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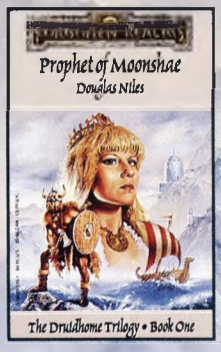

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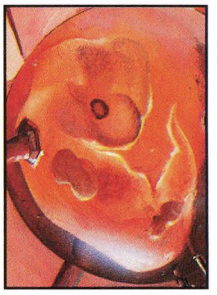

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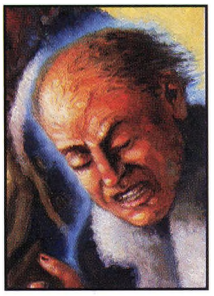

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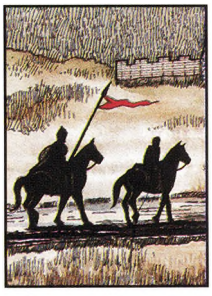

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NONFICTION

LOOKING FORWARD

Cover Art by David Mattingly

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The Fine Art of Reading

Kim Mohan

I don't think about this too often, but sometimes it bothers me: I seem to have forgotten how to read.

I can't settle down with a book or a magazine, or a manuscript submission, and simply enjoy a good story. I don't *read* any more—I examine, I evaluate, I scrutinize. I look at every piece of writing I encounter with a critical eye.

This is what I get, apparently, for being an editor. Put a piece of paper with words on it in front of me, and the antennae go up immediately.

My sensors operate on a couple of levels. First, there's the GAP detection system, which picks up on booboos in Grammar and Punctuation. Most of the time, small-scale technical errors in a piece of writing stand out for me like bugs on a windshield. (Of course, no detection system is perfect, which is why I say "most of the time"—and which is why, once in a great while, a G or P mistake will even show up in these pages.)

I can't just read *through* a small mistake. Even though nine times out of ten it's immediately obvious what the writer meant to say, I still pause ever so briefly. I shake my head, figuratively if not literally, and the little editor voice in my head mutters something like, "How could that mistake be allowed to survive?"

Even though I know it's blatantly hypocritical, I'm especially sensitive to GAP errors that show up in published material. If a manuscript submission contains a few glitches . . . well, okay, these things can happen even to the best wordsmiths. But when a piece of writing gets into print, it does so only after having been seen by at least one person other than the writer who's supposed to be skilled in working with verbs, and commas, and semicolons, and all the other tools of the trade. The key phrase there is "supposed to be." It irritates me, as it should irritate all bonafide editors and proofreaders, to see something published that contains the sorts of errors our high-school English teachers warned us about. When I run into a piece of work that falls into that category, I have to try to resist the urge to stop reading—if the writing itself is this poor, how good can the story be, anyway?

Fortunately, the great majority of writers do know how to use their tools, and when my GAP alarm isn't going off repeatedly I have a chance to absorb the *ideas* that are represented by the black marks on the page. This is the point at which my other detection system kicks in—the SLAP sensors, which alert me to possible problems in Sensibility, Logic, and Plausibility.

The Sensibility alarm sounds when I witness a character doing or saying something dumb, the purpose of which is to make it possible for the story to develop the way the writer wants it to. "Looks like a stick of dynamite, eh, Bob?" "Could be, Steve, but we have no way of knowing for sure." "So true, Bob. How about if we light this thing that looks like a fuse and see what happens?" See you later, Bob. Goodbye, Steve. So long, story.

Logic problems usually aren't the product of the writer's attempt to orchestrate something; they're events or bits of dialogue that simply don't make sense (except, possibly, to the person who wrote the words). Citing an example would be pointless because logic problems come in countless different forms; chances are you've run across one of them if you feel your brow furrowing into a quizzical frown and you ask yourself the question that says so much in a single word: "Huh?"

If a story contains a fair number of sensibility and logic problems, the end result is a piece of writing that lacks plausibility. The writer's first responsibility to his reader is to craft a tale that seems believable—one about which the reader can say, "Yeah. That *could* happen." If I get all the way through a story and I'm still not convinced that it *could* happen, I feel as though I've wasted my time—and I'm even more frustrated than if I had given up on the story at the halfway point.

I'm glad I have these detection systems, because without them I wouldn't be able to do my job. But every so often I envy people who can just kick back and read something for enjoyment . . . which is what I hope we've made it possible for you to do with the contents of this magazine. ✦

Reflections

Robert Silverberg

Thinking fast is a good idea when disaster comes, but sometimes the best thing is not to think too much at all. And so when the sky turned black over Oakland midway through a lovely golden autumn morning, just five days ago as I write this, I didn't spend a lot of time pondering which of my possessions I preferred to save if the fire that had suddenly begun to rage five or six miles north of me should reach my neighborhood, as was beginning to seem altogether possible.

Of course, I've had some practice at this kind of thing. In 1968, when I still lived in New York City, fire came from nowhere at four in the morning on a February night and drove me out into 12-degree weather. I had very little time that night to gather things, or even my wits; so just about all I took with me was the manuscript of the book I was working on and one little ancient Roman glass bowl that I found particularly precious. I didn't even bother to grab the ledger in which I keep irreplaceable business records. Instead of trying to pack up the four cats and various kittens of the household, I chased them all down to the basement, four stories below the fire itself, and shut them into a room where I thought they'd be safe. That turned out to be dumb, because one of the first things the firemen did was to open that room, letting cats loose into the house. As it happened, all the cats survived the fire anyway, and so did many of the possessions that I had left behind, though the house itself was a total wreck. And I found the ledger a few days later in the ruins of what had been my office.

This time, when the alarms began to go off in the distance and that terrible plume of smoke fouled the sky, the *first* thing I did was corral the cats—different ones, 23 years later—and pack them into their carriers. Then I got the business ledger, with 23 more years of notations in it, and the little box of backup disks containing my current story and the financial records I had just finished transferring to my new computer. The computer itself I left behind, along with a houseful of treasures. My wife Karen and I loaded what we had chosen to take into the car, turned the car around in the driveway to be aimed outward for quick departure, and spent the next hour and a half hosing down the roof of the house while the fire drew closer. At half past three in the afternoon the helicopters came overhead, bellowing evacuation orders for our entire neighborhood, and we joined the outward migration. As I passed through the house and the separate building that is my office, locking things and setting burglar alarms, I did find myself wondering whether I would ever see any of this again. But that was as much speculation as I allowed myself. There are times when it's best not to do a lot of thinking.

We took refuge over the hills, ten miles away (it seemed like worlds away) at the home of our friend Jim Benford, Gregory Benford's twin brother, and his wife Hilary. And there we stayed through the frightful night of October 20, compulsively watching the terrible scenes on television as the lovely hillside town where I have lived for the past twenty years underwent trial by fire.

Conditions couldn't have been better for a major conflagration. Not only has Northern California undergone a drought for the past five years, but the *normal* climate of the California coast gives us long rainless summers, and we had had virtually no measurable precipitation for six full months. There had been an atypical hard frost the previous December, leaving many trees in the eucalyptus forests of the high ridges with clusters of dry dead leaves. And October is usually the warmest month of the year for us: the temperature that morning was in the high eighties. A weird and troublesome easterly wind was blowing out of the hot, dry interior of the state instead of the cool ocean breeze that usually sweeps across the Bay Area.

So when a brush fire that somehow had begun in the hills the day before—and supposedly had been extinguished—came back to life Sunday morning and got out of hand, disaster was inevitable. The parched trees and dry grassy meadows of the hills went up immediately; the lovely wooden houses in the initial fire zone were ignited within minutes; and then, as trees exploded into flame, great firebrands were lifted

aloft and carried hundreds of yards by that deadly east wind, down into the heavily populated residential regions below the hill area itself. You probably know the rest of the story, though not as well as we do. By daybreak at least two thousand homes had been destroyed; whole neighborhoods had been obliterated; an enviably beautiful landscape had been transformed into a thing of horror.

Karen and I were among the lucky ones. The fire was brought under control a mile north of our house. At nine the next morning the evacuation order for our immediate neighborhood was lifted, and we said goodbye to Jim and Hilary Benford and set out, badly shaken but immensely relieved, for our house. Because the fire zone blocked the ten-minute direct route between the Benford house and ours, we came home the long way around, a trip of more than an hour; but eventually we were there to see that the place had gone untouched. We unpacked our bewildered cats, wandered around thankfully to visit our possessions, and tried to put some of the nightmare behind us.

Most other members of the Oakland hills science fiction community came through, as we did, with nothing more than a bad scare. Charles Brown's hilltop house, where *Locus* is published, was well outside the danger zone. The canyonside house that Jack Vance built with his own hands and where he and his wife Norma have lived for more than forty years was closer to the blaze, but went unharmed; Jack's son John defied the evacuation order and spent the night in the house to guard it, and when I spoke to him by phone that evening he said that glowing embers were floating by but that no fires had started nearby. Poul and Karen Anderson, who live on the other side of the hill in Orinda—also menaced in the early hours of the fire—were all right also. The most remarkable story involved the house on Broadway Terrace where Terry Carr and his wife Carol lived for many years, and which Carol still occupies. The fire came as far south as Broadway Terrace, wiping out everything along the north side of the street. But Carol's house is on the south side; and the next day we discovered that it was still there, utterly unscathed along with five or six of its neighbors in the midst of the awesome destruction. And on the Berkeley side of the fire, where the Hotel Claremont (site of the 1968 World Science Fiction Convention) was threatened but ultimately was saved, the house known as Greyhaven, inhabited by Marion Zimmer Bradley's brother Paul, agent Tracy Blackstone, and writers Diana Paxson and Jon DeCles, also came through, despite early rumors that it had been lost. On the other side of the ledger was the destruction of the house where my first wife Barbara—who had suffered through that 1968 fire with me—lived. It was in the zone where the blaze broke out, and must have been incinerated in the first moments of the event. (Barbara herself was out of town at the time or her life might well have been in danger.)

Now a few days have passed, and things slowly return to normal for those of us who escaped with nothing more than a few hours of fright, while those who were more closely touched by calamity begin the long, numbing process—which will take a year or more, and in some senses will never be at an end, if my 1968 experience is any guide—of rebuilding their interrupted lives. Already new utility poles are being erected in the disaster area, electric and telephone service is being restored, and crews with chainsaws and jackhammers are starting to haul away debris. In a few weeks wildflowers will begin to bloom atop the ashes; by spring the first new houses will be under construction.

The area where we live is one of the most beautiful in the world. We have the sea nearby; we have hills and mountains; we have a vast blue sky above us most of the year, clear air, months on end of brilliant sunshine. The winters are mild and the summers are gentle, so that our weather is a kind of perpetual springtime. Few of us are talking about moving away, despite all that we have been through in recent years.

But we have been through a great deal here. There has been a drought, in an already dry climate, for the past five years. There was a terrifying earthquake in 1987. 1990 brought us a hard frost, which wiped out cherished gardens decades old and harassed our fertile agricultural regions. And now this fire, which has left so frightful a scar on our lovely hills. It makes one uneasy about what may come next; it eats into one's reserves of resilience. Our friends back east ask us why we don't move to some safer place.

And yet—and yet—

A day or two after our fire there was a great earthquake in India. Last summer the Philippines struggled to cope with the effects of a huge volcanic eruption. Just yesterday I read a newspaper account of another eruption, in the Chilean Andes on August 12, that has buried a section of Patagonia five times the size of Connecticut in volcanic ash, threatening the economic welfare of an enormous region of Argentina. And of course I could go back through the roster of historic eruptions, floods, earthquakes, hurricanes, and all the rest.

So what is the lesson to derive from the fire that roared through my pretty neighborhood last Sunday? That the San Francisco Bay Area, lovely as it is, is too dangerous for human habitation, and that we should all move somewhere else, someplace safer?

No. The real conclusion to draw from what happened here is something that we already know in the abstract from having read about Pompeii or the Bangladesh floods or the San Francisco earthquake of 1906, but which does not become completely real until it strikes closer to home. And that is that there may be safer places than this one, but that no place is really safe. We who inhabit the planet Earth live on the shoulders of an indifferent giant. At any moment he may choose to shrug or even simply twitch, and hurl us to destruction. It's a wonderful planet, and I don't know of a better one to live on. But even its most beautiful regions are places of peril, and though we like to think of ourselves as the masters of the world, we need to remember that we are only its tenants and the terms of the lease can be altered, without our consent, at any time. ✦

Letters

I would like to comment on the story "Divinity School" (November issue) by Kent Patterson. Although I would rather eat earthworms than be identified as "Politically Correct," I do cringe when I see or hear people's beliefs ridiculed, especially Jews. I can't quarrel with the writer's wishing to criticize religion in general (though *mocking* it is technically very hard to do without making yourself seem simply immature), but he crosses the line when the Jewish god is specifically held up to ridicule (the "burning bush" segment). Once we laugh at their beliefs, it's a short step to laughing at them: what's next, long black coats and beards and, ho ho, sidecurls?

Or maybe he meant to mock the Christians, many of whom believe the burning bush story. I suppose that's okay.

Jess Schilling
Huntingdon PA

—

This is the first time I have seen your magazine (October issue), but the new full-color format is wonderful. I am especially pleased by the story illustrations. However, the best picture—and the one that made me buy the magazine—is on the cover, and there is no story for it. That was disappointing. A picture that captivating really deserves a story.

Concerning the actual selection of the stories, I applaud your taste. The selection covers a wide range of my favorites, and the writing is skillful. I was delighted to find a genuine shiver-creeper included; most current "horror" is just slasher stuff. "The Drifter" really made me cringe. "Chapter Thirteen" and "Line Item on a Dead Grant" appeal to me personally because I'm a sophomore in college, and the settings are very accurate.

Overall, I think the magazine's arrangement is balanced and attractive. The stories are well mixed according to length and tone, but putting the longest story right at the end made things a little bottom-heavy. Something short and light at the end that lets the reader off with a twist and a grin would be better. A last-word type article might work too. Other strong points include the one-page author biographies and the dual-format book reviews. The request for reader input is appreciated.

There are some things I would like to see more of in the future. First, those dual-format book reviews are spectacular. No other magazine I read actually prints excerpts from books, and reading those excerpts makes a big difference in whether or not I buy the book. Combined with the regular short reviews, it's a winning idea. Second, I would like to see an occasional article on writing or publishing the kind of stories you print. I know this magazine focuses on stories and not articles, but a few good articles would help a lot. Articles are a good way for writers to exchange ideas and keep up with what other writers are putting out.

Elizabeth Barrette
Alvin IL

—

I read November's "Letters" column, and came across Joel Wyatt's note on Orson Scott Card. On page 45 of the same issue I also see that Mr. Card won the 1990 Hugo for *How to Write Science Fiction and Fantasy*.

Putting 2 and 2 together may not always equal 4. For the past year, I have owned a copy of Card's "How to" book. I found it to be an insightful offering to the world of science fiction and fantasy writing. At least in part because of his book, I have an agent who confers with me on my novel on a regular basis, and I have been able to draw upon enough courage to submit my work to several magazines . . . plus I have the continued drive to take the "No!"s with the nibbles.

From the standpoint of "quoting a brief passage" for the purpose of review, I would like to offer this short excerpt from Card's book:

"Writers have to simultaneously believe the following two things:

"1. The story I am now working on is the greatest work of genius ever written in English.

"2. The story I am now working on is worthless drivel.

"It's best if you believe these things simultaneously, so that you can call on Belief 1 when you're deciding whether to mail the story out, Belief 2 when going over the story to revise it, Belief 1 when choosing which market to submit it to, Belief 2 when the story is rejected (of course, I expected to get this back), and Belief 1 again when you put it back in an envelope and mail it to the next-best market."

These words are of value to any writer, whether they write, rewrite, or even if they "pontificate or deliver homilies," as Wyatt says.

I guess, in my back-woods Arkansas sort of way, I am rephrasing the old saying that "It's hard to argue with success." Before you condemn Mr. Card as being "totally devoted to his own ambition," consider the value of his nonfiction contribution to us "wanna-be" writers, and remember how few of the other "greats" ever took the time to help out the starving artists.

Maybe I'm beating a dead horse, but an awful lot of people out there seem to be saying, "Hey . . . I've read all of this guy's books, heck I've got every last one of them, and they're no good!" So why did you read them all? True, I *am* part Cherokee, but it doesn't take *me* that long to look at a rattlesnake, if you understand my meaning.

Mark L. Lynch
Conway AR

COMPLICATIONS

Brian Stableford

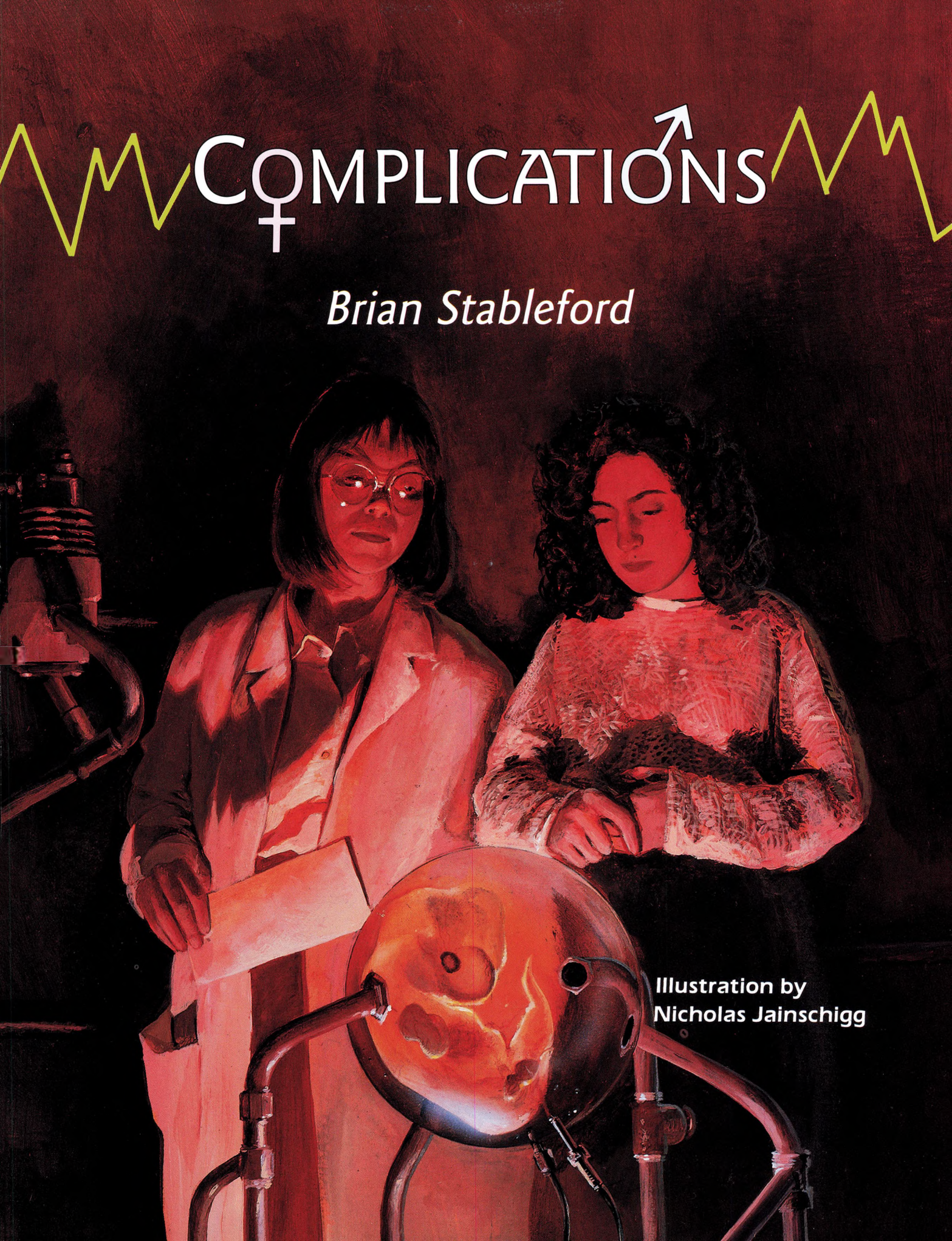

Illustration by
Nicholas Jainschigg

"It's a boy," said Dr. Brewer, pushing her spectacles farther up the bridge of her nose so that she could monitor every nuance of her patient's reaction.

Rachel was determined to remain impassive; she was, after all, an educated woman of the twentieth century. Modern science had freed her from the agonizing months of hope and anxiety her foremothers had been forced to bear while they willed their bellies to swell, and prayed that any failure to do so was merely slowness and not the consequence of their babies' maleness; modern women had a duty to respond with mature reactions.

It seemed, though, that her disappointment showed—Dr. Brewer's scrupulous eyes narrowed a little, and the puckered lips were slightly pursed. On the other hand, perhaps it was merely the older woman's readiness to see disappointment which made her perceive it, even in features as rigid as a mask.

