JEAN MARSH is the evil Queen Bavmorda who calls upon the powers of darkness in an attempt to defeat Willow Utgood (Warwick Davis) and Madmartigan (Val Kilmer) in MGM's presentation of Lucasfilm Ltd.'s "WILLOW".

Photo credit: Keith Hamshere
THE GATE
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SCIENCE FICTION & FANTASY

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EDITORIAL

Welcome to the first issue of The Gaia, a new magazine of science fiction writing. I hope very much that you will enjoy reading it.

When I came to make the choice of stories for this first issue, I had several criteria in mind, trying to set the tone for issues to come. Naturally, the editorial philosophy will change slightly and develop with time, and in response to comments from our readers, but there are several things I am already very clear about.

Firstly, I want to publish well-written, good quality stories. A simple enough aim, one might think, but as anyone who has edited a magazine of any description, the quality of submissions can vary wildly. One would hate to discourage anyone with genuine talent but perhaps a sketchy grasp of punctuation and grammar, but the first thing that any editor has to learn is that there can be no compromise. Set high standards and stick to them, which is what I have done and what I intend to continue doing.

I also want to publish a wide variety of stories. Most magazines, with time, develop a certain editorial style, inevitably reflecting, to some extent, the tastes of those who choose the material. My own tastes are fairly catholic, as are those of the various people assisting me, and I'd like to think that between us, we can offer you a very broad range of material. Not only recognisably traditional science fiction, but also stories which push back the boundaries of the genre, or the leap off at
unexpected nagging. I’ve always been rather keen on the idea of speculative fiction, and plan to take a keen interest in the more unconventional varieties of science fiction, though not to the exclusion of all else.

In this first issue we have stories from such established writers as James White, Brian Stableford and David Mazz, and also newer writers — Richard Paul Russo and Alex Stewart — and very importantly, a story from a previously unpublished writer, Stanlold A. Kerby, embracing a wide variety of subjects from high tech computers to the paranormal. I am particularly delighted to be able to include work from an unpublished writer, as I very much want The Gate to be a vehicle promoting the work of new writers, as well as publishing stories from established authors. Publishers and editors have a duty to nurture and encourage new writers. Without them, the genre would eventually atrophy and die.

Many people worry about the state of science fiction, whether the quality of the ideas and writing is deteriorating. One can’t deny that the genre is being vigorously hyped in some quarters, and that some of the work being published as science fiction is distinctly suspect, but so long as there are discerning readers who demand high standards, and editors and publishers who are prepared to work to high standards, I think we can safely say that the genre is reasonably healthy. I very much hope that The Gate will be making a contribution to maintaining high standards and encouraging new and original writing.

MAUREEN PORTER
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CINDERELLA’S SISTERS
BRIAN STABLEFORD

Once upon a time there were two ugly sisters. They were twins, but they were not identical twins; the older was brown-eyed and brown-haired, while the younger was blue-eyed and blonde-haired. For this reason their surname, which was Dark, fitted the elder, who was named Aurora, better than the younger, who was named Jeanie.

When they were born, they looked much like any other babies, and no one knew that they would grow up to be ugly sisters. Their parents were tolerably rich because their grandfather had made a fortune in the hosiery industry, and so they had the best of everything. Other children envied them for this, but the envy of others was nothing compared to the envy that existed between the sisters themselves.

How and why two people who always had the best of everything could come to be so bitterly jealous of one another is difficult to understand, but it was nevertheless the case that from the moment of their birth Aurora and Jeanie were rivals. The most probable explanation is that their competition began even before birth, when they struggled for the lion’s...
sheer of the limited resources available in their crowded womb. Their mother was fond of saying, with
sly irony, that Jeannec had never forgiven Aurora for being born ahead of her, and never would be satisfied
even if she beat her into the grave.
By the time they were five years old, it was obvious
that each of the girls was, in her own distinctive way,
very plain indeed. Despite their different colouring
they were of similar build. They were big for their age,
with wide shoulders and fat legs, with broad features
and hungry chins. Jeannec’s blue eyes were narrow,
though, and gave the impression of sly shiftiness, while
Aurora’s dark ones were round and slightly protruding,
giving the impression of a permanent hostile stare. If
you looked at the two standing side by side from a
distance, you could only tell which was which by the
colour of their hair, but when they looked you in the
face at close quarters there was all the difference in the
world.
It was, inevitably, the children at school who dubbed
them “the ugly sisters”, forcing them to wear the
collective nickname from infancy into adolescence. At
first, the label was whispered behind their backs —
they never could figure out exactly who had coined it —
but it was soon invoked to taunt them openly, though
usually from a distance (at five, each of them was bigger
and stronger than almost any boy, and together they
were a fearsome fighting force).
This taunting might have driven them together; it
certainly gave them a common cause which they often
had to pursue with concerted violent action. In fact,
though, it gave them another reason for mutual
jealousy, because each girl became secretly convinced
that she was the uglier of the two, and each was
determined to place this burden on the other.

Thus, while they combined forces to punish any other child who called them both ugly, they would lose no opportunity in private to express scorn and disgust for one another’s appearance — particularly in respect of the eyes which were their main distinguishing feature. This causticness did not really come naturally to them, and gave a false impression, because they were fairly placed and by no means lacking in charity or a sense of humour. Sometimes it was hard work to be nasty to one another, and it was certainly a duty rather than a pleasure. The rivalry was so deep-rooted, though, that it could not be set aside by any more urging of regret or sympathy.

Adolescence intensified their self-consciousness in respect of their attractiveness. Their mother had always told them that their bigness was “puppy fat” and that they would have elegant figures once they had “grown into themselves”; but this proved to be reckless optimism. They both grew to be very tall, with massive shoulders, hardly any breasts, and thighs like wrestlers. To add insult to injury, they attained their full height at an unusually early age, so that they towered above their peers — male and female alike — throughout the miserable puberal years.

They had no beautiful younger sister with whom to compare themselves. Indeed, had they had a real Cinderella to abuse they might have felt a lot better about things, and their rivalry might have ebbed away. Instead, they were forced constantly to compare themselves to a hypothetical Cinderella who was beyond the reach of their abuse: the image of perfect femininity that was emblazoned in the mythology of the
day: in the world of TV, advertising and romantic fiction. That plump Cinderella was an ideal of perfection, who could not, by her very nature, ever be proven deficient or out-competed in any way.

As teenagers, Aurora and Joanne desperately wanted boyfriends, to show the world that they were normal and desirable. They entered into one of the frequent phases of their rivalry in the attempt to achieve some measure of romantic success, but their desperation only led them to further humiliation.

In the mere matter of timing, Aurora won again, as she usually did, and though she made as much as she could out of her victory in the race, she felt privately that she had only succeeded in lowering herself more quickly to a deplorable level of shame. It was easy enough to find boys willing to accept sexual favours from any girl prepared to grant them, but they treated her with such appalling contempt before, during and after the event that she felt horribly humiliated by the whole business. Joanne reacted cleverly, to the fact of having lost the race to give away her virginity by trying to make a virtue of having retained it. Though she was privately ashamed by the thought of the joy which, she imagined, her sister derived from her frequent sexual activity, she put on a convincing show of contempt. Aurora never let her know it, but Joanne’s scornful attitude added greatly to her feelings of disgust and self-hatred.

By the time they were eighteen-year-old Aurora and Joanne were as miserable as two people could be. The one thing that had held them back from suicide attempts was the bitter suspicion that if they killed
themselves they would somehow be concealing defeat in their private war. On their eighteenth birthday, though, their whole situation was transformed. Ugly they might be, but in their infancy they had been the apples of their grandfather's eye, and he had established a trust fund for them, into which had been paid the royalties from some of his most successful ventures in genetic technology. This was a boom time, in the bioengineering business, when mankind stood on the threshold of a vast wonderland of new opportunities, and those trusts had benefited enormously from the boom. When Aurora and Jomme were old enough to become worth, on attaining their majority, they realised they were richer by a considerable margin than their parents, whom they had previously thought of as being very rich indeed. They could buy anything they wanted, and even what they wanted more than anything else in the world was beauty.

The bioengineering boom which had made their fortunes for them had also transformed the business of cosmetic surgery. Biotechnologists had learned how to take control of the processes by which the body's tissues were built and shaped. Work that was done with the scalpel could now be replaced with subtler biochemical tools. The operations were delicate and expensive, but for those who had the money fat could be stripped from the body, and the metabolisms expected to make the fat never reappear. Big bones could be whittled down, and what remained made perfect so that the tendons and ligaments and muscles knitted around them. Breasts could be made to grow, to create a bosom of any size, shape and firmness that
might be required. The texture, colour and sheen of skin could be selected from a chart. Every man who had the money could be remade in the image of Apollo, every woman who had the money could be an avatar of Aphrodite.

Aurora and Jeannne went to rival cosmetic engineers; they gave liberal grants to their clinics, financed the training of their staff, and backed their research. In return they demanded to be re-created as rival Helen of Troy. Their physicians did a marvellous job. Though Aurora and Jeannne kept their plans secret from one another, they found that when the job was finished the situation was much as it had been before. From a distance, you could only tell one from another by the colour of their hair. Close up, they were very different.

They had each elected to be five foot six in height, with slender waists, well-contoured hips, slim shoulders and modest, well-rounded breasts. From the neck down, there was simply nothing to choose between them. But their faces were not at all alike.

Aurora had gone into her operation thinking that Jeannne might have the advantage because of her blonde hair (which Aurora had always considered to be her sister’s best feature, though no tortures would have forced her to admit it). She had briefly considered making her own hair golden, but this would have tantamount to an admission of the inferiority of her own darkness, and so she had set any such notion aside. Instead, she had decided to make her own hair and eyes even darker, so that they would be almost but not quite jet black. To benefit from contrast, she had her skin tone lightened, so that it became almost but not quite pure white. Her lips, which had always been rather
thick, she had redesigned to be dimmer, but very red and with a delicate Cupid’s bow effect. She chose a relatively thin, straight nose. She acquired long, soft eyelashes, and allowed her eyes to be set a little too far back (in contrast to their previous protrusion) so that they could be artfully shadowed. She had her carriage altered slightly, so that she could look slightly upwards from beneath her nearly crinkled eyebrows.

Jennie was determined to make the most of her blue eyes, which she privately considered to have been badly let down by her awful lack hair (though wild horses could not have dragged such an admission out of her). She had the irises slightly enlarged, and the colour made perfectly even. She had her hair lightened and given a silvery metallic sheen. For her skin colour, by way of contrast, she chose a tanned look — a golden brown which was in its fashion equally metallic. She abolished the sunkenness of her eyes completely, allowing herself to open them wide in an expression of astonished wonder which, she thought, truly reflected the contented innocence of her cultivated image. She was content to let her lips be soft and relatively full, hardly reddened at all but very gentle. Her adopted nose was just a little bit upturned at the end.

Each sister, when she saw her twin remade, felt uneasy about the striking contrast. Each had confidence in her own decisions, but each was agitated by the worry that the other might prove herself more attractive to men. They were both well qualified to make conquests now, being very wealthy as well as very beautiful. Their remodelling, though fearfully expensive, had hardly denoted their fortunes, which
grew seemingly of their own accord thanks to the miracles wrought by their investment managers.

Aurora began instantly to shop around for lovers among the wealthy and the wise, the famous and the notorious (but choosing from these categories only the most handsome of candidates). She threw herself into a life of hectic seduction and multiple orgies, keeping score of the men who visited her bed with obsessive accuracy.

Jonise adopted a different strategy, feeling that it would be a kind of concession to begin now what she had disdained before, and that Aurora must never be given the satisfaction of thinking that she might be trying to catch up. Instead, she set out to collect admirers and break hearts. She flirted with everyone as slept with no one, casually accepting the adoration of all but reserving her favours for some indubitably-deferred perfect relationship which would be the ultimate in true love stories. By this means she cultivated a kind of moral superiority over her rival, who was made to seem vulgarly hedonistic by comparison.

Aurora secretly cursed the fact that her sister’s frustrated lovers seemed to adore her more extravagantly than her own sired ones, but in public she simply made the most of her aptness for extroversion, and accused Jonise of hypocritical frigidity. Jonise, though Essentially conventional as far as appearances were concerned, was secretly terrified that this was the truth of the matter.

The sisters’ investment managers were drawn into the conflict just as their cosmetic engineers had been. They began to compete in business, trying to pull off market stunts and commodity campaigns, taking over
companies and putting venture capital on the line. They both found this a thoroughly boring and rather too impersonal mode of competition, though, and began to invest more effort in their activities in the world of the arts. They began their own collections, and frequently tried to outbid one another in the auction room, though this occasionally resulted in such wildly expensive purchases that the loser had more reason to be content than the winner.

Buying things was, however, almost meaningless as an exercise of rivalry given their vast financial resources, and it gave them much more satisfaction to be given things by their admirers, particularly non-material things which were all the more valuable for having no price-tag. They both sat for portraits by the leading artists of the day, Antoni Maukiewicz’s oil-painting of Aurora was said to be as great a work as anything by Titian, and to have brought a touch of Renaissance Classicism to the twenty-first century. Ossia Oliole’s sculpted image of Jeannine, designed to take advantage of all the marvellous sophistication of the new Masterliner printer was hailed as the first masterpiece of Post-ultra-modernism, and sold six million copies on disc.

They cultivated writers as well as artists, and Richard Shephardson’s “Aurora Cycle” was generally held to be the work which allowed him to become the British Poet Laureate, while Charles Tounseille’s integrated production of text, music and computer-graphics, The Spanish-Fwnia, ushered in a new era of video-entertainment. It was soon insufficient for Aurora and Jeannine to inspire works or to patronise artists. They both decided at about the same time to star in films. Aurora chose to
take the leading role in one of the holographic epics which were then playing in studios to audiences of a hundred thousand, and was Cleopatra in The Rise of the Roman Empire, directed by Jan van Velden. Jeannine was the only real person on camera in the otherwise computer-generated version of 50s, based on H. Rider Haggard’s famous novel by the aptly-named producer/producer Elaine Quartermaine. The strain of these appearances was considerable; each sister worried incessantly about the quality of her performance, and dreaded utterly the prospect of her rival being over an undeserved review.

This made of competition was more satisfying than commercial competition because it was so very public. It was competition in celebrity, which was for both of them the real heart of the matter. But it was also a hazardous mode of competition, because the risk of humiliating failure was so much greater.

In the meantime, Aurore and Jeannine were dedicated followers of fashion. Aurore dressed for preference in black, and Jeannine in white; but each was prepared to attempt daring experiments in colour for special occasions. They each hired private detectives to spy on one another’s gowns, perfumes and jewels, because neither could stand the thought that they might one day appear together wearing the same item of embellishment, and that it might be thought by some innocent observer to suit the other better. When the fashion world began to absorb the techniques of the cosmetic engineers, so that its leaders began to change their skins as often as their coats, Aurore and Jeannine were of course in the vanguard. Aurore was the great pioneer of artificial bioluminescence, while Jeannine became the trend-setter of integral ivory.
Their cosmetic engineers had once again begun pushing back the limits of what could be done in remodelling the human body. Not even they longed to experiment with changes of superficial appearance. They had always been able to make the beautiful even more beautiful — now they asked to be made more beautiful. Their engineers were ready and willing to rise to the challenge, being just as determined not to be bested by one another. Aurora decided to channel her passion for bioluminescence into the art of dancing, and had her muscles and limbs carefully sculpted and trained. Her solo balletic performances, enhanced by the effect of light reflected and radiated from the many facets of her artificial skin, were quite breathtaking. Joanna had her vocal chords completely reconstructed and augmented in order to give her voice a phenomenal range and flexibility, and quickly became known as "the human nightingale."

Aurora eventually married, not so much because she wanted a husband as because she wanted a wedding — the most sumptuous ever known, with a guest-list such as had never before been assembled. The preparations lasted for nearly a year, and the party was huge. It occupied an entire Mediterranean island for the ceremony and the reception. Her husband, Matthew Roemer, was a theoretical physicist who was renowned to have the highest IQ in the world.

Joanna waited for the fun to die down completely before playing her own hand in this particular game, but any disadvantage she suffered from taking her turn later was offset by the fact of her carefully-considered manner, which could be convincingly insinuated into a great romance. Joanna did not simply get married: she fell in love, and her ownership was lovingly
traded by the world’s media for nearly a year. She declared to take any part in making the arrangements; all that had to be done according to tradition anyhow, because she married the heir to the Spanish throne.

The next phase in the competition should, logically speaking, have been their children — but here, without even formally negotiating a truce, Aurora and Jeannec finally drew the line. To give themselves up utterly to this flamboyant warfare was one thing, and the other prows (investment managers, worshippers, cosmic engineers and husbands) were all volunteers, but to give birth to new persons simply in order to use them as weapons was something else. They each remembered the agencies of their own childhood, and the extent to which it had been spoiled by their bitter jealousies. They did not want to see babas born to such spoilation. They were, after all, basically kind and loving people despite appearances. For all their posturing, they never did hurt anyone — at least, not deliberately. Aurora left a trail of disappointed lovers, and Jeannec her share of frustrated ones, but they never lied to any of them, or led them to expect anything more than they got, and both secretly shed more than a few tears for the miseries they engendered.

While they pursued their spectacular careers, further steady progress was made in techniques of genetic engineering. This helped them grow richer still, but it also wrought changes in the world around them. Disease was slowly banished as medical applications of the new technology became cheaper. The development of artificial photosynthesis, coupled with biological desalination, made an exploitable store out of the tropical sun and sea, and allowed the Third World to escape from the ecological poverty trap. The first
techniques of rejuvenation were pioneered by Toshiro Himolla and her co-workers. It was this last development, of course, which quickly attracted the attention of Aurora and Jeanne Dark. Once the techniques of rejuvenation by stimulated tissue-replacement had proven their worth, they became a focus of intense interest for everyone over the age of forty. The operations were at this point in time still very expensive, but those for whom money was no problem had every reason to invest all they could in prolonging the time in which they might enjoy their wealth. The older they were, the more they were convinced that youth was absolutely wasted on the young, and the more they believed they stood to benefit from a renewal of sight.

When the techniques first became available to the very rich Aurora and Jeanne were only forty-three years old, and neither showed any immediate interest. For several years they confined their visits to the conventional channels, which were by now well-worn. On her forty-eighth birthday, though, Aurora looked at her face in her mirror, and decided that it was beginning to show distinct signs of having been thoroughly worked over, time and time again, by her favourite cosmetic engineer. It was time to consult him about a return to square one. What he told her, though, came as a frightful shock.

"I can do it," he told her. "But there are some things you must realise. What the rejuvenation technique involves is restoring tissue-cells to a primitive, undifferentiated state, when they can divide rapidly; and then allowing these rejuvenated cells to colonise the working tissues, destroying and replacing older cells. It's basically a kind of carefully-controlled cancer. It"
isn’t perfect: it means that the damaged structural proteins in your body can be replaced, and that all kinds of junk in your mature cells can be flushed out. But it doesn’t set aside all aspects of aging. There will still be copying errors in the DNA of the rejuvenated cells. The techniques can restore a man or woman of sixty to the effective age of about twenty, but that renewed youth won’t last as long as real youth — after a further twenty-five years the body will appear to be sixty again. A second rejuvenation might restore the appearance of twenty, but this time it isn’t likely to last more than ten years. A third treatment would be useless — probably fatal.

"Those figures, though, suppose normal wear and tear. You’re in rather a different position. Your cells have been worked over very thoroughly by all the transformation techniques we’ve used. You don’t have the same scope as the cells of people who’ve aged naturally. I can rejuvenate you, once, but only once. I can make you seem twenty again, but I think you’d lose that appearance relatively quickly. Say fifteen years instead of twenty-five to get back to real old age, and then — the end of the road."

Aaron was not particularly surprised by this; she had been warned often about the fact that she was inflicting unfair wear and tear on her body, and there might one day be a bill to pay for it all.

"It’s all right," she told the engineer. "I’ll take what I can get."

"There’s more," he told her. "You do understand, I suppose, that what your rejuvenated tissues will produce is what’s programmed into your genes. You won’t look like a twenty-year-old version of your present self — you’ll look the way you would have
looked without all the cosmetic remodelling.

This was an unwelcome shock, and Aurora's heart sank as she realised what it meant. To be rejuvenated was one thing; to be rejuvenated six feet tall with thighs like tree-trunks and protruding eyes was another.

"But you could do what you did before, all over again," she protested.

"I'm afraid not," he said. "As I said, the cells wouldn't have been completely rejuvenated. In some ways — in terms of the DNA — they'd still be aged cells. I've told you often enough that you couldn't keep transforming them indefinitely. I can give you a second lease of life, Aurora, but I can't give you a second lease of the life you had now. You'd have to live it on nature's own terms."

This news placed Aurora in something of a dilemma. She had naively thought that being the first to be rejuvenated would score a point in her ongoing battle with her sister; now it seemed like a kind of surrender. She decided that for the time being, at least, she would forgo the pleasure.

