appear quite different."

Familiarity need not lead to contempt. Try living with rattlesnakes and grizzly bears; if you remain alive two or three years, you'll understand what I mean. But one can get used to companionship even as disconcerting as a Goddess. She liked my observant temper. That I sometimes noted points in Her creations of which She had been unaware took *considerable* getting used to, but it allowed me to share in the creative pleasure of the art. Sometimes it even allowed me moral gratification.

"Let's go for a walk." How vibrant the hand She extended: shaped by the vitality of Her art, graceful as peach blossoms, firm as pine trees on a stark mountainside.

Though tempted by my own human feeling to stay put and worry at suffering, I knew the sacrificial victim would not suffer less if I refused Her suggestion. She wanted to show me something.

At the same time, experience had taught me She needed to consider my question. She did not know the answer! Human

feeling: Mine. That of the arrested parolee about whom I asked. Human feeling was less central to Her view than to mine, but not less real. She was willing to contemplate the question I raised of that human being's suffering. What She asked was that I accompany Her contemplation.

That I, or any mere human being, could ask a question, fairly frequently even, to which a Goddess, with the power inherent in the title, did not know the answer took a great deal of getting used to. Creeds that denied such disconcerting vistas may speak to how humanity lost the Gods' names. I knew there was every-

thing to lose in refusing and everything to gain for us both in accepting Her suggestion.

I took the hand She offered. We walked.

How can I describe a reality that, for a million years, was obvious, second nature, to every human being who survived past the age of two, but is nearly invisible today?

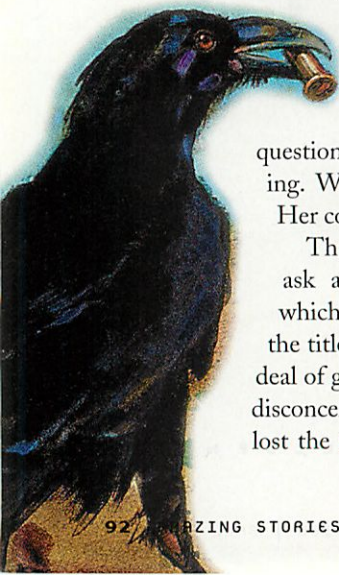
Nature, subject once of awe, of love, of fear, object now mostly of artificial projection. Greed and romance alike miss the point. Desire and need, simultaneous breathtaking beauty and inhuman cruelty, continuing nourishment and lingering death all are real, but Nature exists in continuity. The isolated snippet you notice out the car window, in a TV program, when the hurricane rips your roof off, distorts more than it informs.

I took a good drink of water before we left. Water abounded in turbulent spring release, but we might not find any I cared to ingest. She is a Goddess. She appreciates my company as I do Hers. She is not my magic servant. If anything, I am the servant, though if She had selected a companion for aptitude at plumbing and fence repair, I think She would have chosen someone else. Oh, I keep the goats out of the herb beds, and that takes some wily exertion, let me tell you! But a bucket just squats under the leak in the wellhouse roof as it has for a year...or a decade. Time loses shape.

Her studio stands in the juniper grove, a mile or a millennium beyond the shabby, picturesque village of Apex, preoccupied with small-town gossip and survival. The world's storms, social, political, all that, blow mostly someplace else, wafting through as a breeze just intense enough to amuse the local inhabitants except on rare occasions when the full force leaves everyone in brief shock as an elderly ranch couple is gruesomely murdered for their ten-year-old truck, or a shipment of illegal nuclear waste is inadvertently stopped in the sheriff's cockamamie seatbelt-check roadblock. Mostly the three hundred villagers of Apex attend to babies, hay, and whether the chiropractor a hundred miles south is enough better than the one eighty miles west to be worth the extra two gallons of gas.

Below the juniper grove and a little meadow, two lanes of pavement swirl between somber mountains. Unnumbered, the road leads nowhere in particular and knows nothing of drive-by shootings (though Saturday nights see their share of drunken wrecks). Three cars, or more likely pickup trucks, in sight at once is heavy traffic. People passing wave to each other. Till recently, logging trucks frequently roared past, but not today. The sawmill is closed. Locals blame the spotted owl, an explanation not untrue, though not complete either, as policies of the big distant corporation that bought out the mill twenty years ago have so long dictated no room between big profits and total loss that, even here in Coyote County, people have forgotten any other standard.