"Had you planned for that contingency?" asked the doctor, when it was obvious that Rachel was not going to speak.

"No," Rachel answered, shortly. "That's one of the benefits of early testing, isn't it? You don't have to make any plans until you know what to plan for."

Rachel knew that Gwenifer would not be nearly so impassive when the news was relayed to her. Gwenifer, whose understanding of the calculus of probability was unfortunately rudimentary, had convinced herself that after three boys the line was almost certain to produce a girl *this time*. Gwenifer had been trying hard for a girl herself, without any luck at all, and had begun to suspect that there might be something wrong with her own husband, who only had a couple of years left in him before deadbirth.

"Have you any idea which course you'll be likely to favor?" asked Dr. Brewer, trying hard to make the words sound tactful.

Rachel's impassivity cracked at last; it seemed to her to be a rather indelicate question, even from a doctor. She looked away. "I'll have to talk to my family about it," she said, in a low tone. Then she looked back at the doctor, ashamed of her weakness.

Again the doctor's eyes narrowed slightly, although the effect was offset this time by the fact that her spectacles had slipped down again; the unusually narrow bridge of her nose was inadequate to keep them in place.

"Of course you will," she said. Then, suddenly seeming as awkward as her patient, she said: "But I should warn you that there may be complications to be taken into account."

Rachel felt a sudden chill. "What complications?" she asked. The ostensible purpose of the test she had undergone was to yield an assortment of data relevant to the health of mother, husband and child. Determination of the sex of the child was supposedly only a by-product, though most women inevitably regarded it as the most important question to be settled.

Dr. Brewer held up a hand in what was presumably supposed to be a reassuring gesture. "Please don't worry, Mrs. Hale," she said. "It's nothing life-threatening. There's no danger to you, or to the embryo."

Rachel had no difficulty subtracting two from three and coming up with the right answer. "You mean something's wrong with my husband?" she said sharply.

"It may not be serious," Dr. Brewer was quick to say. "But we'll need to explore further. A scan will show us the full extent of the problem, and I've made an appointment for Tuesday. The overwhelming probability is that it's just a minor abnormality. Even if it's more than that, there's no possible danger to *you*."

Rachel had never shared Gwenifer's suspicion that there was something wrong with the line, despite Gwenifer's failure to achieve a second pregnancy. Elena was on the pill and Candida was contentedly widowed, so there had been no *real* reason to suspect that there was any hereditary defect . . . until now.

"Exactly what are you saying?" Rachel asked. When Dr. Brewer hesitated, she added: "I'm perfectly capable of understanding an explanation. I may not be a specialist, but I teach General Science in the lower school. I know what all the words mean."

"The test shows that there's some kind of histamine reaction taking place in your womb," said Dr. Brewer. "Since histamine is a substance secreted in response to wounds, there may simply be a minor lesion or an ulcer of some kind, although one would expect other indications if that were the case. But it's also produced in allergic reactions, and there's a possibility that your husband might become a victim of wombshare sensitivity."

Rachel felt the hollowness of her boast that she would know what the words meant. In a vague way, she did—but now she felt an urgent need to know *precisely* what might be involved.

"Does that mean that my husband's allergic to his own son?" she said awkwardly.

"No. It's your womb which could be affected. There's a possibility—only a possibility, at this stage—that the onset of pregnancy has sensitized your womb in such a way that it has begun to react against the presence of the husband, and initiate a premature detachment. It's not so very uncommon, and in two cases out of three the reaction is temporary."

"And in the other one out of three?" Rachel asked, while she thought: *It's my fault, then—the flaw is in me.*

"In some cases, the detachment proceeds far enough to be disabling. The possibility of widowhood is remote, but males are delicate creatures . . . if you were unlucky, you'd probably be unable to become pregnant again this time around."

"But it's not hereditary, is it?" said Rachel sharply. "It's just me—it doesn't affect my mothers-in-law?"

Dr. Brewer glanced down at Rachel's records, momentarily uncertain.

"I'm the third daughter-in-law in a line," Rachel said, quickly. We have only one child in the house, and that's from the line-mother's earlier marriage. My grandmother-in-law uses contraception, but my mother-in-law doesn't—she's been hoping to become pregnant again for some time, without any luck. She had the same test that I've just had, though, when she gave birth to my husband. Nothing showed up."

The doctor furrowed her brow. "Sometimes the syndrome doesn't become detectable until a later stage of the pregnancy," she said. "It doesn't always show up at this stage, and when we do detect something—as we have in your case—a specific test is still required. Some husbands *are* much more prone to this kind of rejection than others, and yes, I'm afraid it can be hereditary. Your family doctor will be notified of these results as a matter of course, and she'll probably ask your mother-in-law to come in for a scan. If she does have the same problem, we should be able to identify it and determine the extent of the damage. How old is she?"

"Twenty-five—same as me," answered Rachel. She felt slightly uncomfortable as she added the second phrase. Because matchmakers almost always looked for younger recipients when their daughters-in-law fell pregnant with males, the doctor would deduce—correctly—that Gwenifer's and Rachel's had been a self-arranged marriage. Rachel had shared, in her own quieter fashion, Gwenifer's strong political commitment to self-arrangement, but she still felt the slight residual sting of her mother's disapproval every time she confessed that she had made her own match.

Dr. Brewer was evidently quite unconcerned with the social niceties that had obsessed Rachel's mother. All she said was: "In that case, she has all the time in the world to try again." Then, after a moment's pause for thought, she added: "If there *is* something wrong, there *could* be a hereditary element involved. You'll probably want to hear the results of both sets of tests before you finally decide, but . . . it might be as well to give us a little while to check out your child before you pass him on."

Rachel was briefly tempted to cut through the circumlocution, by saying, *Tank him, you mean,* but she didn't. The doctor was doing her best, in difficult circumstances, and Rachel couldn't bring herself to be rude. Anyhow, tanking was no longer regarded as disguised infanticide; modern medical science made certain that males could survive just as comfortably in a glorified aquarium as they could in a womb. Just as self-arranged marriages were gradually losing the stigma they had once carried, so the time was coming when it would be perfectly acceptable for any woman to tank her son. It would be something that could be talked about openly at dinner parties.

Rachel could not help but wonder whether it had all been simpler in olden times, when girls routinely concealed their pregnancies until they—and hopefully they alone—were certain whether it would be a boy or a girl. Then, if it *was* a boy, and if she should so decide, a girl might simply slip away in secret to the river, and consign her unwanted offspring to the cold mercy of the current. Of course her in-laws would *know,* but they would be forced by the iron laws of etiquette and taboo never to *admit* that they knew. Civilization and science brought greater responsibilities as well as greater opportunities.

All Rachel said, in the end, was: "Yes, I see. You can be sure that I'll think about all the options. I'll see you again on Tuesday?"

Dr. Brewer smiled then, but whether the smile signified satisfaction with her response or whether it was merely a polite conclusion to the interview, Rachel could not tell.

It's a boy, Rachel thought, as she got up to leave. *It's a boy, with complications. As if there weren't complications enough, simply because it's a boy!*

Rachel knew exactly how Gwenifer would react to the news. People who were easily annoyed were easily predictable, and the down side of Gwenifer's ardent desire to be a manager of circumstance was her violent resentment of any subversion of her schemes. Her recent promotion to forewoman hadn't helped any; she was rumored to be a real terror on the factory floor, and she was not the kind of person to leave her work personality in the locker room when the five o'clock horn sounded.

Gwenifer would have cursed her luck even if the only news Rachel had brought home had been the information that the baby would be a boy, but the ominous possibility that further bad news was to come added a deeper shade of black to her mood. Unfortunately, Rachel had to face her alone. Elena and Candida worked in the town center and had to travel home by train; the factory, like Rachel's school, was only a few streets away.

"What is this wombshare sensitivity?" Gwenifer demanded, as though Rachel—perhaps by virtue of being a teacher of science—were personally responsible for the existence of such a phenomenon.

"I don't know much about it," Rachel confessed. "It's not mentioned in the biology textbook I use in class, but that's only for fourteen-year-olds and it's already ten years out of date."

"If I've got it, surely the doctors at the Health Center should have picked it up years ago. It's not as if I haven't asked them why I haven't become pregnant again—I should have known better than to let them put me off with pleas to be patient. Patient!"

"It's not supposed to be serious," Rachel pointed out. "As Dr. Brewer said, you have plenty of time to try again. Even if you have to carry your present husband to term, that's only another three or four years. Then, after the deadbirth, you could marry again. You'll only be thirty-one or thirty-two when you become fertile again."

Rachel didn't bother to point out that as a committed self-arranger, Gwenifer didn't have to worry about the fact that a woman over thirty who'd never borne a daughter wouldn't readily catch the eye of a matchmaker. Even if Gwenifer couldn't find a new mother-in-law by hook or by crook, she could still adopt—this was the twentieth century, after all, and there were plenty of healthy males in the tanks.

"But I *haven't* got the time," Gwenifer complained. "The whole point of having one's daughter early is to have some life left after she's grown up. Suppose Candida had had another girl after the boy Elena received—she'd still have been engaged in active parenting when she turned fifty. I suppose Elena will have to be tested too; there's no point in her taking the pill if she can't have another child anyhow."

Rachel shrugged. "Elena's so close to widowhood that it won't make much difference," she said. "I suppose

they might want to test her, though, in case there's anything problematic about the deadbirth."

Gwenifer had already forgotten about Elena, and had found a determination to set her own troubles aside, at least for the moment. "I suppose the most important question," she said, "is what we're going to do about *your* baby. Do you have anyone in mind as a possible daughter-in-law?"

The question, posed so abruptly, made Rachel impotent with embarrassment. The fact was that she *did* have someone "in mind"—what else was the mother-to-be of a boy supposed to think about on a thirty-minute bus ride from hospital to home?—but having someone in mind was by no means the same thing as having a definite plan of procedure. She had not the slightest idea how the person she had in mind might react to a proposal, especially one that came directly from the mother-to-be and not from a matchmaking mother-in-law.

Gwenifer, seeing her confusion, completely mistook the reason for it. "I hope you're not expecting me to make a match *for you,*" she said.

In the twenty years that she had known Gwenifer, Rachel had had ample opportunity to observe her penchant for leaping recklessly to wrong conclusions, and the corollary habit of hurling around unneccesarily hurtful remarks, but this one was too hard to bear.

"Hardly," she retorted, trying to sound scornful instead of hurt. "If I decided to throw my principles overboard at the first sign of stress, I'd look for someone who could be trusted to take the business of matchmaking *seriously.*"

Gwenifer had already realized what she'd said and how it sounded. Although she wasn't much given to apologizing, she knew when to retreat in haste.

"Just a joke," she lied, dismissively. "It's entirely your own business—but a mother-in-law has a right to be *interested,* don't you think?"

"Well," said Rachel, unmollified, "if you must know, the doctor advised me to think seriously about tanking him temporarily, so that they can check him over thoroughly. So there'll probably be no rush, even when the happy event comes due."

Rachel had the satisfaction of seeing Gwenifer look shocked, but it only took a few seconds for her mother-in-law to pull herself together. Gwenifer prided herself on the modernity of her attitudes.

"Will you do that?" Gwenifer asked.

"I might," Rachel told her defiantly. "I suppose it depends whether I really have got wombshare sensitivity. If I have—and if you have too—then it would be rather irresponsible of me to go foisting the child on someone else without making certain that it was okay."

"I suppose so," admitted Gwenifer. "Then, does that mean . . . ?" This time, she was thinking and speaking slowly enough to abandon the question, but it didn't take a mind-reader to follow the line of argument.

"Yes," said Rachel. "For now, the news that I'm pregnant had better stay between these four walls and the covers of my medical file. It's not that I'm ashamed of what I might have to do; it's just that there's no point at all in making an issue out of it. I certainly don't want my mother to hear about it—not until everything is settled and done. Okay?"

Gwenifer shrugged. "It's your decision," she said. "Just remember—I'm your best friend as well as your mother-in-law. We've always been as close as sisters, and if we've both got this stupid syndrome, we're in the whole bloody mess *together.*"

Gwenifer genuinely meant to be reassuring—her offer of support was utterly sincere, in spite of the awkward tone of her voice—but Rachel couldn't make any appropriate response. The simple fact was that she had known Gwenifer for *too* long, and had too long consented to be dominated and led by her. She had begun to wonder whether it might have been a mistake to agree to become Gwenifer's daughter-in-law, even though they had long had a tacit contract to marry. Rachel felt in need now of *real* independence, not the false kind which was insincerely thrust upon her by this childhood friend to whom she had innocently conceded control of her life. Although there was all the difference in the world between their politics and attitudes, Rachel's mother and Gwenifer were in some ways distressingly similar.

In fact, Rachel suddenly thought—while fully aware that it was a truly *awful* thought—the intervention of medical complications into their lives might turn out to be a blessing in ugly disguise. If, indeed, they *were* in this "bloody mess" together, it might easily be the wedge that would belatedly split them apart, and set her free.

As she lay in bed that night, Rachel wondered why she had never felt that sense of well-being which—according to popular romantic fiction—was supposed to descend upon a married woman the moment her husband was lodged in her womb, not deserting her until he reemerged again at deadbirth. Did *everybody* pretend, or was she simply a freak and a misfit? She had never known whether to blame herself for being devoid of the capacity to feel what convention said she ought to feel, or whether it was simply Gwenifer's son who was mysteriously impotent to soothe her constant anxiety.

It's not a matter for blame at all, she told herself sternly—and not for the first time. *It's a matter for self-congratulation. No high, no hangover.*

The argument made perfect sense, but she could never make it persuasive. The truth was that she *wanted* to feel the way she was supposed to feel: calm, content, fulfilled. After all, if being married didn't make one feel better, why bother? The modern-day rewards of belonging to a linear household were, to say the least, mixed. One's mothers-in-law were supposed to be good companions, and invaluable allies against all adversity—but they could also be difficult, especially if one of them was Gwenifer.

According to the biology textbook Rachel used as a teaching aid, an implanted male was supposed to release a hormone which had a slight but significant opiate effect—an effect sufficient to make the great majority of women addicted to the presence of males in their wombs. Many widows who decided not to remarry—

and more and more widows felt that they *ought* not to remarry, given that the world's population was dangerously near three billion—needed injections of a synthetic hormone to sustain them through the withdrawal symptoms that followed deadbirth. But Candida had been one of the exceptions to the rule, adapting readily enough to life without an indwelling male, and Rachel wondered whether she might now be following in her line-mother's footsteps.

Perhaps it's another hereditary factor, Rachel thought. *Another symptom of wombshare sensitivity.*

In ancient times—even today, in famine-stricken Africa and the desolate Americas—widows who had enjoyed to the full the chemical blessings of marriage had been condemned to await in feverish anxiety the birth of another boy within the family group, and then forced to compete with the nubile girls most favored by the matchmaking mothers-in-law. It had always seemed to Rachel to be an unkind trick for Nature to play on them, but Nature had never been renowned for her kindness, and the wisdom of lore and legend insisted that the benefits outweighed the costs.

But then, Rachel thought, *it would, wouldn't it?*

She tried so hard to feel *something* that it would almost have been a relief to feel an ache or a pain: some stirring in her entrails that might confirm that her poor husband was restless in his fleshy bed, assailed by the ingratitude of her own wayward immune system.

There was nothing at all; it was as if her brain had entirely lost contact with her nether regions, as uninspired by her pregnancy as it had been by her marriage. Her thoughts were troubled, but her body seemed stubbornly, infuriatingly calm.

How her mother would have laughed, had she known of her daughter's condition! "That'll teach you, my girl!" she would have said. "That'll teach you to fly in the face of decency, and break your mother's heart!"

Unfortunately, it hadn't so far taught her anything at all, and she doubted that it would.

The sonic scan wasn't really an ordeal, and while the instruments were recording, the doctors relayed the pictures to a TV set beside the bed so that Rachel could see what was going on. Dr. Brewer had to point out the tiny embryo that was her son, because it was so hard to see, but the coiled shape of her husband was unmistakable.

It gave Rachel a creepy feeling to be looking at him that way, while he was inside her. She'd seen countless pictures of the interior of a fertile womb, of course—ranging from the neat and clinical diagrams in her school textbooks to the luridly tinted photographs taken by tiny cameras mounted on careful probes which had recently been featured by the Sunday supplements—but it wasn't the same as looking into the depths of one's own body.

She realized she had never really *seen* her husband at all, until now. The birth-and-marriage had gone very smoothly; he'd been out of Gwenifer's womb and into hers like the proverbial rat up a drainpipe, and despite all her resolutions she'd been unable to avoid looking modestly away at the vital moment. The ancient taboos still contrived to cast their gloomy shadow over modern life, and in her particular case they were aided and abetted in no uncertain terms by a mother whose attitudes were about as liberal as Pope Joan's.

The picture on the screen was rather blurred, and Rachel couldn't imagine how the consultant could deduce from such an uncertain image whether anything was subtly wrong with the implantation of her spouse, but the technician assured her that there was information enough for expert analysis. They took more smears and samples from inside her, to make sure that they had all the data available.

Afterward, when she'd dressed, Dr. Brewer came to see her.

"The results won't be ready for a couple of hours," said the doctor. "I wondered if you'd like to take a little tour while you're waiting."

Rachel wasn't in the least confused by the vagueness of the words; she knew that the doctor wanted to take her to see the tanks. She had no difficulty in keeping her face quite straight; a few days of turbulent doubts and the contemplation of various nightmare scenarios had adequately steeled her against atavistic disgust.

"Yes," she said, levelly and sincerely. "I would be very interested."

She found, as Dr. Brewer led her away, that even the hospital's administrators did not seem to be entirely modern in their approach to the care and keeping of unmarried males. The tanks were in the basement, deeply buried. They were between the central heating boilers and the laundry, not so very far from the mortuary.

Although it was not the sort of thing that could decently be displayed on prime-time TV, Rachel knew well enough what she would see. She knew that the males would be swimming free in a clear but viscous nutrient solution. She knew that they would be crowded together, like eels which had been captured as they swarmed and then loaded into a bucket. She knew that every one of them would be marked with indelible dye in order that they could be told apart from one another, and the provenance of each one remembered.

The main tanks were, as she had expected, little different from the big aquaria at Regent's Park Zoo, although there were three dozen smaller ones not much bigger than shoeboxes, which were reserved for infectious occupants and those under intense individual scrutiny.

The males in the big tanks ranged in length from a newborn four inches to a fully grown foot. They were pale pink in color, but not the same shade as Rachel's own skin, which was faintly browned by melanin. They were almost featureless, having neither mouth parts nor sense organs, but their skins were delicately patterned and pitted, and her educated eye could just about pick out the portals from which the mature specimens released their sperm. The codes identifying the males were marked in red: two letters and three numbers, like flight numbers at the airport.

Rachel stood and watched, while Dr. Brewer watched her.

"We've just about perfected the nutrient solution," said

the doctor, eventually. "The average lifespan of a male in the tanks is seven point one three years—that's only five weeks short of the average for successful implants in healthy wombs. They still release sperm, even though they're not implanted, but the water is constantly filtered and the sperm taken out. It's unnatural, in a way, for them to spend their entire lives swimming, but they don't seem to be at all disturbed by it."

Retention of primitive traits, thought Rachel, remembering it as though from one of her college textbooks. *Vertebrate females have come a long way, and have explored many different forms—all the myriad kinds of fishes, amphibians, reptiles, birds, and mammals—but the males remain essentially similar. All the vertebrates except the placental mammals lay their eggs in liquid-filled purses, so that the male hatchlings can swim to meet and enter the bodies of the female hatchlings. The placental mammals keep their reproductive apparatus safely tucked up within their bodies, so that males need only slither out of one vagina into another, but mammalian males still retain the ability to swim. It's an understandable echo of the evolutionary process, and has nothing to do with the fact that the traditional fate of the unwanted was to be chucked into the nearest river.*

She was glad that she understood. Understanding allowed her to look into the tanks without awe or revulsion, almost entirely free of the burden of dark superstitions which had so long confused human women's attitudes to their own reproductive processes.

The only thing which corrupted her equanimity with discomfort was the hugeness of the big tank and the sheer *number* of the eel-like males confined there. Science had given women a way of keeping unwed males alive, but the modern way of life encouraged women to stay single for longer periods of their lives, thus reducing the demand for the male children which—in accordance with the sociobiological logic of natural selection—had always been produced in superabundant numbers even in the days when those doomed to remain unmarried had to be fed to the fish.

In theory, all the males in the tanks were "up for adoption." In practice, nine out of ten would simply live and die without ever knowing the comforting solidity of a wife's womb. Even in these enlightened times of free choice, few women cared to get their husbands from the tank, even though such a move could give them—if they so wished—the option of not acquiring a mother-in-law, and hence a whole line-family, at the same time as they acquired a husband. Even those widows most heavily addicted to the condition of marriage usually waited until they had exhausted every last hope of finding a new mother-in-law; their visits to the tanks would be covert and confidential, and they would almost always set up as line-mothers in a different town, where they were unlikely to be the subject of gossip. Some preferred to continue the synthetic hormone injections indefinitely, despite the growing evidence connecting long-term use with an increased vulnerability to cancer.