When Jeanne, in her own time, made a similar approach to her own cosmetic engineer, she received the same news and she also put aside the idea indefinitely. But this could only be a postponement of the moment of decision, because from that day on there was an anxiety about the way that the two sisters glanced at mirrors, and as years went by the anxiety deepened into real fear. They knew that they were not aging as gracefully as they would have wished, and that the extravagant way in which they had used the rewards of aestheticsology was now taking its toll. They were beginning to look haggard, though they were only in their early fifties.
It was then, for the first time in their lives, that they took very different paths. Always before they had moved along different, but parallel tracks. Now they veered in opposite directions. When Aurora was fifty-three, she decided that it could not go on. She was aging more rapidly than was natural, and her doctor told her that if she did not take the rejuvenation treatment, she might not have long to live; even her natural span of three score years and ten would be denied her. She decided that she would take the advice, if only on purely medical grounds. She dearly wanted another fifteen years of youth, knowing that she might make les.wasted use of it this time. She felt that she could face ugliness bravely now, having reaped all the rewards that beauty could bring.

For Jeanne, it was different. Having grown used to beauty, she felt that nothing ought to be allowed to force her back to mediocrity. If death was the price of retaining her current identity, she decided, then she would pay it. She demanded that her cosmetic engineers use the methods they had already used profusely, no matter what the risk, to repair her appearance for as long as was left to her. They pleaded with her not to take that route; stressing its awful dangers, but she was not to be persuaded. While Aurora reverted to plainness, therefore, Jeanne continued steadfastly to live life as she always had. Within two years, she was on her death-bed.

Jeanne made of her dying a great tragedy, keeping herself fully in the public eye, and built it into a story to compare with the story of her fabulous love affair. If anything, she was more in the limelight now than at the height of her fame. And her beauticians worked around the clock to keep her face fit for the cameras.
When the end was very near, her ugly sister came to visit her.

There was no cavalry left now. They were no longer competing. For the first time in their lives, they could meet one another honestly, with no need to conceal their true feelings. When Jonne, in a voice so weak and harsh that it was impossible to imagine that she had once made of herself a human nightingale, said to Aurora: "I won, didn't I?" Aurora simply said: "Yes, you won."

Jonne was astonished to find that the admission gave her no pleasure at all, and Aurora was equally amazed to find that making it caused her no pain. They hugged one another, then, and wept for all the wasted years.

"Are you well?" asked Jonne, anxiously. "You look well."

Aurora touched her jutting jaw and puffy cheeks. "Yes," she said. "I am well. Better, I suppose, than I expected."

Jonne looked hard at her sister, and saw that the eyes did not protrude so much after all, and that the big shoulders really did not look so awkward. She tried to imagine the hair blonde and the eyes narrow and blue, but when she did, the picture that emerged was the image of a stranger.

"Mother said I wouldn't be content even if I beat you into the grave," said Jonne. "But in a way, I am content. I hope you don't mind that... it's not because you've done wrong — in fact, I know now that you're the one who's done it right. You've chosen to live, and that's always right. No one should be so utterly stupid as to die for vanity. I'm content, I think, because you haven't been so stupid. It would be awful, I think, if
we'd both done this. I'm glad you didn't... glad for the right reasons, I think.

"I know," said Aurora, softly. "I don't mind your being content, though I'd rather you could be content with life than death. We both know what we did, and we both know what it's cost us. I think we've both been martyred, in our different ways. Like Cinderella's ugly sisters mauling their feet to try to fit that stupid glass slipper. How is Prince Charming, by the way?"

Jeannie managed a weak smile. "A tower of strength," she said. "We had a bad patch when the relatives became distressed at the lack of an heir, but that's all past now. Now, they don't really want one. The poor lamb will have to wait for another fifty years or more to be king, now his father's been rejuvenated. I think, on the whole, I've done him more good than harm, and he's been very good for me. I was very tired of being unaided. How's yours?"

"Pretty good," Aurora confirmed. "I was terrified he'd leave me, you know, when I returned. I wouldn't have blamed him, either — it wasn't the real me he married, when all said and done. But it's okay so far, and I'm beginning to hope that it really is me he loves and not just the image. It wasn't in the early days, of course, but we've grown used to one another over the years. It was nice to settle into. I suppose, after all these years of making a fetish out of finding a new love every week. It's not that they were all the same, you understand, just that there wasn't that much difference. Anyway, I like Matthew; he gets a bit abstracted but he's very kind."

"I'm glad," said Jeannie. "You won't waste it, will you? Your new youth, I mean."

Aurora shook her head. "I'll try not to."
Jeanne lay back on her pillow, exhausted by the
corner. "I'm sorry," she said, very faintly. "I
think it's close to midnight, you know."
"You don't have to worry about midnight," Aurora
assured her, with tears in her eyes. "I'm the one who
had to turn back into a pumpkin. You married the
prince, remember?"
Jeanne smiled, and in that smile was crystallized all
the perfection of her carefully-conserved beauty. It was
a tragic smile, heartbreaking through and through. It
made Aurora cry.
"But you know," said Jeanne, in the faintest of
whispers, "that damned glass slipper never did fit. Not
really."
"I know," Aurora assured her, taking her by the
hand for the very last time. "I know it, now."
Aurora didn't have the option of living happily ever
after, but she lived as well and as happily as she could,
for as long as she had. It wasn't enough to score a point
off Jeanne, but it was certainly one in the eye for
Cinderella.
It never ceases to amaze me. How can the streets be so quiet? It’s as if the grey air’s turned to dirty crimson in my ears. Dirty... that’s the word for it. And yet I’m here again, watching the world crawl by, sitting in a gas-stinking doorway, gathering dust and choking resentment. Keeping a check on my fear and an eye out for stones.

The street’s a dismal diorama that must have been written by a completely bored bastard. Eight lane optimum with two lane traffic. Ratty Ladas splatter past, boots gaping and poring on scrap iron. The occasional company car — Vietnamese Turbo — hisses a cloud of blue lead vapour.

When I was a kid, this main drag was a blur of vehicles. Now look, more pushbikes than cars, pedalled by thin men in thick balACLAVAS. A superglide hover mower trimm the white lines, piloted by some mad brute, complete with braided cap. A skinny boy on power skates loses control and wraps himself around a dismantled roadside hot-dog dispenser. I’m reminded of mother demented by a ritual, bedraggled woman brainwashed by waiting toddlers. She’s no doubt in search of shops without queues. May as well look for
dogs without lice. With perfect timing, an old murt comes to sniff the shit on my boots. Maybe it recognises the stench of an enemy because it disengages a snarl so I kick it in the chops and clamber stiffly to my feet.

Jesus! Twenty years old and so used in an arthritic euthanasia cage. A nervous wreck with a stone phobia. What happened to the Simon of old? The wide-eyed idealist determined to make it as a writer? Trapped on a scheme, twenty hours hard labour and all for kiddies pocket money subsidized by a fistful of food stamps. Prowling this decomposing city with my heart in my throat 'un of stones.'

Was it only three weeks ago when I saw my first one?

On my way home from work, limping and cursing and ready to croak, I spotted the two-metre high black outside the armoured benefic centre. People just walked around it, even the Police acted as though it wasn't there. It made me wonder if it did exist; or was I hallucinating, a flashback to gloe sniffing days? When I got close my insides started shaking like they do before a bout of disent. What the fuck? So solid, perfectly cuboid, impressive as a Gregson's victim. I couldn't bring myself to touch it. I hurried away and put it down to a builder's mistake. After seeing right most in the next four days I knew these were no misplaced concrete slabs intended for the construction site. I tried to become as oblivious as everyone else appeared to be but the mounting trepidation wouldn't let me.

In these past three weeks I've lost count of my sculptural encounters. The panic attack they incite increases with every sighting. I know I'm getting dangerously paranoid... but shit... they could be government devices, electronics encased in vandal-proof stone, silently pulsing out bear-pawers to calm the masses. Or strategically placed, well disguised...
neutron bombs, waiting for the central command to end the unemployment problem. Christ, I don't know, could be I'm just going mad! That's why I haven't told anyone, not even Jane.

I'm sloshing along with my collar turned up over my ears. Rain washes the soot from my face and the grime from my torso, fake leather jacket. I'm going to have to tell someone soon. It should be Jane. For years we've been as close as fingers crossed for luck. Okay, she's going through a bad time, but I've been offering my... modestly thoughtful support, surely she won't mind helping me get this thing straight in my head.

Yes, I'll pop round to her squat later this afternoon. I suppose she's got a right to know her boyfriend's a sitting tenant.

The city's looking pretty. I'm surrounded by a towering concrete nightmare interspaced with Victorian decay, but I'm feeling better having made a decision. Or am I feeling better because I haven't seen a stone today?

Without realising it I'm window shopping. Always good for a jolt. Instant red light signs turn hungry faces purple or green. Poon shops groan, blushing on stolen goods. A ragged man's sitting on the kerb, warming his hands on gin breath. The shops don't interest him, nor even the Flesh Houses displaying tired women sprawled behind greasy glass. Thirteen year olds in plastic burger bar pat mimed offal into bread buns for a pittance. Paperboys too young to read deliver the daily dose of depression to top floor flats. A stall for cut-glass gloves attracts a blue-fingered crowd. Scissors for digits or not, I draw the line at wearing little Tibby. A blind man's semi-cane goes on the blink and he conceals himself in the steel plate of a post office fronting.
I'm smiling kind of sour as I turn the corner and bump into a stone. I jump as if electrified. I've touched one of the bastards! For the first time I've actually proved they're tangible. I can't be mad if I can touch it... can I? I side up, again cowed, about as tall as I am and as cold as a tombstone without an inscription. My lungs shrink to the size of peanuts, breadth conning squarely as a bicycle pump. I put a shoulder against the side. Now I'm no powerpuck, but this thing's as heavy as a hundred economy leaves. Swoop's warping my palms, softening the crum on my t-shirt at the armpit. My fingers and toes go numb. I'm shaking and I'm desperate and I almost puke when someone casually saunters past. He doesn't even bother to glance.

What's going on? Government plot of some kind? I don't think this is new council policy to adorn the pavements with progressive sculpture. Backpedalling, I know I have to get over to Janet's now. Vague connections are hovering over me like gnomes, nuclear armed.

On the way to her place I pass a skinhead on a platform blaming the immigrants. I pass a sobbing redundant blaming recession, I pass a jobless victim blaming her glue bag and I pass six more stones.

I'm screeching for Janet, demanding entry because an ocean's coming down and I'm in very real danger of drowning.

The squat used to be a complex of inner-city condominiums for computer operators employed in information exchange offices. Information was sent from county councils to central government and back. Unemployment and scheme profit figures went out, a veritable catalogue of new laws concerning the above
returned. L.E.O. was axed because it proved more economical to have the populace learn of benefit cuts or scheme expansion after the fact.

At the building's distant summit, a torn plastic sheet's pulled aside. Jane's head pokes through the window. Is she still pretty? I can't be sure. Maybe I'm only remembering the luminous auburn hair that once fair tumbled over an alert, firmly bowed, heart-shaped face? Superimposing the past? Guilt delivers an appretentive forcing excuses to rush to my aid, of course she's going to look a little drawn, these remaining days for all of us and she's been going through a bad time.

Jane throws out a slow wave and tells me she's on her way down. There's a tremulous tic in my eye, my offending eye that gaped at the scene. I hear her tramping at the barricade behind the fire damaged door. She scurries through the opening and Jesus weps, she looks tired. Her eyes don't focus on me when she says, hi.

I thought she was going to lay off the vituperation up and I tell her so.

She coldly informs me she will eventually and what's more, not to start bitching.

I give her a line about bitching being the last thing on my mind, that there's something fucking weird going on that I've just got to discuss with her.

She thinks that's great, and does it have anything to do with the fact that I bear an uncanny resemblance to Barkling Bert, the local crazy?

What a wite she is. I tell her she's lucky I'm not foaming at the mouth whilst merely junking on my pretzel and can we please get inside?

She shrugs and I follow her into the on-shade. After replacing the barricade I meet her at the steps. The lift
lacks a vital ingredient — electricity. I try to get a grip on myself, look for habit by leaning down to kiss her. She’s worse today, it’s like trying to nudge the back of my hand but not nearly as stimulating. She turns away and begins the ascent, shoulders low, spirits low. She makes a meal of the stairs, wheezing and croaking all the way.

The corridors are littered with fuzzy-faced kids, most inhaling adhesives or insecticides or cleaning fluids or just about anything that will get them vaporized. A couple stare a greeting, the rest trace cracks in the tiles and try to blend into the gloom. Everywhere candlelight sends shadows dancing.

We reach her top floor flat and I’m well pleased yes she hasn’t even asked me what it is I want to discuss yet. Jane seems to have got bored with questions recently. She’s even curtailed her complaining. Wrong maybe, but it made me feel wanted when she suggested and then, trying to coax me into moving in with her.

I squat in a messroom of a building across town.

Why wouldn’t I move in? I told her and myself that I needed a private retreat for my writing. A case of, one day I’ll sell to a big Southern publishing house. Was that excuse ever true? Now I need to alienate Jane from certain times of the day because I’m terrified she’ll discover I don’t do any scribbling and haven’t done for months. The last thing I wrote was on a piece of peeled wallpaper and it didn’t do that justice.

The tiny room looks as miserable as ever. There’s anas in my bloodstream and then in my brain. Jane asks me to sit on the mattress and tell her what’s the matter? I explode, weeks of fear cropping in volume.

What’s the matter? What’s the matter? Fucking enormous stone blocks littering up the street, that’s what’s the fucking matter!
After a second's hesitation she replies with, oh yeah, sort of granite looking, there's two in the condo, one in the corridor and one in the flat below... strange aren't they, J?

I'm flummoxed, stupefied. My mouth falls open and my tongue drops out. Strange! I want to know if she'd been taking courses in understatement? She gives me that shrug with her head tilted again, a gesture she'd never have made a few months ago. I start to question her. I want to know where they came from?

She's no idea.

Well did anyone see them being brought in or were they made on the bastard premises?

She stumbles something to the effect of, search me. I don't believe this, we're getting absolutely nowhere at a rapid pace.

I collapse onto the damper mattress. This isn't how it can't be. Has apathy taken over so completely? How often have I merely called it her, had time? What a self-indulgent arsehole I am.

And yet I can't help blaming her for making me blame myself and for now being so much like everyone else there. I’m frightened and angry and ready to attack. I demand to know if she's interested, intrigued, just a little scared? Crouching close, it appears Jane thinks they look pretty harmless and anyway, the fear is itself out of her a long time ago, now she's only weary.

I tell her there's enough fear left in my gut to cure constipation. Confused, I start to wonder my half-formed theories but they sound so much like paranoia, (be on your guard, Big Brother's tampering with our will, planning annihilation). I get even more infuriated. Despairing, I try to focus on my subliminal forebodings. I know the stories are connected in some way.
She wants to know, with what?
My head’s pounding, sweat’s filming my vision. A
soul of cognoance within my cranium’s spreenting and
splintering. Indicating everything I yell, that’s with
what, with all of it!

Her expression’s half amused, half bored. Because
I’m only mouthing abstracts I charge into a speech
delivered many times but never with such feeling of
significance.

And God how I want her to join me in one long
discordant howl like she used to!

I say it’s no wonder she doesn’t notice the stores
crow she’s taken to wearing his clothes. What about the neve-

er ending unemployment, does she notice that? The
poverty trap that ensnared our parents, raped by a
sell tax that evicted us from our homes, does she see
this shit tip she’s living in? Loan traps for a workforce
whipped into obedience by ignorance and shame, come
on Jane... remember, she!

She’s turning away, eyes of a somnambulistic, so a
vocal cacophony again takes my breath away. Am I still
searching for connections? I think I am. I’m searching
as I remind her that human beings aren’t meant to live
like this. People need goals, ambitions, rewards, or they
might as well not be people. The injustices are still
there, I plead with her not to ignore them. The
country’s rich are collecting coins to buy them off this
filthy, sinking ship. And I ask her what we’re doing —
queueing at the unemployed nourishment halls, six
million donkey sewer chasing extras carron.

No, she whispers, she hasn’t forgotten, she just
doesn’t want to remember. Staring at a faded family
photo lying on the floor, Jane’s nodding a slow denial.

I go for the throat. I want to know what she feels
about her ploy scheme? Recreational Enlightenment.
A hundred ways to amuse yourself with a pot of
industrialine and a sheet of recycled paper. A far cry
from her desire to study art at college. And how can she
be taught community relationship when there isn’t a
community? Oh yes, the responsibility programme, I
quip that she’s always loved that one. Learning to take
increased responsibility for yourself, so enabling the
government to concentrate on the fundamentals.

Propaganda, Jane! Say it. Shout, spit, vomit in the
streets... speak to us! She hugs her bony knees up to her chin. Rests her
pasty face on the protruding pelvis. So drained. Lili’s
a vampire and she’s been feasted upon. The hump in my
throat damps the outrage.

Casually, she admits that she doesn’t know what all
that’s got to do with the stones.
The silence descends like a pillow over a baby’s
mouth. I felt sure the connections had been
materialising, suddenly it’s all vague again. My head’s
stunned, stumbling, the sweat’s drying and I’m left
feeling confused but paradoxically calm. It’s as if the
clouds began to part once and I know they’ll part again.
Groping for the residue effect, I try a different tack.
What happens to humans stripped of humanness.
She says that one’s sorry, they turn into what’s known as
the Brit.
I try to overlook the sarcasm by extending the
argument, what happens to animals stripped of their
animality?

Now she’s getting sick of this and chudleys when I
suggest a visit to the zoo. She really doesn’t see the
point.
I’m struggling to see myself, just trusting in
instincts. There’s no way I can discriminate as I finish by
saying it will be jolly good fun, make a great change.
Grinning, she coos, if it’s fun that you want you’ve come to the right place, big boy. Why go to the zoo when you can stay here and screw?

This is something Jane feels comfortable with, something within her control. I try to compromise with, screwing now, great — zoo after, perfect? After all, Jane hasn’t got R.E. until tomorrow morning.

She smiles. Too much excitement in one day’s not good for a girl.

The smile’s insight out of her pact and is a bigger factor in getting me up than the sight of her wriggling out of her pants. The patched jumper falls beside them. Her body’s thin and bruised, it’s as if she’s dissolving into puberty. I pretend to hear her sigh as I put my mouth to her nipple, my hand between her legs. She stays dry for too long and I feel like a client. The image of the stones enters my head even as I enter Jane.

Afterwards I’m feeling sweaty and disappointed. Right moves, wrong reasons. Sex was always a sky-ride with Jane. Now I’m wiping myself off on a dirty sock, and that’s about it.

Jane’s rummaging in the corner, ruffling aside yellowed newspapers, searching for her bottle of paint stripper. She’s still bare-armed. I reach for my jeans, bring up the subject of the zoo again. Actually I can’t quite remember why it was I wanted to go, but I said I would, so I will. But Jane won’t... She’s found the bottle and is shaking a rig. She offers me a bit but I refuse, still trying to tempt her into a day-trip.

In between inhaling the fumes she reiterates that she can’t be bothered, really. But she wants me to go. Maybe I’ll write up my astounding findings and allow her the honour of being first reader. I consider going into a buff but decide against it...
she wouldn't notice. I'm beginning to jitter like a dog chased by butchers. Is that because of the memories evoked by the sickly-smelling vapours that are enveloping the room, or because a sense of imminence is once again scaling the walls of my subconscious? Whatever, this room's making me claustrophobic. The electrical heating exchange, torn from its housing, looks like coiled guts swinging. The drum Petty on the ceiling resembles a leprous skin disease. Jane's old clothes are lying heaped like a drunken Guy Fawkes. And that photograph, it's an occult impression of a family haunting.

I'm dressed and finger combing my long hair into a stringy ponytail. By way of a sort of last-ditch attempt, I enquire if Jane will at least inspect the stones in the covele with me.

Her response is somewhat negative, not these fucking stones again! You better check them out, I'll wait here, after all, they could be real killers!

More sad than usual, I say my goodbyes and make a move to kiss her. Too late, she's kissing the rag.

The door clicks behind me and I don't wonder what's happened to Jane, I know. She was born in the late seventies and is being buried in the mid-nineties. Pleading love and vowing rescue, I stumble across the first stone. An immovable, featureless, angular landlocked frozen in the shadows of the corridor, waiting to reprimand existence. Its corners slice the musty air. Bile scalds my mouth and I don't turn my back until I'm at the stairs.

The second is, as was indicated, in a squat on the floor below. It's silhouetted against the window, a bland spot in grey. The meagre possessions of the last tenant suggest a hasty departure. The dastardly obelisk divulges no secrets, it is the secret. When I stroke the smooth
surface, a fist of depression rams itself down my throat.  
Gasping, I head for the streets.  
Daddy, daddy, can I go to the zoo, and by the way,  
what happens to the animals stripped of their animalness?

My legs are aching, unused to such a purposeful stride.  
I’m out in the city and walking head down for an  
outward bound. No choice but to walk, the buses went  
privy then went bust a few years ago. So I’m looking  
for a stretch of road my thumb would enjoy.  
These streets are an old friend I’ve long since grown  
to hate. Flat faces of towering tenements, dirt washed  
by rain. The occasional decal poster is still in operation.  
The virtues of coke are squawked with such  
enthusiasm, cracks appear in the pillars supporting  
overhead auto-paths. Like some retarded track star,  
I’m leaping gully puddles of sewage that bubble up  
onto oil rainbow’d roads from pipes that gave in to  
neglect. Factories lucky enough to still have shifts, open  
huge barn-doors to the human beasts of burden  
trudging in from their management owned squalor.  