WE WALKED THROUGH A FIELD: grass, wildflowers, cows, ravens, under tall, budding cottonwood trees, where a step in soft, brown sand released pungent wild rosemary aroma, to the Adobe River. In dry weather two inches deep and ten feet wide, you wouldn't even call it a river someplace else, but this was the American Southwest. It was also





spring of a year of floods: Volcano half a planet away? El Niño (a nonexplanation that obfuscates unanswerable Why with ponderous How)? Ecology afloat? Even without the floods, spring snowmelt from the surrounding mountain temenos would have the river deep enough at the gravel road crossing to knock me down.

Here's where significance becomes difficult to convey. What didn't happen matters as much as what did. No, I didn't swim the icy torrent. No, we didn't drive a twenty-thousand-dollar four-wheeler in, capsize, ruin the truck, drown. No, She didn't transform me into a swan to soar across, though She did turn into a soft brown female mallard Herself, to quack, laughing as She dove for a minnow (soon to be recognized as an endangered species).

I strolled upstream, through a willow thicket where I had to brush the occasional branch out of my way to follow the path utterly invisible to anyone who didn't think to look, obvious to anyone who did. Three barbed wire fences might have shredded hands or pants, but didn't. A Black Angus bull might have charged me, but just blinked and trotted off instead. A third of a mile up the river, out of sight of road or tourist, a path formed equally by cows, cowboys, and wildlife, none presently about, led to a wide stretch of river. I took off my pants and boots. Sure enough, the river ran only a few inches above knee-deep here, fast and icy, but not dangerous as at the road crossing. On the other side, I carefully wiped any grit from my feet before putting my socks back on, thus averting blisters. She joined me, mallard feathers melting to soft, brown cotton jacket. We strode together up the path, invisible on the juniper-dense, steep bank unless you knew to look, obvious if you did.

What would the teenagers dismantling the fancy watch have done, the watch's owner, the city cops, their chosen scapegoat? An adventure? An ordeal? They weren't here, to cross the Adobe River, to know where and how it could be crossed, as most of humanity once had, as most today do not.

The trail climbed a ridge, steep enough to fill lungs, to stretch calf and thigh, but not difficult. Anywhere else cliffs, all but impassable, would have impeded our way. Coming down the other side, all human civilization hidden, a rattlesnake, ochre and umber sinuous diamonds, sunned itself on a yellow sandstone slab, first rattler I'd seen this spring. I noticed it ten feet away. It didn't bite me. It didn't even rattle. Why get so close as to upset it? Again, no lethal ordeal, no great adventure even, just a thrill and awesome bit of Nature. I took off my green corduroy shirt, tied the sleeves around my waist, stretched in the warm, invigorating mountain afternoon. In the valley beyond, a bald eagle hunkered in a ponderosa snag above a creek that tumbled lush snowmelt in brilliant Southwest sun. A dozen elk trotted out from a piñon-covered slope to circle a small meadow and disappear into oaks on the other side.

A killdeer called. A flicker flashed speckled orange and black. It dropped us an orange feather for good luck. We scaled a sweaty bluff, where prickly pear and pricklier cholla grew and scorpions hid under loose rocks, but I did not put a hand on either. Though tumble-slopes indicated past rockslides, and winter freeze-and-thaw had loosened more, none crashed down on our heads nor slid out from under our feet. Was this good fortune the gift of a Goddess companion? There was

some luck involved, but mostly it was the obvious attention of eye and hand and foot born of know-the-land as most people have always learned, as most people today know a world of expensive machines, social position, television images, a world sustaining and lethal as Nature, but artificial in how.

"Real world," you call the artifice, exquisite in glory as in grime, full of money, garbage, and police. No. It is the Goddess's odd art; and its nourishment, the seed from which its sustenance has always germinated, lies here, where a great blue heron snags another endangered minnow, where the bluffs stand silent, without opinion in the sunshine, while a rabbit darts furtive from a coyote that will catch the rabbit . . . or another . . . only when the coyote wakes up a few hours from now.