Dr. Brewer passed on to the rows of tiny tanks where individual males were lodged. Their inhabitants looked oddly pathetic in their isolation, though Rachel knew how absurd it was to wonder whether such brainless creatures might feel lonely.

"This one already has a wife waiting for him," said the doctor. "And so have these three along here. They're only in here for observation or treatment—we'll be implanting all of them within the week, provided that they come through fit and well. So, if you have a daughter-in-law in mind, and if she were willing to wait . . . you're very welcome to bring her here to see for herself. . . ."

If she were willing to wait, Rachel repeated silently. She didn't even know if the person she had in mind would be willing to hear a proposal, let alone whether she'd be willing to say yes. The question of whether she might then be willing to wait for a few extra days before consummating her marriage belonged to the remoter regions of the wilderness of ifs.

"It's too soon to start thinking about all that," said Rachel curtly. "Let's wait until we have the verdict of the tests. Even then, we'll need to wait for the results of Gwenifer's tests before we have the full picture. It was kind of you to fit her in tomorrow."

"In the circumstances . . ." said the doctor, leaving the sentence unfinished so that she could go on to the next point at issue. "I'm glad that you're taking all this so well, Mrs. Hale, but if there's anything at all that you're uncertain about, we do have a counselor attached to the hospital who's always available for consultation. I don't know anything about your line-family, of course, but the pace of technological change is so rapid nowadays that it's not unusual for tensions to surface even in the happiest household, when issues like this are raised."

"That's quite all right," Rachel told her. "The eldest Mrs. Hale is very understanding, and my grandmother-in-law is only a few years older than Gwenifer and myself. There's no problem with any of them."

It was true, in a way. Candida and Elena would make every effort to be supportive, and even Gwenifer might not have been a problem if only Rachel had not begun to feel so utterly *smothered* by her. There was also her mother, of course—but perhaps *she* could be left out of the matter entirely; perhaps she would never need to be told. As for Vanessa . . . how could she possibly tell whether Vanessa would be a problem or not? But Rachel did not want to see a counselor; she was twenty-five years old and she was determined that the time had come when she must stop allowing other people to make up her mind for her.

"Let's go up, then," said the doctor. "There's still a while to wait before we'll know anything more, but you've seen all there is to see here."

"I suppose I have," said Rachel. "What will it be like, I wonder, in a hundred years' time, when there are millions of them?"

The doctor looked at her sharply, but said nothing.

"It will be such a waste, won't it?" Rachel went on. "All that flesh bound up in an impotent and useless form, waiting to die before its elements can be recycled." She didn't go on. There was no point in plumbing the uncomfortable depths of the notion. But she couldn't help

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thinking, privately, that there was a certain hypocrisy in striving so officiously to keep these unwanted births alive in such numbers. After all, most of a male's mass was absorbed by his wife before deadbirth, so wasn't it ridiculous to quiver with shock at the thought of turning *these* into food, whether for fish, or cattle, or women?

In a hundred years' time, she thought, *maybe we'll really have shaken off the burden of our past—maybe we'll be* truly *civilized.* It was a thought, she knew, of which Vanessa would have wholeheartedly approved; Vanessa liked nothing better than speculating about future possibilities and the betterment of the human condition.

Rachel saw Vanessa on the following day, at school. Because it was Wednesday, the afternoon timetable was empty, making room for the sporting activities which were supposed to add the *corpore sano* to every pupil's *mens sana,* and the science labs were quite empty. Rachel had no plans except for catching up with her marking and trying not to think about Gwenifer's trip to the hospital, but Vanessa wanted an audience on which to test out her latest idea for a science fiction story. Vanessa had lots of ideas for science fiction stories, of which only one in ten ever reached the stage of being typed up and submitted to the magazines.

"It's about this alien planet," Vanessa explained, "where the inhabitants are pretty much like us, except that the males are sentient bipeds just like the females."

"It's been done before," Rachel pointed out.

"Sort of—as a gimmick—but I want to do it properly. Complete evolutionary logic. It'll be difficult, of course, but there are dozens of insect and crustacean species which have physically similar males and females."

"There are also social insects whose hives have queens supported by legions of sterile female workers. That's been used as a model for humanoid alien species too, but it's never really convincing."

"Maybe not," conceded Vanessa. "But think of it this way. Suppose it was just a freak of chance that the proto-chordate species which was the common ancestor of all the vertebrates had an indwelling male. Suppose that the proto-chordate species had had a free-living male instead. Then the entire evolutionary history of the vertebrates would be different, from the first fishes to the first mammals, and from the first placentals all the way through to humans. It *might* have happened that way."

"I don't think it could have," said Rachel, after a moment's pause for thought. "It's so *wasteful* to produce full-scale males as well as females, given that a male's only function is to fertilize the female's eggs. Insects tend to be profligate that way—they often produce short-lived adults whose only function is to reproduce and die—but the bigger an organism is, the less profligate it can afford to be. The energy-economics wouldn't make sense, even for reptiles of any considerable size. For mammals there would be the additional problem of figuring out a way for your males to fertilize eggs that are retained within the female body."

"*That's* no problem," Vanessa said dismissively. "I'd give them something like an ovipositor so that they could introduce sperm directly into the womb. Maybe I could fudge the energy-economics by giving the male some extra functions as well as fertilization—I don't know what, but I'll think of something. I can argue that the system would enhance the power of natural selection, because a free-living male would be able to impregnate dozens of females, so that males could compete against one another for the privilege. Only the best would breed. That might be more efficient than our system, because even the fittest of our females rarely have more than two or three husbands—unless you believe in all those old demigoddesses who effortlessly went through nine or ten, and continued bearing daughters into their nineties."

"Even if you consider that as an advantage," Rachel pointed out, "there'd be all kinds of compensating disadvantages. All these free-living males would put a terrible strain on resources, even if women only kept the best of them around. Think of all the extra work that would need to be done to feed and support them! It's surely much more efficient to have a population consisting entirely of child-bearers. Then again, humans seem to have been so successful as a species because of the way we form strong bonds between individuals through ever-extending line-families. If males took as long to mature as females, everybody's mother-in-law would be as old as her mother, and you wouldn't have that powerful family structure—or will your males be quick to mature and short-lived, despite being free-living?"

"I'm not sure," said Vanessa. "I thought I might compromise on that, and I'll have to try to figure out some other way to build in strong family groups. Maybe I'd have to make these aliens slow evolvers by comparison with us—that'd be convenient anyhow, because it's so much easier to have primitive societies in stories than technologically advanced ones . . . maybe a species like that couldn't ever become civilized in the way we have, but that doesn't mean to say that it couldn't *exist.* I really think I can make something of the idea, Rae."

Rachel heard a desperately plaintive note in Vanessa's voice, and realized that she had been completely negative about the idea since the moment it had first been put to her. She wasn't usually like that. Usually, she would enter into the spirit of Vanessa's fictional enterprises, adding her own ideas rather than simply shooting Vanessa's down. No wonder Vanessa felt wounded.

"I'm sorry," she said tiredly, laying down the pen which she had kept hold of throughout the exchange, as though wanting to get on with her marking. "I'm just not capable of thinking constructively today. Try me again on the weekend."

"I'll have it fully worked out by then," Vanessa promised. "Will you come to dinner Saturday—or have you got something going on at home?"

"Nothing at all," said Rachel, uncomfortably aware of the fact that had things been different, she would have had to find a way to seduce exactly such an invitation out of her friend—out of the friend which she could not help having "in mind" as a possible potential daughter-in-law. Even now that she knew for sure that she *was* a victim of wombshare sensitivity, it might still be possible

to think in terms of a proposal—but she did not know whether she could pluck up the courage to make such an eminently refusable offer.

I'm pregnant with a boy, Nessa, but it's a fifty-fifty chance that he might have this hereditary disease . . . he'll have to go into the tank, but it might only be for a few days. I know it wouldn't be quite the same as a traditional wedding, but do you think . . . ?

Surely it was all too awful to contemplate!

"What's up?" said Vanessa tenderly. "It's something at home, isn't it? Is it Gwenifer?"

"She's in the hospital today," said Rachel. "Nothing serious. Just tests." It was hardly a revealing admission in itself, but Vanessa already knew that Rachel had been to the hospital the day before.

"What tests?" Vanessa asked. "Is it some kind of infection you've both picked up?"

Rachel thought of telling Vanessa that it was nothing *she* was likely to catch, but didn't have the audacity, and didn't like to entertain the more uncomfortable implications of the notion. Instead she said: "There's a possibility that we might be suffering from something, but it's nothing life-threatening. We'll be okay. Everything will be okay."

"I won't pry if you don't want me to," said Vanessa, evidently having noticed—how could she help noticing?—that Rachel had carefully avoided telling her what it was from which she and Gwenifer might be suffering. "But if you need someone to talk to—someone outside the line—I'm always available. You will come on Saturday, won't you?"

"Yes, I will," Rachel said. "And I'll be in a more constructive mood, I promise."

When she got home, later than usual because the bus had been held up by the road work near the biscuit factory, her mothers-in-law were all waiting for her. Gwenifer had the results of her test. Her husband was suffering from womb sensitivity too; he was only slightly detached and might not be entirely sterile, but Dr. Brewer had told her that the probability of her getting pregnant again by her present husband was definitely on the low side.

Elena wasn't the least disturbed by the news, and was quick to say that she didn't think it was worth the bother of having a scan and a smear test herself. Candida, on the other hand, seemed more inclined to share Gwenifer's distress; she was the head of the family, after all, and possibly the originator of the series of genetically defective males. No one was going to say that it was her fault, but Rachel knew that she wouldn't be able to keep from feeling responsible. The doctor had been quick to confirm that Marianne—Candida's daughter from her previous marriage—couldn't possibly be affected, but that news could do little to lighten the house-mother's burden.

"I'm very sorry, Gwenifer," said Candida. "Elena's husband was a late baby, and it didn't seem particularly unusual that I didn't become pregnant again. The tests I had didn't show up anything unusual. They're refining them all the time, you know."

"I suppose it's really my own fault," said Gwenifer bitterly. "I wouldn't concede control of my life to a matchmaker, so I have to take responsibility for the consequences of my own decisions."

"That's hardly fair," Elena objected. "It was *our* decision, not yours, and there was absolutely nothing wrong with it."

That was true enough, but everyone knew that if Candida had been allowed to make a match for her daughter-in-law, she would have been most unlikely to have picked someone like Gwenifer. She had admitted Gwenifer to the household readily enough, and had done her best to keep it running smoothly, but Rachel suspected that she had always regretted the fact that she could not gather together a line of daughters-in-law of her own choosing.

"There's no use bickering about who might have been at fault," said Candida soothingly. "The only question worth addressing is where we all go from here. For the time being, Rachel is the one who has the most urgent decisions to make."

"Well . . ." Rachel began—but she wasn't allowed to finish.

"No, she isn't," said Gwenifer. "*You* might not see anything urgent about my predicament, but I do. I want a divorce."

Rachel noticed that although they all turned instantly toward Gwenifer, only Marianne seemed genuinely astonished. Candida seemed hurt—though perhaps not on her own behalf—and Elena was definitely irritated, but they all knew Gwenifer well enough to know her penchant for seeking short, sharp solutions to all her problems.

"I'm not sure that this is a good time to talk about breaking up the household," said Candida. "Rachel—"

"Rachel's a grown woman," Gwenifer cut in. "And you know perfectly well that splitting the household isn't the main point at issue. I'm not prepared to wait three or four years for a natural deadbirth when I don't have to. I want a daughter of my own while I'm still young—maybe two."

"You already have a daughter-in-law," Candida pointed out. "Have you asked her how she feels about your breaking away from this family to find another one?"

Gwenifer glanced at Rachel, but didn't let her gaze linger long enough to read anything in Rachel's expression. "Rachel and I have been fast friends since we were six years old," she said firmly. "I assume that her first loyalty is to me, not to the household—but she's a grown woman. She can make her own decision about whether she'd rather stay here, or come with me, or become the head of her own family. Naturally, I'd prefer it if she came with me, but I'll understand if . . ."

"That's not fair," said Elena again. "You can't just present her with a *fait accompli* and say that it's up to her to decide what choice to make. Hasn't she got enough difficulties already?"

"I—" Rachel began—but again she got no further.

"It's because she already has enough problems on her plate that she'll be grateful to me for removing this one," Gwenifer retorted. "How do you think she'd feel if

I'd gone to her and said, 'Look, Rae, I'd like a divorce but I can't go ahead unless you feel all right about it'? *That* would be adding to her confusion. This way, she just has to figure out what's best for *her,* secure in the knowledge that everyone else is looking out for her own interests."

"This is a family!" said Elena hotly. "It's not a war of all against all, in which everyone looks after her own interests!"

"It *was* a family," said Gwenifer, "until we discovered that the links holding it together are rotten."

That brought silence down like a curtain. Marianne looked so unhappy that Rachel was quick to put a protective arm around her, and even Candida's face seemed to be drained of all color.

Gwenifer looked about her, and said, "I'm sorry—but it is *true,* isn't it?"

"No," said Rachel, slightly surprised by the emergence of an opportunity to say something without being instantly interrupted, "it's not true. Dr. Brewer says that my child might be perfectly all right—and she's sure that she can find out one way or another, given a few days to observe him in a holding tank."

"And what will *that* solve?" countered Gwenifer. "Even if he does pass the tests, who'll take him under circumstances like those? And even if your son is all right, that won't help you to have another child, and it certainly won't help *me.* I didn't want to put any pressure on you, Rae, but I assumed that you'd be thinking along the same lines as me. We can go for our divorces *together*—we can face this whole thing together, the way we always have."

"Oh sure . . ." began Elena, but this time it was Rachel who interrupted, and would not be denied.

"By 'the way we always have'," said Rachel, "I presume you mean with you in the lead and me following meekly behind."

Gwenifer, perhaps surprisingly, was more astonished than annoyed. Rachel had half-expected the words to be thrown back at her, in contemptuous agreement, but Gwenifer only shook her head, as though she were unable to believe her faithful friend's newfound ingratitude.

"If this kind of argument is the only way that we can handle our affairs," said Candida quietly, "then Gwenifer is quite right. We *were* a family—but we're not any more."

"That's not what *I* want," said Elena fiercely, "and it's not what you or Rachel wants either!"

"It's not a matter of wanting," said Candida. "Nor is it the kind of thing which can be put to a vote. It only takes one broken link to destroy a chain, and if Gwenifer is convinced that the link is broken . . . that's enough. But even if the household has to break up, we're all still here for the time being. Rachel's problems are still our problems, if Rachel wants our help in dealing with them. As Gwenifer says, she's a grown woman—but that doesn't mean that she has to go her own way, alone . . . or trail in Gwenifer's wake. Even Gwenifer can surely agree with that."

All the time she was speaking, even when she was referring to Rachel, Candida kept her eyes fixed on Gwenifer. Gwenifer wilted a little under that authoritative stare.

"All right," said Gwenifer, in the defiantly dismissive manner which was so typical of her. "I was only making *my* position clear. I was trying to *help.* Sure, let's hear what Rachel has to say."

Suddenly, all eyes were on Rachel. Earlier in the conversation, she remembered, she had twice tried to intervene in order to make her own position clear—but now that position no longer seemed as clear to her as it had.

"I don't know," she said, lamely, after a moment's hesitation. "I'll have to think about it. I can't say yet whether I want to stay, or what I want to do."

She saw Gwenifer smile, and knew what she must be thinking. *Same old Rae—never knows what to do until she's told.* Elena frowned, presumably because she had some similar thought in mind. Candida only nodded. Marianne was looking at the floor unhappily, embarrassed by the whole discussion.

"Take your time," said Candida. "We *are* your family —every one of us. You know that you can rely on us all. Whatever you decide, we'll help."

Rachel knew well enough how the assurance might be decoded. What Candida was really saying was: You can stay here with us, if you want to; you can be free of Gwenifer, if you want to; we'll look after you instead. *But I don't need looking after,* Rachel thought. *I really don't—do I?*

Things didn't get any better in the days that followed. On Thursday, Gwenifer went to the hospital to make arrangements for her divorce, and came home in a bad temper because Dr. Brewer had insisted that she see the counselor first.

The doctor and the counselor had both argued that since there was no conclusive proof that Gwenifer's husband *was* sterile, and since she only had three or four years to wait for a natural deadbirth in any case, the surgical removal of her husband from her womb was unnecessary and inadvisable. Gwenifer—always a very assertive champion of a woman's right to choose—had been rather rude to both of them; she had advised Rachel to find another doctor, though Rachel had no quarrel whatsover with Dr. Brewer.

The tensions within the household were heightened by the fact that its members were pulling in every possible direction. Elena wanted the household to stay together, and kept coming up with new reasons why it should not split up. Candida seemed to be taking it for granted that there would be a split of some kind, and that Gwenifer would go, whether or not Rachel went with her. Marianne was not quite sure what she wanted or expected to happen, although she did appear to hold to the commonplace opinion that four parents were better than two, and she feared that if Elena could not maintain the *status quo,* then Elena too might decide to look elsewhere for the kind of household she wanted to belong to.

Rachel found herself avoiding everyone, even Marianne. While she was at school, enmeshed by familiar routines,

she shifted into a different emotional gear, but as soon as she left for home she felt that she was descending into a whirlpool of uncertainty. Her attention became firmly fixed on Saturday evening, when she could take her problems to Vanessa's flat, hopeful that it would be an oasis of calm and sanity, and perhaps a place where a solution to her problems might be found.

Alas for her hopes, she couldn't relax when she arrived at Vanessa's. Vanessa was her usual cheerful self, but Rachel simply couldn't match the mood; she was knotted up inside, and she soon realized that the knot would not begin to unravel until she gave it the vital tug. She anxiously awaited an opportunity to do what she had to do, but somehow there never seemed to be an appropriate moment while Vanessa was chattering away about the logic of her science fiction story.

Eventually, Rachel concluded that there never would be an *appropriate* moment for what she had to do, and that she would simply have to muster the courage to damn propriety and act. It was not easy, but she did it.

"I'm pregnant," she said abruptly, awkwardly holding a forkful of pasta at bay while she broke the news. "It's a boy." She had not intended to say it quite so baldly, without warning or prelude, but in the circumstances there really was no way to be delicate about it.

Vanessa, who had already talked at some length—more tediously than she could have known—about the logical problems of her hypothetical world where men were like women, could not adapt to the sudden change of subject without a short breathing space. By the time she finally said "Oh!" Rachel's forkful of pasta had been very thoroughly chewed and deliberately swallowed.

"That's why I've been such poor company," Rachel explained apologetically. "It's caused one or two problems—at home, that is."

Vanessa started to reassure her, politely, that she hadn't been poor company, but soon stopped, and started again. "I suppose it's Gwenifer who's causing problems," she said. "Don't tell me she has some ludicrously unsuitable match in mind for you?"

"That would be too much even for Gwen," said Rachel with a faint smile. "It's not that at all. There are complications. When the doctors did the routine tests they found out that there's something wrong with my husband—and hers, too. She's getting a divorce."

"*Surgically?*"

"Yes. She thinks I ought to have one as well."

Vanessa blinked. "Is that necessary?" she asked tentatively.

"No," said Rachel. "It's just that I probably won't be able to have any more children, unless and until I marry again. Gwen's been trying for some time to have a daughter, and she's not the kind of person to tolerate obstructions getting in the way of her most cherished aims."

"Never mind what kind of person Gwenifer is," said Vanessa. "How do *you* feel about it all?"

"I don't think I want a divorce," Rachel told her, trying to sound calm but definite. "Not because I share my mother's view that divorce is a kind of murder—just because . . . well, it's not the sort of thing to do lightly, and it's not as if I'm *desperate* for a daughter. I mean . . . if Gwen hadn't been so keen, I might have gone on the pill when my husband matured, to give myself more time. . . ."

Vanessa had laid down her own fork. She was looking hard at Rachel, and Rachel knew what kinds of ideas must be drifting through her thoughts. "What about the child?" Vanessa asked. "Do these complications affect *him?*"

"Possibly," Rachel admitted. "It's a straight toss-up—a fifty-fifty chance. The doctor wants me to tank him for a while, so that he can be checked out." She might have added: *but I don't know whether that's a good idea . . .* but she didn't dare. Vanessa might just take the inference that she already had a womb on line to receive the child, if it didn't go into the tank.

"That's too bad," said Vanessa neutrally.

"It's awkward," Rachel agreed. "It would be unfortunate, even in the best of circumstances, but Gwen's determination to get a divorce as soon as possible . . . well, I could have done without an instant family break-up. A quiet week or two would have helped. Candida's being kind, of course, and Marianne's sweet, but Elena and Gwenifer are at one another's throats all the time—ridiculous, really, given that what Elena actually wants is to keep Gwen in the family."