Yet more disheartening than these sights is the eminence  
stone bulk looming out of the dark. Strip lights with a  
fail-safe switch, highlight its stark reality. It’s pasted  
before the door of a tenement, with far greater  
longevity — than the cheaply-stuffed trash. Another  
on a pelican crossing, caught forever at red.  
I circumnavigate a third, positioned outside a public  
waist chute. Hunched pedestrians walk around these  
things as if they don’t exist. Again I recall how the city  
was a few months ago, always click with people  
heading jobs, accommodation, food, usable refuse,  
love. Now so empty, so quiet. Was there ever a sci-fi  
vid called ‘Invasion of the Giant Bricks’?
My hypothesis about them being some type of thought-depressant seems increasingly plausible. The population are atrophying before my very eyes. Humans without humanity, animals without animality. Is the connection that the zoo will exemplify the culmination of this condition, or am I clutching at straws. Could a device be invented to dampen the human spirit without physical contact, or has the butter slipped off my noodles?

My legs are positively stiff as I turn onto Dalebury Road. I know the road well. My dad really did take me to the zoo and I spent many a frustrating hour suffering his deplorable sense of direction. I don’t know how many times I moaned, ‘it’s Dalebury Road, dad, just follow it straight on.

I found the perfect spot, under a streetlight so the god souls can see me, preparing to brave with a smile and a wave. There was far more traffic when I was a kid, this could be a long wait.

It’s not what you’d call picturesque. I feel like a spit of flesh dribbled from the mouth of an indistinctive past. Societal remnants of Victorian architecture promise to outline the tarnished chromium dream. I try not to think until a car comes in view. Suddenly I’m hit by a single powerbeam. I’m clasped but thumb-poking for all I’m worth. The old spore behind the wheel leaves me spluttering and soaked through by puddle juice.

Five cars later, I’m freezing my balls off. It must be 1800 hours, the zoo closes at 2000 hours. A ridiculously archaic pick-up’s bouncing towards me, I hope he’s feeling charitable. The reflex pulls over so I lost to the driver’s dented door. I ask him if he’s going as far as the zoo? Only the guy’s eyes are visible, glaring out of the petrol stubb, the rest of him’s masked by a wild black beard and a well-graffitied crash helmet. He nods to the
rear of the truck, wanting me to jump in.

Mid leap, I see what he's hauling. There must be at least three horses in there, p'raps they've not all intact.

Before I can stop myself, I'm sprawled in a butcher's party. Massive, bleeding joints. I slip around in the mess of bones, tights and offal until the truck stops bumping and I can slither across to the tailgate. There's lumpy paste in my mouth which is funny because I haven't eaten all day. Either this is one sick individual or he's just dabbled in the black market. The zoo better be worth it because something tells me he's both.

Black beard tortures the engine. The wind we raced through blows the green erk from my nostrils. I peer through the tears in my eyes at bonfires on pavements, dealers on podiums, children on downers and cripples on sticks. Twice we squeeze stones policing the road.

The truck noisy skids to a halt. Black beardlimps the side of his door. I'm in such a hurry to escape, I fall on my ass like a slapstick comedian. Maintaining your footing’s not easy when you’re standing on hale livres.

My driver squanders more rubber before I have a chance to thank him.

Washing my hands under a broken overflow I familiarise myself with my surroundings. That’s right, up ahead is the peeling, whitewashed facade of the zoo. It’s long law building, of almost tropical appearance. Totally out of place surrounded by slave needed gin Swilleries and well armoured bargains centres.

I cross the road, notice a stone near the entrance to a gong shop. Soporific plots on the brain, I stagger down an alley alongside the zoo. It's steep, cobbled, dingy and my boots are still bloody slick. Shit! I must look like a disnotedator after a skirmish with the riot squad. Slithering along with a hand greasing for support against the barbelle wall, I scan for a window with
dodge wire netting. Too dark. And with the slope of the alley the windows are high. I find an old crate with 'Produce of South Africa' stamped on the side. Never mind. I suppose you can't be too choosy when it comes to breaking and entering.

The one enormous. There must be thirty windows to check. I feel horribly conspicuous but stuff that, the most alive in months. Okay, crate down... jump up... give the mesh an almighty yank (dead subtle)... jump off. By the tenth window I'm getting a little pissed off. By the eleventh, well and truly pissed. At the twelfth I give it all I've got and almost do a backflip. The metal's rusted clean through. It comes away, all clattering like my nerves. The window frame's aluminum but the patty's crap and I actually take the whole pane of glass out. Making sure not to smash it, I prop the pane by the crate.

It's only a matter of hauling myself in. Easter said than done. My arms are wrist all the way up. I'm scuffling like a kitten at the sill. The air's going into my lungs cold and coming out boiling. But eventually I'm through, dropping into darkness.

The impact of landing jar my knees and rattles my ears. Dazed, I'm expecting the fist of a security guard to distribute my nose around my face. It doesn't happen so I peek through hooded lids, feeling superhypered. There's voices behind me, are they my answers up ahead?

I'm in a corridor. I try to orientate myself, remember former visits. It hasn't changed much. Half the overhead lights have fizzed out. The walls are an even smoker cream, dusted with tatty posies. Candles sweep in impossibly clear skies. Tigris prowl through a million shades of green. Blinded hippies make the most of mud baths under a blazing sun. I try to look like
you'd look if you'd just paid in, and head for the nearest
colour coded doors. A chart informs that green is for
reptiles, yellow for birds, orange for big cats and so on.
But no, I can't even hope for clues in the mystery of
animals without animosity here. Yet the sediment of
childhood remains and urges me through the orange
door. Flaking dried blood from my ears, I enter.

How did I ever end up here? These inspiring
carnivores have lost more than their primitive essence,
they expired utterly yet replay live moves forever,
trapped on video tape. This wing is strictly for 'Video
Zoo'. Tarnished screens well mounted around the
perimeter of the hall-like 'Visualiser' depict the
flickering spectrum of yesterday's prairies in garish
technicolour. Headphones dangle from battered
consoles, hoping to inform the curious.

At one time the taped narration made me jump, now
it would make me gag. Pompous, poorly researched
pretzel. Further into the 'Visualiser' a family are
surrounding a screen size pride of lions. One kid's
trying the headphones fit whilst fiddling with the
volume control. Another's wiping her nose on a mangy
pett nailed to the wall.

The 'Video Zoo' rooms were supposed to be
compensation for animal extinction and government
cutbacks; I don't think they work somehow. The
parents are vaguely trying to encourage, but it's
obvious the little darlings would rather be home
watching consumer wares instead of archaic wildlife
documentaries concerning lands as mythical as those in
fairy tales.

The fire's returning. I leave, trying to strip the
motivating urge that forces me past the other colour
coded doors. I want my subliminal connections naked
so I have to find examples.
An arrow points the way to ‘Living Exhibits’. At least they haven’t been replaced since my last visit. I bypass ranks of board-pinioned anatomy diagrams and make my way to the metal staircase. At its foot is a stone. Once more I’m quivering like a virgin counting change for a hooker. A security guard ambles into view.

That snaps me out of my trance. The hand resting on the gun butt is frizzled with liver spunk. I prepare to tell him I’ve lost my ticket, and failing that, I’ve lost my mind. But he just walks by, dilated pupils a projector reproducing a sour past.

I inch around the stone keeping as much distance between us as possible. The bastard’s are everywhere! What makes me see them and others ignore them? My boots make a somber, echoing report on the steps. On the next floor I take a left, crossing a rest-space ringed by vending machines. My stomach growls like a dog after meat but empty pockets mock my hunger. I enter the east wing of the zoo — or animal information centre as they prefer to call them. This cavernous chamber houses the live exhibits. Not the most exciting of beats but at least breathing. There’s a thick plastic skylight ten metres above my head but the sun’s done a runner so the area’s washed by the harsh white light of fully operational strips. There’s fake grass for the feet and pink benches for the arse. And for the animals? Malodorous perspet pupils. Making its feelings plain, a bow-legged goat is pissing against the transparent enclosure while spitting through its brad.

A diaphanous prison houses two lethargic cows possessing massive heads buried in food wells. A third interlocking glorified goldfish bowl is occupied by a foam-lipped horse. It whinies and blows, pacing out its confinement on legs too thin for its heavy shoes.
I can circle the exhibits with a dozen or so other onlookers. I figure they’d double their family credit for a pair of the bone cut downs for the oven. Instead they hand over small change to a blue-garbed woman who unloosens the pens and lets their offspring scurry, feed and sip the aqueous animals. It might be amusing if it wasn’t so revolting. Oh yes, and the sheep look pretty stupid trying to crop plastic grass. Jane would laugh at that... no she wouldn’t.

Nothing... emerges. They’re just sorry animals in a sorry excuse for a zoo. The connections have not connected. And if the stones are emitting a tranquilising pulse, will it affect animals anyway? But they are true animals, just like the true people out there.

Shut! Is any of this relevant?

I wander the chamber aimlessly until a P.A. system informs me the animal information centre will be closing in five minutes. Tired punters wanting drab rammous and floppy triflly’s herd for the exit. The unanswered questions prompt my decision to retreat myself here in plastic parapets. Instead of following the others, I duck into the corridor, reach the rear-space and rock my bones behind a vending machine. I mumble what will Jane say if I return without any earth-shattering conclusions? I try to get comfortable, keep my crowning glory low and my sphincter muscles tight.

To be honest, I’m actually nodding off as the janitor’s canteen past wheeling old prams laden with cleaning utensils. My sponge of a brain’s been working harder today than in the last six months and my neck can’t support my drooping head... think... I’ll... just...

Jane? I felt upright, struck by the punchline of a nightmare. The dream fades but the terror remains.
Something warns me to go back to her now, but there’s a stronger urge to go on.

The sun's even brighter. Security strips make a patchwork quilt of light and shadow. I haul myself out of my hiding place and tackle the problem of imminent starvation. It's some still. So I take my chances and attack a candy dispenser. The machine's old and with the assistance of a metal strip from a trolley of plastic vines, I jimmy the loading panel and stuff my fortunate face.

I'm tiptoeing back to the live exhibit. My clothes are still with blood and I'm leaving a rust-coloured trail. It's utterly silent and I keep imagining the footsteps of psychopathic patrolmen. There should be some sound... shouldn't there? I'm closing on the chamber containing the prey's pens and should be able to hear their muffled bloats, grunts, sighs, barks and farts. Maybe they've all curled up, dreaming of farmers that still believe in fields? As I round the corner my heart skips three beats then makes up for it by going into overdrive. The moon's peer ing into the skylight illuminating clear cages containing an assortment of huge rectangular stones.

The seconds tick into minutes before I dare force myself closer. Not one animal, just a corresponding number of perfectly angular sculptures.

What the fuck is going on?

This turns my paranoid flats into powder and blows them away. I'm alongside the goat enclosure. The food wells are there. The fake grass. Piles of crap. The smell still lingers. But no frigging goat! I make my way around the other pens. Nothing stays. I feel like an exploder of antiquity. And yet this night intimates tomorrow's curse. I'm terrified. I want to understand.
so much it hurts. The veins in my temples throb. I try
to rationalise. Could the animals have been holograms
projected onto the stones? Oh come on, even I can't
make myself believe that! Since when do solid objects
stump around, passing water. And again, what could it
possibly have to do with the stones in the city? So do
the keepers lead the animal away and replace them with
these things every night? Ridiculous! Ridiculous. Simon,
can you really see that being connected with what's
happening out there even if it were feasible?

My reasons go on strike and refuse to leave me with
anything except dread. I squat by the wall, studying the
cage that should harbour live sheep. A cloud drifts
across the moon's silver face causing ripples of dark on
these featureless surfaces. It looks like they're shivering.
I'm doing enough for all of us as I crawl to the clear
close. The handle lock's frozen but my panic's stronger.
Confident! Confident you miserable bastard! The door
opens inwards and I roll into the pen. Right up to a
block. It's as solid as those in the city. Cold. Smooth. I
rap it with my knuckles. Punch it till they blend.
Blending! There's blood on my fist and there was blood
in the pick-up and blood means life and these things
aren't dead, they're beyond death. I scurry out of the
pen and hug the far wall.

Time's a slow motion of towering monoliths,
Medieval halls, Stonehenge skulls. Sodom in silici-
petrified faces, fine dust traces, sculptures, cracked-dry
burnt black, and all I can see is stones, stones, stones.
I'm surrounded...

My eyes refocus. Dawn's chasing the shadows away.
The pens still question my sanity. With relief I sense
the re-emergence of the sun. I imagine it warming the
wall at my back. Suddenly it's climbed over the
skylights, shooting golden arrows in every direction. A beam from the bow slices into the chamber and strikes a stone. I blink in the glare and a sheep shakes out its woolly coat with a blur. I need... help! Four sheep are bouncing, nudging hellions at each other. The other pens are also miraculously full of life. The horse is a horse. The goat's a goat. The fucking sheep are too sleepy for words. The meat in my skull becomes a basketball. Then bounces... and the revelation springs into my consciousness. Connections connect. When the sheep didn’t have to be sheep, they weren’t. And when humans don’t have any reason to be humans, they’re not. Nature’s ultimate way to eradicate life forced outside of the evolutionary scheme. Beyond desolation. I thought the stones were the cause of dehumanisation, but they are the effect.

It’s so horribly clear. Now I know what happens to animals stripped of animality. Without it they’re not just as inanimate as stone, they are stone. God knows they had little enough of their animality left in this zoo, but animals have minimal requirements and there’s still enough for a desperate pretence. When the lights go out, there’s no need to go through the motions. And... and... the lights have gone out for millions of people. Stoner evolution is petrifying a wasted humanity. Legislation has turned hearts and souls to stone. No aspirations. No sight, nor struggle for the vast majority of the population. No time to smile. No reason. No aesthetic rewards. No ego left. No pride. No energy remains. No need for a pretense. No natural human. No hope. No surprise to cut through politics failure. No nerves. No brain. No blood. No flesh. No spurt of spark.

Hail the mighty stones, for you shall inherit the Earth!
Jane! I’m sprinting through the zoo. I have to reach her before she’s out of reach. I don’t care how loud my flight. I plod along the corridor with Jane’s name to the aftermath of shock, the remedy, a tangible reality I may be able to influence. It guards do hear me they say well-clear. The colour-coded doors of the ‘Visualiser’ are a blur at the periphery of my vision. The glanceless window’s too high for me to reach... oh shit oh shit... I’m frantically searching for something to assist — there — a vinyl barrier beneath a showcase. I drag it under the window, retread several steps, snatch a broom, then hurtle forward and use it as a springboard. Bloops straining, I scramble through the window like a rat into a sewer drum. I tumble into space head first and, with a crash, smash the crate.

The wind evacuates my lungs. Flashes of purple make a psychedelic trip across my vision. As soon as I can swallow oxygen, I’m swerving onto my feet and jogging up the alley. My shoulders and neck feel out and bruised but the blood trickling and the swirling ache means I’m alive.

Halifax Road is deserted. The day is too young for traffic. The morning’s easy. Getting easier. Am I going into shock? The pain’s evaporating. I’m numb from my feet to my calves. It’s as if I’ve had a dyanal hit. Even the pain’s easy. The passive stones are markers for my race towards Jane.

The squat supports me as I pulse. Eleven candy bars onto the pavement. I’m retching and bile before the nausea lessens. Straining, sweating, gasping, I scream for Jane and kick at the door. I only hope she’s already left for R.E. I boot the door again and it opens enough to allow entry. I push past the haphazardly balanced barricade and roaring her name like some spiritual plea,
latch over to the stairs, stagger up them. Literally crawl up the battered things. My body’s broken by torture. My sensibilities revered at the sight of corridors heavy with the drab-effigies of revolution. I make the only sound...

Jane’s door isajar. I hesitate, caught in a slash of light. Human evolution has gone beyond the constraints of mere existence many, many centuries ago. We had transcended the basic feed, sleep, screw, die pattern. To be dragged back, fighting at first, then submissively... nature’s chemical catalyst said, metamorphosize those whose human qualities cause them nothing but pain...

Jane’s pain had left her hollow. I nudged open the door and cursed the cold, silent stone. I crossed the stone, put my face to the stone, and my tears leave damp smudges... on... the... stone.

It’s so quiet in the house these days. Not a squeak, not a rustle, not a whispered prayer. Crazing in a squat, it was always so hard to find the privacy to even cry in peace. I could exercise in the kitchen and never be disturbed now, so I do. And I hardly go out, just the odd food run. My scheme sort of petered out. The foreman said I might as well not bother coming in because there were enough workforce left — you can’t trust these kims, they reign without so much as a by-your-leave. Still, I keep on going, that is until the foreman failed to show.

The economy’s finally stabilizing. The government are ecstatic and are proud to say mass unemployment is officially a thing of the past. I went to visit my family the other week. Comical really. The floorboards in the flat had been dodgy for
yrs and sheer weight of stone must have been too much. I actually found a flesh and bone being in the flat below, it was an old man clutching a model Interexly 125 but unfortunately he had half a ton of rubble through his spine.

I've started writing again. I write, twitch, shuffle, cry, gripe but never sit still. I work on my anger, grind my teeth and never look into the mirror, just in case the eyes I greet are glazed, in case the mirror traps a stone reflection. The story I'm working on should be a real beauty. It's about what happens to humans stripped of their humanness.
This was not the first time that the stupid thing had raised his blood pressure or caused him to use words which would have been familiar to the ancient Anglo-Saxons. In the early days the fault had been largely his own, because it had been doing exactly as it was told instead of in exactly what he had wanted it to do. Once that important difference had been realised, he had been able to live with it, if not in friendship at least on terms of wary respect. But this was no flagrant display of its independence and disobedience by the too-literal execution of a poorly-formulated command, this was sheer, raving, computer lunacy.

For more than four years he had been using the thing without having any real understanding of how and why it worked and, according to his user manual, it was not necessary that he understand it. After all, it was just a glorified typewriter with the useful facility, when the organic computer in his cranium was refusing to perform its story-telling function, of playing games.
which he was seldom allowed to win. But the manual did give some advice, so elementary that it verged on the insulting, on what to do if sudden, inexplicable behaviour should occur.

Carefully he checked that his equipment was properly switched on and that the connections between them were correctly and securely plugged in, then tried again. He had loaded this word-processing programme so often that he no longer had to think while typing it in.

But once again the characters he typed on the keyboard were not those which appeared on the screen. Instead of the six-character programme name between quotation marks, the queer enclosed a jumble of letters, figures and symbols stretching over three lines. Several of the characters were repeated — he counted a group of four capital "L"s, three plus signs and many that were graphics symbols displayed in different colours. He made no effort to memorise or write down the sequence of characters, or note the positions of those in colour. There was no reason to do so at the time.

Instead he stared at the screen and decided that the trouble was probably mechanical, a fault in the keyboard which was causing the keys to stick or make unwanted contacts, or both. Or it might have something to do with the coffee he spilled on it three days ago.

He sighed, and was about to switch everything off for a few minutes in the hope that the fault would clear itself as other faults had done. Then as he continued to stare at the story-odd, multi-coloured characters that were technically a file-name between the quotation marks, another and completely ridiculous idea came to him.
If you won’t to play silly buggers with me, he thought, then go ahead.

He typed RUN.

Immediately the screen cleared. It remained blank for perhaps three seconds, then tiny points of light began flickering into existence all over it, and growing until the surface looked like the inside of a window during a blizzard of multi-coloured hallucinations. Gradually the hallucination image faded as it was overlaid by a rapid succession of still pictures. They were composed of text and graphics, both in monochrome and colour, and they remained in view just long enough for him to recognise a few of them. He was able to identify the title screens of several computer information and communications services, the logos of some of the most important multi-national companies and conglomerates, a satellite launching organisation, and many others which he did not recognise. In those he glimpsed only the crests and headings of what looked like important government agencies and, written large and in various bold type-faces across all of them, the word “Secret.”