"I was born here," She said, stating what we both knew as a familiar finger calls attention...to point toward an Unknown, as the temperature plummeted with the sun, turned dusk, magnificent final exhalation of afternoon wind purpling mountains and ringing pines against the fragrant sky. "Did I make this, or did it make me?" White bones, of a deer perhaps, with gnaw marks, lay amid crystal rock, beautiful in itself and indicative of possible gold. The moon, a little more than halfway to full, stood well above tree-clad peaks, giving us several hours of good light to follow ridges back to the trail and the river crossing, whereafter I leaned on a frosty log to rub sand from my feet before putting my boots back on to accompany Her back to Her studio while coyotes and the village dogs colloquized our passage.

No bear attacked us, though we had seen sign. We didn't get trapped on a ledge. I did not fall in the river in the freezing dark. Nor was it all that dark, as I knew the time of the moon to guide us and could have found the way, if need, by direction of a few bright stars. Many people can do this. It is not an arcane skill. It is a practice and attention, for which few now have time or need, by which most human beings lived for thousands of years and beings not yet human lived before they even knew what they were doing, like the heron or the rabbit.

Hungry and invigorated, we ate a late dinner, of beans and salad, sausage and chewy homemade bread, with chocolate chip cookies for dessert. (Even a Goddess can like chocolate chip cookies. She claims to have invented them, but I don't believe Her.) She likes my cooking, but She insists no mortal, woman or man, knows how to prepare a salad properly. Who am I to argue? She made the cookies, too. I washed the dishes. Then we went to bed, and what we did there is none of your business. Suffice to say I eventually slept satisfied, and whether She slept or not, which I do not know, She gave me the impression She too felt satisfaction.

In the morning, we rose to puffs of wind and a few clouds. "I believe some weather may be coming in," I said. Fair weather wind would not likely have risen till noon.

"Oh, yes," She replied, a bit abstracted. "Shall we see how your prisoner is doing?"

I flushed, ashamed. I had forgotten.

The young robbers prowled again, predators in perpetual concrete twilight whose food was excitement. The watch owner fussed over fluorescent insurance forms, documenting invented losses along with the real ones, devouring power as money. The city cops drank coffee and gnawed, as a cow its cud, on the suffering



# WHAT DOES THE ALGAE EAT?

that nourished them. And the prisoner, charged not with the robbery he never committed, but with the parole violation of being arrested, even though innocent, sat in his cell, with smelly drunks and pacing shoplifters, nearly numb, but still alive, still human. What did he want, this bottom-of-the-food-chain human being, the psychic analog of algae? What did the algae eat?

What did the minnow want that the heron ate, or the rabbit dodging sleeping coyotes hours before there would be any hunting that needed to be dodged?

Limp, brown hair and dull, slack face, not fat, not skinny, not ugly, not attractive, still the young man on the gray, chipped concrete bench in the jail was a human being. He knew that he suffered for reasons that made no sense to him. Fear, guilt, injustice, fate: He knew all of those, but none explained him to himself, no less to me.

As food, he sustained all the others. "But what is he to himself?" I asked.

"Shall we enter the movie?" I knew that ambiguous, seductive smile.

The . . . Gods—I know the term is inadequate, but what else shall I call Them?—are conservative in a funny way. Infinitely creative, the very means by which the energy of creation takes form, They live in a realm where Time remains fluid. A term such as "movie," already becoming archaic, has barely absorbed itself into the Gods' vocabulary. Intensity helps catch Their attention, but so does repetition, and that takes time, however fluid.

"Could we keep it brief? It doesn't look like a very pleasant movie."

"But so enticing! Look how many more people choose there than here."

A great mystery, that, but one I knew well. It was not really the rattlesnakes, floods, or rockslides that deterred most people from living where or as we did, my Goddess and I. Most people do not know how to live here and would subject themselves to disasters, uncomfortable, wallet-hemorrhaging, and probably body-maiming, at every step; but knowing how is just a matter of familiarity and common sense. Most people don't stay that long because a snowmelt stream on the knees seems to them too high a price to pay for the sight of eagles and elk, because they find Nature's rhythms and requirements more annoying to learn than the world's, most of all because they would find it a bore to live here where there's just one local band and ice cream only comes in three flavors. I am grateful. There are few enough such places left for the few of us whose souls require them.