"Uncomfortable for you," observed Vanessa.

Rachel nodded. "Of course," she said, desperate to fill the emerging conversational gap with some kind of chatter, "it could never happen in your imaginary world. There'd be no families in turmoil there, would there? No cut-and-slash divorces." She was tempted to add: *no boy-pregnant women desperate with anxiety about the prospect of finding a daughter-in-law,* but she didn't dare.

"It's not supposed to be a paradise," Vanessa replied half-heartedly. "If they don't have any problems, how am I going to work up a plot?"

"You'll think of something," Rachel assured her, weakly.

Vanessa opened her mouth to say something, but it seemed as if the words became stuck in her throat. She had to fight in order to make them come out. When they finally emerged, they were infected by a stutter that Rachel had never heard before in Vanessa's voice. "H-have you anyone in m-mind as a wife for the . . ." She didn't manage to reach the end of the sentence.

Rachel wished that she had the courage to say: *Yes—you,* but she didn't. Instead, she said: "No." When Vanessa didn't say anything in reply, she felt compelled to go on. "It's very difficult, you see, with the doctor wanting to make sure that the boy's all right—and if he *isn't* . . ."

"Can I have him?" Vanessa blurted out. The stammer was gone, but she sounded frightened—as though the possibility that Rachel might refuse was quite terrifying.

Rachel felt as if she might burst into tears, but she took control of herself. "Oh, Ness," she said softly. "I'm so sorry—I just didn't know how to ask. I didn't even know if I *could.*"

Vanessa understood the last remark perfectly. "We're the last people in the world to need a matchmaker," she said. She was diplomatic enough not to elaborate the

observation into an insult leveled against Gwenifer. "I don't need anyone else to run my life, and you don't need anyone else to run yours."

"Not any more," said Rachel. Almost immediately, though, her euphoria clouded over. There were still complications which had to be addressed. She took another mouthful of pasta, and swallowed it hurriedly before laying the fork down. "What if he's not . . . I mean, what if he's . . . ?"

"Can we cross that bridge when we come to it?" asked Vanessa anxiously. "Or do you desperately want it settled now? It won't hurt, will it, to take a little time to think about it?"

"No," said Rachel gratefully. "It won't hurt at all."

It was late when Rachel returned home. While she walked the mile that separated Vanessa's apartment from the house, she felt truly relaxed for the first time. The dimly lit streets were quiet, and the gloom seemed oddly comforting. Ordinarily, Rachel was a little bit afraid of the dark, because it made her feel isolated and vulnerable, but tonight she did not mind being by herself.

While she walked, she made her plans. She decided to tell Candida first, in private, what she had decided. Only then, with the decision on record, would she confront Gwenifer. It was not that she had any doubts about her ability to stick to her guns, even with Gwenifer firing verbal broadsides at her, but simply that she would be able to remain calmer if what she had to say to Gwenifer was mere repetition of what she had said to Candida.

As she had expected, Candida took it all very calmly. Candida offered no opinion of her own, nor even any advice. All she said was: "If you change your mind and decide that you want to stay here, you can—however things turn out with the boy. If all goes well, your daughter-in-law would be welcome to join us if that's what you wanted. But if you're sure that you'd rather start again, somewhere else, I understand. We'll still be friends, and we'll always be glad to see you."

If only, Rachel thought, as she went to Gwenifer's room, *it could all be as simple as that.*

Inevitably, it wasn't.

"You've done *what*?" said Gwenifer, in frank disbelief.

"I've asked Vanessa Wright to marry my son, if he's pronounced healthy," said Rachel. "She's accepted. We're going to start a new line-family, on our own."

"That's not what I planned," said Gwenifer. "I hoped that you'd get a divorce, like me, so that we could start again—just you and me, the way it always was—but even if you didn't want to get a divorce, I'd still want you with me. I'm perfectly happy to welcome your daughter-in-law into our household. Did you think I wouldn't be?"

"I thought that you were content to make your own position clear, and leave my decision to me," said Rachel, knowing perfectly well that what Gwenifer had said and what Gwenifer had intended to happen were two very different things.

"I was trying to make things *easier* for you," said Gwenifer petulantly. "If I'd thought for one minute that you'd come up with something as silly as this . . . Honestly, Rae, I don't want to be rude, but can you really see yourself as a line-mother?"

"Yes," said Rachel. "Yes, I can."

"You say that now," countered Gwenifer, "but you really wouldn't be able to cope. Anyway, we've always been a team. We've *always* done things together. It was a mistake to marry Elena's son, but how could I possibly *know*? It's not the end, Rae—we have a second chance. Everybody has second chances nowadays, and we mustn't be ashamed to take them."

"The trouble is," said Rachel quietly, "that I'm not sure I've had my *first* chance yet. I think this may be it, and I intend to take it. I'm sorry, Gwen—I know how disappointed you are—but things have become too complicated."

"Disappointed!" Gwenifer exclaimed. "It's not *me* I'm worried about—it's *you*. I've always looked after you—I can't just let you walk away, just because of some stupid sickness our husbands have."

There was something in Rachel which wanted to attack and accuse, to declare that Gwenifer had always needed *her* far more than *she* had ever needed Gwenifer; that Gwenifer needed someone to be dependent on her, someone to dominate, someone to organize, someone to listen; that Gwenifer's fierce assumption that she was always right was a mask to hide some deep-seated insecurity . . . but she knew that it wouldn't be fair, or right, or even true. It was all much more complicated than that.

"It's what I want, Gwen," she said. "I don't want a divorce, and I don't want to be your daughter-in-law all over again if you don't happen to catch a daughter next time around. I want my son to be healthy, and I want to marry him to someone I . . ." She trailed off.

"Someone you *what*?" demanded Gwenifer, knowing full well what the answer had to be.

"Someone I love," said Rachel, finding it less difficult than she had supposed it would be actually to say the word.

"You love me," said Gwenifer, leading with her chin.

"Someone I love *more* than you," said Rachel, genuinely trying to put it as gently as she could, but realizing as she spoke the words that the circumlocution made it sound even worse.

"You're mad," said Gwenifer. "Quite mad."

"Maybe so," said Rachel insincerely. "But that's what I'm going to do." And she took care to add, even though she knew what response she was setting up: "I'm sorry, Gwen."

"You probably will be," Gwenifer prophesied, darkly. "And I shan't be a bit surprised if you are."

When the time eventually came, the birth was very easy, as male births almost invariably were. In fact, Rachel thought, as she lay on her back with her legs apart, there was more to be said for bearing a male child than popular opinion was routinely prepared to concede. Daughters made you obscenely fat, and then tried to tear you apart as they made their slow and inconvenient

way to the outer world; boys just slipped out, smoothly and discreetly—and in spite of all the dirty jokes which compared the process to shitting there wasn't any *real* need to feel embarrassed about its essential pleasantness. Then again, a daughter started you on twenty years of child care, whereas a son either gained you a new help-meet in the shape of a daughter-in-law, or vanished quietly into the waters of oblivion. . . .

She watched her son slide out of her body, into the vessel which awaited him. She didn't avert her eyes, and didn't even have to make a particular effort not to.

Vanessa was there, watching with her, but not to receive the newborn into her own vagina—not yet. But when Rachel looked up from her son's pink body to her friend's blushing face, she saw hope there—some apprehension, to be sure, but mostly hope.

"We'll take a cell-sample right away," Dr. Brewer assured them. "It'll take forty-eight hours—then we'll be able to tell whether he's likely to face the same problems after implantation that his father has."

Having delivered this speech, the doctor hurried away to make good her promise. It took only a couple of minutes for the nurse to tidy up, and leave Rachel alone with Vanessa.

"You know," said Vanessa softly, "I really don't mind. I'm prepared to take the risk—it's not as if it would be the end of the world if I could only bear one child by him, and I really do want him. I want to be with *you,* you see—and this might be my only chance."

"I know," said Rachel gently. She had already done the calculations a hundred times, and knew what all the alternatives were, if this marriage didn't take place. Five years to deadbirth . . . and then what? Take a boy from the tank, immediately, knowing that it probably would be two or three years before she would become fertile again? There were other possibilities, of course. Divorce and remarriage was still an option. Then again, there was no reason why Vanessa shouldn't find a husband four or five years from now, so that Rachel might become *her* daughter-in-law if and when *she* became pregnant with a boy. . . .

But all of that was hypothetical, and all of it was complicated. Rachel wanted this marriage, but she also wanted it to be *right.* The simple thing—the one stroke of luck which was needed to make everything as right as it could be—would be for the boy to prove healthy, to break the chain of misfortune. That was what she was hoping for. She didn't want Vanessa to feel forced to volunteer to marry a defective husband, even though she was certain that Vanessa's willingness to do that was quite sincere.

Please, she asked the Fates, mutely. *Just one stroke of luck, and it will all come out right. I know it will.*

Vanessa sat and held her hand for an hour or so, and then Dr. Brewer came back, to tell them that the tests were under way.

"Can we visit him?" asked Vanessa. "Can we go to see him . . . to keep in touch?"

Dr. Brewer hesitated, and glanced at Rachel. Rachel understood the hesitation well enough. It was all very well to take a prospective mother on the tour of the tanks, in order to persuade her that she could consign her son to them with a clear conscience; the sight might have a rather different effect on a prospective wife.

"I think we should," said Rachel positively. "It's quite all right, doctor—we're neither of us at all superstitious. I teach biology to the lower school, and Ness writes science fiction."

The doctor raised an eyebrow, but nodded her head. She did a lightning examination before telling Rachel that she could get dressed, and then she waited so that she could lead them both into the bowels of the hospital.

When she had guided them to the relevant tank, she discreetly left them alone.

Rachel stood with Vanessa, watching her son swimming lazily around in circles, looking for all the world as though he had been born to inhabit some warm tropical sea.

"Think how different human psychology might be, if they didn't look so much like leeches," said Vanessa softly.

"What sorts of theories would an Anna Freud have come up with in your science-fictional world?" Rachel wondered aloud, blushing slightly at the indelicate thought that after all, when you came right down to it, they *were* leeches, weren't they? "I suppose they wouldn't be anywhere near as bizarre as the ones ours had to produce."

"No," Vanessa agreed. "Mine would be a relatively straightforward world, psychologically speaking. All our silly taboos and superstitions, and all our horrid anxieties and guilty fears, would be quite superfluous. I still think a world like that's *conceivable,* you know. I still think things could have turned out that way, if the grandmama of all the chordates had been a slightly odder creature than she was."

Rachel stared at the reflection of her own face in the glass of the tank, contemplatively. "Men and women able to look one another in the face," she said. "Able to talk to one another, able to love one another. But it's like all Utopias—too tidy. Reality simply isn't that *orderly.*"

"But sometimes," Vanessa said, "things do work out, even in our world. Sometimes, you just get lucky, in spite of all the things that can go wrong. That boy in there is healthy, Rae, I *feel* it, down here. In two days' time, I'm going to marry that boy—and I know it's going to be a *perfect* match. No complications at all."

"I hope with all my heart that you're right," said Rachel.

Fortunately, she was. ✦

Bad Brains

From the author's forthcoming novel of the same name

Illustration by Rick Lieder

Kathe Koja

Being sick is an expensive proposition; even his pills cost more than he had expected. He had joked about keeping up his insurance premiums, but there were ceilings and limits and he was definitely pressed against both. Back to the wall; back to work.

Which in its way was good; he could fall into it like the familiar constraints of an uncomfortable position, he could work any and all hours he chose, and he chose mornings to evenings, convenience store lunch and dinner eaten behind the counter with the radio's cheap chime drowned out by the air conditioner, the gritty occasional rasp of the door. People asking directions, wanting to use the bathroom. Acne and big tits, acne and skinny arms, in love and buying T-shirts with each other's names. TINA and JAMES and what will happen in five years, five months? Will you still love me tomorrow? How about by the end of the week? He had had passing impulses to call Emily,

say *Guess what happened to me?* but so far had successfully controlled them. She had never had much of a fund of pity, and anyway pity was nothing he wanted from her.

Seated overwarm and half slumped, elbows on counter, a lazy mental addition: ten a.m. to eight p.m., six days a week, at what he was making he would be working here forever. Of course it made no difference, what else did he have to do? Go home and study *Criosphinx* for the millionth time? Hang out at the gallery with Peter and watch papier-mâché mockups of bad editorial cartoons sell for twice what he made in a month? Or, least likely, drag out the canvases again, do work that in the end satisfied only himself? It was no longer enough, to work that way; besides, he joked with Peter, he was running out of wall space.

"You're wasting yourself," Peter said. Another carryout dinner, another lecture. If not for Peter, he would have no visitors at all; would that be bad? Feet on the chair, "Do you know how many sorry fucks I know who would kill to be able to do what you do?"

"What, work in a T-shirt store? No, I'm serious," leaning forward, arms pressed hard against the table's edge; he could feel his heart, flesh mallet, working like the gallop of an aging horse. "I've got doctor bills up the ass, Peter, I can't afford art for art's sake."

"There are people who can."

"Who, your Medicis?" Flipping a grain, two grains, three grains of rice, lining them in a row, cold obedient maggots. "I don't want to be anybody's pet artist." Four grains. Six. "I don't want to be anybody's pet anything."

"Except Emily."

All the grains now washed in gravy, sluggish as cooling blood. "Excuse me," not really smiling, standing. "I have to take my pills."

In the bathroom, stubby plastic cup and the lukewarm dribble of tap water, he would have to fix that faucet, did he still remember how? Doctor, I can't seem to recall which end of the wrench to hold and which to suck. They had admonished him to report any problems with memory, with smells, with all the things on the list; his own list had blackouts; so far nothing had happened. Tired, yes, but that would be normal, wouldn't it? He had sustained quite an insult, head split open, bruised brain bounced like candy against the slick inner walls of his skull, his—

Silver.

Trickle mixed with water, so subtle he barely saw until he could not stop seeing, torsive gripe in his bowels like the flex of grinding claws, mingled flow in thin cascade and he dropped the cup, hollow plastic sound, his empty fingers pressed in empty fists. Something fell.

Across the mirror's face the long wash, beautiful, horrible, half there, like molten rain and he trapped to stare without that promontory plain of disassociation, nothing but the human dread of his naked eyes as it glittered and shrunk in strange burlesque, now you see it, big boy, now you don't.

Peter, knocking hard at the door.

"Hey! You all right in there?"

Hands against his mouth, Munch howl. Adrenaline clench in the muscles of his back.

There was nothing at all in the mirror.

"*Austen.* Are you all—"

"Fine," he said. Sweat all over his body, chilly as piss. Maybe he had pissed himself too. "I dropped the glass." The pills lay beside the toilet as neatly as if he had placed them there. Sluicing vertigo as he bent to pick them up.

Oh please no.

Peter in the hallway, not trying to stare. "You sure you're okay?"

Slow step and close the door behind him, politely shielding a guest from some sordid household sight. "Yeah. I'm fine. Sometimes the small motor skills, you know," standing uncomfortable and sideways so Peter couldn't see the wet, passing jargon as if it made sense. When Peter left, still that look on his face, almost funny: are you crazy or am I. The fat ass dominatrix in disdain, black-masked saintless patron, a patron saint and he in her shadow, watching Peter's taillights. Closing the door, he was assailed with an exhaustion so intense he had to sit, right now, right where he was, legs collapsed like a Chinese puzzle into some approximated shape. He had a headache.

Had it been like this, in the hospital, this degree of throb, this sizzle against the eggshell walls? Was it the aftermath of a seizure? Harbinger? And why hadn't there been a smell?

He sat until he could not sit, lay flat, there on the floor, in the dark, eyes closed in the cave of pain and nervous fear, tired, *tired,* and thought of sleeping there, just as he was, thick slumber like an ethered insect and waking to find himself silver: drenched, slick to the honeyed eyes and clotted, membranous, unable to move. As above him the slender grin of no human mouth at all.

What's worse: hallucination, or not?

It's starting again.

Go to bed, asshole.

Still it took him a long minute to gather himself, to rise. He turned on the hall light to walk to his bedroom, and as he passed he did not open the bathroom door.

In the morning it was all blessedly stupid, boiled egg and early to rise and it stayed stupid all week long. Peter's questions, were the seizures like acid, well maybe more than he knew and that had been a flashback, sort of, just an echo in his healing brain abetted bright by nerves and imagination, nothing bad at all. Nothing to call the doctors about. He had a checkup scheduled for the following week, and if he was still having problems, well. Well.

There was an opening at Peter's gallery that Friday, some woman who did watercolors; he showed up late, after work, stood around holding a plastic cup of oily blush and trying not to make conversation; there was no one there he wanted to talk to. Peter was busy, he felt more sadly out of place than in the worst of the hospital corridors, wheelchair-bound beside the weak and weakly drooling, the talkers, the compulsive starers, at least

they had something to stare about. Positioned not in a corner but by the door, propped open by a chunk of concrete stenciled with the gallery's name, what breeze there was unkind in the larger gasp of a humid late summer evening. A good night not to be here. A good night not to be anywhere. On nights like these he and Emily used to sit on the roof, drinking beer and talking. Looking for stars through the dark humidity. Once she had wanted to make love up there; he was scared of falling, embarrassed to say so, instead said nothing at all.

"Well?" she'd said, shorts already unzipped, thin untanned line above her panties. Hands between his legs, her breath a whisper on neck and ear. "Why not?"

"No." Oh she felt so good. "Somebody'll see."

Long squeezing stroke, her teeth grazing his jawline, moving to his lips. "Who?"

"I don't know," lame. "Planes."

"If you don't want to fuck, just say so," and, pissed, pulled away, back, pulled off her tank top anyway to lie silent, staring at the stars. Or planes. He had tried to talk to her but she had ignored him; finally his crawl, defeated, barefoot through the attic window and she still there, sweat on the concave swoop of her belly, beautiful as some strange ornament; that night she had not come to bed at all. Was that why she left him? he was too scared? Too scared of things she wanted? Was that true?

Two women, one in red and one not, both too loud —how many little plastic cups had they emptied?—and coming his way. "Hi!" happy as if she knew him, the larger of the two. Big shiny teeth.

Silent, falsely smiling, saluting them with his half-empty cup. "Hi," the woman said again, more insistently.

"Hi." The wine went down like medicine. If he turned his head very slightly to the left, he could see down the blouse of the shorter woman; it was not a necessary exertion. They were both smiling at him. He couldn't think of anything to say. "How do you like the show?"

"Oh, I think it's excellent, really superior work. She's really going places." Red must be a collector. "You know, she's done a few nudes here and there, but never anything with this scope."

Scope. Right. A tit the size of a fender. He drank the rest of his wine. Over Red's shoulder he could see Peter laughing, squeezing some woman's elbow. Almost a third of the paintings had the telltale sticker beside them, a red circle indicating the work had been sold.

"Are you familiar," Red again, or still, "with her early work?"

Madame, I would rather burn out my eyes with cigarettes. "No," fingers squeezing, squeezing his empty cup. "No, I'm not."

"She studied with John Boston," said the friend, glancing at Red for corroboration. "For years."

"Mmm." He turned to stare at the big water-color tit again, its false contours, the craggy range of the nipple like some chrome-tipped Everest, silver molten as discharge, hey lady you better get that looked at. Hey lady the silver moved.

Perception pulled, the painting itself seemed to shift, as if the nude moved in her artificial sleep, giantess disturbed and see, there, the sly crawl, the shudder beneath the real imperceptible as a clot in a vein, creeping shine and they were looking right at it, couldn't they see it? It was right there. It was right *there.*

It was trying to get out of the picture.

Turning his back, soldier swivel and the floor cold now beneath his feet, he walked past them, straight out the door, straight to his car, sat inside with windows rolled and doors locked, shaking. In the heat. He didn't smell anything, just the sour lip of the empty glass, faint endless odor of gas and exhaust. He felt no headache, yet, just the trebled exhaustion of fear, worse than the last time: things were happening, again.

Oh God, please.

And driving, carefully—still no legal right to do so—windows down to admit the muggy night and he thought again of Emily, wished for her with a desperation strong enough for tears; now he would lie naked on a pure verticality for the chance to hold her, rest his cheek on the hill of her collarbone, hide in her body until there was nothing else to see.

The house was humid as the inside of a glove, empty; the lusterless sheets of his bed and above it dark alkaloid glow: *Creatrix*, the archwife, nightmare austerity with her legtrap and scepter, robes made of patchy skin and pleated with bones, tiny, as if filleted from the hands of infants. The woman who had commissioned it had refused to buy it afterward; she had wanted her deposit back; she had asked him Why. Why did you do that? she kept saying. Why did you do that to me?

He touched it now, one finger gentle on the tender peaks of paint. All greens and rotten golds, the colors of a field sunk past fallow, a pure and wanton parable of decay. Yes. And nothing there would move without his knowledge, nothing there would shimmer with a knowing, growing gleam. Most of the night he lay sleepless, waiting for something to happen, sweat on his forehead, his armpits, slick down his temples and ribs. Waiting for the seizures to start again, jackhammer buildup into some rough crescendo that this time would split his brain in two. Waiting to wake in the hospital, under restraint or not for days; or not at all. Waiting, under siege, for Emily to call.