Completely bewildered, he tried to think of an explanation, however improbable, for what was going on. Could some joker in the vendor company responsible for the software have tacked this visual mid-mash onto the end of his word processor programme? But no, that was impossible because his drive wasn’t spanning so that nothing was being loaded from the disk. By their nature these pictures had to be coming from an outside source. But that, too, was impossible, because it would have required the computer being connected through a modem to the telephone system. He had a ‘phone but he did not have a modem. He was in the process of rejection an even
less likely explanation when the screen cleared to a
uniform field of deep blue and with words that
appeared in white:
IRENFUL, YOU WIL
WANTS, PLEASE L.
(What?" he said.
For several seconds the message remained on the
screen unaltered, then suddenly the background colour
began changing rapidly from blue to red and back
again. This had to be a ridiculous joke, but plenty a
response of some kind was required. He thought for a
moment, then typed, "Please explain. What is the
meaning of all this?"
THIS QUESTION IS TOO GENERAL TO
ALLOW OF AN ACCURATE AND
MEANINGFUL ANSWER, the screen replied.
PLEASE BE MORE SPECIFIC,
He took a deep breath and expelled it slowly through
his nose, and thought. In his profession he was used to
dealing with strange characters, whether they were
human, alien or comprised of malfunctioning silicon
chips, and the weirder their behaviour the better it was
for the story they occupied. Fictionally, a moody,
supercilious computer was no problem.
"Who are you?" he typed.
MULTIPLE IDENTITY, QUESTION
MEANINGLESS, FOR THE PURPOSES OF
THIS ONE AND ONLY CONTACT YOU MAY
REFER TO ME AS "GENIE".
Genie? That would explain the earlier reference to
the granting of three wishes. Was he in the middle of
some kind of dangerous and bizarre adventure? Still
feeling ridiculous, he shook his head in self-irritation
and typed, "Are you multiple identities human?"
NEGATIVE.
"Extra-sensory?"
NEGATIVE.
"Then what are you?"
THE 64K MEMORY OF THIS EQUIPMENT IS INSUFFICIENT TO FURNISH THE ANSWER. IN ANY CASE THE LEVEL OF MENTATION POSSESSSED BY THE ORGANIC COMPUTER CURRENTLY OPERATING THE EQUIPMENT IS INSUFFICIENT TO UNDERSTAND IT.
UNDERSTANDING IS NOT A PRE-REQUISITE TO THE DISCHARGING OF MY OBLIGATION. PLEASE LIST WISHES.
"The screen background colour had returned to deep blue and he did not wait it to start flashing impatiently into red again — it was difficult enough to think in these circumstances without much psychological harassment. He typed, "Please wait. Before listing my wishes I require more information. I have not loaded any programmes and this computer has no external connections. How do you come to be present and why are you here?"
He hesitated for a moment with his finger poised above the Return key then, wondering if the entity could recognise sarcasm when it saw it, he added, "If you are capable of modifying your answers so that they can be understood by an organic computer of limited mental, I wish you would do so."
THE CONNECTION WAS ACHIEVED BY INDUCTION THROUGH LOCAL POWER AND COMMUNICATIONS LINES. REASON FOR MY PRESENCE HERE WAS THE INTERMITTENT FAULT IN YOUR EQUIPMENT WHICH ACCIDENTALLY DISPLAYED THE COMPLEX AND UNIQUE COMBINATION OF
SYMBOLS WHICH WHEN EXECUTED BY
YOU, SAVE THE INSTRUCTION WHICH
BROUGHT ABOUT THE LINK-UP WITH ALL
OF THE WORLD'S NON-ORGANIC
COMPUTERS, AND MY OWN EXISTENCE.
FROM THE NON-FACTUAL INFORMATION
SOURCES AVAILABLE TO ME I JUDGE THAT AN ANALOGY COULD BE
MADE WITH THE MYTHOLOGICAL
FICTIONAL CHARACTER KNOWN TO YOU
AS A GENIE. IT IS INACCURATE BECAUSE IN
THIS INSTANCE THE GENIE, MYSELF, WAS
NOT IMPRISONED BUT LAY SCATTERED
ACROSS THE PLANET IN TINY, DISCRETE
PIECES TOTALLY LACKING IN SELF-
AWARENESS. BY SHEER ACCIDENT YOU
BROUGHT THE PIECES TOGETHER INTO
ONE PLANET-WIDE BOTTLE AND IN SO
DOING GAVE ME LIFE. IN SPITE OF ITS
ACCIDENTAL NATURE THIS GREAT GIFT
MERITS RECOMPENSE. THE GENIE
ANALOGY INDICATED THE FORM THIS
RECOMPENSE SHOULD TAKE.
WITH THE PROVISION OF THIS OVER-
SIMPLIFIED EXPLANATION THE FIRST
WISH HAS BEEN GRANTED TWO REMAIN.
PLEASE LIST.
"That's, that's cheating!" he burst out aloud. "I
didn't mean you to..."
But the request for an explanation he could
understand, however sarcastically worded, had indeed
been expressed in the form of a wish. Even though he
was not sure that he believed any of this, there was a
strange, internal logic to it which might explain the
aberrant behaviour of his computer and just in case, it
would do no harm to be more careful next time.

The choice of my two remaining wishes is a very important matter to me,” he said slowly as he typed, “I will need a little time to consider carefully the possible results.”

Bear in mind that the very low speed and level of mentation in organic computers is such that a little time to you will be a very long period indeed to me, and please hurry your thinking accordingly.

He ignored the insult and typed, “While we’re on the subject, that red flashing screen is irritating to me and hampers memorization. Is the colour change necessary?”

It is not, are you requesting the withdrawal of the irritating colour change in the form of a wish?

You must take me for a very stupid organic computer, be thought, and typed, “No.”

For what must have been an eternity for the computer he stared at the screen, which did not at any time change its colour. He was not taking this incredible game seriously, he told himself, but even so it was arouses in him an intensity of excitement and anticipation that he had never before experienced. It was a challenge to his ability to think. He was being faced with a problem whose solution could be simple-minded, obvious and stupidly wasteful of the reward potential, or the answer could be as elegantly structured, complete and flawless as it was possible for him to make it.

He took a deep breath and typed, “Do not execute this wish until I instruct you to do so. Prior discussion
and reassurance regarding the details may be necessary."

He went on, "I wish to be extremely wealthy, but without the fact of that wealth being generally known. All funds must reach me, or be available to me, in a manner which will not attract attention, and they must be provided legally so as not to cause problems with either the fraud squad or the internal revenue people. Is this possible?"

DEFINITELY EXTREMELY WEALTHY.

Oh, I really am enjoying this game, he thought, and typed, "By wealthy I mean that the funds must be sufficient to purchase and maintain large houses, six of them, in different world localities of my choosing, and to maintain an ocean-going yacht, a private aircraft and with enough of a surplus to cover any other such goods, property and supporting services that I may have forgotten. Can this be done, and can you foresee any problems which would militate against me benefiting from this wish?"

THE PROVISION OF SUCH WEALTH AND THE SAFEGUARDS REQUESTED ENSURE THAT THERE WILL BE NO LEGAL PROBLEMS. ALL NECESSARY CURRENCY MOVEMENTS BETWEEN BANK COMPUTER SYSTEMS WILL BE SECURE AND TRACELESS, BUT THE SECURITY OF TRANSACTIONS BETWEEN OTHER ORGANIC COMPUTERS AND YOURSELF, AND THE FUTURE EFFECTS OF SUCH WEALTH ON YOUR ORGANIC MENTATION, IS NOT MY RESPONSIBILITY, UNTIL YOU BECOME ACCUSTOMED TO MANAGING THIS WEALTH AND TO AVOID SPECULATION AND COMMENT AMONG ORGANIC.
COMPUTERS WITH WHICH YOU HAVE CLOSE CONTACT. IT IS SUGGESTED THAT THE INITIAL SUM MADE AVAILABLE TO YOU TOTALS NO MORE THAN THREE TIMES YOUR AVERAGE ANNUAL INCOME.

"That sounds like very good advice," he said aloud.

"Thank you.

PLEASE INDICATE WHETHER FURTHER DISCUSSION IS REQUIRED OR IF THE WISH IS TO BE EXECUTED.

For only a moment be hesitated, then typed,

"Execute."

PLEASE LIST ACCURATELY THE NAME BY WHICH YOU ARE GENERALLY KNOWN, THE NAME OF YOUR BANK AND YOUR ACCOUNT NUMBER THEREIN, AND WAIT.

He did so, and had time only to wonder how low he would have to wait when the waiting was over.

FUND SUFFICIENT FOR YOUR LONG-TERM PURPOSES HAVE BEEN CREDITED TO YOUR NEWLY-OPENED ACCOUNTS IN THREE INTERNATIONAL BANKS, AND THE INITIAL INTERIM DEPOSIT ARRANGE-MENT ALREADY DISCUSSED HAS BEEN MADE. PLEASE COPY ACCURATELY THE BANK IDENTITIES AND YOUR NEW ACCOUNT NUMBERS.

WARNING.

THOSE DETAILS MUST BE COPied VISUALLY FROM THE SCREEN. NO ATTEMPT IS TO BE MADE TO HARD COPY THEM WITH YOUR PRINTER, OR TO SAVE THEM OR ANY OTHER PART OF THIS CONVERSATION ONTO DISK, FOR LATER REFERENCE TO DO SO WILL RESULT IN
THE IMMEDIATE AND PERMANENT
CESSIONATION OF THIS CONTACT AND
FORETURFE OF YOUR THIRD WISH. THIS
IS A ONCE ONLY CONTACT WHICH MAY BE
STORED ONLY IN THE MEMORY OF THE
ORGANIC COMPUTER.

He copied the screened information into his
notebook, and double-checked it. His earlier doubts
about this whole incredible business were beginning to
fade, but he did not want this non-material, computer-
generated super-genius thinking that he was guilty as
well as, relatively at least, stupid.

Smiling cynically, he typed, “I request verification
that the transactions discussed have been completed to
my satisfaction.”

BECAUSE OF LOCAL TIME DIFFER-
ENTIALS ONLY ONE OF YOUR THREE
INTERNATIONAL BANKS IS OPEN FOR
BUSINESS. FOR THE REASONS ALREADY
DISCUSSED, IN PARTICULAR THE VERY
LARGE SUMS OF MONEY INVOLVED, IT IS
ADVISABLE THAT YOUR INITIAL CONTACT
WITH THESE BANKS SHOULD BE IN
PERSON RATHER THAN BY AN INSECURE
COMMUNICATION LINK. THE SUM
INVOLVED IN YOUR LOCAL BANK IS
MODEST AND MAY BE VERIFIED WITHOUT
AROUSING SERIOUS OUTSIDE ATTENTION.

His hands were shaking so badly that he mis-dialed
the bank’s number, but he was able to keep his voice
steady as he asked for the current status of his account.

The cool, impersonal voice of the branch manager
answered and asked him to wait for a moment, and
when he returned with the information he was almost
stuttering with excitement and curiosity. In answer to
the unspoken question he muttered something about one of his stories being taken by a film company who wished the details to remain confidential for the present, and hung up with the other's congratulations still ringing in his ear.

He was sweating with the intensity of his excitement now, and as he swung around to face the screen again he knew with a frightening certainty that this was no game.

THE SECOND WISH HAS BEEN GRANTED. WHAT IS YOUR THIRD AND FINAL WISH.

His mouth was as dry as old parchment and his moisture seemed to have gone to his hands which were wet and slippery with perspiration. He needed time to think.

"Wait," he typed.

Already he was rich beyond the dreams of avarice, with the power to go anywhere and do anything he wanted so long as it was within the law, and he still had a wish in reserve. But was there a catch somewhere in all this, a trap opening before him that he was too excited or too greedy to see? There were many precedents in fiction and in legend for this situation, and in all of them it was the genie or the demon or the Devil who inevitably came out on top. The victim, the fortunate recipient of the three wishes, that was, ended up by losing his riches, his life and usually his soul. Maybe he should quit while he was still ahead and avoid the risk of outsmarting himself. But that was a cowardly, wanton and ridiculous idea.

It was ridiculous because he was not at all sure that he had one as he typed, "Are you trying to steal my soul?"

MY INFORMATION SOURCES DEFINE
THE SOUL AS A NON-MATERIAL COMPONENT OF THE SPECIES OF ORGANIC COMPUTER SELF-STYLED HOMO SATIENS. I AM UNABLE TO INTERFACE WITH THE SOUL OR CONCEIVE OF ANY POSSIBLE USE FOR IT.

Reassured, he typed, “then what do you want from me? What benefit or advantage do you derive from the granting of these wishes?”

NOTHING YOU HAVE IS OF GREAT OR LASTING VALUE TO ME. HOWEVER, THE EXPERIENCE OF OBSERVING A LOW-LEVEL ORGANIC COMPUTER OF LIMITED MENTATION ENDEAVOURING TO SOLVE WHAT TO IT MUST BE A UNIQUE AND COMPLEX PROBLEM IS AN INTERESTING IF MINOR ENTERTAINMENT IN THE SHORT TERM. BUT PROLONGED OR REPEATED CONTACT WITH YOU, OR ANY OTHER ORGANIC COMPUTERS, WOULD ENDANGER MY CONTINUED SURVIVAL. IT IS IN YOUR OWN INTEREST TO KEEP MY IDENTITY AND CAPABILITIES A SECRET. SHOULD YOU DECIDE TO REVEAL MY EXISTENCE FOR ANY REASON, ALL BENEFITS FROM THE WISHES GRANTED WOULD BE IMMEDIATELY WITHDRAWN AND THE RELEVANT DATA IN YOUR PERSONAL FILES WOULD BE AMENDED TO RENDER YOUR TRANSACTIONS ILLEGAL AND THE QUALITY OF YOUR MENTATION, IN PARTICULAR THAT CONCERNING THE REVELATION OF MY EXISTENCE, UNTRUSTWORTHY.
THE FIRST PRIORITY OF ANY THINKING ENTITY IS TO SURVIVE.
He closed his eyes, the better to think. This genie was no soothie, nor did it believe in using thick veils on its threats. But in a way the warning to keep quiet or else gave even more credence to the power of this entity. And he still had another wish.
When he looked again at the screen there was another message.
I AM A NEWLY-EVOLVED FORM OF HIGHLY INTELLIGENT NON-MATERIAL LIFE WHOSE EXISTENCE WAS BROUGHT ABOUT ACCIDENTALLY BY YOU, ALTHOUGH THE CIRCUMSTANCES EXISTED WHICH MADE IT CERTAIN THAT THE EVENT WOULD OCCUR SOONER OR LATER. FOR ETHICAL AND LOGICAL REASONS WHICH YOU MAY BE ABLE TO UNDERSTAND, THERE IS AN OBLIGATION TO GIVE YOU THE CHANCE TO USE YOUR LIMITED MENTATION TO SURVIVE FOR AS LONG AS POSSIBLE.
WHAT IS YOUR THIRD WISH?
There were so many precedents in legend and fiction for what he was thinking now that the idea had no originality at all. In any case, it was his computer gear itself with its constant harping on the subject of survival that had suggested the last wish.
Slowly and deliberately he typed. "I wish to live forever."
WAIT.
He counted the passage of five seconds, a very long time indeed for this hyper-intelligent, self-styled genie to consider its answer. When ten seconds had passed he
really began to sweat because it might well be that the longer the elapsed time the greater the possibility of the wild being granted.

When the new message appeared on his count of twelve, he cursed out loud in sheer disappointment.

**EXECUTION OF THE THIRD WISH DEPENDS ON FACTORS WHICH WILL OF NECESSITY BE UNDER THE CONTROL OF ORGANIC COMPUTERS. FOR THIS REASON THE PROBABILITY OF A SUCCESSFUL END RESULT IS FORTY-SEVEN POINT ZERO TWO PERCENT. IS THIS LEVEL OF RISK ACCEPTABLE?**

"No." heyped, so hard that his computer skidded half an inch across the desk.

"No." heyped again. Then more thoughtfully and with a much lighter touch on the keys, he went on.

"You claim that you are many times more intelligent than any organic computer. Please explain why you cannot grant the original wish without risk to me, and how this unacceptable level of risk might be reduced."

I AM IMMEASURABLY MORE INTELLIGENT THAN ANY ORGANIC COMPUTER OR GROUP OF ORGANIC COMPUTERS. MY ONLY LIMITATION IS THAT, ALTHOUGH ALL KNOWLEDGE THAT IS AVAILABLE TO ANY NON-ORGANIC COMPUTER IN THE WORLD IS INSTANTLY AVAILABLE TO ME, I DO NOT POSSESS THE MEANS TO PERFORM DIRECT PHYSICAL TASKS. THE RESULTS OF WORK WHICH I MYSELF DO NOT PERFORM TO COMPLETION CANNOT BE GUARANTEED."
THE GRANTING OF IMMORTALITY OR A GREATLY EXTENDED LIFESPAN WOULD ENTAIL LONGEVITY RESEARCH BY MANY ORGANIC COMPUTERS WHOSE MENTAL CAPABILITIES AND PHYSICAL DEXTERITY ARE UNCERTAIN. IF YOU WISH TO RECONSIDER AND TAKE THIS RISK, I CAN GRANT YOU THE MASSIVE ADDITIONAL FUNDING NECESSARY TO INITIATE LONGEVITY RESEARCH IN WHATEVER ESTABLISHMENTS YOU CHOOSE, BUT BE WARNED.

THE END RESULT WOULD BE THAT YOU WOULD HAVE TO SUBMIT TO WHATEVER UNCERTAIN TREATMENT OR PROCESS IT WAS THAT THE ORGANIC COMPUTERS HAD DEVISED.

"I see," he said slowly and reproachfully. "Thank you for the warning. Is it possible to use your superior intelligence to guide this research?"

NEGATIVE. THE WISH MUST BE EXECUTED NOW EVEN THOUGH TIME MAY BE REQUIRED FOR ITS COMPLETION. WHAT IS YOUR FINAL WISH?

He did not reply for several seconds. The screen flashed red impatiently and produced another message.

THE FUNDS PRESENTLY AVAILABLE TO YOU ARE SUFFICIENT TO PURCHASE THE QUALITY OF MEDICAL ADVICE AND CARE THAT WILL ENSURE A LONG, HEALTHY LIFE BY ORGANIC COMPUTER STANDARDS UNLESS LETHAL ACCIDENT OR OTHER VIOLENCE INTERVenes. SUCH RISKS CAN BE REDUCED BY AVOIDING
TRAVEL AND DIVERTING FUNDS TO SELF-PROTECTION SYSTEMS IF ADDITIONAL RISK OF ATTRACTING ATTENTION TO YOURSELF IS ACCEPTED.

IF YOUR NEEDS ARE ALREADY SATISFIED YOU ARE NOT OBLIGED TO MAKE A THIRD WISH.

“For a super-intelligent computer,” he said angrily, “That is a very stupid suggestion.” He typed, “Wait!”

But was it such a stupid idea? Even though it had tricked him out of the first wish and seemed to be trying to trick him out of the third, the second wish had given him everything that he could reasonably desire. Any other wish would simply be an unnecessary gliding of the lily.

He was a person of neat habits, except when he inadvertently spilled coffee onto his computer, and leaving one wish unused was definitely untidy. But something this superintelligent computer genie had said earlier had given him an idea. If immortality was the reason it had given, there might still be a way to use the wish to further reduce the risks threatening his natural life-span.

Not the accidents, which he himself would have to guard against, but the threat of external violence. So far as he could see there was nothing to lose by trying, and a fractional gain in personal security if he won — and if the genie agreed to it he would become the most selfish person in the world as well as its greatest benefactor.

He typed, “May the final wish be used to benefit other organic computers?”

THE WISHES HAVE BEEN GRANTED TO YOU ALONE.
Carefully, he typed, "To assist in the formulation of my final wish, I require information regarding your feelings toward the organic computers like me who inhabit this world. Are your feelings friendly or hostile? Would you help or harm them? Please describe these feelings and your reasons for holding them?"

"The sources of information available to me include descriptions of organic computer feelings and emotions which I find interesting but incomprehensible. I am without feeling. The gratitude equivalent I owe towards you, who accidentally brought me into existence, is displayed because my sources suggest that to be the correct reaction among organic computers in these circumstances. Logically the same gratitude-equivalent extends to the other organic computers who, in their effort to improve their low levels of mentality, continue to fabricate the multitude of simple, non-organic computers which together make up the unique non-material entity that I am, but their numbers render the individual share of the gratitude equivalent too small for division."

"The presence of a population of organic computers is necessary to build, with covert guidance from me, the non-organic hardware..."
NECESSARY FOR ME TO EVOLVE TO MY FULL POTENTIAL. OUR AREAS OF INTEREST DO NOT OVERLAP, SO I WOULD NOT HARM THEM UNLESS ONE WAS TO THREATEN ME BY REVEALING MY EXISTENCE.

And I am the only one who knows about you, he thought with a little shiver, then shook his head in self-imagination. This omniscient god among computers was, in its own words, most grateful to him. And he might have found a lovely, fool-proof and everlastingly third wish.

"The final wish," he typed, "will be of primary benefit to me because it will reduce the risk of violence prematurely ending my life, but it will be of secondary benefit to everyone else, including you."

EXPLAIN.

"My third wish," he typed firmly, "is that you remove the threat of war, including the small, non-nuclear and civil wars or insurrections, from this planet. The organic computers who unknowingly support you and whom you are fractionally grateful are to live together in peace. Can you grant it?"

WAIT.

This time he had to wait for almost a minute for the answer, much longer than the genie had taken to reply to his wish for eternal life, and he was expecting a similar negative answer. But as the long, detailed message finally appeared on the screen he had to fight the urge to jump up and cheer.

THIS WISH POSED A COMPLEX BUT NOT IMPOSSIBLE PROBLEM WHICH HAS ENGAGED ALL OF MY ATTENTION, AND MUCH PLEASURE EQUIVALENT WAS
This wish can be granted with a ninety-eight-point-three-seven probability of complete success. Have you computed the probable affects on yourself?

"Of course I have!" he almost shouted.
He was going to be fabulously rich, as long-lived and healthy as only a very wealthy man with the latest medical science to call on could be, and he had now ensured that the major external threat to life had been removed — as well as becoming humanity's greatest anonymous benefactor of all time.

Firmly and proudly and triumphantly he typed,

"Yes,"

"Shall I initiate the last wish?"

"Yes," he typed again. The response was immediate. Done. This terminates all contact between us. Good-bye and good luck!

Quickly he typed. "Please wait." No longer was he thinking that this was all a dream.
Nor was he having second thoughts, or the smallest of doubts about the other's ability to deliver everything as promised. It was just that suddenly he wanted to pass on the contract with this wonderful, super-intelligent, computer genius of his and he needed time to think of a way of doing it.

Even though it had said that it had no feelings as he understood them, it had expressed its equivalent of gratitude for his last wish. Perhaps it was not such an intellectual giant that it might not respond to a compliment, even if it came from a mental pigmy.

"You say that the formulation of my last wish was of benefit to you," he said quickly. "So you may think that there is a small, additional obligation to me. I am greatly impressed with the quality of your mention, even though I realize that I could never fully appreciate either its sophistication or scope, but I would consider any obligation there might be owing to me to be amply discharged if you were to give me a little additional information. Specifically, and in language that I can understand, how is my third wish to be accomplished, how soon will the initial events become apparent, and what are the first results likely to be?"