**N**EXT THING I KNEW, the air of eternal days that ended in uniform failure hung dank and heavy about a wan maple branch. I realized the chirping came from my own beak. Two sparrows, we perched on a sickly tree outside the jail. Thank the Goddess sparrows have a short lifespan, I thought. I'd been in Her artworks before. Much as I appreciate them, the drama, when in its midst, can weigh exceedingly grave. You may forget everything else.

"Hush," She chirped. "Let's listen."

Of course, close up, impressions increased not only in intensity, but in complexity. Whether entering the art added clarity or confusion I could never quite decide.

Take the cops, for example. I had observed that they ate suffering, received nourishment from fear. Whatever their personal taste, that's what their job required. Close up, this remained true, but greatly diluted by each one's individual life. One thought fondly of his daughter, a fine gymnast who would never go to the Olympics but might make a state junior high championship meet. Another worried about his health insurance. A third found prisoners of his own gender sexually exciting and performed the most amazing psychic contortions to hide this fact from himself, not to mention from everyone else.

And the minutiae of daily activity obscured even overriding personal concerns: paperwork to fill out, a case to follow up on a particular schedule, lunch.

The prisoner exuded qualities equally individual and complex. Predominant, a dull dread of prison, where he assumed he soon would be, undulated heavy as a damp, translucent blotter. "At least I'm not too pretty," he repeated in his mind like a mantra. Not especially strong, not especially mean, he knew he would be food to those who were, in a prison even more than in the city where he could at least hope usually to be ignored.

Why had he, this time, not been ignored? Why did this jail cage him? The fact that he had done nothing to merit arrest meant less to him than the fact that some quality of his being had attracted arrest. In the past he had stolen, not a robber, no violence, no confrontation, just a thief. But he had stolen, from need, more from resentment of an arbitrary world. He had been caught, several times. Eventually he had been sent to prison. Eventually he had been paroled, mostly just to make room for somebody else in the prison who might or might not have done any more harm than he had. Now, while he struggled to maintain a minimal lawful existence, the world in which he never really had a place had chomped down on him yet again.

But what did he want?

With a shock, I realized: He was the other side of me. He did not focus on some obsession—power, excitement, sex, wealth, fear. All he really wanted was the peace of his own soul. But, unlike me, he did not know this, still less what would bring him such peace.

I knew, now, what the algae eats. Algae eats anything. Those at the bottom of the food chain are the least specialized. They take whatever they get. It sustains as long as it does. Eventually they wear out, run into something poisonous, or just get eaten themselves.

I felt nauseated, repulsed. Poor slob.

Even as a sparrow, to me the environment lacked vitality: Drab, unhealthy tree. Dirty concrete. Brown sky. Rank smells. Clashing noises. Choking people. Choking me.

She knew how I felt. "Shall we get out of here?" She asked. A relief. We had not yet strayed so deep into her artifice as to forget any other reality could exist . . . this time.

"Yes. Please . . . but could we leave him a gift, something to . . . to give him hope?"

"I'm not sure there's enough to him for there to be anyone to hope."



She was right, of course. But then, it was Her art. I might once have blamed Her, have held Her morally accountable. But this would be a mistake, a projection of human concerns onto one who is not just inhuman, but is more than human. As soon blame the rain, bringing both life rejuvenated and tearing flood. It was not in Her nature to eliminate the cruel aspects of human soulweaving. I'm not sure She could if She wanted. Even a Goddess has . . . well, limits is not quite the right word. Pathways, perhaps. There might not be anyplace She couldn't get to, but certain routes took a concentration of disparate energy She found unacceptable, while others . . . To me it appeared a question of difficulty, of quantity of effort. She gave me the impression that to Her the issue was more aesthetic, or sometimes a matter of continuity of consciousness.

**A** WOODPECKER RATTLED THE WALL.

I shook my head. The familiar blue quilt on the comfortable, worn sofa informed me we were back in Her studio—a relief, let me tell you! Stately pines punctuated a clean, fragrant sky. Increasing clouds only flavored the vitality a different tone.

"There is one gift I could give him." She touched a graceful finger to Her chin, then to Her current opus.