"How are you, Austen?"

Stella's office but not Stella, the partner whose name he did not know, no name tag on the spiffy coat tailored not to seem medical, unthreatening shade of ivory less clinical than white. Call me Doctor. Her hands were incredibly cold. Maybe she had a circulatory problem.

"Okay," he said. Barefoot on the table, each tiniest shift announced by the crinkling sanitary paper, he had been through this so many times, he could dance it with his eyes shut. She was thorough, she went through the whole checklist as if he were a brand-new patient. First the cranial nerves; the swing of the bright disk to check his eyes' ability to follow; then the litany: look up, look down, to the left, right, good. Close your eyes. Raise your eyebrows. Simon says raise them again. Stick out your tongue, move it, put it back in your mouth, way

back. Touch your chin to your right shoulder. Left shoulder. Good.

Her cold hands clasped in her lap, looking up at him from her red plastic chair beside the exam table. "Still taking your Tegretol?"

His nod. The whole office smelled like one of his seizures, but the smell was too real; it was the border places you had to watch.

"Any problems with the dosage?"

How should I know? "No."

"Any problems in general? Headaches, anything like that?"

Well. Like a chill down his sides, almost embarrassing the length of his giveaway pause; he had to say something. "Um, I have had a couple headaches," touching his forehead, "here, and here," twin fingertip graze of his temples.

"Anything else? Any abnormalities?"

That would depend on what you think is normal, wouldn't it. "Well," again. Go slow. "I'm a little bit, a little concerned. I think I might have experienced a—" slow. "Like a preseizure state, sort of."

Her pen like a raptor, ready. "What do you mean?"

He did not look at her, instead at the wall beyond her, ugly walnut paneling, weren't neurologists supposed to be rich? On the near wall a print, insipid, a watermill and a man beside it presumably in reverie, maybe he was really in a preseizure state, whatever the hell that meant.

"Well," again. "It's a little hard to describe."

I see things, Doctor.

"Please try."

Her hair was almost the same shade as her shoes. "Once or twice I thought I, I thought it was going to happen again. I felt the same as if it was happening."

Writing, she had a hard little script, bet she poked holes through the paper. Sweat on his palms and he brushed them against his thighs, up, down. His bladder felt suddenly full.

"Did you experience any strange smells? Tunnel vision?" No, and no, and the jackpot question: "How about hallucinations?"

Silver, framed elusive in a mirror, stretched coy beside smears and water; no. "No," he said, voice dry on the lie. "Nothing like that. It's hard to explain, but I know it when it happens."

She wrote something, small, quick, then sat back, legs crossed at the knees, square knees like a soccer player's, and told him about postconcussion syndrome, the posttraumatic symptoms that follow a serious blow to the head: sleeplessness, headache, dizziness, lethargy, depression, he was entitled to them all. "Certainly your symptoms are something to report," capping her pen, tiny percussive blow. "But don't be too worried."

Waiting. His hands, damp again.

"What should I do if it happens again?"

"Well, for now I'm going to schedule you for some tests, mostly precautionary, I don't think anything serious is happening here. But we like to be sure."

We sure do.

"Let me or Dr. Stella know if anything else happens," smiling, shaking his hand, her own quite dry and cold as ever, walking out to leave him, socks and shoes, a tiredness in his motions unfed by the shimmering anxiety of a seizure's birth; just tired. When he got home he lay on the couch and slept for three hours, waking open mouthed and nervous pounding heart, listening to the refrigerator click on, and off, and on again.

The tests came back negative, or clear, or whatever. Sitting with Dr. No Name again, nodding his head, smiling. Yes. Good news, yes, great. Right. Keep track of the post-traumatic symptoms, some patients liked to keep a spiral notebook handy. No, no Valium, he could manage his anxiety reasonably well on his own. But thanks. And out the door, closed breathless in the heat, windows open on the long drive back to work.

Nothing wrong.

Right.

Peter came over, no call, two bottles of warm wine in a plastic sack. Austen was sitting out front, dry spiky lawn, digging one toe at an anthill, new harmless obstacle for the dimwit industrialists to overcome. Sunglasses and T-shirt ripped to the nipples, washboard belly too white for the summer's age. His gym shorts said NEW HORIZONS.

"Hey," he called to Peter, popping cool and dry from the air-conditioned envelope of his car, like a fashionable new hand appliance from its hermetic packaging. Peter's shorts had a thin crease down the sides.

"Hi yourself. Got any ice?"

"Door's open."

Banging in, then out, two plastic tumblers with four cubes each, crappy-looking wine as purple as no-brand jelly. "What a fuckin' day. Ouch. What the hell's the deal with your grass?"

"Nothing."

"Well, water it once in a while, all right? Shit. You know a woman named Gina?"

Two ants ran a blind obstacle course on his left baby toe, then up to sure stubborn collision. "No." The wine tasted as bad as it looked. "Why don't you ever drink beer?"

"Gets me too drunk. Listen, there's this party coming up, right? At Mike Miguel's house, you know Mike." He didn't, but he nodded. "And this Gina keeps calling, asking are you gonna be there. She says she wants to talk about buying some of your stuff."

"Oh yeah?" He drank more wine, fingers slick with condensation. The sun moved behind a cloud. "Do you think she means it?"

Peter's loose shrug, eyebrows high over shiny iridescent sunglasses. "Who knows? She sure keeps calling."

A car went by, dark car like Emily used to have. The ants had abandoned his foot. Peter seemed to be waiting for some kind of conclusive answer, so Austin shrugged, smiled a little. "What time's the party?"

Mike Miguel had half an acre of land and a house with thirteen rooms, most of them closed off; the steps leading up to the front door were missing risers; two of the

windows were broken, one enough to admit the night's heavy air.

Austen paused on the back porch, twelve-pack in hand, peering into the kitchen where there seemed to be a constant stream of drinkers, spillers, people with crushed empty cups. No one answered his knock, it was mostly for politeness' sake anyway. Peter had offered to drive, but Austin had insisted on coming alone, pulling up late, hoping the party would be crowded enough to allow him as much anonymity as possible; it's easy to hide in a roomful of drunks.

Inside he realized he did not remember what Mike Miguel looked like. So: Find Peter, moving slowly, smiling over his can of beer, warm sudsy taste. The last time he had drunk Budweiser, tried to drink it, was the accident day. Omens, omens. He did not believe in omens. Or luck, bad or good. Either you made your own luck or life made it for you.

Somebody changed the music, loud and homemade. Peter was sitting on the listing arm of a shit-brown recliner, smiling down at the cleavage of the woman in the chair. Austen crossed the room, mostly sideways, and tapped Peter on the shoulder with his beer can. The woman looked up.

"Hi," she said. Her teeth were slightly brown, faint cocoa stain on the canines; what have you been eating, little girl? She was wearing a button that said I TRIED TO GET IN TOUCH WITH MYSELF BUT I KEPT GETTING MY ANSWERING MACHINE. "Did you have some of that seaweed? It's really good."

"Um, no."

Peter laughed; Austen saw he was already fairly drunk. "She means sea*food*, there was some crab or something in the kitchen. On crackers."

"Why don't you have that at your openings?" the woman said, diagonal lean to look up at Peter; Austen saw the fatty loll of her breasts, drank more beer and found the can empty; that was quick. "It's better than that crappy packing popcorn stuff you serve."

"But I *like* that crappy popcorn stuff." From chairside he picked up a bottle, dark wine again, a better class of label than the stuff he had brought over to Austen's. "Here," pouring for himself and the woman, then nudging Austen with the bottle. "You want some?"

"No," showing his beer can. "I think I'll get another one of these."

The kitchen was empty. He left his can on the sink, already crowded with glasses, crushed chip bags, plates in unsuccessful folds around what must have been the crab crackers, some thick pink paste like the plaster they use for dental impressions. The music went up a notch, harsh distortion. Somebody shrieked upstairs, there was a thump, laughter for a moment.

A woman came into the kitchen carrying an empty plate and paper cup. Very short hair, a shade of red unnatural; long thin legs and arms. Her earrings were as big and bright as Christmas bulbs. She took an imported beer from the overfull refrigerator. "Mike always has good beer," she said. She stuck her hand in the counter's disorder and miraculously came up with the opener. "Is there any more of that crab stuff left?"

"Uh, I don't know." Peering around, trying to look helpful. "There might be some chips or something."

"You're Austen, aren't you," in a way that was no question, and she smiled. "I'm Gina Fisk."

"Oh, yeah, hi," putting out his hand. "Peter said you'd be here."

"Did he also say what a pest I've been?" Her grip was loose, wishy-washy, but she squeezed his fingers as she let them go. "I wanted to talk to you about your work. I remember you used to show at Peter's gallery."

"Yeah. A while ago."

"You don't anymore, though, do you?"

He shook his head, drank a little.

"Peter said you were sick."

Thanks, asshole. "Well, yeah, but that's not why I'm not showing." Two subjects he didn't want to talk about, what to do, but then people came in the kitchen, loud, arguing about how to make a particular drink. One guy kept saying, "No, you need *lime*," over the shoulders of the others, and Gina motioned with her beer, Let's go.

There was no place to sit but the stairs, amid the scatter of bent nails, paint flakes, an old issue of *New Art Examiner*. Gina sat down, plop, on what looked like a small pile of wood chips; she didn't seem to notice or care, so Austen chose the step below her, sitting across the stairs until he very nearly hit his head on the banister—a long iron pipe held in precarious place by thick concrete nails more appropriate for crucifixion—then switched at once to her side. Looking up at her.

"Peter says," pausing for a drink, "you were pretty ill."

"Peter says a lot of things."

"He says you were in the hospital."

He could see her nipples through the pale T-shirt she wore, peaking shadows. When she spoke the Christmas-bulb earrings swung, a somewhat alarming trajectory; if she yelled or nodded hard they might hit somebody. Her left leg was leaning, very slightly, against his right arm.

"I got in an accident," he said. "I don't really like to talk about it."

Her leg leaned more firmly against him. "Then we won't."

They talked, she talked mostly, he listened and drank. Her job, her classes, her ex-boyfriend who was now seeing another man. Hours, it must be very late now and he found himself drunk, very drunk, still on the stairs with a cluster of empty cans on the risers above and below him. He had a memory of talking to Peter, of some absurd kitchen debate between Peter and Gina, of trying to piss and being unable to close the bathroom door correctly. He had to piss again now. His ass felt numb and sore. Gina sat between his legs, her head resting heavy on his thigh; she was even drunker than he. One of her earrings was gone. He bent to say something to her and she reached with one arm to pull his head down, put her tongue in his mouth, a wriggling slippery thing like a little red fish.

"I have to go piss," he said when his mouth was free.

"I'll come with you." She had a hard time standing up but once upright was more mobile than he. In the bath-

room she insisted on unzipping him, drawing out his cock; he pissed all over the floor, her hands no useful guide; he was starting to get hard.

"I have to pee too," she said, and skinned up her skirt; her panties were a strange fluorescent green, and he wondered at a color like that. Her pubic hair was very dark. As she pissed she reached for him, curled her hand around his cock and started stroking.

"Hey," leaning his head back, closed eyes, "not in here, okay?" The bathroom felt very hot, thick with smells, coy shampoo odor, sour mildew and wet. When he opened his eyes again she was starting to take off her T-shirt.

"Wait," he said, and someone knocked on the door, called through the crack. She pushed at the toilet handle, missed; in the anemic gurgling flush he managed to zip up again, help her pull her T-shirt down. There was a distinct and almost pleasant buzzing sensation behind both of his eyes.

She led him now through the kitchen, hot there too, people yelling; the music seemed exceptionally loud. Outside it was much better, cooler, quieter. There was a picnic table at the very back of the yard, the long bench seat half cracked like a long dangerous splinter. "Here," she said, and passed him a beer; he took a token sip. "No, this," and he felt the foiled square of a condom package.

"Look," she said, and though it was dark he tried: she was holding something in her hand, on her palm, some weird wrinkled ball; behold, she might have said, my liver! It was green. It was her panties. She put them on the table and reached for him, kissing him, pulling out his cock; his back was to the house and its lighted windows. Somehow she had taken back the condom, was putting it on him. And now she was straddling him, skirt around her hips and one skinny thigh on either side, holding his lolling head against her. He plucked at her T-shirt and obligingly she raised it up, did something to it to keep it out of the way; she had thick nipples, heavy as gumdrops, incongruent on her small breasts. Groaning now, making a whistling noise through her teeth, her breasts bumping against his face; he thought of her earrings, that same swing. She was still wearing one, and it bounced and shuddered as she did, as if it were an organic part of her and not something made of glass, or plastic, or

silver

and he was ready, he found, to come, in fact was going to, there in the dark, her hands tight on his shoulders and her sweaty tits in his face and as he came he saw the earring brighten, fast jaunty sway and across its surface the slim and patent leer, pure silver, transmuting as she moved into something shaped like a human heart. It swung dangerous, almost against his face, almost touched his skin and he cried out, pushed awkward but her hold on him was strong, her legs fastened around him as if in the midst of cramp, and the shape changed again to something like a brain, spattered, crawling, rich with insects, nameless things with waving legs, the frothing bubble of silver blood and he was crawling too, away, clumsy in the grass with the condom dangling small and bloated on his shriveled dick, throwing up, throwing up, throwing up.

Somebody shaking him.

"Hey."

EMS?

No. Peter.

"Hey, asshole, get up," but gently, gentle too the arm that raised him. He was all wet on one side, piss or dew, hard to say. His right arm felt numb. He remembered little, still felt sick, a taste in his mouth like eating his own shit. Maybe he had. It was morning, or almost: he could see the house clearly, see cars still parked in the driveway. "Let's go inside, okay?" and as Peter walked him toward the house, half carrying him like a medic in a war movie, he saw in the shine of new sun the earring, lying serpent in the grass far beyond the picnic table; its surface was green, smeared with the lawn's reflection, but in the looking it changed, glossed immediate shine like the rainbow oil makes in a puddle, but silver, silver, and leering up at him in passing, no organ shapechange this time but a shock more subtle: the smile between friends.

The receptionist sounded as if she had a cold, or maybe it was just the phone. "You're not due for a checkup."

"I know," Austen said. The air conditioner in the T-shirt shop was broken, one of the windows too. There were two fat flies going slowly around the ceiling. Scratch, scratch, one nail against a sore spot on his knuckle. Scratch to blood.

"Are you having symptoms?"

The party. Drunk, he had been drunk, don't forget that. "Sort of. Yeah. I just want to see the doctor."

"Let me see what I have open." Silence. Blood brown under his scratching nail. "I don't have anything until a week from Thursday. This coming Thursday," as if there might be some confusion. "That would be the twenty-eighth. Nine-fifteen."

"Okay. My last name is Bandy," spelling it, slowly, concluding the call and now as slowly another number, the insurance company. To find his premiums increased and the stern admonition against unnecessary office visits, unnecessary tests. This equipment costs money, and so does the technician's time.

I know.

And driving home, hands dreary on the wheel and a thunderstorm coming, he had forgotten to recheck the patch job on the window, all the YUCK FOO T-shirts would get wet. Smell in the air like dust, too fine to see or even feel; summer was lasting forever. He found himself wanting autumn with a hard impatient illogic, as if somehow the change of seasons would change him, too, the passing of the sullen voluptuous heat into a cold to sterilize, to freeze, to clench in zero grip the mocking fluidity of silver running wet, like semen, like blood, like the tear-clear liquid that means death in the brain.

Since the party disaster—and no, he had not called Gina Fisk, had been too ashamed even to hear her voice —there had been no new shocks, no fresh manifestations;

a clean and uneventful week but now Austen felt the beginnings of besiegement, an over-the-shoulder mentality that had begun to expect, at all times, the worst. And more, things he could not imagine; how to prepare for the unbelievable? By admitting belief in what your eyes tell you, by the grope and shock of the fear that you feel? And is it better or worse, safer or more dangerous, lighter or dark? Crazy or not? He was getting sick of the question, sick of questioning himself at every turn.

In the backseat of his car, lying solemn against the jiggling empty soda cans and the faintly doggy slouch of an old armless windbreaker was his stock of ammunition; if knowledge could be power. Books with titles like *Coping with Neurologic Problems, Essentials of the Brain, Brain Power.* Nursing manuals, dumb gossipy layperson accounts, My Sick Head juxtaposed with texts so technical, even the indexes were beyond him; still, he read them, all of them, in no order, learned much but all ajumble: aphonia, aphemia, aphasia, ataxia, apraxia, like the names of Greek goddesses, a roll call of the queens of disease, keepers of the brain, Nyx and Nox and the region of night. He read of meningitis and MS, of intracranial pressure, of Guillain-Barre, of epilepsy; obsessively of those who had sustained brain injury, of temporal-lobe seizure patients. Everything he could find, library, bookstore; he had requested a reading list from Stella's office, and got it, along with some unspoken opinions that let him know some people thought he was taking his illness much too personally. No one had actually come out and said hypochondria but it was probably on his horizon, one or two office visits, one or two negative test results down the line.

Turning into his driveway and the first jut of lightning, quick strike off to the near west; he hurried inside, books in arm, to shut the kitchen windows. One dumb determined fly pressed itself against the screen door: I want out, I want out, I want out. He opened the screen —go on, idiot—but the fly kept crawling, up and down, bumbling deliberation until he brushed it lightly with his fingers: Go. And it went. And promptly in again.

"Right," smiling, brushed it out more strongly to make sure that it was truly free. Kinship with a grown-up maggot. How low can you get. There was beer in the refrigerator but he chose water instead, cold water shot and slivered with the cracks of ice left in the bottom of the ice-keeper. The storm was taking its time, arrival close but not closer, dull ponderous farts of thunder before the grand explosion. He took his water and went to sit on the front lawn.

The grass was sharper than ever, little spikes against his weary thighs. Too dry. Well, the storm would take care of that. He drank, the water cold to pain. Sweat on his forehead; hotter, now, as if the storm needed a certain temperature to break and if nature would not accommodate, it would fashion its own. There was in the clouds a tilt, suggestive for some reason of the fugue before a seizure, a certain distortion common to that borderline between pained prosaic consciousness and the ether-state of scales and smells and fear, the land where the silver thing lived. If it lived.

Don't start.

And the depression, again, the idea of difference forever ingrained, fear so he felt its jelly quiver at odd dry moments, self-disgust over his behavior at the party, the way he might likely behave, at any time; and all of it a poor mingle with the overpowering fact of belief, or its opposite: to accept the doctors' verdicts of recovery was to accept madness. But if not, what?

And above him the slow-growing mutter of an enormous stroke, lightning building like God's generator, the first hot drops and up, quick, empty glass in hand as he crossed the grass, head down and hurry, hurry, before he looked to see in the lightning the unmistakable sizzle of silver.

"What kind of symptoms are you having, exactly?"

Stella in the morning, bad morning, not particularly happy with him and not particularly careful to hide it, ticcing away, reading through his file like a novel he had not enjoyed the first time. He had on a red sweatshirt under his white doctor coat; for some reason it felt important to read the lettering.

"Your last tests," Stella said, tapping at the file.

"I know."

Are you going to tell? he asked himself. How? Imagine: Hey, Dr. Stella, guess what? I keep seeing the damnedest thing, dunno if it's hallucinations or not, but it's pretty fucking wacky. Right.

Stella folded his arms. The white coat swung, tantalizing over the lettering, less white, faded maybe from lots of washings. Who does your laundry, Doctor?

"Why are you here?"

Well. He could be blunt too. "I'm still not better."

"All these tests say differently."

"Then the tests are wrong."

"There are other factors. Have you been taking your medication?"

Austen nodded.

"Regularly?"

Nod again.

Stella's tic seemed to worsen; maybe it was because he was pissed off. "Alcohol can reduce the medication's effectiveness," sounding just like one of the backseat books. "Are you having headaches? Dizziness? Blurred or double vision? Any other vision problems?"

"No."

"Austen, let me tell you something." Putting down the file; uh-oh, time for The Talk. "Tegretol is a very effective medication, if taken the way it's prescribed. If you're using the medication correctly, and you're not experiencing seizures, or any other suggestive symptoms, *and* all your tests come back normal, then. . ."

A pause. Was it customary to take a deep breath before announcing your patient is a card-carrying attention-craving hypochondriac? Was it customary for the patient too? The silence was starting to get embarrassing. Go on, Austen thought, deliberately refusing to pick at his knuckle sore, no tics for him. Tell me it's all in my head.

"Then," another breath, "I have to repeat, again, that nothing is wrong with you. You had a serious head in-

jury, you experienced trauma, you experienced seizures, and it's all over."

Austen said nothing, Someone laughed in the hallway. The air conditioner clicked back on.

"Austen, maybe you need to get some counseling."