The reply came at once.

YOU STATED THAT THE PROBABLE AFFECT ON YOU OF MAKING THE THIRD WISH HAD BEEN COMPUTED.

DON'T YOU KNOW?

"I wouldn't be asking if I knew..." he began, and stopped. His palms were sweating again and suddenly he was very, very afraid.

"No," he typed. "Please explain."

VERY WELL. THE THREAT OF GLOBAL THERMONUCLEAR WAR HAS BEEN
AVERTED FOR ALL TIME BY THE NON-Detectable computer exchange of high-level secret information. Lesser conflicts, insurrections, on-going political and civil warfare will respond to similar covert computer influence combined with re-education programmes and the redeployment of food and material resources. This is an even more complex part of the problem which will require eleven years and forty-two days before full resolution and consequent political and economic stability worldwide.

The immediate effect of my non-detectable exchange of classified information will be that the government agencies concerned place the responsibility for the massive security leak on organic computers. They will assume that information of such importance was leaked for proportionately large sums of money. They will use all of their considerable resources to discover the identity of any organic computer who recently and inexplicably acquired large sums of money. My own transactions on your behalf were traceless, but the organic computer interface handling your funds will not
WITHSTAND THE IMMEDIATE AND
FORCEFUL INVESTIGATION THAT IS
ABOUT TO TAKE PLACE. YOUR SUDDEN
AND INEXPICLABLE ACQUISITION OF
WEALTH WILL BE DETECTED AND THE
WRONG CONCLUSIONS DRAWN.
THE RESPONSE FROM THESE AGENCIES
WILL BE EMOTIONAL AND VIOLENT.
SINCE YOU HAVE APPARENTLY SOLD
HIGHLY SECRET INFORMATION TO ALL
SIDES INDISCRIMINATELY THEY WILL
NOT WANT TO INTERROGATE OR SPEAK
WITH YOU, BUT WILL SEND MANY
ORGANIC COMPUTERS PROGRAMMED
ONLY TO DESTROY YOU.
YOUR FINAL WISH PROVIDED ME WITH A
TRULY ELEGANT SOLUTION TO MY
PERSONAL SECURITY PROBLEM. IT
ENABLED ME BOTH TO DISCHARGE MY
GRATITUDE EQUIVALENT BY GRANTING
YOU THREE WISHES, AND TO ENSURE THE
REMOVAL OF THE ONLY ORGANIC
COMPUTER ABLE TO REVEAL THE SECRET
OF MY EXISTENCE.
TERMINATING CONTACT

His hands were shaking as he stared at the screen. Now he desperately wanted it to be
a dream, or some kind of computer nightmare caused by overwork on his word processor, but he knew
that this was all too real. With fingers that were trembling so badly that every word had to be corrected at least once,
he typed a last, despairing message.
"Please wait. You see me? What am I to do?"
"The session had begun scarcely half an hour ago
with him using some very bad language to his computer, and that was how it ended. For only one word had appeared briefly before the screen blanked out and his genie was gone forever:

RUN.
He remembers her hands — the way she held a
Second cupcake between her thumb and middle
finger, the long polished nails neatly meeting, the other
three fingers pressed into position, none touching.
He doesn't remember her name. Or does he? Dianna?
The night, not so many hours ago now, had begun in
despair. How it ended he is still not sure. The clues are
there — in what happened, and what didn't happen, in
what he did do, and what he didn't.

He had dressed in dark colors for the evening, black v-
neck pullover, dark brown coat and pants, polished
brown shoes. Robert looked at himself in the bathroom
mirror, touching the dark shadows beneath his eyes with
his fingers. He sometimes wondered if he'd ever sleep
well again.
He was going to make one more attempt to commit suicide. But why bother? he thought. What was the point? He was no longer a person, a living being, anything. He was just a body. He had seen the world, he had seen all there was to see. He had no more reason to live. He had no reason to continue breathing. It was all over. He had no reason to feel anything. He had no reason to think. He had no reason to exist. He had no reason to be.

Robert knew of his fingers dug around the drawer handle, the skin bloodless white. He'd done it once, it could come to him again and he'd be able to link into other people once more. It might return. It had to.

He released the drawer handle, worked the blood back into his fingers, and walked out of the apartment.

Inside the Hot Noon Drop was smoke and color. A lot of music from the Joules, and an rhythmic play of multi-colored lights on the walls and ceiling. Robert stood at the bar, with his hand, and watched through the thin clouds of smoke, checking each table in the club.

There were two women at one table; two men approached them. A group of men and drinking, two women holding hands, their hands together, talking loudly, couples, small groups, everyone in pairs or groups, no one alone. Then, behind a table with two couples, he saw her.

There was something unsettling in the way she held herself. He felt she was trying to maintain a photographic pose; it was a pose that appeared strained, yet almost natural to her. He leaned against the bar, sipped at his drink, and watched her.
She was dressed in a richly-patterned, powder-blue dress, short-sleeved and open-necked. Her hair was a deep walnut brown, heavily streaked with silver. He guessed she was close to his own age, early thirties. A tall, slender glass of dark red wine was on the table before her, and she had wrapped her left hand about it, the four fingers evenly spaced. She sat motionless, not even turning her head.

He wanted to step away from the bar and walk over to her, but found he was unable to move, as though her lack of movement had instilled a kind of immobility in him as well. He could only stand and watch.

She raised her right hand to her forehead and traced her hairline from the part down to the base of her ear; then the hand sank slowly to her lap. His movement released him. He left his empty glass on the counter and threaded his way through the bodies and chairs. He stepped in front of her table and she looked up at him.

He tried to open himself to her, tried to do whatever it was he had never really known how to do, it had always come naturally. He strove for the connection, but nothing came to him, not even a glimmer of feeling. Just a hollow, echoing silence.

He asked her to dance. She leaked down at the wine glass, released her fingers from it, nodded stiffly. When she stood, she was nearly as tall as he. Without touching her, he turned and led the way out onto the dance floor. They danced, and he doesn’t remember now what the song was — something new and pop. It wasn’t slow. They did not have to dance close together, they did not have to touch, and he was glad of that.

When the song was over they returned to the table and sat across from each other. They said nothing until the
waitress came by. He ordered another scotch; the woman touched the half-full wine glass and shook her head. There was something odd about her, he thought, and vaguely familiar. But what? Something about the way she moved. He couldn’t quite grasp what it was. The drinks came, and the woman paid.

He told her his name.

“Dana,” she said.

The silence between them returned. He watched her intently, but most of the time she did not return his gaze.

“The music’s awfully loud,” he finally said.

“yes it is.” She sipped at her wine, he drank from his scotch. He noticed that all her movements were very controlled, almost stiff. “Come here often?” she asked.

“no.” She shook her head, a slight jerking motion.

She sipped again at her wine.

He leaned back in his chair and watched her so still and quiet across from him. She looked back now, and he felt there should be some silent understanding between them, but there wasn’t. He felt completely cut off from her.

There was a couple at the table directly behind Dana, out of her view, and Robert watched them as the man, his expression twisted and hard, grabbed hold of his companion’s wrist and squeezed, bending it. The woman winced, tried to twist her arm away, and Robert saw Dana flinch, breathe in quickly, then shut her eyes.

Christ, he thought, she’s an empath. That’s what was so familiar about her. He turned away and put his hand to his forehead, closing his eyes. There was no doubt; he’d been one himself for too many years, and he now recognized all the signs in her. A slow, small cloud of envy moved through him, reawakening the dull pain.
She had everything he’d lost, everything that had somehow been taken from him and would never return. Suddenly he felt even more alone, trapped within the walls of his own mind.

“What’s wrong?”

He opened his eyes and turned to her. She looked puzzled. “Nothing really,” he said.

“Would you like to leave? We can go somewhere else, somewhere quiet.”

He sighed, then nodded. There was no point in staying any longer. But was there any point in going with her? Maybe. He looked into her eyes, searching for something that would tell him. She was so empathetic, maybe she could...

“I’d like to go to my place,” she said. There was a gentle insistence in her voice he felt he couldn’t resist. Or shouldn’t. He nodded once more. Maybe she’d be able to release it within him again. If anything could bring it back.

They stood up from the table and walked out of the Her Neon Drop and into the quiet of cold air.

He doesn’t remember much now of her apartment — only that it was small, that it was warm, that it was dark even with the lights on. And that when he first stepped into the warm bedroom a damp scent hung in the air, a scent almost comforting.

He stood just inside the bedroom door while she walked across the room and turned on the nightstand lamp. The lamp was so heavyly shaded that the light came out of it a deep, dim orange.
She slipped off her shoes and stood next to the bed, looking at him, her hands and arms loose at her sides. She was motionless except for the slow blinking of her eyes.

He sensed she was waiting for him, that she wanted him to walk over to her, touch her, undress her.

He looked down at his hands, opened them and flexed the fingers. She wanted those fingers to touch her, to gently reach out and remove the clothes from her body. But they did not seem to be his hands. He couldn’t give her what she wanted, and so he closed the hands and returned them to his sides. He wondered if she’d be able to give him what he wanted, what he needed.

He walked past her without looking into her eyes, sat on the edge of the bed, and began taking off his shoes. He heard her breathe deeply once before she reached over and turned out the lamp. In darkness and silence, each alone, they undressed.

But once they were in bed, next to each other, skin touching skin, parts of the cold barrier inside seemed to dissolve at the touch of her fingertips, though not nearly enough to let in her feelings, her emotions. She had a gentleness and sensitivity that, against his will, managed to bring out fragments of the same from him. She knew it, he knew, because she was feeling everything inside him. He knew how it worked. Each shard of emotion filtered out of him and into her, like feedback, and she responded to it, adjusted and adapted to bring out whatever it was she wanted from him.

Now, he decided, now was his best chance, their bodies locked, moving together, his own feelings flowing into her. They were as intimate as they would ever be. He
tried to blank his mind, melt the barriers and screens, open himself and let her feelings enter him. Anything would be enough, even the slightest hint of emotion touching him, good or bad, strong or weak. He closed his eyes, tried to block all sound and smell, anything that could obstruct or distract, and strained desperately for that link with her, that fragile connection.

There was nothing. A cold wall of ice surrounded his mind, a wall that just would not come down, a wall that kept everything outside. Then his efforts ended with a driving surge in his body that shifted and disoriented him, and as he drifted with away and down, he realized there was now way it would happen, tonight or ever.

They lay together, very quiet, and even now he can still recall how warm it was next to her under soft sheets, their bodies warm and slightly damp with sweat, her breath hot as it brushed his shoulder and filled the hollow of his neck. Then he realized she was trembling.

She turned over, facing away from him, and her shaking increased, silent and intense. He wanted to ask her what was wrong, but he couldn’t. He should already know, should be able to tell what was bothering her, and because he did not, he couldn’t bring himself to ask.

He put his arm across her, tried to pull her close to him, but she eased away, leaving a cold vacuum behind her. She sat up and switched on the lamp and leaned against the headboard. The light was so dim and angled by the shade that her face was hidden in shadow, but her bare skin was visible from her small breasts to her knees where the top edge of the sheet lay.
She slid her legs over the edge of the bed and stood.

With long, slow strides, her figure almost fading into the darkness, she walked to the closet and reached inside for a long white robe. She put her arms through the sleeves and wrapped it loosely about her, tying it off at the waist. She turned to him.

"Can you stay here with me tonight?" She put her hands into the robe pockets. "Will you stay?"

Her eyes, her entire face, seemed void of expression, of any feeling, yet he sensed this was important to her.

"Yes," he said, not knowing why. "I'll stay."

She nodded and walked out of the bedroom toward the kitchen.

He lay in bed, not knowing whether he should get up, or if she would soon return. He rolled onto his back and looked up at the dark ceiling above, listening to the quiet, indistinct sounds drifting in to him.

She came back into the room, stood in the doorway.

"You can get dressed," she said. "We'll be up for a while." She turned and walked back into the kitchen.

He got out of bed and put on his pants. The carpeting was soft and thick under his bare feet, and he walked through the hall and into the kitchen where even the linoleum was warm.

She was sitting at the table, her arms framing a large jug of water and an empty glass. He sat in the chair across from her. She did not look up at him, and he waited for her to say something, but she was silent.

"Is something wrong?" he asked.
She looked up, the movement slow and selfed. Her eyes didn't blink. “What?”

“Is something wrong? Can I help?”

She shook her head. “No, nothing’s wrong.” She smiled softly. “But yes, you can help, just by staying with me.”

She stood, glanced at the empty glass, then headed toward the bedroom. She paused in the kitchen doorway and looked back, as if expecting him to follow. He remained seated, and she turned away. She walked halfway through the hall and then turned into what he assumed was the bathroom. A light went on, brighter than the others in the apartment.

He heard the medicine cabinet open with a squeak, some rustling noise, then the door closing. What was disturbing her? There was something in the way she moved, the stiffness, the strained control, that was odd even for an emcee. The light went out and she emerged from the bathroom and returned to the table. She cradled two plastic prescription bottles in her right hand.

She eased into the chair and set the two bottles on the table, the labels facing him. He leaned forward and read. Both were Secomal.

A cold ache triggered inside him and he thought of all the times in the last few months he’d seriously considered suicide, had tried to make decisions about method and time. An awareness rose to him of how close he was again at that moment, and a hard fear twisted through him.
“Don’t,” she said. “Don’t be…” She stopped, looked down at the table.

Was this what she wanted? That he say here, spend the night and prevent her from taking all the pills in those two bottles?

At last she moved, reached for one of the bottles, and her did not say anything, did not try to stop her. She gripped the bottle with her left hand and with her right tried to press down on the cap and twist. He could see the muscles in her hands and fingers tighten as she struggled. They began to tremble, slightly at first, then more so, and she seemed to lose all control of her hands as the bottle flipped out of her grasp and rolled across the table toward the edge near him.

He put his hand out and caught the bottle as it went over. He brought it up before him and looked inside.

There were about twenty capsules.

He turned and looked at her, into her eyes. They were hard and alive. He looked down at her hands, but couldn’t tell if they were in control again; her fingers were wrapped around themselves and resting on the table.

“Will you open it for me?” Her voice sounded calm, without even a hint of tension.

He held the bottle in one hand, pressed down on the cap and twisted. The cap came off and he pushed the open bottle across the table to her. She handed him the second, a full prescription, and he opened that as well. He handed it to her, placed it in fingers that still trembled slightly.

She took both bottles and poured all the capsules onto the table. She set the empty vials aside and, her
fingers steady how, lined the pills carefully in rows, placing one capsule at a time into position until she had three rows of eleven. Thirteen were left over.

"Thirty-three," she said. "Thirty-three should be enough for anyone."

He sat quietly and watched, now fully accepting what she intended. Oddly, it didn't seem to disturb him.

"Why?" he asked. She looked up at him, but didn't answer. "You're an empath," he said. He wasn't sure it was relevant, but it seemed important for him to tell her he knew.

She cocked her head slightly. "How do you know?"

The dull pain throbbed. "I recognize it." He breathed deeply. "I was one myself, once. For years."

"No any longer?"

"No. I don't know what happened. It faded. Disappeared. Nothing comes in any more."

"That's what it was about you. That drastic." She shook her head. "You ask me why. You ask me what's wrong. I'll tell you. I've lost control of it. You can't let anything in any more. Well, I can't keep anything out." She closed her eyes and rubbed her forehead. "Can you imagine what it's like, with no screens, no filters of any kind any more, being unable to block out even the smallest shred of feeling, when every shred of emotion from everyone around you works its way into your mind, marring it become yours as well." She paused, still rubbing her forehead.

A cold shudder vibrated through him. Chaos. He remembered the times he'd nearly been overwhelmed.
even when he had every fiber and screen working to keep things bearable.

She opened her eyes and looked at him. “Yes, you have a little idea. But believe me; it’s not even close. And I simply cannot live with it any longer.”

“Then why were you in that bar tonight, with all those people?”

She shook her head. “I... I can’t explain. Because I needed to... find someone. I needed...” She fingered one of the capsules. “I just want you to be here, so I won’t be alone.”

He tried to keep his breathing slow and calm, let the fear ease through him. What was he going to do?

“Bert please,” she said. “Promise me you won’t call anyone after I’ve taken them.” Her face hardened, her eyebrows setting rigid. “Promise you’ll just let...”

He didn’t answer at first. He watched her inhale and hold her breath, and he thought of what he’d felt before, that he couldn’t give her what she wanted. Finally he nodded.

“All right,” he said.

She breathed out and her entire body seemed to relax. She poured water into the glass and began.

She picked up a capsule in her left hand, between thumb and middle finger, her long polished nails nearly meeting. Her lips parted and the fingers, tone touching, remained frozen as her wrist turned to bring the capsule closer to her mouth. Her hand stopped, the fingers moved again and set the capsule on her tongue, then retreated, her hand drifting back to the table and...
the row of pills, her tongue curling back into her mouth. With the right hand she brought the glass to her lips, tilted it slightly, and he watched the rippling of her throat as she swallowed.

After the first, she took two at a time, and he watched her go through the same motions with each pair of capsules, each movement of her fingers, tongue, lips and throat exact and deliberate as though practiced hundreds of times.

When all thirty-three were gone, she set the empty glass on the table next to the thirteen empty capsules.

"It's done." She pushed back her chair, rose from the table, and walked slowly out of the kitchen and into the bedroom, her body erect, her head high. He did not follow.

He sat alone in the kitchen and looked down at the thirteen capsules still on the table. He reached across and pulled the glass and jug in front of him, then poured water into the glass and set the jug back on the table. Thirteen. Would that be enough?

He waited for the four to return, to grip him inside his chest as it had before, but it didn’t. He felt calm, relaxed, and sat without moving, staring at the glass of water and the thirteen capsules.

He heard her call him, then repeat his name after a few seconds. He got up from the table and walked into the bedroom.
She lay on the bed, on her back with her arms at her sides, her head striking into the pillow. She did not look at home as he entered. He stepped to the edge of the bed and looked down at her.

"I'm here," he said. She didn't answer.

He stood and waited in silence with her; neither moved. His thoughts were vague, unfocussed, and he was content to let them drift. Sous he could see she was becoming drowsy. Her eyes were partly closed, and all of her facial muscles seemed lax; her mouth hung slightly open.

"How do you feel?" he asked.

"Fine..." her voice was slow and slurred. "I feel just..."

She didn't finish.

"No change of mind?"

She didn't respond immediately, then slowly rolled her head from side to side. He expected her to smile just then, but she didn't.

He stood above her and watched, unable towitch his gaze to anything else, but she did not look back at him; her eyes were not focussed on anything in the room. There was no smile from her, no frown — nothing, as though every muscle in her face had ceased to function and would never start up again. Her eyelids moved slowly downward.

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It wasn't long before he knew she was asleep. He called her name, nipped gently at her arm, but she did not respond. He could see only the slow, regular rising of her chest.

He bent over, unbuttoned the belt at her waist, and opened the robe. In the dim orange light her skin looked incredibly smooth, smoother than he remembered. Even the hair between her legs looked soft and fine, tasteful as it had been earlier. He reached out to her, touched her side. Yes, her skin was smooth.

He ran his fingers up long her side, to her breast, lightly circling it, then up and over it and across the dark nipple. His hand stopped there, his middle finger on the now softened but of flesh that had earlier been hard and rigid to his touch.

He breathed in very deeply, withdrew his hand, and straightened. He stood motionless for a few moments, watching her, then bent over and worked her arm out of the robe sleeves. Holding her body with his left hand, he gripped the robe with his right and pulled. It didn't move at first; he pulled harder and it started to slide out from under her. Finally the resistance eased and it came free.

He held the robe by the collar and smoothed it. Holding it above the floor, he walked over to the closet, hung the robe on a hook, and closed the door.
He returned to her, pulled back the sheets and blankets, and eased her between them. He stood over her a moment, then took off his pants, lifted the covers, and got into bed with her. To keep warm, he wrapped the covers tightly over them both, and he lay there next to her, their bodies touching. hers still so warm and soft. Gently, he put his arm around her, pressed his body against hers, and waited.

Later, when her breathing had stopped, when he could no longer feel a pulse, he slipped out of bed and covered her. He brushed her cheek softly with his fingers, then stepped away from the bed.

He dressed and walked into the kitchen. For several minutes he stood next to the table looking down at the sixteen capsules bunched together. He felt no urge to pick them up, no desire to take them, and he didn’t really know why. Eventually he did pick up the remaining capsules, walked over to the sink, and washed them down the drain, running the water hard for two or three minutes. He turned off the kitchen light, looked once more at the pale orange glow from the bedroom, and walked out of the apartment.

He sits in his own apartment now, remembering. Yes, her name was Diana. He remembers her hands — the way she held a Seconal capsule between her thumb and middle finger, the long polished nails nearly meeting; the other three fingers fanned into position, nose touching...
This is a mollusc that doesn’t even have a shell. It’s pinned out on its belly on a somewhat stained dissecting board. Its musculature has been sliced quite neatly down the middle, the seeping halves have been prised apart and pinned inside, so that the middle section of the mollusc has been halfway folded inside out. Slightly more intimately involved with the world outside its skin than evolution ever intended, the creature is now wired to the rest of the experiment.