A cop entered the drab holding cell, sandy hair thinning, distracted by his own marital discord. "Here," he said. "You can make a statement. Parole officer'll see you at eleven." He handed the prisoner a pad of yellow, lined, legal-size paper and a cheap, black ball-point pen.

The prisoner took the paper and pen, sat listlessly as the cop clanked back out of the cell. Several other prisoners stared at the door, a bright event whose opening meant not so much hope of freedom as just a break, however meager, in dull futility.

We watched.

The prisoner did not write. What did he have to say? "I was walking down the street, minding my own business, when the cops jumped me. I didn't do nothing." Uh-huh. True, but ineffectual, embarrassing even.

He didn't write a thing.

After a while, bored, not even noticing that the very fact of being alive generated a certain vitality, a tension that demanded some outlet, any outlet handy, the muscles of the man's right hand firmed around the plastic pen. He began to doodle.

"There," She said. "Now he can create . . . himself."

"Will he?"

"More likely than before."

That wasn't really an answer, but it was all the answer She would give.

"You know what?" She said. "I'm going to sign the next one."

Astounded, I replied, "You'd enter Time that far?" Of course, She had already entered Time. How many centuries have known wristwatches, health insurance, ball point pens . . . or chocolate chip cookies?

"It needs something. Didn't you notice the smell?"

"It stank, but it was a big city. Pollution. Garbage. Jail . . ."

"Yes, yes of course, but that puddle under the tree . . ."

I looked somewhat blank, I must admit.

"Really! What's the point of making you a sparrow if you

don't notice things important to sparrows?"

I blushed. I hadn't even noticed there *was* a puddle under the tree.

"The algae in the puddle was dying. Horrid! What a stink! And you didn't notice?"

"I was preoccupied with the man, human algae . . ."

"Yes, yes, but if the real algae dies, what will anyone have to eat?"

"It was just a puddle in a big city. The algae's healthy enough here."

"Like your prisoner's soul?"

I looked. He'd stopped drawing, out of energy, defeated.

"I am going to come up with something new," She said, "and I'm going to sign it. But there is something I want from you."

"What's that?"

"I need a name."

"You want *me* to name *You*?! I am a man, just a human being with the brevity of view even a full lifespan can contain. "You are a Goddess!"

"I'll find the name I'm to use," She said. "What I need you to do is help me reflect."

She kissed me then, first on the lips, because a Goddess can love, then on the brow. Golden light suffused my head, flowed down to embrace my shoulders, chest, loins. Even my feet felt warm in the glow by which my Goddess chose, in the question of a mere mortal, to reflect on the health and sustenance . . . of algae in a puddle, on a name to sign Her next creation.

Outside, past the lilac bush just starting to bud, a raven called. 🐦

## about the author



*Uncle River holds what he believes to be the world's only earned Ph.D. in Psychology of the Unconscious—implications of which have impelled him to live the last 20 years as a hermit, in sufficiently remote parts of the Mountain Southwest that his most recent new neighbors are the reintroduced lobo wolves. Fellow writer Mark Rich told River that every sentence of "What Does the Algae Eat?" could make a novel. Accordingly, River is currently revising Ever Broten, his epic-length expansion on this story's themes. Other of his work has appeared in Asimov's, Analog, Interzone, and BBR.*

## about the illustrator



*Terese Nielsen was born and raised in Aurora, Nebraska. She studied illustration and design at Ricks College in Idaho, then honed her skills further at Art Center College of Design in Pasadena, California. Terese began freelancing after graduating in 1991, and turned to the comic book and gaming field in 1994, painting super-hero cards, graphic novels, and trading card art for various games.*

*Terese's academic training merges with fantasy and a respect for the beauty of the human form. Along with raising a family, she continues to illustrate in her studio in Temple City, California. She is currently working on a sketchbook to be published later this year.*