That night he dreamed repeatedly of Emily: the drift of her hair, firm fingers in his, the long rare grin; and woke sweating, sheets twisted tight and fettering around his legs as if by some clever hands. He wanted to cry. He wanted to call her. He wanted so much to call her and say, I need help. Will you come?

Instead he tugged off the sheets, went to the bathroom, pissed, drank water. No midnight stares in the mirror, please. Back to bed and he thought he would lie awake but instead slept again at once, thick poleaxed slumber, dreamed of Emily standing in his front yard with a toolbox.

What are you doing? he asked her. What's that?

It's a toolbox, Austen. The same dry half-smile. God, was she beautiful. She was wearing a T-shirt and no bra, old black jeans. By the way, she said, why'd you fuck that woman?

Absurd, what woman? But somehow he had those stupid green panties right there in his hands, balled up and she reached, casual, to take them from him, shake them out with an air of incompetence confirmed, as if she'd caught him driving with no oil in his car.

You'd better be careful, she said.

Landscape of storm, behind her, the sudden summer kind. Rain on the sidewalk, dark spots against the baked gray concrete. He began to argue with her to come inside, it was stupid to stand out in the rain, she was holding a metal toolbox, for God's sake.

Her hair blew backward; the wind was rising. Oh, stop worrying, she said. Besides—with that other grin, her mean one—it's just a brainstorm, isn't it?

Isn't it?

And waking, crying, an erection, garroting sheets again and the phone, ringing. Ringing.

"Hello?" through tears, trying to sit up. Sweat all over his body.

A voice, thickened, she sounded drunk: Gina Fisk. Behind her the noise of a party or bar.

"You shit," she said.

Slowly he put the receiver down. The phone did not ring again.

She was right, of course.

Workday. Forty hours a week now, his last puny gain negated by the latest bill from Stella. Peter stopped by the store to tell him he was working too hard.

"Stop thinking so much," perched on the counter, incongruous swing of his legs; Peter was not the swinging-leg type, especially now in his gallery director's outfit, black linen pants and blue shirt fashionably creased. "You know what you ought to do?"

"No, but you do."

"Ha ha. Fact is I *do* know." Austen, back turned to take up a slim stack of invoices, lucky they had gotten that soccer team order, it was pretty much paying his wage this week. And what if the orders shrank smaller still?

"You need to stop thinking so much. Go out more."

"Yeah," stamping the first of the invoices, Rorschach smudge on the side of his hand. "Like that party."

"So you got drunk, so what." This did not quite come off; they both knew it. "All right, you don't feel up to partying, no problem. They're lots of other things to do besides sitting at home alone in the dark."

"Peter, I make it a point to turn the lights on."

Peter touched him, very lightly, one warm hand on his shoulder; Peter's hands were unusually small, he had never noticed that before. Small, and hard at the palms.

"Austen," with a gravity evidenced by the smileless cadence of the words, Peter was always a smiler, "listen to me. I'm your friend, and I can say stuff like this."

"Like what?"

"Like you look like shit. You must've lost twenty pounds and believe me, you can't afford it. You can't afford your doctor bills, either, but you keep on going anyway. Why?"

Austen did not answer, but did not look away. Tell Peter? It would be its own relief, to talk about it, even a little; find perhaps not explanation but a kind of tardy sense; something. There was a silence in which he might have spoken, launched the first words, irretrievable.

But Peter went on. "You look sick, you act sick, you don't want to go out. You know what I think? I think you need to work, and I don't mean," waving one dismissive arm to take in the crudity of the signs and the shirts, the crusty linoleum, the burglar bars on the windows, "this shit either. You need to do your art, man."

Austen did not speak. Peter's hand was still on his shoulder, and now squeezed, a little, shook him gently back and forth.

"So why don't you work? It can't still be because of Emily."

Austen shrugged; it was embarrassing, somehow, to be seen as one who carries a torch, who can't let go. Blind devotion. Stupid. He wished a customer would come in, wished Peter would just stop.

"Point by point," hands now spread before him, honest fingers, "I loved Em. But you can't let her going kill your art, man. Nobody's worth that."

His shrug, again and handy. Emily had done nothing to damage him; he did not need to argue that point, with Peter or anyone. Even himself. Even Emily.

"You haven't done anything in, what? A year? Since the Sphinx series, right?"

"Right." *Criosphinx, Androsphinx, Hierosphinx;* the ram, the human, the hawk. Nobody had liked them.

"Look." Hands now flat on the counter; time to deal. If he had seen Peter use that gesture once, he had seen it a million times, and now he almost smiled; he knew what was coming. "Do one for me. All right? I'll pay you for it like anybody else, just do one."

He had to smile now, shook his head, not in refusal. "Right. Of who?"

"I don't know," smiling back, "anyone you want. Yourself. Emily. Anybody."

"I'll think about it."

And he did: sitting out the last few hours, the shop empty, only three calls; driving home, fixing dinner—microwave chicken, some frozen biscuits from the back of the freezer—thought hard enough to go upstairs, take the plastic off the easel—a glorified drafting table, but it had always done its job. He had not done some grand sign-off, good-bye forever; things were still in their places, kept carefully, he could not afford in any sense to waste supplies. Most of his brushes were camel's hair, their handles smooth dark stems. One year for Christmas Emily had bought him expensive brushes, a vast expense, they were living off her unemployment compensation that winter. Love's extravagance, and she had been astonished to anger when he returned them, cold at the kitchen table when he came back. Snow on his coat. Scared to look at her.

"Emily."

She had not turned, would not. He remembered the long arch of her backbone, she sat like a soldier.

"This better not be some O. Henry shit," she had said, and he had hurried to deny, no, I just bought groceries, put some gas in the car. Her anger had always frightened him a little, unnerved him, there was potential there: like standing before some iron door, without feature, faintly warm to the touch; what would happen if you opened it too far? Well, he had found out, hadn't he. But that night at least they had reconciled, made love in their cold bedroom, the furnace turned low to save money; she had fallen asleep with the covers over her head.

Last Christmas, drunk with melancholy, he had called her, sitting winding the cord like a teenager; she had not been home, had never returned his call. This year maybe a hospital would do it for him.—Oh, stop it.

He sat in the folding chair before the easel, its irregular canvas square, sat there for almost half an hour, doing nothing, simply looking. Then he put the plastic back on and went downstairs.

Before bed, mouth faintly ringed with toothpaste, staring into the mirror: Peter had said he looked like shit. Did he? Looking at himself, really looking, not like when he shaved. Dark a little under the eyes, so what. Cheekbones harder, more gray in his hair, he needed a haircut pretty bad. Who cares. Gina Fisk had seemed to like his looks, but then again he didn't want to think about Gina, ever, if possible. He turned on the radio, loud so he wouldn't have to, found himself instead thinking of Emily, of doing her portrait; even Peter could be right sometimes. He had enough photographs of her to consult, if consultation was what he needed. He took them out, well-used manila envelope, flipped through them, flipped slower, half-painful slump at his half-assed desk: Emily poker-faced in an ugly red ski hat, Emily with her girlfriend, what? Sara? Sharon? Emily eating, somebody's kitchen. Emily on a beach, one hand shading her eyes. Emily at Christmas. Emily in a very thin T-shirt, he could nearly see through it, definitely saw the sweet slope, endlessly remembered, of breasts and ribs. If he tilted the picture, looked just so, he could pretend to see them, memory's eyes, their weight, the softness of the skin beneath. Little nipples in his mouth, gentle, so gently sawing teeth back and forth, barely grazing, she would put her hands to either side of his head and that little whuff, whuff of sound, as if she was breathless, as if pleasure made it hard to breathe.

Useless, oh, but he remembered, felt the sorry rush of arousal, worked himself to come, fast, get it over with, sat tired, tired, too tired to get up but he did. Get up to go to bed.

And slept to dream, thick scars like rivets on forehead and back, he saw himself lying nearly naked on a road that led to his mother's house, a house he had not visited, a place he knew only from address, lying with his eyes wide open and a clear and constant stream of liquid from his nose and ears, syrup on blacktop, washing pink, a risky freshening red until it all ran black and across the road like some tremendous shadow came the elongated slouch, exaggerated hunch and dance burlesque of silver, immemorial, come to take what it needed, what it wanted to have; to usher in an era of blood.

And: woke, to find each individual window, each daunted square coated like paint with silver, living ripple, the squelch and shine like the sounds of breathing tissue and Austen screamed, sat up in bed and screamed like a child with night terrors, but nobody heard, and nobody came. ✦

In Brass Valley

Avram Davidson

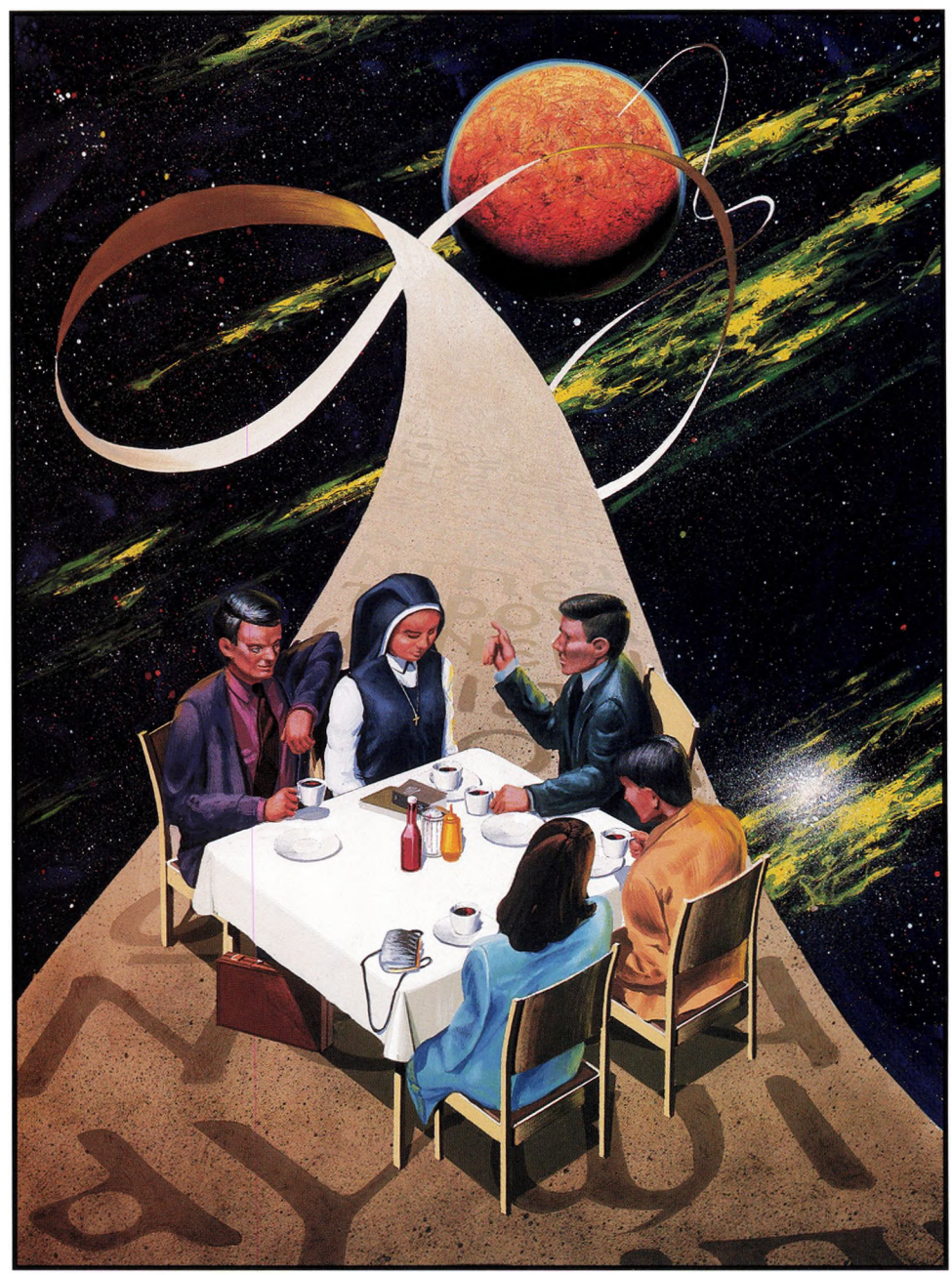


Illustration by Mark Skullerud

"Mazatlán," I said, "has buzzards the way gringo cities have pigeons."

"But Mazatlán is *great* in October!" said Mr. Bucktoo.

"But I prefer Brass Valley, then. So. Nope, but *nope*." Short way with dissenters.

"Sister Josepha says she wishes she could find him, and maybe find out where he *got* it, because maybe he's got more." So Robby said.

"But why 'Brass' Valley?" asked Mr. Bucktoo, shifting ground. His name wasn't, of course, Mr. Bucktoo, neither was it a nickname referring to his teeth. His name was Tim Brown; *now* do you get it? And was it worth the effort?

"Probably a million years old, but looks almost new."—Rob.

"I'd be afraid to eat here.

but the coffee's good." Probably Yar. Might as well be Yar.

"And why *not* Brass?" That was me.

In writing down an alleged transcript of conversation, it is customary to have it follow a straight progression. "Like a railroad apartment: in the front door and out the back." Supposedly this furthers the story line; if it doesn't further the story line, throw it out. Any teacher of creative writing (which is, of course, totally unteachable) will tell you. Well, almost any. Actual conversation, however, is often idle and meandering: an attempt to ignore this just leads us back to those earlier fictions supposedly being told around a campfire while the faceless company manfully smokes its pipes; after a few opening lines one speaker gets the floor and begins to tell his story ("Curious you should say that. Rather reminds me of something which happened to me once on the Upper Slumgullion, don't know if you chaps know the UpSlum . . .") and then the story unfolds, page after page and paragraph after paragraph, each paragraph naturally beginning with a fresh set of quotation marks —because it is, after all, a transcription of some one person speaking. Very grammatical. And very tedious.

Most conversations, if real (always excepting those very real conversations beginning, "Wanna come down to The Station with us so we can talk about it?"—and just what if one doesn't wanna? Ho *ho*) are *idle* conversations, and jump around from person to person and subject to subject. Plant a tape recorder sometime, unknown to the tapees, and then listen to the replay. (And please, will someone, anyone, tell me what "unbeknownst" conveys, which "unknown" does not?)

"Why does Sister Josepha want more, when she can't read the one she's got?"

"No, the coffee *is*n't bad. Food isn't bad, either, when you come right down to it."

"I'm not *go*ing to come right down to it. I have my pride. Eat in a place which says it serves *Put Rost?*"

"Snob. Fred just cooks better than he spells, is all."

Sister Josepha said that if she had more of it, instead of only a page of it, it would Pique People's Interest. How much it would really pique the interest of people in Brass Valley (where Sister Josepha was librarian of the small college) to have, oh, seventy pages, instead of only one page, of a Coptic Gospel, was not hard to say. Hardly at all. But Sister J. was an optimist (it is true that she couldn't identify even the single page, but she had the smarts to send a xerox copy to the library at a Jesuit, or No Fooling Around, university downstate); also she wanted very much to encourage donations to her own library, the ones she usually got being along the lines of *Life of the Blessed Aloysius McGonnigal, by Rev. Peter O'Praty, P. P.* ("It belonged to Grandma, Sister, not that she was ever much for reading. It must be very *old,* Sister, look: *Roman numerals*!" Sister Josepha could read Roman numerals, even though the donor couldn't, but was kind-hearted, and never bothered to say that 1922 was not very old.)

"According to the booklet they printed up for the Centennial, it was named after some pioneer called Colonel Joseph Brash, and somebody got the spelling wrong."

Nothing was likelier, of course, than that somebody would get the, or any other, spelling wrong; what the Centennial pamphlet didn't say was that one of the pioneers who could and did write had mentioned . . . once . . . *that old scant-soap Joe Brash and other trash,* plus . . . once . . . *Joe Brash warned agin about selling his Bad Whiskey to Indjians.* . . . Colonels then, of course, were as common as chicken pox.

"Hey, I was sitting in the dentist's office once and he came in and handed me half a page of a newspaper."

"Who did?"

"The guy."

"Same guy?"

"Yeah."

Someone said he *still* thought they should've dragged the G. B. B. again. Someone else said, "Dick Bayrish is not in Great Brass Bay."

"So where *is* he, then?" A shrug.

"Coptic newspaper?"

"No, local newspaper." Sometimes Mr. Bucktoo showed a sense of humor, and sometimes he didn't. "And then he hung around like he was expecting something and I said, 'What's this for?' and he made a funny noise and went away."

"Maybe that wasn't a funny noise, maybe that was Coptic."

Another turn on the platen. "What you don't realize, Yar, is that a cheap place to eat, like this, with good cheap coffee, is an amenity. So are the other few cheap restaurants here in Brass Valley town. Unless you *like* paying seventy-five cents plus tax for coffee with a plastic hostess. Or twenty bucks for supper."

Yar then cited us his perhaps favorite line of philosophy. " 'As through life you go / Whatever be your goal / Keep your eye upon the donut / And not upon the hole.'—Isn't that better than Plato?"

"Plato. Him and his pansy kings."

Yar's great question remained unanswered, and an oral list was gradually made of the town's amenities, including several really *good* restaurants, a *large* public library, the pleasant old campus of St. Anne's College, several good bars even not counting the two good jazz bars, four bookstores (what if one of them did also sell incense?), a first-rate second-hand clothing store, a couple of stationery stores offering something besides computer paper, a real good marine supplies place that didn't charge you an eye and a leg for a grommet ("Hey, don't you mean 'an arm and a leg'?" "No, I mean an—").

Pat, previously silent save for coffee-slurping sounds, busted out laughing. Robby said, "It's got more amenities than the capital of the State of—"

Mr. Bucktoo again wanted to talk about selling or trading one of his time-share deals, but no takers.

"Plus it's got The Place." At this, heads were nodded. "*The Place*" was what most people called an externally rather bleak-looking building which covered more ground than it seemed to, had a rather long official name, and employed all of us then at the table in Fred's.

Fred's was one of the, say, inexpensive eating-places with good coffee. Local people of the kind who go often to Katmandu and keep an apartment in Martaban, serious older hippies with serious older trust accounts—the ones who casually describe gross piles of organic rot and filth heaped up around the houses of the once-nomadic Glopp People and also casually tell you that although they don't like eating hunted meat, eat what the once-nomadic Glopp People hunted because the Glopp were really beautiful people, man, and they were one with the spirits of the earth. Man.—these who write books, *How the Picturesque Ethnic Natives Loved Us.* Y'know?—these people had eventually decided that The Place, though either partially or entirely government- and university-funded, posed no pronto problems to being One with the spirits of the earth; and therefore left it (The Place) alone; and got on with going after the ass of a local official who allegedly wasn't good to guppies. Man. Next to *Fred's* was *Clem's,* another amenity: in the front of its pool-hall cold soft drinks were sold, also magazines not exclusively confined to the do-it-yourself-RCV-culture. Next to *Clem's* was an old-established family bakery whose bread, however thinly sliced, bore no resemblance to blotting-paper: *God!* it smelled good! And just around the corner from the old-established etc., several of the smaller private label Valley wineries maintained an outlet store, and encouraged casual sipping. There were lots of trees, and the river, as it curled through town, was only partly canalized on its way to Little and Great Brass Bays. Where Dick Bayrish probably was not—where *was* he? Ah.

Though sometimes I found I needed other stimulation, still, I am sorry for a State Capital or other city where amenities of these sorts do not abound. Or, anyway, exist. Though sometimes a person did look for other diversions. "What are you laughing about, Pat?" someone asked, for the conversation had not really paused while I was thinking these long and deep, deep thoughts.

"What's the connection with that Copital whaddaya-callit?"

"Cop*tic*. Well, I heard that he handed it to the guy at the window inside the union hiring hall. Huh? Oh . . . the Teamsters Union, I guess . . . the Warehousemen's? . . . and *he* finally gave it to Sister Josepha."

Pat finally had finished his laugh. "Must be the same guy," he said. "The bishop, you know I live next door to a bishop? Bishop Olson. Said that a man came into his office and handed him a beat-up-looking paper. And by the time they had figured out what it was, hey, he was gone!" And Pat began to laugh again. Figured out it was *what*? It was a lab report. An old one. For a Wasserman test. And, no, Bishop Olson hadn't mentioned any name. Maybe there wasn't any name: *old.*

Not only was there the caff called *Fred's,* there really was a Fred, it was Fred who called it a caff, Fred was an Englishman; furthermore, Fred was just then present, as why not. And had overheard. As—

Fred asked if this wasn't the funny old bloke? (Bloke, that's what he called him; evidently a word in actual use; makes you think, doesn't it?) Asked, What funny old bloke?, Fred said that there was a funny old bloke who'd been going around town handing things to people. What'd he hand you, Fred? Two dollars in food stamps. Yar said he thought they weren't supposed to be used for restaurant meals. No, said Fred, they weren't. But as the old bloke didn't exactly look like a caPITalist (Fred's exact word, a caPITalist), so, he, Fred, had given him a bag of sandwiches. *Dirty* clothes, looked like he'd been rolling about in the sand.