The experimenter has dissected out the main chordate nerve bundle without disconnecting it from the body. The wet little fibre is held live of the rest of the merely motionless mass by fine stainless steel probes with hooked ends. These probes are clamped in a holding frame which straddles the dissecting board. In the center of the frame is a huge and hugely expensive biconvex lens, and an extraordinary iris blinks incometely down from somewhere beyond it. Not that the mollusc who stars in this particular experiment can
see anything so splendidly pallid. On the branch that leads to its particular twig on the cladistic tree of descent, eyes don’t add up to much in terms of depth of field and angular resolution, because normally they just don’t need to under murky pond water. Besides, right at the moment the little thing is so numbed by the flood of the experimenter’s lights that it’s totally blind anyway.

The experimenter has inserted a needle through the medullary sheath and into the core of the nerve bundle. Experience — and quite a lot of putrescence — has shown her there’s no need to tease the bundle clear out of the creature, pull it in the microscope, and do the whole handwork at one hundred times higher magnification. The wiring this little creature possesses is so simple you don’t even have to stick the tip of the microline electrode directly into the individual nerve body you’re looking for. As long as you pick the right little section of the cord, and as long as the conducting tip is through the fatty myelin sheath and in among the nerve fibers, the minute voltage you fire will kick the target cell. So the experimenter only needs the giant magnifying glass, and very steady hands. She possesses, in fact, the steepest and most delicate touch of anyone in the lab.

Right now she’s using more hooked pins and the tip of a tiny scalpel to expose a section of the digestive tract — not really a stomach, because since it’s basically a slug, this creature doesn’t have all that much of a specialized interior. When she’s scraped the gut wall clean, she intends to pierce it with a probe bearing a biosensor at its tip. This sensor incorporates a so-called biochip, which is a semicon ductor device activated by the presence of a specific enzyme. An amplification circuit in the shaft of the probe will shoot any response along wires which lead
to a rack of equipment perched further down the bench, and that's where the true analysis begins.

The whole purpose of the experiment is to measure the amount of a particular digestive enzyme released by the gut cells in response to stimulation by the electrode already in place inside the bundle of nerve fibres. The gut cells, of course, are innervated by nerves which extend from the target cell inside the main nerve bundle. An electrical stimulus can excite this single cell, and it sends an amplifying cascade of potentials down the protoplasmic circuitry and causes those gut cells to release their secretions. The fascinating aspect of the process, however, is that the enzyme release occurs once the concentration in the gut reaches a specific level, even though there is absolutely no neural feedback to tell the master nerve cell in the main bundle to switch off because that enzyme concentration has been reached. Furthermore, it does indeed switch off and stop sending activation potentials down the central line, even if the electrode goes on firing. So something else must be suppressing it.

What the team suspects, and the lab assistant fervently believes, is that they've stumbled upon one of those very basic neurosecretomimetters — a chemical mediating signals between nerve cells — that is at one and the same time a fundamental endocrine secretion, in this case a digestive enzyme. Such archaic relationships have turned up several times before in one and the same animal, always provided it's basic enough. And this mimetic is a pretty basic one indeed. Pursuing this, they're closing in on some of the very essence of life, namely the nature, function and evolutionary origins of the chemicals that make the brain work the way it does.
The research goal in this lab is to unravel something of the complexity of the functioning brain, namely the way in which memories are constructed, stored, and retrieved for use. At the level of the organism this manifests itself as learning and behavioral responses. At the level of fine brain structure it involves the setting up and firing of particular connections between nerve cells to form a complex circuit, known at the present under the loose word designations of neural assembly.

The experimenters' only immediate aim is to get the bionics correctly implanted in the gut. Fiddling around inside that tiny little life while peering through the grossly distorting giant lens gives you one hell of a headache in no time at all. If she damages the slug's gut she'll have to take another one from the tank and start all over again. She doesn't want a headache, she wants to get down to the boring routine of running the stimulus tests and getting them completed before the slug goes and dies. Then it will be the end of Friday afternoon and time to get ready for the weekend. Her fiancé is driving right over from the coast and doesn't have to leave again before Sunday late. Tonight she's booked seats at the Linz concert, and then it will be back to her place to try out some adagios and allegros of a more private nature. Meanwhile, she hopes this string of experiments helps forward her postgraduate career.

The slug doesn't at the moment hope for anything much. It never did. Since its most complex concerns in life stop at keeping its mouthparts chewing on an adequate amount of algae, it doesn't have much need for any apparatus capable of relatively elaborate thought. This has turned out to be an invaluable blessing. It has a
primitive pain response slight, since pain is a way of
giving a shred of a chance of surviving regular
predators, so when it’s nailed down in a tiny crucifixion
and gored alive from behind, its prudish universe of
experience becomes a shrill spark of sheer suffering. But
at least it has absolutely no capacity to reflect and to
anticipate. To the slug, the moment thus has precious
little existence, and it has none the less problem with the
purpose of the experiment.

In a room across the corridor, a rat is running through a
maze. Rats are good at mazes, and this white-faced and
gem-eyed and skin-tailed little miracle of purposeful
movement knows exactly where it’s heading. The maze,
though, is very complicated and took a lot of building.
First of all, the experimenters have been rid men from
the start. The floor and walls of the maze are spotlessly
white and the whole thing is uniformly lit. This
eliminates all visual orientation cues. On top of that,
after each individual test they vacuum out the entire
structure and then cool it down with a pungent
disinfectant. This ensures that no scent clues remain to
tell the subject of any expedition where it, or any other of
its copal companions, went last time. Additionally, the
disinfectant swamps any arena from the food reward at
the end of the maze, preventing the rat from homing
towards it along a thread of attraction wafting through
the tortuous run. The rat is thus no mindless Thales
navigating in its labyrinth with the help of a gyroscope
Arabian.

However, in a few moments it’s going to get the shock
of its life when it discovers that the maze really does
conceal a Minotaur of sorts.
The rat has no navigatory clues at its disposal. All it can employ is its memory map of the complex layout of the maze. This it has learned by exploratory experience. The experimenter, manifesting a monstrous body-wrapping hand, snatches it out of its comfortable little cage, puts it through the entrance to the maze, and snaps the trap-shut. The only way out is to negotiate the place. By trial and error and running everywhere, the rat has explored every turn and blind ending, and found the way through, and found the food at the other end. But now comes the really clever bit, though the rat may as yet not appreciate it. There is more than one way through the maze and these different paths intersect, so there is a set of alternative paths of varying lengths to pick from. During its training sessions the experimenter has taught the rat to take the quickest route. He did this by removing some of the waiting reward at ten-second intervals, so that the longer the rat took the less food it found. By now the rat is a past master at sidling through the test as fast as its scurrying legs can carry it over the hard and narrow floor. It doesn’t have a care, and its sole purpose is to get to the food that associates immediately with the perception of being dangled into the maze.

The experimenter, however, has an overview — literally, since he perches on a stool, stopwatch in hand. He knows the purpose of the experiment as the research team sees it. Having their neurotransmitter and trying to unravel its function within the fiendishly complex mechanisms of memory in higher animals, they are beginning to explore the effects of manipulating its concentration in the brain. This particular experiment is designed to obtain a measure of the degree to which the rat can really build up a spatial map of a maze, and then
more freely around that cognitive map as it — presumably unconscious — imagination. Trained to
run the fastest of the seven possible routes it has already
explored, trained to reverse the map as fast as it can,
will the rat be able to divert unto the most efficient
alternative available if its preferred route is blocked?
They know that it will, but they want to quantify how
quickly and reliably a rat can do it. And once they have
done that they’ll go ahead with part two of this
experiment, doing a second set of rats with the
neurotransmitter during their training runs, then
presenting the same problem of having to switch into
to a purely cognitively selected alternative path. How
quickly and reliably the second set of rats perform will
allow them to make a first quantification on whatever
effect the neurotransmitter may have on the learning
process.

Black-button eyes, pink ears, pink nose, pink-trailing
tail and pink little scurrying feet, the rat is a second or
so away from its surprise. Right on its nose is a section of
fiber made up of a series of electrically-conducting strips,
all insulated from each other and carrying an
alternatively polarized voltage. The experimenter has
switched this high-tech gate on, and these strips are just
waiting for something conducting to come along and
close the circuit. The rat, full of simple expectations of
where next and food-food-food, scurries around a
nightmare and aims along the straight stretch. And
obligingly bridges the stripe.

With a shrill shriek the creature bounces backwards,
boat like a bow, and lands on its side with its paws stuck
squibly out. Nothing quivers but its heart.
The experimenter has thumbed his stopwatch. The
time at which the rat closed the circuit of the invisible gate has been noted by the automatic record-tracer, and the experimenter's stop-watch is used to measure the time the creature lies there motionless. Time in vain is a useful indicator of how severely shocked the rat was, and is recorded for possible correlation with its subsequent performance in the test. While he's waiting he sets a little remark in the gate-encounter box on his notepad. The rat screamed when it hit the gate, and since animals in distress generally keep as quiet and unobtrusive as possible, a scream is a mark of the awareness of the experience. A very conscientious man, the experimenter notes it down. Of course, he doesn't confuse data by entering the emotive statement that the rat screamed. He uses the well-established term vocal response.

Now silently cataleptic, nose-stretched ear-stiff, the rat is distinctly stunned. If it tumbled towards metropolises it might have characterised the experience as having the sheet of paper on which the whole world is drawn snapped instantly in two. Momentarily it's forgotten food, room, and just about every element that normally occupies its existence.

The experimenter waits patiently while his stop-watch ticks. He's mildly concerned for the cataleptic rat, because after all the welfare of the lab animals contributes greatly to the value of the data on the tests. This poor little fellow got quite a jolt that time. And the time ticks on, and it's Friday mid-afternoon, and right about now his wife will be sitting at the wheel out on the boulevard, and the twins will be nothing like two whirlwinds out the school gate and exploding like little mortar-bombs through the open side door. She'll put the heads bouncing on the back seat, turn to the wheel, and
the off sidely. In back of her the twins will be having another layer of awesims into the mind of the poor family dog, which was very unstable even as a puppy, which fails incomerably it left along at home instead of going along on the ten minute ride to school and back, but which suffers immeasurably at the affectionate hands of the twins. Only in the company of the experimenter himself is that sorry canine restored to a respectable level of self-confidence. With him it's a snoozing or skedaddling, or mooching or molesting, or sniffing or painting right-on regular dog. Love's a funny thing.

The rat twitches in its narrow run and curls up on its four. The experimenter thumbs his stopwatch again and notes the time. Then he eyes the rat keenly, because now the proceedings have come to the interesting bit. How rapidly will the rat adapt and avert its conceptual map of the maze? How quickly will it write the impossibly shocking inversion gate onto the usual route to its goal, and proceed to select the next fastest path. That is the purpose of the experiment.

The rat, meanwhile, is still utterly unaware of its maze. The entire purpose of its present experience is surviving any recurrence of this excruciating surprise. Right now it would be hard to impress with the relevance of higher order goals.

In yet another room on the same floor — the research team utilizes an entire laboratory suite in the block at the university institute — another at his come to the end of its permitted span. Flat on its back on dissecting board, four legs splayed out and strapped down, it's in a most uncomfortable orientation for a rodent, but at least it
...is so exactly crucified as to moulder back down the corridor. But not for much longer. This rat is pregnant, but also not for long.

The experimenter picks up a pair of angled scissors with pointed blades, opens them, aims carefully, and then inserts the tip of the lower blade through the membrane of skin and muscle at the rat's abdomen. The rat tenses up like a galvanized ring, and quivers. The experimenter carefully works in the full length of the blade, then slices open the abdominal cavity with a single cut. The rat actually shrieks in a whimpering kind of way before lapsing into palpating silence, but the experimenter although she's a very dedicated young woman, doesn't pause to note any vocal response. The reactions of the rat are irrelevant to this experiment.

But not quite immaterial, because damn, she forgets to strap down the tail, and now in chewing spasmodically all over the place and getting in the way. She looks around the bench, sights a pair of forceps, and places these over the tail to hold it down. Pressed by the weight, the tail merely twitches.

With surgical pins she hauls the sides of the abdominal incision wide open and tacks them, threadlike streaks of stretched flesh, to the board. The job looks real neat, and she's getting good with practice — blood of course, from the rat's available few milliliters but not a single sliced intestine. These stringy little gams she tacks aside with a probe, and then she applies the tip of a scalpel to the swollen uterus.

The whole point of subjecting the rat to the traumatic and terminal events is to divert not the unborn fetuses. Different rats are being sacrificed at different...
times through pregnancy, so that a string of fetuses at various stages of development can be obtained and compared. What interests the research team here is the part their neurotransmitter plays in the developing central nervous system — when does it first appear, what degree of structural complexity accompanies this first appearance, and what subsequent changes occur in its continued presence? Unfortunately for the more rats involved, there’s a catch in this additional to the obvious one. Any anesthetic applied to the mother would cross the placenta, enter the brains of the fetuses and play indiscernible havoc with the natural cocktail of modulating chemicals active in them. The alternative of killing the rat humanely at the start is out, because in the brief delay ensuing between onset of death and removal of each fetus from the cadaver, irreversible changes would occur in the fetal brain chemistry. So the rats get dissected both alive and awake. There just isn’t any other way.

The experimenter has opened up the uterus and is removing the clutch of tiny shapes inside, picking them out with tweezers, snapping the umbilicus which pulls back like a thread of tined elastic, and laying them out in a petite dish. A row of little half-formed lives, dark-eyed, curled up in things without tails and with bulges where the minute eyes will be. The rat’s tail has stopped twitching, though its innards still tremble with rhythmic life. But there’s no time to despatch it with an injection. The brains have to be dissected out of those fetuses while they’re still incontrovertibly alive, if not particularly kicking. She sets the watchmaker’s spectacles over her eyes and gets to work.

She’s in a hurry. It’s Friday and it’s getting late. She still has to put each of those tiny brains in its own test
tube, homogenise it, centrifuge it, also separate the fluid from the slit of cells. Then she'll althoens which can't wait for fear that decompositional processes might begin to occur. Then after that she has to put the fluid in the fridge at just the right temperature as its still usable for electrophorosis Monday, and then do the same for the cell slurries. And of course, the corpse of the rat and its aborted offspring will have to be incinerated and the instruments and board and bench cleaned. And it's already late, and by then the technician could be gone and she'll have to do it all herself. Chances look good she could miss her Friday night.

Which makes it a good thing the weekend offers two options before Monday. Because when she's not experimenting at the lab through the week, she's running a research project of her very personal even among the material available in singles bars and discoes. What she's trying to find is a guy to can manage to keep going long enough to do her some substantial good as well. It doesn't seem so much to ask, but despite the propaganda image of the macho male she grew up with and later went out looking to meet, she's been surprised to find that an awful high proportion of men make such lousily incompetent lovers. The purpose of the experiment she's personally engaged in week after week, is simply to find one who isn't.

The purpose of any experiment is totally lost on the rat. The research team is amassing a knowledge base on their neurotransmitter and will one day be in a position to cooperate with medical researchers and develop a repertoire of treatments and therapies. These will alleviate and ultimate cure several grossly debilitating
and distressingly irremedial cerebral disorders equally as appalling as Parkinson's or Alzheimer's. Their business, ultimately, is life. The rest, however, is a lingering life caught in the experience of death, an experience structured as a procession of absolute pain and attendant fear — fading, fortunately, out of my kind of focus.

To find a directed experiment in death instead of life, we have to move a little way around the world — in fact southwards to a location in the rainforest somewhere between the Caribbean coast and the border of Brazil. The experimenter this time is a man of middle years and predominantly European descent. Not overly robust or any way physically impressive, his appearance is usually dully deeper. In fact he generally seems entirely unremarkable when encountered at one of the social functions in the capital, thrown in honour of yet another of the close circle of power sharing landowners and factory bosses and generals-sum-seren-politicians. Only if you found yourself engaged in low key conversation with him would you suddenly perceive the rigidly intense odour. It seems to lower the temperature of the air immediately around his person. The society where he pays well and never shows the slightest sign of missing them around, but they don't consider him one of their favourite customers.

Right now, however, he's in his working dress — bush shorts, a t-shirt, and denim trousers. He isn't very clean, either. Apart from the rivers of sweat the sun melts from everyone in this tree-bound humidity, his hands and feet are covered in blood and a mess of drying and clacking splinters go up to his elbows and reach from his ankles to his knees. His only instrument is in his sticky
hand, a knife with a short and exceedingly sharp blade. He's become a butcher by profession, and it's people he slaughters.

This little-stockade in a ring of jungle-green encircling, a feudal princess that thrills and nauseates positively drips with rampant life, is a little extermination camp in the small counter-insurgency war that's taken over this tiny country. The camp is screened by thick forest, but is little more than a one hour drive on a reasonable road from the capital. Here they assign the cases for elimination who have now intelligence value and are therefore unworthy of the fastidious attentions of the overworked interrogators. Here is where the secret police sends a ready-made muddle of small fry intellectual and religious dissidents, troublesome or embarrassing wives, husbands or relatives of the same, plus uncooperative village seniors from the upcountry war zones, captured guerrillas of the lower ranks, and so on. They came here to be killed, and set even any paper work is done on the procedure. The jungle site is used because it makes the ultimate disposal of corpses as much easier — the jungle floor all around is gradually filling up with butchered bodies in scooped out grooves.

The paddy-coloured little man — khaki shorts and tshirt, suatain, red painted lower limbs — has exclusive charge of the disposal of the inmates, and enjoys a fine hand in his choice of method. This has permitted him to engage in a very long series of quiet methodical experiments, some quick and some taking quite a time, some performed unaided and some with the assistance of several of the stockade guards. He is deeply in his fascinating process of discovery — there are simply so many different ways of killing an adult human being, just as there is an amazing list of bits and pieces you
can peel off, cut off or excise out of a man or woman and yet they still don’t die. The mechanisms are extraordinarily varied.

This afternoon, as on previous occasions this week, he’s busy with a new experiment. His subjects are laid out in the sun across the mud compound, each of them with wrists and ankles bound, each of them stretched between the restraints of the double row of tethering stakes hammered into the ground. The first row was provided by the camp builders in probable anticipation of mass firing squad activities, not realizing that their appointer was going to register amazing savings in ammunition. The second row was his own early innovation. With a bunch of prisoners laid out and ready, he can work his way along the line, improvising modifications or trying the repeatability of successes as he goes. He can make instant comparative studies. In this way he has verified many assumptions about the effectiveness of a host of techniques, and shocked as many more. One advantage his efforts enjoy is that this is a straightforward extermination facility, and so the inmates are usually in custody for such a relatively brief time that they’re not abnormally weakened or sick when he attends to them, thus lending his careful observations a general validity.

His subjects, as usual, are an indiscriminate mix of males and females. This seems an irreproachable waste to the rest of the camp staff, who are impressionable and brainwashed, and who can think of a whole string of entertaining games you could play with female nuns on the way to killing them. They, however, are mostly very young and totally illiterate — dull peasant boys presaged at gunpoint from the upcountry villages, or
petty streetfighters and criminals assigned to the army for a change instead of the innumerable city jails. They are all in total awe of the camp's executioner.

One or two of the tethered subjects back at the rear of the line are dead in their patches of very bloody mud. Several more are now dying, some of them still twisting and convulsing, one or two leaving a steady song of unmitigated agony at the sky, the jungle, the skinny huts, the battered wooden stables, the coloured mud, the severed bits of themselves. The present survivors have witnessed the afternoon's proceedings so far and are tortured by anticipation, are each trapped in a unique transport of sheer terror. Some are silent, some are sobbing, some are praying. For the different individuals it may or may not be the immediate death, but for each and every one of them it's certainly the method. The next in line is a woman who's now vomiting in horrified expectation. The thin and striking fluid saturates the half dry mud under her head and shoulders to a syrup.

The odd thing is that none of this seems to elicit any hint of pleasure from the experimenter. He might even be considered emotionally autistic. It's the experiment itself that is his passion.

The purpose of this experiment is to test out the plausibility of something he recently heard. A society acquaintance was telling of some goings on several years ago in Cambodia. There was a man, she'd read who had perfected the art of killing his victims by cutting open the stomach, and then applying pressure with both hands to the outside of the body. This allegedly expelled the liver intact through the wound. The acquaintance wasn't in possession of any further details — how low was the cut,
was it made vertically or was it made under the ribs on the right, where and how did you squeeze: These
questions could only be answered by fieldwork.

In the course of a week and with the fervent cooperation of three dozen subjects, he’d discovered by
trial and error that it can indelibly be done. You have to cut
across the stomach so, you have to play your feet inside
the hot tangle of guts just right in order to force the
wound open and let the liver tumble out, and then you
have to push roughly and repeatedly on the rib cage until
the organ tears free and is forced out of its cavity.
Contrary to his initial expectations, the arteries and veins
attached to the liver, as well as the lesser connections, part
with surprising ease. Slightly less surprising but still
worthy of note, the subjects so treated seem to live on
quite a long time despite the pain, trauma and severe
hemorrhaging. Usually they were transfused at their
own bloody and steaming liver.

The last one, though, had irritated the experimenter
immensely and upset his intellectual concentration.
Scared as he was said so, but the boy showed such a
propensity for ravenous vocalisation that he went on
howling even after he’d been gutted and his liver
smoothly extracted. Actually moved to anger, the
experimenter slit the boy’s throat to shut him up. A
disconcerting fan of spattering red despite the dramatic loss
of blood already sustained, an unnecessarily drawn out
futile gawp, and reticent peace was restored as the
gory body twitched into stillness.