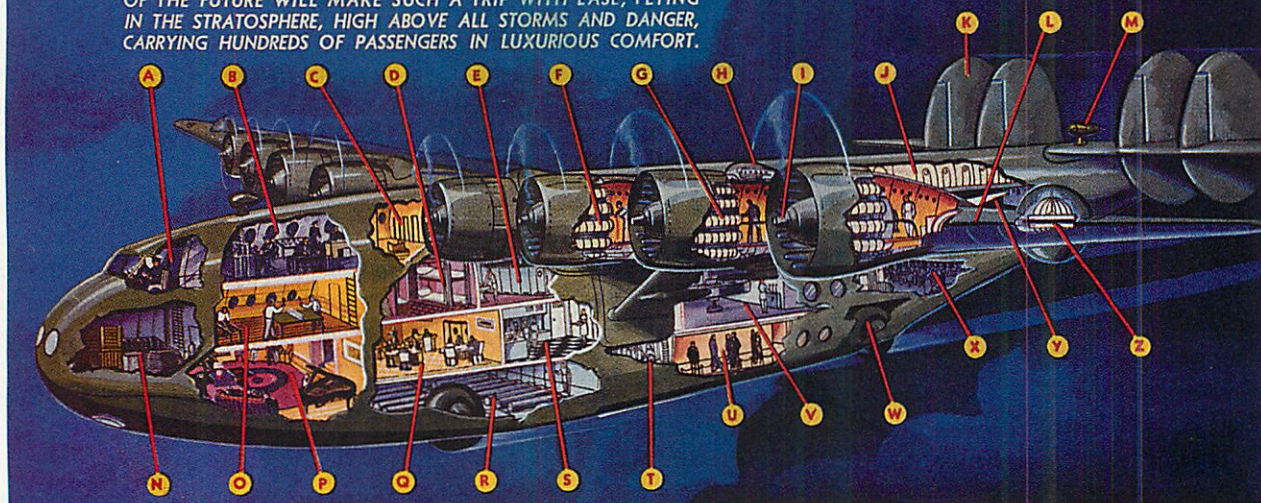




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When we stop to consider the progress of aerial science during the years since the Wrights lifted their unwieldy craft aloft, we can't help but make an attempt to picture the plane of the future. Already the day of the giant airliner has come, and the trend is definitely toward large size and toward higher flight levels. We will build larger ships as time goes by, and we will send them ever higher, until finally we utilize the stratosphere lanes where exist the ideal conditions to insure swift transportation to any part of the globe with the greatest possible safety factor. No storms, no uncertain conditions, no varying ceiling, but uniform and prevailing weather factors which can be permanently charted. That these giants of the heights will hurtle through the rarefied air at cruising speeds of 450 miles per hour, at the 50,000 foot level is not a vague dream but a scientific feasibility. In this graphic diagram we have attempted to depict the stratosphere airliner of 50 years from now, with a few of the scientific marvels of construction and engineering that will make it an actuality.

- |                             |                               |
|-----------------------------|-------------------------------|
| A Pilot Control Room        | N Cargo Storage Hold          |
| B Radio-Navigation Room     | O Hand-Ball Court & Gymnasium |
| C Officers & Crew Quarters  | P Passengers Lounge           |
| D Special Passenger Suites  | Q Dining & Cocktail Room      |
| E Lavatory & Wash Room      | R Compressed Oxygen Tanks     |
| F Alternate Gasoline Motors | S Kitchen & Food Storage      |
| G Alternate Hydrogen Motors | T Fuel Mixing Chamber         |
| H Hydrogen Compressor Unit  | U Promenade Deck              |
| I 4-Blade Adjustable Props  | V Gravity Nullifier Rotor     |
| J Passengers Staterooms     | W Landing Wheel               |
| K Super-Area Rudders        | X Television Theatre          |
| L Wing Fuel Tanks           | Y Television Projector        |
| M Television Receptor       | Z Gyro Wing Stabilizer        |

### ▼ AND WORTH EVERY PENNY

The front cover of this issue of *Amazing Stories*—priced at a paltry 20¢—featured an illustration for the lead story, Richard Tooker's "Ray of Eternity." Six other stories, including work by Stanley G. Weinbaum and Edmond Hamilton, ensured that readers got more than their money's worth.