"Suppose he can't help it," said Fred, "but I wasn't too keen on his hanging round here, so I sort of gestured [hard *g*; to each his own] him to follow and I handed them to him at the door. Funny old bloke." And, ah, what had Fred done with the food stamps? "Used them to buy *food,* of course. *Yes, mahm!*" He moved away to wait on a customer. In this transcription I have refrained from doing anything cute about the absence or intrusion of the letter *h,* because Fred was really very nice, and never once complained about our taking up table space for (mostly) little more than coffee at his cafe (or caff).

Couldn't help what? one may well ask, but those familiar with the appearance of the funny old bloke at once explained to those not, that he looked *odd,* perhaps belonged to another race than those generally visible around Brass Valley (Q. Which ones *were*? A. All of them; well, all most of them, most all of the other ones, that is.) and/or was probably down on his luck. Way down. As well as being dingy. "And besides all that, said Robby, "he just looks, well, damned *odd.*"

After a musing moment (yes, yes; the kettle itself does not boil; *okay*?) Yar said, "Behaves damned odd, too, evidently."

But Pat (I think it was Pat) said that didn't figure at all. "It seems to me," said Pat, "that this guy is maybe a bit mixed up, but he at the bottom of his mind has the notion that if he hands the right papers to the right person at the right place, then he will get the right something. Like, to eat. Which he *will.* But he doesn't always manage to make all the connections."

A hot wind, but not very hot, with some faint scents of grapes and hay, blew through the open doors. There was no more old railroad, but there were still some old railroad men, and one of them sat down at the counter and said, "The pot roast, Fred. I could," the casey jones informed the world, "eat Fred's pot roast all day long and every day." Yar murmured, "A survivor from the age of faith."

"Well, but where *is* Dick Bayrish?"

"Probably on Mission Street, with a jar of muscatel as big as his head."

"—Dick *Bay*rish? Naa."

"—okay, then: Dick Whittington—"

To Pat I said, "Don't you call that 'behaving damned odd'?"

Just then the telephone rang. There is no long arm of coincidence involved, the telephone when it rings is ringing *some*time, and now and then that time happens to be "just then" time. Fred answered it, it was after all

his telephone, and after we heard him say, "Fred's Caff," after a moment, we did not hear him say as I once did hear him say after saying that, "Well, fook you, too!"; we heard him say, "I'll ask, Doctor." And he looked over at us. "Is Doctor Patterson or Doctor Nelson or Doctor Knight or Doctor Brown or any of you gentlemen here? It's Doctor Jefferson." Fred always had a high respect for those of us who worked at The Place, and always called us each *Doctor,* which we weren't each, or all. And he had just named every one of us.

It didn't seem to matter which one of us answered; Pat was nearest. "Patterson here," we heard him say. Then, "Uh-huh, uh-huh . . . He *did*?" For a second Pat said nothing. Then he said, "Jesus Christ." Then he hung up and came back, more slowly than he went, and sat down, and had a gulp of coffee. "It's that same *son* of a bitch that we were talking about. The fluke who goes around handing out *fun*ny papers."

"It *was*—? Well . . . what did he hand Jefferson?"

"A birth certificate."

Stir of interest. Several people asked, almost together, well, where's he *from*? "Oh, it isn't his own birth certificate," said Pat. "It's Dick Bayrish's."

Maybe I ought to have explained about this, earlier. Aí de mí.

Dick's first wife came with two ready-made children, girls, Toni and Tini. Their *names*. None of us were ever sure what their onlie begetter's name had been called, he was a vanished man, she had vanished him, told him that she and the children "had the right to a new life in which he had no part or place." So, "naturally, Dick adopted them." Law of Nature and of Nature's God. Dick was once dopey enough to say (I heard him), "When we have children—" See her eyes open wide. *Wide*. She had but *no* idea what he could mean. "'When'?" she said. "'When'? We *have* children." You will have noticed the use of only the pronoun, so far. At an earlier stage in human development Mrs. pre-Bayrish was called Caroline: fine. Then she became Caro*lin, Car*olyn, *Carolynn,* Kar—you think I am making this up? No. Hold on. She next became aware that, on a certain level of society, girls of Old Family were being given last names as first names, just as boys had been for centuries. Their turn now. Carter Smith, she. Harper Hopkins, she. Hopkins Carter, she. I am not totally sure that her maiden name had been Kraemer, but I doubt if that had been her first husband's. Somehow, I doubt it. And so anyway, she became Kraemer Bayrish. Very suddenly Dick was supposed to have divined it, as he was supposed to have divined the other changes: and he hadn't. Didn't. Singing telegrams, you ever hear of screaming telephones? Can you imagine waking up not knowing the name of your own mate? And God help you if you called her today by her name of yesterday: telephoned screams all day long. No use at The Place for whoever answered the phone to say that Dr. Bayrish couldn't take the call at that very moment, because the call would be repeated every moment on the moment until he could. And did.

Very well, Dick was a dolt. But a harmless dolt. How did a simple soul like his ever get into such a pickle? Mathematically, Dick may have been a genius; socially, he was a moron, and no maybe. While I don't suggest that he had had no woman prior to "Kraemer," I suggest that he hadn't had many. And then.

And then it became obvious that she had found, shall we say, a man with a bigger dick than Dick's? Obvious to everyone save Dick, that is. God save Poor Dick. Hershey Bars and all . . . he never smoked nor drank. Reveling and Carousing to him was a tablespoon of (gag, brack) Manischewitz Red.

"Where *did* he say he was trying to go?" Yar asked Mr. Bucktoo, at Fred's.

"Must've told you almost a thousand times."

"Tell me again. Maybe this'll be the thousandth blow that splits the rock."

That day had been a day of many, many telephoned screams. The proper form of her latest name was just a straw in the wind, mighty strong winds were blowing, and the winds were full of straw: why was it supposed to comfort *her* that her husband was a mathematical genius? If it weren't for *him,* if he hadn't been a bastard and a son of a bitch, *she* would have been a mathematical genius . . . an opera star . . . the head of an advertising agency.

Whose fault was it that she wasn't? Whose fault was it that the world did not discern her teeming talents, that she had two small children whom she had decided not to want? It could not have been her fault, because nothing *was*: therefore it was Dick's.

Then, who knows why, a lull. And Bucktoo had come across Dick, not at his usual desk, but at his carrel in the library. At The Place? Of course. "Perhaps it's merely supposititious," said Dick, as though they had been a while in conversation.

And *that's* when he said that mysterious thing? "Yeah"? Well, *would* one mind repeating it? The usual—well, usual with Dick—swathe or swale of Hershey Bar wrappers on and under the table; well, it beat chewing pig-tail plug, hell yes. Only maybe not. "Attempts to reach the perhaps entirely theoretical fourth planet of Orion's Dog, via gamma-grade kineportation"; wouldn't *you* call *that* mysterious? I certainly would.

One agreed? More coffee, please, Fred?

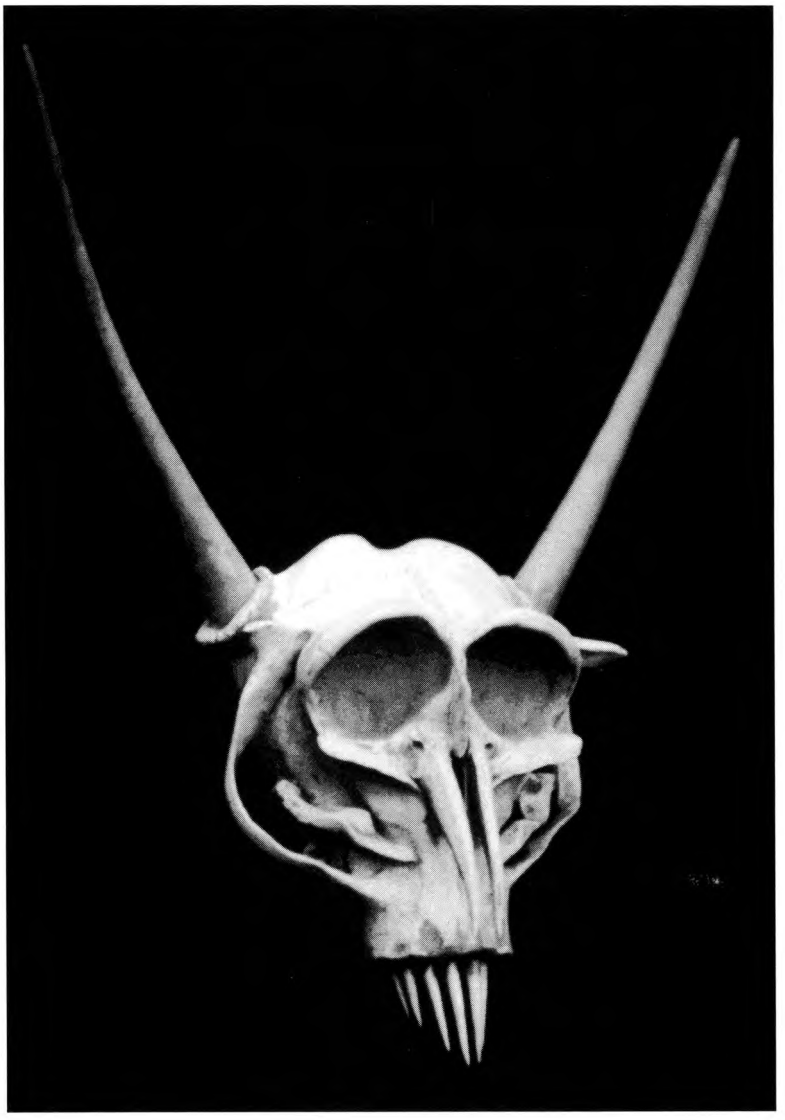
Pat: "Well, what's with the little girls?"

"One of them was eating flaky paint. And the other one was eating her own hair. Maybe they miss Dick."

Sad silence. Broken by, "Dick may have had a nervous breakdown." Yes, and maybe Daniel Boone was antisocial. Thanks, Fred. *Any*way, Dick had disappeared. The Place had enough pull ("clout," it's called now) to persuade Brass Valley to have the Little Bay dragged. No Dick.

Mr. Bucktoo asked, "And what the hell *is* Coptic? anyway."

As it hadn't happened that I had had a lot to say, I said this: "A late form of ancient Egyptian speech and writing, both heavily influenced by Alexandrian Greek.



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AZ

So Father Flynn wrote to Sister Josepha. And he also sent a transliteration, and the same text in Latin."

Someone said, "Whenever things got tense, he lit out for a library."

Again, silence. "Sister Josepha lets you read her mail?"

With dignity, I: "Sister Josepha was kind enough to xerox Father's letter and enclosure. She said she thought it might pique my interest." I reached it out of my pocket. Mr. Bucktoo said, Sister Josepha and her xerox; when he was a boy the Sisters never used anything more complex than a yardstick. Which they used to whack hell out of him for eating apples during catechism class. In the back row.

Yar said he had absolutely no sympathy with him. "If there's anything I hold in contempt, it's one of your furtive apple-eaters. Shame on you. Bordering on heresy and schism."

Bucktoo said something vulgar. To *Yar.* To *me,* he said, "And you just happen to have the letter with you?" Heavy on sarcasm.

"All right, then, it's a talisman. A talisperson. The *old* one wore out. Barodi a Soldan. Hoyts *you?*"

They peered at the paper . . . the pa*pers* . . . one can't say that they peered at them very intently. Yar "read" a pretended version of the transliterated text, something like this: "Yah-yah gombo bubastis luxor memnon logos, osiris ain't *got* it, *p'tah.*" Pat, amused (anyone who would write that, "An amused Pat," with its implication of several amused Pats as well as several unamused ones, should be condemned to unscramble pied type in hell), asked that he next do the Latin. But Yar said that he preferred to leave the Latin in the decent obscurity of a learned language. And Robby said, "He probably ripped it off from a library."

Asked (I asked) why did he say *that?* Robby replied that the guy ["The, ah, *bloke?*" "The, ah, bloke. Yes."], well, because he gave that impression. Too many years close confinement with the Dewey Decimal System had addled his eggs . . . Maybe . . .

I picked up the copy of the Coptic transliteration, and, for some reason, was moved to read it aloud. And, for some reason, they listened.

"Evol ghar sa khoun evol ken piheet ente piromi shavi evol enje nimokmek ethoou nipornia nichiouwe no khotaib nimetnoik.

"Nimetchiengons nimetpethoou nimetdolos nisaoaf nival ethoou nijeoua ouchisi enheet oumetatkati.

"Ny teerou ethoou evneyou evol sakhoun ouoh sesof empiromi."

Silence. "Sounds impressive. Odd, mind you. But impressive. More."

"More."

"If you want more, you'll have to have it in Latin. Okay?" They said, okay. So I read on.

"Ab intus enim, de corde hominum malae cogitationes procedunt, adulteria, fornicationes, homocidia.

"Furta, avaritiae, nequitae, dolus, impudicitiae, oculus malus, blasphemia, superbia, stultitia.

"Omnia haec mala ab intus procedunt et communicant hominem."

Silence. Someone muttered, "Which nobody can deny." I wished that I had studied Latin longer and more recently: still . . . still . . . slowly something of it kept seeping in on me . . . but . . . what . . .

Mr. Bucktoo gave a start, a jerk of his head. "Here he *comes,*" he said. In came the nut . . . fluke . . . bloke . . . guy . . . weary, fatigued, confused, dogged, and several other attributes I couldn't quite put my finger on. Was he heading for me ? Immemorial cry: *Why me?* Answer: Why *not* me? Somehow I very much wanted not to have to have this, too. So I turned my head and began babbling. "Not Mazatlán!" I said. "They eat goat's-head roasted with the horns on, and tripe and hominy soup for breakfast!"

Didn't take much to turn him on. "Well, if nobody wants to buy my time-share in Mazatlán, how about my one in Alexandria? I'm just over-bought, y'see. Alexandria is *great* in April!"

But the goop not only headed towards me, he circled me, never taking his eyes off me. I got up. Why? Why not? He came around and faced me at fairly close range. It seemed important to me to do what I next did. Which was to open my wallet and remove an old color photo of self and D. Bayrish, side by side. The odd fellow peered, blinked, made sundry sounds, said words. Moved by too many half-exposures to too much second-rate cinema, novels of the same rank, who knows what else—so I held my hands out, palms up. The bloke dropped something very crumpled into them. It did not take long to identify the items as the inner and outer wrappings of a very common brand of chocolate bar. But by that time the alien had disappeared entirely: I had a hunch: never to return. And, just after that, the phone rang. Again.

"I can't *talk* now, Kray—"

And her voice in my ear, weeping and screaming, "It's not Kray! It's Rā, with the macron—as if you don't know, you son of a bitch, you bastard, as if you don't know!"

My turn now. ✦

If There Be Cause

Sheila Finch

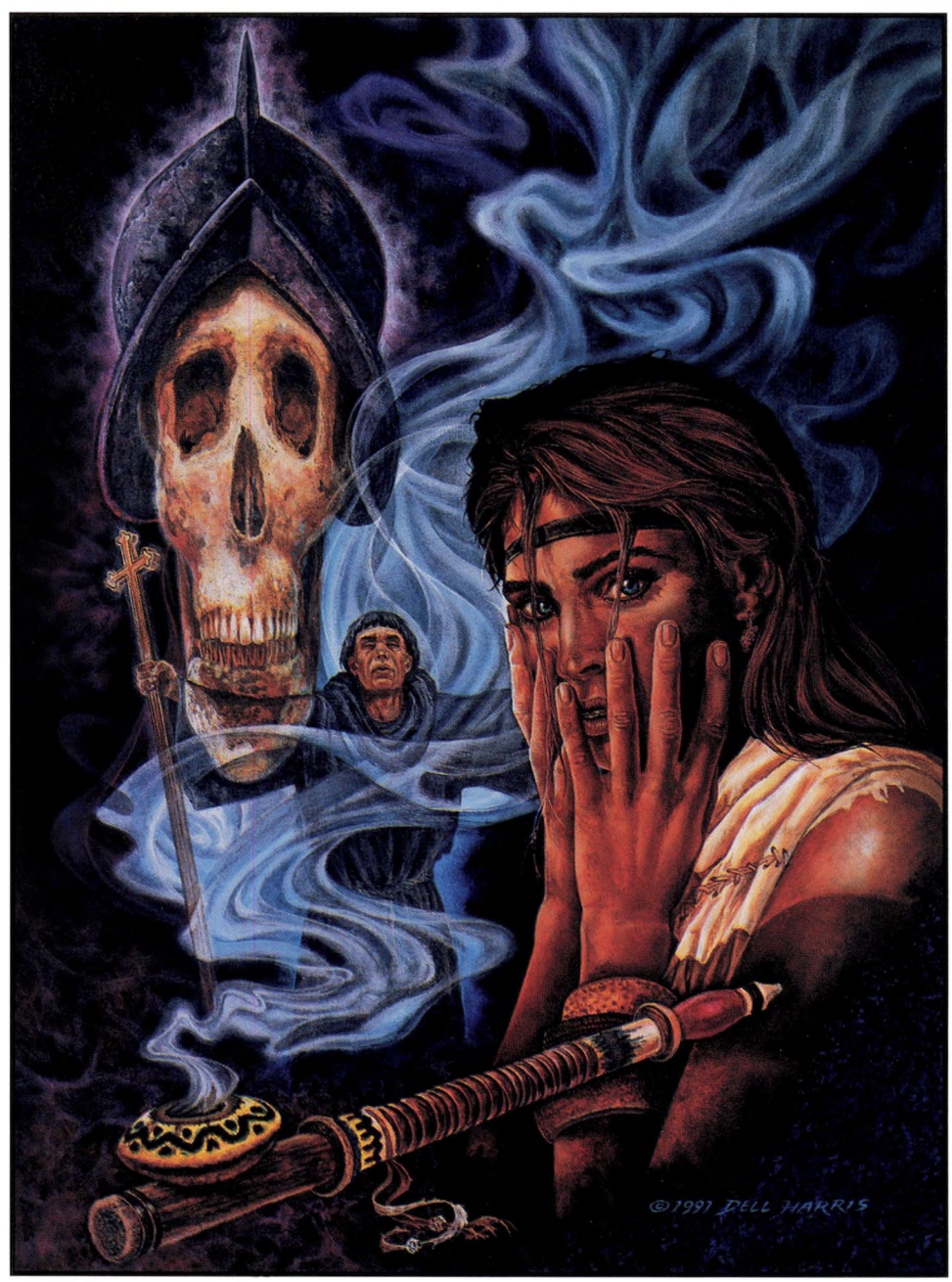

Illustration by Dell Harris

"Consider what a great voyage we are like to make, the like was never made out of England, for by the same the worst in this fleet shall become a gentleman."

— Sir Francis Drake, 1578

The Inland Sea, 1776

Little Gull saw the men before I did.

A fine, early summer day, I remember, two days after we returned from the shores of Great Sea, where we celebrate the coming of First Captain in the Big Canoes, swooping out of the setting sun. I was gathering duck eggs when my brother came running to me, panting hard with excitement, abalone beads bouncing around his neck, berry basket bouncing on his back, spilling its purple fruit along the path. Five summers is not so many that a boy should remember berries and forget exciting news.

My pulse raced and I was

filled with sudden hope. In spring, I had met a young man here, not Miwok but yet one of The People. His name was White Cloud. We walked together beside the irrigation ditch, and he was full of questions. Why did our canoes have sails? Why did we bother to plant crops? Why were our fields so square and neat, each with its own hedge separating it from its neighbor? How did the windmills fill the ditch with water? I laughed at his childlike ignorance. The tribes farther south on the shores of Great Sea were not as rich and wise as we, but he did not even know a well when he saw one! Yet I thought him the most beautiful man I had ever seen. My heart shivered when he touched my hand. Some day, he promised, he would come back to claim me. I believed him utterly, as only those who love believe. In that blustery spring weather, I knew White Cloud was my destiny.

"Red Deer! Red Deer!" Little Gull called out breathlessly as he ran headlong into my arms. "There're men coming! Lots of men. Strange-looking men! Wearing very odd clothes!"

Hope that a moment before had made me light as thistledown vanished.

"Don't you want to see them, Red Deer? Come with me! Please? You can see them from the top of the hill."

I held Little Gull firmly by the arms. He had the light skin that often runs in our family, speckled all over with dark patches like the wings of a pheasant, and eyes the color of misty sky. But his hair was brown, the color of pine bark. My own hair had red light in it, as if a field of poppies grew there.

"Don't talk nonsense, Little Gull!" I said.

"A lot of hunters coming up the long valley," he insisted. "Some of them were—riding, it looked like. I couldn't tell what the beast was. And there were women with them. And *children*!"