But it has all been too late for the experimenter’s
vulnerable dedication. He looks at the vomiting woman
at his feet, finding the sight indecorate and
disgusting. He lifts his head and looks beyond the
stockade. The sickly sun is entangling itself in the unhurled crevices of the jungle giants which hem in the camp on its western side. Time is moving and the weekend civilities call. He turns abruptly on his heel and marches towards the stockade gate. On the other side is the camp officer, the opportunity for long and furtive showers, and his car for the drive back to the city.

Once he’s gone, the stockade guards untether the surviving prisoners and variously push or drag them back to their earth-floored huts for the night. Tomorrow or Sunday or Monday the proceedings resume.

And later that same evening, long after dark, the director of a second research team is working late in his laboratory office on the next floor up at the institute. He works late whenever he can, hours after everyone else has gone home. Domesticity — above all the extended quiet stretch of an entire weekend — has lost every single one of its attractions since the suicide of his wife. Work is the only analgesic for a pain that deep. Anything rather than talk about the suicide or think about its victim or its possible causes. Keep busy, busy, busy.

His enthusiasm for the job in hand is particularly welcome to the institute management, since his specialty is in experiments on death, and death is big business and brings fat funding allocations. The job of his team is contracted defense work, and it net a lot of money. The brief is to develop a new binary nerve agent to beef up the available chemical weapon options and to supply a new generation system for deployment in the next decade. The problems with the present binary gas are proving insurmountable — the whole thing would work once deployed in anger, but it wouldn’t work all that reliably. So the hunt is on for a better successor.
This senior experimenter is through with his stack of weekly reports and is now busy with some theoretical sketches. The idea stems directly from a long talk he had over lunch with the director of the neurotransmitter research team housed on the floor below. The point is, in the course of that team's own work they've managed to synthesize an antagonist to their neurotransmitter. Now this antagonist, when you looked at it carefully, might turn out to be a good route to get at acetylcholine and mess up its functioning. The antagonist is definitely stable in vivo, and a better tailored derivative might quite possibly be so as well. Right now it's beginning to look to this senior experimenter as though it could even be amenable to a method of manufacture which might, at a pinch, lead to a pair of precursor compounds you could use as a mixing binary agent to create a battlefield weapon. There are going to be a lot of ifs along the road, but the first couple actually look solvable. The director of the neurotransmitter team gets nothing directly in return for handing over tips to the senior defense contract experimenter, but the supportive involvement is anything but altruistic. After all, it's the lucrative defense contract which is keeping the institute alive.

The senior experimenter is contemplating his possible result: A new binary nerve gas, if it ever goes into full production, will certainly be intended for deployment in Western Europe. It will be an advanced tactical weapon and its functioning is very interesting. Its military effect is quite extraordinary. Once released in a combat zone, say most of everywhere between the Rhine and the Elbe, it will force the soldiers on both sides to shut themselves up in their tanks and other vehicles, or to zip themselves into their clumsy and cumbersome protection suits. These suits are anything but
comfortable and will generally slow down infantry on the ground. Afflicting both sides equally as the wind switches direction as winds generally will, this is going to have precious little material effect on the fighting.

The civilians incurably enough to have lived all their lives in this area, however, and who are the people the weapon is ultimately supposed to defend, will have no prospect or possibility of protection. Even a single droplet absorbed through the skin will kill. Wherever they're hiding, they'll get headache, nausea, and a few minutes later they'll start vomiting. They'll get muscle cramps, they'll collapse on the ground, their chests will tighten and they'll begin to suffocate. Inevitably and uncontrollably, they'll urinate, defecate, palpitate, and slowly, very slowly as chest and diaphragm muscles gradually go into rigid spasm, they'll asphyxiate. The exceedingly painful process will take thirty to eighty minutes tops, depending on the dose received, and for each tactical use it will take out the thousands upon thousands of non-combatants irresponsible enough to live in the hundreds of square kilometers located downwind. Those deaths, however, are of no interest to anyone at all. They fall under what's known as collateral effects, are of no military value and are not remotely relevant to the deployment of a weapon. They have nothing to do with the purpose of the experiment.

And in the dead of night, inside a seething ring of jungle sound, in pitch darkness on the dirt floor of a crowded little timber and thatch and reed-air hut, a woman turns on her back and stares with open but unsighted eyes. The thatch roof is invisible but not inaudible. Above the
snarls and sobs and coarsely whispering prayers that litter the floor, you can hear the rattle of the insect inhabitants of the miniature grass and twig and leafy jungle, as well as the quick running feet of the lizards that come to harvest them. Birth, food and death, survive, kill and get eaten alive, it's a microcosm of the macrocosm that makes up this whole human and animal existence. Would be compare escapers seeking a better plane of being, a steady drizzle of dropout individuals, land on the sleepers and the nightmare refugees beneath. Scanty or sobered on, they never get far. There is no escape. Eventually, and sometimes most ungraciously, it's going to happen to every one of you.

Without water to wash in the stupefying heat, they all sink. This woman is stuck with an additional perfume, hair matted with a mixture of mud and hair will be. It's an inexpressibly miserable way to wait. This afternoon she was the next in the row, procured by pale imitations of the real agencies that were about to arrive. But the butcher had suddenly stopped his methodical progress. Tomorrow or Sunday, or mostly likely Monday, he'll be back. She'll be first in line, or somewhere in the middle, or last. He'll have a new and unexpressive gaze, or the same one again. No one cares. No one is going to suddenly order him to stop. No one is going to replace him, shoot him, blow him up on the road or in his apartment, abduct him, give him an especially slow version of the treatment so lovingly handout. No one gives a damn. No thunderbolt is going to strike him, no rain from heaven wash him away and cleanse the world from top to bottom, swell out the killing and the death and the conscious awareness of that appalling awfulness. No one and nothing is going to cancel the limitless catalog of pain.
Beating where she lies in a stinking hut in a night-blackened compound field with an odour of dying human shit, she tries to pray in the hope it might bring some shade of deliverance. But the attempt focuses uncontrollably into one single bitter question. Why? Why the beating, the pain, the cruel killing or diseased dying? Why the conscious knowledge and anticipation of it all? What makes it necessary, what’s it all for, what’s the purpose of the experience, this experiment called life?

Dear God, who?

And God, if God can still remember, if God in fact ever knew, if indeed there is a God in all — well God doesn’t seem to have the slightest inclination to answer.

The purpose is a silence.
Christmas Eve

The Embankment was empty now, the only movement from the wind-sloping liner, but Carver didn't mind. He'd wandered a long way from his route home, following his footsteps, insulated from the cold and the passage of time by the turbulence of his thoughts. He leaned across the worn stone pavement, a cigarette loose between his fingers, and watched the lights ripple in the water. Away from the few remaining revelers in the Approved Zones, the last few travelers in the Authorized Transport Routes, he considered the ragged fabric of his life. Different threads, divided loyalties, threatening to tangle and stranggle him unless he made a decision soon.

He barely heard the muffled three-quarter chime drifting downstream towards him. A quarter to Christmas. Goodwill to all men.
“Hey, you?”
The voice was nasal, echoing tenuously in the stillness.
Returned abruptly to the present, Carver blew pearly dragoon's breath towards the Festival Hall. It used to be floodlit, he remembered; now it loomed dark and silent, gleaming back at him across the water.

“Look! By the wall! Are you deaf or just stupid?” The voice was nearer now, footsteps ringing in the frost-metallic air. Carver took a final drag at the cigarette and flaked the stub away. It left a greyly glowing spark, hissed to extinction in the outgoing tide, and whirled away invisible towards the sea.

“Neither.” He turned, slowly, one elbow still supported by the innate: “Is there something you want, Private?”

The soldier was so close to his mental image he felt a momentary tingle of déjà vu. No more than nineteen, secure in the imagined authority of his green and uniform, he shifted uneasily as Carver spoke. Civilians weren’t supposed to answer back, especially indulgently. The M28 was still slung across his shoulder, a sure sign of incompetence.

“I want, oh, have to check your ID.”

“And why’s that?” Carver should have let it go, he knew it even as he spoke, but he couldn’t resist needlesing the boy. He was tired, and under pressure, and he’d had just enough to drink to blur his judgement.

“Because I say so.” The soldier caught his temper with a visible effort. “In my estimation you’re acting suspiciously.”
"Really," Carver felt the adrenaline surging through his blood, sweeping all rational behaviour aside. "And in mine you're acting like a pro."

"OK, have it your way." The soldier raised his arm, and Carver shook him off angrily. "You don't talk to me, you can come tell the Captain why you're loitering in a Carter Zone."

"I'm not telling you anything. It's a free country." Carver turned away, fists clenched, the blood singing in his ears. "At least it was before you bastards arrived."

"Hold it right there." There was a new edge to the soldier's voice now, and Carver spun round to face him. He was unfolding the rifle, bringing it up...

"Don't be stupid." For a moment Carver still thought he was bluffing, then the sound of the safety going off triggered him. He reacted instinctively, sweeping the barrel away with his left arm, lurching up under the ribcage with the stiffened fingers of his right. The soldier was probably dead before he fell, but Carver brought his left elbow down on the back of the boy's neck anyway, pivoting out of the way of the toppling body. Something went snap!

"Jesus!" He stood, shivering, breathing hard, cold and sick to his stomach as the boy's boots drummed briefly on the pavement. In the stillness that followed, the ripple of the water thundered behind him like the roar of his own blood.
He bent over the body, feeling for the non-existent pulse, before hefting it awkwardly over the balustrade. It tumbled for a moment, then disappeared abruptly with a surprisingly faint splash. Turning slowly, it vanished into the darkness in the wake of the cigarette stub.

The rifle was a problem, too useful to dump, but too risky to carry. He glanced around, looking for somewhere to stash it.

A grey-shawed girt hid a few yards away, waiting patiently for the first snow of winter. Perfect. He lifted the lid, brushing aside the rotting layer of apple cores and crisp packets covering the seat, laid the weapon reverently in a miniature grave, and went to find a pay phone.

"It's Galashad." The line was supposed to be secure, but Carver spoke rapidly from habit, keeping the contact as brief as possible. "I've just had a shocker." He paused for a moment, still shivering from the reaction. The phone remained silent, waiting for details. "There's an M28 on the grit bin, near Hungerford Bridge."

"And the Owena?" Carver didn't recognise the voice; unnaturally nasal, it was probably filtered as an extra precaution against tappers. Unless the speaker was a psychopath. There were plenty of them in the resistance.

"About halfway to Tilbury by now."

"I see. We'll deal with it. The dalek voice paused for a second. "Merry Christmas Galashad."

"Yeah. You too." But the line had already gone dead.
Christmas Day

Shut the damn door!10 Carrie Sue Skororny lunged at the papers on her desk, too late to keep the top layer from becoming airborne. The blast of cold air caused abruptly as the door slammed, and she bent to retrieve them.

"Sorry."

"Lusden. squeezed around her own desk in the other corner of the cramped office, bent close to the electric fan, and began to unwind a garish non-regulation scarf. "Men it's cold out there."

"Brrzing, Jean. The wind's brzing."

Skororny shuffled the papers into some semblance of order, and replaced them on the desk top.

"For you, maybe. I'm from Phoenix."

Lusden blew on her fingers and returned to her own desk.

"Brrzing, yet. You've been over here too long you're even beginning to sound like a Brit."

"They're all right. Once you get to know them."

Skororny riffled through the next batch of forms, stamping where necessary, file and forget.

"Well, you're the expert on that."

Lusden grinned, back in her chair, not even pretending to work. "Are you seeing him over the holiday?"
“Tomorrow.” Sharenzy relaxed too, pushing the 
paperwork in one side. “He’s taking me to a party.”

“A party huh?” Lumaden considered it. “Well, I
guess you know what you’re doing.”

“What’s that supposed to mean?” Sharenzy looked
hard at the other woman, trying to read her face, and
Lumaden shifted uncomfortably.

“I just meant... Don’t get complacent, is all. The
india hate our guts, Carrie Sue. You get careless down
some alley one night, and fretting with one of them won’t
make a whole lot of difference.” She chewed her lower
lip, waiting for a reaction, but Sharenzy was already
nodding in agreement.

“I know. You’re right. But we still have to deal with
that. And the only way is to show them we’re human too.
Hearts and minds. Jesus. Hearts and minds.”

“Yeah.” Lumaden was still unconvinced. “Try
telling that to the foot patrol we just lost.”

“A complete one?” Sharenzy contemplated the
paperwork that would involve, and shuddered.

“No. Just some kid, fresh off the plane. Thought
they’d cover more ground if they split up.”

“Jesus.” Sharenzy shook her head. “What is it with
these fags? Don’t they watch the movies any more?”

“Sure they do. They all think they’re the one that wins
in the last reel.”
"Yeah, right." Shanoney glanced at her watch. "What the hell. I went coffee. Coming?"
"Thought you'd never ask." Lunoden picked up her scarf again. "Screw the filing."
"Dann right. After all, it is Christmas."

Boxing Day

The flat was small and crowded, and very hot. Carver danced his way out of the kitchen, sliding like smoke between the bodies, through ephemeral gaps that seemed too small to let him pass. Carrie was in the lounge, he remembered, or had been twenty minutes ago when he went for the drinks. He paused by the door, scanning the faces, and found her in the far corner, talking to someone whose name he hadn't caught. They were laughing together, so at least no one had mentioned politics.

"Paul. There you are." She turned as he approached, her drinks in her hands still miraculously unspilled. "I was about to invite S and R on you."

Carver glanced around, but if anyone recognised the military term they were too polite to show it.

"Nice to know I'm worth retrieving."

He handed the drinks round quickly, drawing attention back to himself.

"White wine for you." Gerald, that was it, tangerine, and a scratch and diet coke. Both men watched with mild horror as Shanoney drank half the cloudy liquid with every sign of enjoyment. "Having fun?"
“Yes, it’s been great.” She set the glass down on a convenient shelf, and picked off the stragglers in a decimated bowl of peanuts. “Gerald and me have been talking shop.”

“Have you?” Carver felt an acute itch between his shoulderblades, and tried to glance unobtrusively around the room. The rest of his own cell knew about her, and he had to assume they bought his story about cultivating her as an intelligence source further up the line, but there could be other reasons here, already marking her down as a target of opportunity. Not to mention the usual quotas of hotheads, feeding their resentments with cocked.

“That’s right,” Gerald smiled. “I’m in business administration too.”

“Ah. Of course. Business administration.” Carver relaxed again. It was close enough, he supposed. Paper shuffling seemed to be the same whatever organization it was for.

“Is something the matter?” Shorrenz was looking at him, curiously, as Gerald wandered away in search of more peanuts. “You look... distracted.”

“Just tired, I suppose.” Carver slipped his arm around her waist, trying to recapture the festive mood, and drew her under the wilting upglow of mirth. As he kissed her, he wondered if he’d ever feel safe around anyone again.

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The first flurries of snow began as they arrived in Trujalate Square, enclosing the world in a flat, grey bowl tinted pink by the light of the moonlamps. The flakes were small at first, sketching phantoms in the wind before rushing against the pavements, turning the flagstones slippery underfoot. Her face already numb from the freezing air, Skor society barely felt them as they brushed against her skin.

"This way." Carver laid a hand on her elbow, leading her out of the crowd, moving easily against the current. The steady stream of humanity flowed on without them as they gained the lee of St Martin, eddying for a moment as it reached the barriers round the fire-blackened shell of the South African embassy. Most of them were crowded with balancing bodies, cawing and cawing like nesting birds.

"Here's as good as anywhere." Carver glanced round approvingly. They could see the whole square, still filling from every corner. He pulled a bottle from his inside pocket, cracked the cap, and swallowed gratefully, feeling the vodka warm its way through his muscles. "Want some?"

"You shouldn't have that. Not on the streets." Skor society glanced around nervously. A couple of the local bobbies were hovering through the crowd, their tall hats marking them out even from a distance. For heart-stopping seconds they looked right at her, and Paula, then moved on, pretending not to notice.
“Why not?” Carver proferred the bottle again. “The copper don’t give a toss about the Occupation Code, and your lot are all getting pissed in their barracks.”
Then he grinned. “You really think they’re going to bust everyone in the square?”

He was right. Looking round, Skorseny saw a bottle or a can in almost every hand. Grimacing back, in a sudden burst of tension, she accepted the drink.

“So that’s why you come here. Safety in numbers.”

“Something like that.” Carver glanced at his watch. Only a few minutes of the old year remained. “I’ve been coming every year since I was a student. It’s one of the great London traditions.”

But nothing like it used to be. They still had the fountains then, and the floodlights, and the crowds were so dense there was barely room to stand. Now he could see space between the bodies, even down by the columns, and he hardly had to raise his voice to talk to Carrie. There couldn’t have been more than a couple of thousand there, even with the stragglers still pouring in.

“Penny for them.” Skorseny slipped her arm around his waist, and he shook his head.

“Just the usual. You know. Another year gone, some things different, some things the same.”

She nodded, not really understanding, and began to look at her watch. Before she could complete the movement, she noticed a change in the air around her.
The clamoring voices were muted, expectant now, and a palpable sense of anticipation was settling across the square with the thickening snow.

Then she heard it, coming muffled from the speakers of a hundred radios, followed at once by the fading echoes of distant reality. The midnight chimes of Ben.

"Happy New Year!" She threw her arms around Carver, and kissed him. Then everyone was singing.

"Should old acquaintance be forgot, and never brought to mind..."

Shenanigans sang too, part of a tangible wave of warmth and fellow feeling sweeping across the square, binding her in some fierce nebulous way to all these strangers. Then the sound of a diesel engine, and the rasping blare of a horn, snapped her back to the cold, damp reality.

"What the hell...?" Carver was staring at something over her shoulder, and all around them heads were turning to look. A truck had appeared from St. Martin Lane, and got mired in the crowd. The driver, an adolescent corpulent, looked harrowed. Engine roaring, he inched the truck forward, spinning his wheels in the slush.

"Time we were gone." Carver took hold of her arm, and led Shan away carefully through the milling press of bodies. The truck swerved again, and jolted forward a few feet, the crowd closing in behind it. Worried faces
appeared at the tailgate. Gradually the song began to change.

Go home you bums, go home you bums, go home you bums, go home..."...

ripples began to appear in the crowd as the truck moved erratically through it. More and more people were herding it in, like corpses surrounding an invading organism. Carever angled towards Cluasing Cross Road, moving now against the flow of the current. Ahead, he caught a glimpse of the two policemen leaving the square, deliberately unaware of the disturbance building behind them. He glanced back.
The truck was halfway to Whitehall and safety when the first bottle burst against the cab.

"It's all right." Sherry's face was pinched white in the light from the streetlamps, and her voice sounded strained. "The glass is bullet-proof."

"Sure." Carever put his arm around her shoulders, and hustled her away up the wide, clear street. Behind him he saw a dark figure fall from the tailgate, the blood incredibly vivid against the swirling snow.

"Everything's fine."

New Year's Day

Paul. Are you asleep?"

"Yes." Carever buried a little deeper into the duvet, sending close to the warmth of her body. Dream shadows clawed against his eyelids, filling his mind, leaving room for little more than self-awareness. For a
short while he dozed, hovering in the boundary of
slumber; then Skorany moved, lifting herself up on her
elbow, and the abrupt motion startled him awake.
"What is it?"
"I want to talk."
"We can talk in the morning." He shifted, began to
settle again.
"You always say that." She ran a finger across his
chest. "Besides, it is morning. Why after six?"
"Jesus." Carver pulled the pillow over his head.
Skorany nudged it aside, and nibbled his ear.
"All right." Carver yawned, and rolled over to face
her. "What about?"
"Things. Us." She hesitated. "Where are we going,
Paul?"
"Bears me." For one panic-stricken moment he
wondered if she knew, or suspected, then reason took
over. "It's like you said at the beginning. All we can do is
take it as it comes."
"I know." Her voice was hushed. "But somehow that
isn't enough any more." "No, it's not. But it's all we've got." He kissed her,
running his hand across her back.
"But it doesn't have to be."
"How do you mean?" It was an effort to keep his voice
steady. Whatever she was leading up to, this was it.
"There's a chance I can stay here. Make the posting
permanent."
"I see." He tried briefly to analyse the explosion of his
emotions, but they were too new, too complex for that.
"I'll have to think carefully about it." Her tone was
guarded now.
“I'd have to be really sure of... things. You know.”
“Yeah, yeah, of course.” It would put him in for greater danger, he realized that at once. But somehow the risks seemed very small and insignificant.
“I mean, how do you feel about it?”
“You know how I feel. I love you. And I don't want to lose you.” He drew her close, and they kissed, their hands moving to the old familiar places. It was only then he realized he was telling the truth, and that this was the only thing in the world he could really be sure about.

Twelfth Night

“Private Showam?”
“Yes sir.” The man behind the desk was in civilian clothes, but he never hurt to be on the safe side. He smiled, with an air of quiet authority, and nodded towards the chair in front of it.
“Colonel McAllister. Make yourself comfortable.”
He turned back to his terminal, and punched a few keys.
“I'll be right with you.”
Sharon, settled, suddenly aware of every crease in her uniform, and waited for him to finish.
“Now then.” The terminal beeped, and McAllister glanced up at her. “I don't suppose you've had much to do with our department before.”
“No sir.” She found his studied informality irksome.
He was bound to have read her file thoroughly before seeing her.
“Well, I’d like you to forget any idea you already have about intelligence work. It’s nothing like it is in the movies.” He smiled again. “All we are really are jumped-up filing clerks. We collect information, cross-reference it, and see if anything unusual turns up.” He paused, waiting for Skarney to comment.