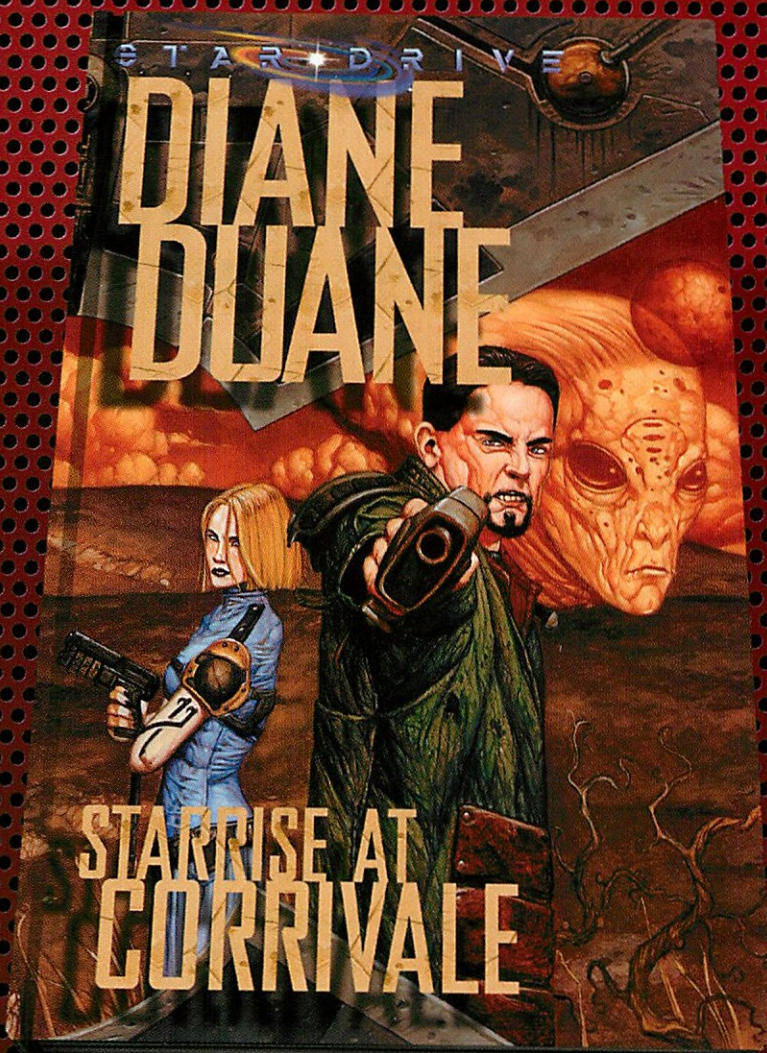
On the back cover of the November 1938 issue, *Amazing Stories* presented this conceptualization of a giant airliner that would ply the skies fifty years in the future. "In preparing this prophetic feature," writes the editor in an accompanying article, "we have been guided by aviation developments of the present day, and have carried them forward to what we consider to be the most logical mechanical evolution."

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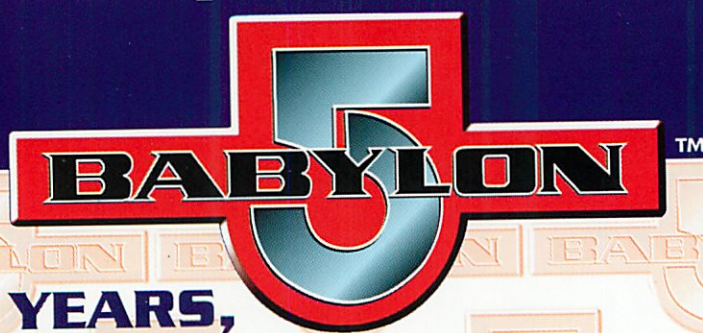
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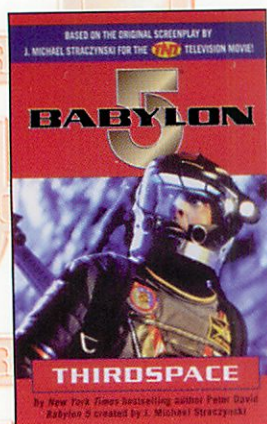
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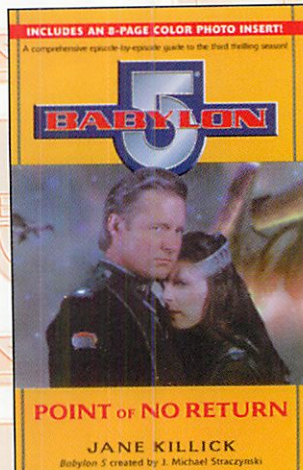
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