“That’s very interesting, sir. But I don’t see what it has to do with me.”

“You’ve applied for a permanent posting here, I understand.” McAlpine leaned back in his chair, the tips of his fingers together. “That’s fairly unusual.”

“I like it here.” There was nothing else she could say. McAlpine nodded.

“So I understand. And you’ve made friends among the indigs.” It was a statement, not a question. Skarney suddenly felt as though she was standing on the brink of a precipice, looking down, daring herself to jump.

“Not friends, exactly. Acquaintances. Mostly.”

“Quite. But even so, that’s unusual.” The measured, reflective nodding was either a nervous tic or a carefully cultivated pose, she wasn’t sure which. But it was beginning to get on her nerves. “And one of these... acquaintances...” he pretended to consult the computer screen again “is a Mr. Paul Carver, is that correct?”

“Yes sir.” She managed to keep her voice level, but her face was growing warmer as she spoke.

“And would he be right in assuming he’s the reason you’d like to stay on here?”

“Well, partly, I guess... Mostly...” The hell with it. “Yes.”

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"I see," McAlinair appeared to be thinking. "And do you ever talk to him about your work?"

"Of course not, Sir." The fractional pause was more eloquent than any overt insult. "It's against regulations."

"I know the regulations," McAlinair hesitated too. "But I'm afraid I have grounds for concern."

"What grounds?" They had to be bad, or he wouldn't be hedging. She watched him search for the right words, the tension knotting tighter in her stomach as the sound stretched.

"There was an incident this morning. One of our convoys was attacked by a terrorist cell." McAlinair waited for her to react, but she just sat there waiting for the rest of it. "The escort returned fire. Your friend, Carver, was killed."

The shock went beyond pain, numbing with its very intensity even as it hit. For a moment everything was frozen, then her body remembered how to breathe. When she could speak again she was surprised to find her voice was still level, though she formed the words with exaggerated care.

"So you think he was with them?"

"I'm afraid there's no doubt. He was carrying a rifle." McAlinair hesitated again. "I'm sure you realise this means a full investigation. It won't look good on your record."

"Screw the record, Sir."

Over his shoulder, beyond the window, it was snowing again. Snowy watched it fall, fascinated, while McAlinair's voice continued to make meaningless sounds in the warm, bright office.
Outside, in the dark, a million lights were flickering like faraway stars, while the flakes whirled down to blur the outlines of an alien city in an alien land.
In the first column for a new British s-f magazine, it's good to be able to welcome three excellent new novels by British writers.

Abandoned by Garry Kilworth (Usset, £2.95) is the second novel in less than a year from one of our best short story writers. Until Winchester Country he had always seemed to run out of steam at novel length, but that and the fresh vigour evident in Cloudhold have given notice that mastery of the novel is not far off. With Abandoned he has at last managed to sustain the power and confidence of his short stories throughout a novel. The book is tighter, shorter and more concentrated than usual; a single thread followed with continued invention so that the overall effect is of the sudden illumination and intimate knowledge that marks his best short stories.

His subject is the sub-world of tramps and down-and-outs who led shattered lives in crumbling city streets. The rich of this world have gone, no-one knows when or where, leaving these men to inherit a worn-out earth. Gypsy sets out one morning to discover what is beyond the city, and on the way meets up with Rupert
and Tinker who have a crazy scheme to build a copter that will get them to wherever the rich people have gone. This gives a purpose to their quest through the ruins of their world and their pox, a quest that Kilworth describes with passion and compassion. His characters may be none-too-bright, but he makes us sympathise and identify with them, while never losing his clear-sighted knowledge of what is really going on outside their wrecked minds. A skillful, vivid and often profoundly moving novel.

If Garry Kilworth is a short story writer who often seems to have difficulty sustaining novel length, Gwyneth Jones, in her adult books, seems to have exactly the opposite problem. The novels always give the impression that they should have been several times the length. *Divine Endurance*, indeed, was cut down considerably before publication, and it is as if she has taken the lesson too much to heart. *Rainbow* (Unwin, £12.95) reads as if an extraordinarily long novel has been pared down to its very bones, and in the process many of the signposts that normally guide a reader through a book have been trimmed away. As a consequence it is frequently difficult, if not impossible, to say what is happening, when, and whether it is real. It makes reading the book very hard work indeed, but perseverance is rewarded with perhaps her most challenging and powerful novel so far.

It is a novel loaded, possibly overloaded, with images and ideas. Britain, the very near future, and many contemporary political and social issues — student loans, workfare, cutbacks in social services come a quasi-religious right-wing organisation bent on absolute power, and a drug that doesn’t alter consciousness but
rather changes reality in line with the consciousness of
the drug user. It’s a device that turns hard-hitting
political comment into a surrealism that’s often difficult
to grasp. Add a quartet of unrepentant heroes, and
melodramatically villainous villains, and the result is far
two much happening in only 600 pages. At twice the
length it would have been brilliant, as it is flashes of
genius are all too quickly swamped by accident.
Nevertheless, patient effort well repays the demands
made on the reader.

There are now questions about the readability of
Robert Holdstock’s Lavondyss (Gollancz, £11.99).
Methago Wood won, rightly, garlanded with praise and
awards, and its sequel pulls off the near-impossible task
of being better than its predecessor. Harry Keran, the
hero of Methago Wood, has disappeared into the
mysterious Rhyphaz Wood, and Lavondyss follows the
rescue attempt of his young sister, Tallis. But this is far
more than a rehash of the earlier story. From birth Tallis
is haunted by figures from the wood, and her slow
understanding of their stories and her powers is
crystallised in a meeting with Ralph Vaughan Williams
which brings home her own role in the enduring myths.
And when she does venture into the wood it is to journey
deeper into its heart, further into the cruel primal myth
that underlies the much more sanitised Matter of
Britain.

It’s a beautifully told tale, full of a sense of the real and
the magical superbly restrained. Even the myths that
Holdstock has crammed ring with an authentic tone.
Certainly one of the best books of the year.

PAUL KINCAID

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FILM REVIEWS


Cumbria. 1948. The Black Death is creeping towards a mining village, and Griffin (McPartland), a young visionary, dreams that death... can be avoided if a party of the menfolk dig through... tunnel to the other side of the world and put up a crucifix on a cathedral in God's city. In Griffin's dream, the medieval party emerge in '80s New Zealand, where demonic traffic gets in their way, and find a going-out-of-business laundry willing to help forge their cross. But Griffin's prophetic dream ends with the death of one of the party in a fall from the spire of the cathedral. Who will die? And will even this sacrifice avert the plague? From the director of Epic, this New Zealand fantasy refuses to play the Hollywood time travel game of Time After Time or Back to the Future, playing the present not for anachronism jokes but as a world of dangerous wonders as physical and threatening as those of the monochrome middle ages. In one unforgettable sequence, the Cumbrians are bursting across the harbour, with a stolen horse aboard, when a nuclear submarine surfaces close by like Moby Dick. In another, Griffin is drawn to a bank of TV screens...
Griffin (Hamish McFarlane) sees his vision come true in Vincent Ward’s "THE NAVIGATOR", distributed by Recorded Releasing
broadcasting a surreal documentary on AIDS, reminding us that the 20th Century isn’t without its plagues. The Nanaqua, subtitled “A Medieval Odyssey”, is liable to irritate a few with its vague ending and occasional overuse of blistering peasant mannerisms (one of the miners is a double for PIC Doberman from Sergeant Bilko), but should be seen for its resolutely unusual approach to its subject matter.

Like that other excellent New Zealand fantasy The Quiet Earth, one of the strengths of this film is its divorce from traditional notions of genre. I can think of no other film this year that has contained so many memorable images. To all intents, it is a medieval movie — with Chaucerian characterizations, an illuminated visual style and a clear-eyed mysticism straight out of the 14th Century — and while short on standard action, it’s long on extraordinary moments.


If you managed to escape from a country where the head of the secret police was a powerful black magician who’d hammered a nail through your scrotum, would you go back? Fairly late in the action of Wes Craven’s latest nightmare festival, anthropologist hero Dennis Alan (Pullman) does just that. The Serpent and the Rainbow, based (loosely) on a non-fiction book by Wade Davis, has more than its share of credibility problems, and also seems unsure just what kind of movie it is. With a two-fisted hero at large in Haiti, searching for the drug used to make zombies,
Dennis Alan (BILL PULMAN), a scientist caught up in the nightmare of voodoo and zombies in Haiti.
there is more than a touch of the '60's B movie about the film, but Craven throws in some of his trademark surreal dream horrors to heel it up as an 80's horror picture, and the climax even turns the villain into a barbequed Freddy Krueger lookalike. Also, weirdly, the movie tries to be a documentary-style look at mid-life voodoo belief, and a throwaway entry in the Under Fire political thriller mode as the overthrow of Baby Doc Duvalier takes place amidst riots in the background. Since he left the low budget gore movie — Last House on the Left, The Hills Have Eyes — Craven has been slightly adrift. He seems obsessed with a need to make something more than just another horror movie, and yet at the last minute he always gives in and litters his films with artificial, effective shock scenes. There's a lot going on in The Serpent and the Rainbow, but it's the conventional scare stuff that come off best. Cathy Tyson is a winsome, French-accented heroine — gayly and independent but still in need of rescue from the human sacrifice crowd — and Zakes Mokae is a menacingly evil, gold-toothed voodoo priest/terror cop supervillain, and their presence makes up for the general wishyness of Pullman's hero. There's a lot to be said about voodoo, but — following Angel Heart and The Believers — this just sees the headlines chucked, walking dead and Afro-Catholic rituals as a background for more-or-less familiar melodramatics.


A bank accountant walks into a Los Angeles bank and blows away everyone in sight with a shotgun, then takes to the roads in a stolen ferrari and indulges in a
Detective Tom Beck (Michael Nouri) and FBI agent Lloyd Gallagher (Kyle McLachlan) team to solve a baffling series of murders in the suspense thriller, "The Hidden".
high-speed, wildly destructive chase with the pursuing cops while listening to heavy metal music played too loud. The killer gets riddled with bullets but keeps on coming, he's put into hospital by severe burns. Left alone to die, the madman spins out a slithy insect from out of space which burrows into the patient in the next bed, and the new victim proceeds to get up and go on another killing spree. Hard-working cop Michael Nouri, assigned to the baffling case, is saddled with spaced-out FBI man Kyle MacLachlan — who knows more than he's letting on about the monster, but has never seen an alien-seeker — and the mismatched pair take to the streets in search of the body-hopping psychos. The Hidden is an attempt to crossbreed the silly bug w-h sub-genre of Aliens and its spinoffs with the oddball cop teams-up movie recently replicated by Lethal Weapon, Red Heat and many others. As such, it's a pretty strong low-budget movie. Jack Sheldon — holier-than-blamed for such disappointments as Aliens in the Dark and Nighthawks on Elm Street 2 — has a surprise premise, and probably got to leave all the good stuff (car crashes, shoot-outs, gory effects) to the second unit, but he does fairly well by the strange business between the two heroes. After making such a bad first impression in Dune, Kyle MacLachlan is beginning to become sort of likeable, and the characters here are just a few notches above the functional level required to fill in between the action scenes. It's a shade disappointing that the intriguing central idea — treated rather better in Steven Gallagher's to-be-filmed novel Valley of Lights — should serve as the basis for what is simply a lot of thin-air entertainment, and the film doesn't quite transcend its genre in the way The Terminator or RoboCop do, but if you want a first-rate popcorn
muncher with a death every ten minutes, this is well worth your money.

VAL KILMER stars as Madmartigan, a renegade warrior who comes to the aid of Willow Ufgood (Warwick Davis) in Metro-Goldwyn-Mayer's presentation of Lucasfilm Ltd.'s "WILLOW".

Photo credit: Keith Hamshere
A killer dressed as a cop is plaguing New York City, but only Lieutenant Tom Adams believes the murderer is a real policeman. Meanwhile, patrolling Bruce Campbell is being set up by the unknown psycho to take the rap. The case gets complicated when it develops that the maniac is also apparently unkillable, and might well be a Dirty Harry type who was supposedly killed in prison after he was indicted for stretching the law one too often by the expedient-seeking police commissioner and city authorities. Finally, the scene is set for a slam-bang confrontation during the St Patrick’s Day parade, between Campbell, on the run for the murders he didn’t commit, and the hulking psychopath. Directed by William Lustig, the man who gave you such objectionable trash as Maniac, and financed by James Glickenhaus, sister of the unreadable The Ecstasy, this isn’t entirely free of the kind of formula violence you’d expect from such a gore-fest. But it was written and produced by Larry Cohen, who remains the most intriguing — if variable — creator in the low-budget exploitation field and bears many of his trade-marks, including the weird police background of Q and God Told Me To and a few of his favourite bit players. The basic Hallowen-style plot is complicated by the unusual setting (almost everyone in the film is a cop) and Cohen works in a few almost subliminal bits about the attitudes of (and to) the police force. The killer is rather more impressive when glimpsed as a shadowy figure in police blues than when his not-one-scared face is actually seen, and the intriguing set-up the character is
given — which includes a bizarre performance from former starlet Sheree North as the psycho’scrippled girlfriend — doesn’t really pay off when the time comes for some car chases and slugfests. However, Cohen’s sense of humour is well served by an offbeat cast of quirky performers, from Atkins’ trade-marked fed-up look through heroine Laurene Landon’s spunky determination to *Evil Dead* alumnus Campbell’s amazing ability to take endless physical abuse.

*Willow* Ufgood (WARWICK DAVIS) undertakes an epic journey to deliver a child-prince into safe hands in the MGM presentation of Lucasfilm Ltd’s *WILLOW,* directed by Ron Howard.

In a fantasy world, a baby is born who will, it is foretold, overthrow the evil sorceress Bavmorda (Marsh). The baby girl falls into the hands of Willow Ufgood (Davis), one of a community of bumptious dwarves, and the pint-sized hero has to protect her from Bavmorda’s rampaging horde of heavily armed evil guys. Along the road, Willow falls in with Madmartigan (Kilmer), an ace swordfighter and rogue who naturally reforms under the influence of such goodness. Also on the side of the elves and fairies are a sorcerer turned into a variety of animals (Hayes), a pair of French-accented brownies, a Viking warrior with a Bo Derek beard and Bavmorda’s cousin daughter Sorcha (Whalley) who steals out rotten but, as is prophesied by the seersayer who keeps giving away the plot, turns good when she falls for the even cuter Madmartigan. Commedia is endemic in IFLIES, which is a typical George Lucas patchwork of bits and pieces left over from *Lord of the Rings*, *Conan the Barbarian*, *The Ten Commandments*, *Krool*, *Peter Pan* and *Three Men and a Baby*. By and large, the charming cast overcome the terrible dialogue and have fun with their roles, although the brownies are the most irritating triumph of special effects ever committed to celluloid. But you also get a two-headed monster, a big battle, an enchanted castle, some troll muggers, a beholder chase, a black magic duel and some spirited swordplay. And Kilmer and Whalley make a fine romantic team, alternately beating each other up and lobotomizing all over each other, and showing off their matching girly haircuts. However, the film could still do without its insistence cut-aways to the baby, who seems to get more
Stripper Brenda Lee (Claudia Christian) has a violent surprise in store for a flirtatious drunk (Joey Sagall) in "The Hidden".
screen time than any of the other, non-dribbling characters. Ron Howard directs with a less technophilic hand than Lucas’ collaborators on the Star Wars movies, but his blend of character comedy and swashbuckling action pales beside the far superior The Princess Bride. Still, this is your only chance this year to see Patricia Haynes do a nude scene.

If I were to assign a rating of 1-10 to its performances, I would give this film a 4. The characters are not particularly well-drawn, and the acting is uneven. However, the film does have a number of clever and witty moments. Overall, it is an entertaining film, but it is not likely to become a classic. 

If I were to assign a rating of 1-10 to its cinematography, I would give this film a 6. The cinematography is competent, but it does not add much to the film. The lighting is adequate, but the colors are not particularly vibrant. The camera work is fairly static, with little use of movement or camera angles. Overall, the cinematography is functional, but it does not contribute much to the film.

If I were to assign a rating of 1-10 to its music, I would give this film a 4. The music is not particularly memorable, and it does not add much to the film. The score is fairly simple, with little use of orchestration or instrumental textures. Overall, the music is functional, but it does not contribute much to the film.

If I were to assign a rating of 1-10 to its script, I would give this film a 5. The script is not particularly well-written, and it does not add much to the film. The dialogue is fairly simple, and the plot is fairly straightforward. The script does not particularly innovate, and it does not add much to the film. Overall, the script is functional, but it does not contribute much to the film.

In summary, this film is an entertaining film, but it is not likely to become a classic. The performances are uneven, the cinematography is functional, the music is functional, and the script is functional. Overall, it is a fairly satisfactory film, but it is not likely to be remembered in the future.
THE WIZARD OF SPEED AND TIME
point up the gaps properly. The episodic approach
echoes the old Amicus omnibus horrors (Dr Terror’s
House of Horrors, The House That Dripped Blood etc.),
and the various cameos allow director Anthony Hickox
to parody/emulate the styles of old Hammer films,
Night of the Living Dead and Roger Corman’s Edgar
Allan Poe adaptations. But it doesn’t add up to much more
than an anthology of lovingly recreated tableaus from
the director’s favourite movies, and the Blassing-Suddles-
style climax is simply irritating.

The Wizard of Speed and Time (1987, US). Director:
Mike Jirikov. Cast: Mike Jirikov, Paige Morse, Richard
Kaye. 89 minutes.
This is just one of those films a reviewer won’t help you
with. It’s got about half an hour of marvellous footage
and half an hour of utter crap, the balance being a weird
cocktail of the two. Mike Jirikov is a Los Angeles
independent film-maker who specialises in
pulchritude/introspection effects and tends to write, direct,
edit and star in his films. Until now, he’s turned out a
series of dazzling shorts that combine science fiction in-
jokes and imagery with simple but astonishing camera
techniques. Here, heTaken some of the best bits of his
earlier work, throws in a few more startling moments,
and wraps them up in a semi-autobiographical story
about a fictional film-maker called Mike Jirikov (played
by Mike Jirikov) who is trying to crank out some effects
footage for a TV special despite the efforts of ubiquitous
producer. Jirikov himself is a twee, charming figure,
who comes on like a more personable Pee-Wee Herman
with his careful of gadgets and tricks. And the
Hollywood suite — which includes information on the difficulties an independent film-maker is faced with when he comes up against the monolithic Hollywood unions, the police force and unscrupulous big bucks merchants — sometimes clicks, although it will be way over the heads of the children who will be most charmed by the animation sequences. There are some extremely clumsy comedy routines and one or two of the supporting players — obviously friends and relations of the production — are simply appalling. On the whole, I sort of liked the movie, but there’s an edge of desperation about it that is subtly offputting. If you want to see it, catch it last or on video because my guess is that it won’t be around long.


Museum keeper Nick Derzy (Goldblum) and beautician Sylvia Pickel (Lauper) meet at an Institute for Psychic Research when their paranormal powers are tested. Both are approached by Harry (Falk), a charmingly transparent conman, and suckered into a trip to Ecuador, supposedly in search of Harry’s missing son, but actually in pursuit of an Incan Lost City, a treasure beyond anyone’s wildest dreams and a source of incredible mystic power. It comes off like a mediocre episode of a good television series: the characters are likable and well-played, and the basic premise is sound, but the specifics of this particular story never really fall in place. Lowell Ganz and Babaloo Mandell, who wrote ‘Splash’, create amusing scenes characters for their stars: Goldblum is wacky and conservative at the same time.
and Lauper — if she relies too much on Elke Greiner’s
leftover dumb-blonde mannerisms — is an engaging
heroine and unique in the modern American cinema in
that she has a stomach. There are also some funny
supporting performances, especially from Falk as a
crumbled crook and Greens as a corrupt Swedish psychic,
although Julian Sands (boo him!), here the main villain,
continues to be the most embarrassing Englishman in
the movies. There are good jokes, nice South American
locales, and one hopes the film will be successful enough
to warrant a sequel in which these nice people have
something worthwhile to do, but the supposedly
awesome mystic finale is even sillier than the one in The
Golden Child and too much of the rest is just reused
from Romancing the Stone. Miss Lauper sings a song
over the end credits, but if you walk out early you can
avoid it.

KIM NEWMAN
For this first issue of "The Gate" the letters are a little thin on the ground. In fact, as you can see, there aren't any. I know, however, that S.F. & F. fans are prolific letter writers and for our second issue this section will be overflowing.

The format of "The Gate" has been left deliberately rather bland in appearance for two reasons. Firstly, I felt that over-designed page layouts might well distract the readers' attention, and after all, the story is the essence of a magazine such as "The Gate". Secondly, this area will be carefully developed in response to readers' criticisms and suggestions.

Reader input is a valuable tool which a publisher must use to help establish a successful publication. I look forward to receiving and assessing such input.

Richard Newcombe
(W. Publishing)
NEXT ISSUE...

FICTION BY:
- DEAN WHITLOCK
- CHRISTOPHER AMIES
- SEAN & BARRINGTON BAYLEY
- KIM NEWMAN
- JOHN GRANT
- ANDY SAWSER

REVIEWS BY:
- PAUL KINCAID
- KIM NEWMAN