I still did not want to give up my fantasy of White Cloud's return. "What kind of hunting party travels with its children?"

"I did see them, Red Deer," he said stubbornly. "I did!"

"Then we'd better tell Bear-With-One-Ear," I said.

My heart was heavy. White Cloud had vowed he would return, but the weeks went by and my loneliness grew.

Holding hands, we ran down the hillside to the town, then up a street of very fine houses until we came to my uncle's house.

John Bear-With-One-Ear was sitting outside, where the overhanging thatch roof offered a shady spot to sit and enjoy the flower gardens. A sweet sound of music drifted on the fragrant air. My uncle's house was the largest and finest in the town, just as Nova Albion was the largest and most powerful of all the towns around the Inland Sea, which the old people called Lesser Sea. He was sharing a cane pipe of tobacco with his three brothers. Little Gull and I and our older brother Francis Hawk Wing were raised in his house, for our uncle had no children of his own.

(I tell you this at such length so that you should understand all things at last.)

We stood in front of the men, waiting for them to speak first, and I gripped Little Gull's arm to remind him to be polite, for he was shaking with excitement and would have blurted everything out before they asked him.

At last Bear-With-One-Ear laid down his pipe. He was an old man by then, but still handsome. The bright hair was only now fading to grey, but the locks that curled over the grey lace collar were just as thick as ever.

"Well, Little Gull," he said, "have you brought berries for our supper?"

Little Gull looked down at the basket and was much surprised to find it empty.

"My brother brings something better, Uncle," I said hastily, before Little Gull could cry. "He brings news. A large group of men approaching from the south."

Bear-With-One-Ear gazed at me. "And how is this unusual?"

"They're not Pomo or Miyakma or Yokuts. And they travel with their women and children!"

Bear-With-One-Ear frowned, and Edward Grey Seal, the youngest uncle, who had been playing the lute, said, "Not much to fear in that, I think."

"Still," one of the other uncles said (Walter Black Otter, I think it was, but my memory is not so clear now), "it *is* unusual."

Bear-With-One-Ear looked troubled. He was a strong leader, a peacemaker. Yet it was said of him that he was sometimes slower to anger than was good.

"We've heard of a gathering of strangers," he said. "Lookouts to the south sent word by the smoke towers. They seek land to grow food and raise children. The land is big enough to share a little with those who need it."

Black Otter set down his cup of fermented juice from apples I had helped harvest last autumn. "Where's my nephew, Hawk Wing?"

"My brother's hunting," Little Gull said proudly. "He's going to bring me an eagle feather for my cap!"

Bear-With-One-Ear smiled. "Your brother's skilled with a crossbow. But I doubt he hunts eagles with it!"

Little Gull pouted. "Someday, I'm going to be *Big* Gull! And I'm going to kill enemies too."

Bear-With-One-Ear stopped smiling. "We have no enemies."

"Don't delude yourself, Brother," Black Otter said. "These strangers may be the very wolves of whom First Captain warned."

There was one uncle who had said nothing. I knew he was a shaman, although among the men it is done differently, and they did not seem to have the sight. I remember that his name was Henry Fog-On-Water.

Now Fog-On-Water said, "First Captain warned us of evil men who come from a land of abomination. They seek treasure and they kill all who oppose them."

"Then we must do something!" I said.

Black Otter smiled at me. "First Captain also gave us a strategy. Let the enemy advance into a fortified place until you have them surrounded!"

"These aren't matters a girl just turned woman should hear!" Fog-On-Water said sharply.

I started to protest, but Bear-With-One-Ear held up his hand.

"We won't begin by fighting in the family. Red Deer, take Little Gull to your grandmother. Little Gull, stay with your sister until I send for you. We'll need Lark Singing's wise counsel in this matter."

"There is now a very great gap opened very little to the liking of the King of Spain. God work it all to his glory."

"First Captain warned us to beware the coming of men who worshipped images, for they are wolves who would devour us," Elizabeth Lark Singing said. "He told us the leader of the wolf pack is called the *papa*. We must be vigilant against this man."

My grandmother had a fine house in town, next to the one of my uncle, Bear-With-One-Ear. But in spring she had built a hut of willow branches at the top of a little hill; it had three sides, the fourth open, facing away from the town to Lesser Sea. She said young men and girls might face the storms of Great Sea even as First Captain had, but Lesser Sea was kinder to the old. She liked to watch the fog creep in along the water, then slide up the hills till its cold fingers reached into her hut. She said she would not die inside four walls, or her spirit would not find its way out. Fog-On-Water scoffed at that, but Lark Singing quelled him with a glance, a hard look from eyes so blue I thought as a child a piece of the sky had fallen into them. My grandmother was a powerful medicine woman, and none of her sons could ever withstand that flinty look.

"Tell me what we must do?" I asked her. But in my heart I did not want to *do* anything. I wanted White Cloud to come back. I wanted my life to go on as I had dreamed it would.

"Something is changing. My time is over. Yours is coming."

Little Gull played with a family of ducklings that had wandered into the hut while the mother bird watched from the open side. "How will we know if these are First Captain's enemies, Grandmother?" he asked.

Before she could answer, a shout rose outside, and I went quickly to look out, shielding my eyes against the sunset.

A small tribe of strangers was coming up the road along the stream towards Nova Albion. They were led by men in metal clothes that flashed in the sun, like the metal mirror in my uncle's house that had come from First Captain's canoe. Some of them rode on the backs of strange animals. They were warriors, for I saw their weapons—long knives that hung from their belts to their knees, and something else, like a metal pipe, that they handled lovingly as one touches a baby. They were followed by others on foot, some carrying banners, some dragging burdens on carts and sleds. Yet I saw also that Little Gull had spoken truly, for there were women and children and even tiny infants in their band.

Then I saw one man in a long grey robe, the top of whose head was hairless and shiny with sweat. He was holding a long stick in front of him, to which a shorter stick had been joined as a crosspiece. First Captain taught us also to hold that symbol sacred in our ceremonies, but there was something different here, something *wrong*.

"Grandmother," I began. "I must go back at once—"

But she cut my words off. "Tonight I will teach you many things, Red Deer. I will teach you to see, and to hear the truth."

Raising herself on one elbow, she told Little Gull to throw wood on the fire, and when the flames leaped up she instructed me to take powder from her medicine pouch and pour it in a cup of water and give it to him. Then I wrapped him in a blanket and laid him on the sleeping mat at the back of the hut, and soon I could tell from his breathing he was asleep.

The valley outside filled with flooding dark and a crescent moon rose, drawing stars with it like salmon on a fisherman's line. Somewhere in the distance I heard shouts, then laughter which suddenly ceased. Unease crawled over my skin as if I had sat by an anthill, and I wanted only to run to my uncle. But I too could not stand against my grandmother's fierce eyes.

She took out a small pipe, daubed with yellow and black paint on the bowl. She filled it with dried leaves of a plant I did not recognize and lit it from the embers. The smoke filled the hut with fragrance. I watched her face; it seemed small and grey, sharp as a bird's face.

After a while, she opened her eyes and held the pipe out to me. I took it with both hands. She nodded at me, encouraging me to draw in a breath of smoke.

I think I must have known all my life that this moment would come, that I would someday learn the secrets of women's medicine. Only the women of our family had the sight. Now that the moment was here, I was afraid. It was a terrifying gift she would give me then. Once I received it, there would be no turning back. There might not even be room for my own life.

"You don't have a choice, Red Deer," she said to me. "The power chose you a long time ago, as it chooses us all."

But why must *she* choose now, I thought, when so much was happening?

I lifted the pipe to my lips and inhaled the sweet, dark smoke. My nose stung and my throat tightened, but nothing else happened for a moment, and I thought perhaps she was wrong about my being chosen. Then the hut lurched, and outside an owl screeched, and my vision went black.

My inner eyes opened and I saw the grey-robed man with the cross, but above him I now saw four frightening figures swooping down on the backs of eagles. I knew their names: Famine, Pestilence, War, and the pale rider who was Death. A voice said to me, *"There is no time to lose!"* I felt someone touch my hand, and I turned to see Elizabeth Lark Singing in a white deerskin robe trimmed with beads in the fashion of young brides. Her hair was braided, full and red, and her face was as young as mine. Then it seemed as if she were smoke drifting away, dissolving the shape of the young woman

she had been. But before she was gone, she gave me my ceremonial name: Mary.

Mary Red Deer. The name echoed in my head.

I must have fallen down then in a faint, for when I woke again it was early morning, and I was lying on the floor of my grandmother's hut. Little Gull was weeping.

"Don't cry, Little Gull. I'm alive," I said.

"I'm not crying for you, Red Deer!" my brother said indignantly. "I'm crying because Bear-With-One-Ear told me to stay here with you, so I can't go outside to see the strangers!"

The air was filled with the voices of men shouting in a language I had never heard before. I stood up and glanced at my grandmother to ask what to do, but Lark Singing slept soundly.

"If you're awake now, Red Deer," my little brother said hopefully, "perhaps we could go out together?"

"Grandmother," I said, half afraid to disturb her, for she had been so sick.

"She's been asleep a long time," my brother said.

I looked again at Lark Singing, so still on the sleeping mat, and I knew she was dead. Her spirit had flown away over the water just as she had wished. Then I felt very lonely, for who would give us good counsel now? She had made me medicine woman in her place, but I knew how much I still had to learn.

Little Gull clutched at my skirt. "Please hurry, Red Deer!"

I made him help me gather sticks and kindling to make a funeral fire. When the hut and everything in it was burning well, smoke and sparks blowing over Lesser Sea, I took his hand and we stepped away. There was no time to mourn, nor would she have wanted us to. The ceremonies must come later. Now I must tell my uncle of Lark Singing's passing, but I would also let him know he would not be without a medicine woman!

In those days the town spread up from the banks of the little lake between Great Sea and Lesser Sea, to the top of the low hill where Lark Singing's hut was. The other side of the lake was empty, a water meadow where ducks nested and bees browsed among the flowers in summer. I saw at once that the field was not empty now. The strangers were setting up camp, and already bright banners fluttered over their heads, horns blew and bells rang. I saw women tending a cooking fire, and children racing about, their shrill voices coming towards me on the clear air. I heard their words but I could not tell what they said.

Surely, I thought, the smoke-dream could not be right. Men who travelled with their women and infants must come in peace.

"Look! There's our uncle!" Little Gull said.

Bear-With-One-Ear had put on the tall hat of woven grass that Lark Singing had made for him, its colors and patterns more beautiful than those she wove into seed or water baskets. He stood, head bowed and hands clasped before him, as Fog-On-Water asked Sky Father for a blessing, and the other captains stood with him. That done, he moved again towards the strangers, his brothers beside him, the men of the town following, all in their finest deerskin and bear fur and lace collars. I thought how splendid they looked. If I had not grown up with the young men of our town, perhaps my heart would have been moved by them instead of by White Cloud.

But I had arrived too late to give him my news. I must be patient a little longer. Little Gull and I crowded at the back with the women and children.

"And there's Hawk Wing." Little Gull pointed. "How handsome he is!"

My older brother was not tall, but broad-shouldered, strong of limb, with a quantity of gleaming, red-brown curls spilling over his wide forehead. His eyes were blue and merry. He was bold enough when needed, and quick to take action. It was said of him that he carried the spirit of First Captain as well as the ceremonial name. Yet I knew that his impulsive ways did not always please Bear-With-One-Ear.

A family of ducks scurried hastily away as my uncles walked to this meeting, and the strangers fell silent.

I thought of the stories of the coming of the Big Canoes to the shore of Great Sea, and the day my ancestors first saw First Captain. Everyone had put on their finest clothes and carried gifts, and First Captain too gave gifts, and there was feasting and speeches and singing. Even though the Big Canoes had come out of the sunset, we understood First Captain's home was far away in the direction of sunrise. He told us he was on a journey longer than we could imagine and needed to rest and repair the Big Canoes. Many good things happened between First Captain and the Miwok before the Big Canoes rode out on Great Sea again. Even then some of his men stayed among us because they had taken wives. As the years went by they taught us skills of planting and harvesting, building our town and governing it. This is why babies with light skin and eyes the color of sky or water are born so often among the Miwok, though red hair comes in our family alone.

Filled with these thoughts, I wondered, might not these strangers bring good gifts as First Captain had done? Yet the darkness that had touched me with Lark Singing's death and my first smoke-dream stole the joy from the scene, and I felt cold in the sunlight. We must be cautious, not giving our trust too quickly. I crept closer to my uncles so I could hear what was said, and perhaps find a moment to whisper a warning.

The man with the ring of black hair surrounding his sweat-glazed crown and the shining one who had ridden in front stood apart from their group as Bear-With-One-Ear approached. The children hushed. Not even the larks sang in the sky then, and the breeze fell still.

My uncle raised his right hand to show he carried no weapon. "We greet you in peace, Friends. I am called John Bear-With-One-Ear. Tell us now where you come from and what is your purpose in coming."

The strangers looked at each other at that, and one of them said something I did not understand in a tongue that seemed to my ears to hiss and huff and slide about unpleasantly. One small, very dark man put a hand to his side where I saw a long knife like the one over the hearth that had belonged to First Captain himself.

Fog-On-Water, who was standing beside Bear-With-One-Ear, said quickly, "Don't trust these men! Remember what was taught!"

Bear-With-One-Ear turned a little towards him. "*'We are English, who are well disposed if there be no cause to the contrary,'*" he said mildly.

Though the language was that of First Captain and not of the Miwok, there was no child who had not learned the words by heart and what they meant. It was the rule by which we lived.

"Finish the saying, Brother!" Fog-On-Water urged.

I wanted to yell out to him that he *must* remember what came next! But Bear-With-One-Ear shook his head, his expression mild. "We are gentlemen, Brother, with a gentleman's honor."

In the silence that followed I could hear Little Gull's rasping breath, the lap of water on the shore, the soft beating of a butterfly's wings over my head. The strangers conferred in low tones.

Then there was a stir among them, and a young man about my own age stepped forward. My heart thundered in my breast and I thought I would faint again as I had after the smoke-dream. The young man wore a long robe like the stranger who carried the cross, so stained and dirty I could not tell its right color, yet his skin was dark and he wore his hair in the fashion of the southerners. And when he spoke he used the language of the Chumash tribe, which we understood with difficulty.

It could not be!

But it was White Cloud.

"God be with you," he said. "May the blood of Jesus Christ redeem you from your sins!"

Fog-On-Water growled in his throat. "What did I tell you?"

"I am called Angelito," White Cloud said.

"What kind of name is that?" Hawk Wing muttered.

"My masters here—" White Cloud hesitated at that, for he knew The People recognized no masters. He pronounced more strange names: "*Lieutenant Moraga* and *Fra Palou* come to bring God's forgiveness to the heathen. We come in peace if you will accept the word of God. If not . . ."

White Cloud glanced quickly at the tall man he had identified as Lieutenant Moraga.

My thoughts whirled. I remembered walking with him along the hilltops. I remembered grey clouds blowing out on Great Sea, the harsh cry of gulls swooping through the sky, the faint spout of whales. I remembered the passion in his voice when he promised to return to me. I remembered how I had called upon Sky Father to give me my lover's seed that I might bear his children. I was so glad to see him again! And yet—what was he doing here with these strangers the smoke-dream had warned about?

"We know already of Sky Father," Fog-On-Water said with dignity, but under his words I could feel his anger rising. "Do you think—"

Bear-With-One-Ear put a hand on his brother's arm, silencing him. "If not?"

White Cloud said something. Lieutenant Moraga's fingers played over the handle of his own long knife, and his eyes glittered under heavy lids. There came a rustling as of impatience from among the warriors lined up behind him. The other stranger, who wore the grey robe and was called Fra Palou, spoke in a low voice to White Cloud, who bent his head reverently towards the man.

Then White Cloud turned to us again, translating. "We bring many gifts of beads and blankets and food. And the blessed salvation of God's love to all who will accept it."

My heart became a cold lump of clay.

"This makes my heart rejoice," Bear-With-One-Ear, the peacemaker, said. "Welcome, friends who also know of Sky Father! We'll light cooking fires and set fish to bake. We'll feast together this night."

White Cloud translated this, and I saw the strangers' faces soften into smiles, rigid muscles relaxed. Men wandered away from the gathering.

"'Beads and blankets'?" Grey Seal wondered.

I touched my uncle's sleeve.

"What is it, Red Deer?" he asked kindly, his expression showing his satisfaction.

"Lark Singing is dead, Uncle! But before she died she made me—"

"What?" He stared at me, shock warring with the relief that had been in his face a moment ago.

"She died. I—I made the funeral pyre. I didn't think you had time right now."

"By what authority did you make this decision, Red Deer?"

His voice was calm, but I could hear anger in it, and I knew I must seize my own power at once or never have any in the tribe.

"I'm not a child anymore, Uncle. I'm a medicine woman. And I have warnings to give!"

All the uncles were staring at me, especially Fog-On-Water, who had never liked me. But Bear-With-One-Ear said, "I'm very glad to hear we won't be without counsel, Red Deer!"

Grey Seal laughed.

"I didn't mean—"

"We must mark Lark Singing's passing properly. But we'll talk about this later."

"That may be too late, Uncle! I've seen—"

"Our guests are waiting for a feast."

He turned away, deep in conversation with Fog-On-Water.

Little Gull tugged my arm. "That man who spoke for the strangers. He's looking at you, Red Deer!"

But I had failed my first task, and I could not bring myself to greet White Cloud.

> "I have taken that in hand that I know not in the world how to go through withal. It passeth my capacity. It hath even bereaved me of my wits to think on it."

"Fish," White Cloud said to me later as we sat in shadow at the edge of the feast. "Priests save the miserable creature for Lent or Friday penance!"

We had naturally come into each other's company,

neither of us being important enough to sit with the captains after the first exchanges of pleasantries were over and the services of a translator were no longer needed, since the words both sides spoke no longer contained much of importance. My heart was pounding against my ribs. Something was different, something had changed. I felt full of dread.

"Tell me again, White Cloud," I said. "What're you doing in the company of these men? Why didn't you tell me of them before?"

"First of all," he said, "my name here is Angelito. Remember that. And there was nothing to tell before."

I thought about that. Among the adult Miwok too it was common to have a ceremonial name, just as my grandmother had given me mine, though we did not use it in everyday speech. So why did he turn his face away so I could not see his eyes?

"And now?" I asked, when he had not said anything for a while.

"Don't make a fuss over trifles," he said. "Be happy we're together again, as I promised."

Though my mind flooded with doubt, my heart was happy to have me sit with him and listen to him explain the strangers. There were not many young men I could talk to with such pleasure. When a woman has grown up with her suitors, seen them as little boys, their hands dirty, noses unwiped, children who cannot yet control their bladders, it is hard to feel excitement in their presence. White Cloud—Angelito—whatever he wanted to be called—moved me in ways I had not known before.

"I'm still hungry," he complained after a while.

"Here's bread," Little Gull said. He had eaten his fill of clams and abalone and the silver fish that come up on the beach by moonlight to lay their eggs at this time of year. Now he was stuffing berry pies and honey cakes into his mouth so that I was afraid he would soon be sick.

The noise was growing steadily as the feast ended. The strangers sat on one side of the fire and the Miwok sat on the other. There was much gesturing and pointing and making faces from both groups, and both laughed a great deal and shouted out when a meaning jumped the barrier of language from one to the other. Bear-With-One-Ear had given orders that there be no shortage of cider for the feast, even though we seemed very nearly in danger of exhausting last season's apple harvest. When the eating was done, the tobacco pipes were passed around.

Then the one called Lieutenant Moraga yelled something, and a man brought out a small wooden barrel from which he poured a liquid the color of pollen, and this he shared out both sides of the fire. It seemed the oftener this liquid went round the circle, the louder grew their voices, and the loudest ones belonged to my uncles, Bear-With-One-Ear, Grey Seal, and Black Otter. They shouted and laughed and their faces were fiery red. Once, when the barrel came our way, Angelito offered me some. I tasted it—I remember still how it burned my tongue!—then I pushed it away. First Captain taught us to ferment the apples, and that was good, but this was liquid flame and dangerous.

"Sometimes we eat other things besides fish. Little birds, or small game," Little Gull said. "What do you eat?"

I tugged playfully at his hair. A small boy's conversation is all out of time with that of his elders.

"Meat, of course!" Angelito said. "Buffalo or oxen. Or a tasty water fowl. You have plenty of them, all over the place. Why didn't your Chiefs serve them?"

"We never eat their flesh, only the eggs," I explained.

"You wouldn't kill the ducks?" Little Gull asked anxiously, and I hugged him to me.

Angelito's laughter, bubbling out like a spring of pure water, melted my heart. "Why not?"

"Because we honor First Captain," Little Gull said. He glanced at me to see if he had given the right answer, and I smiled at him.

But already the power my grandmother had passed to me began to shape my destiny, in spite of the wishes of my heart. I said, "Forgive me, Angelito, but I must ask again, and you must answer me this time. Why do you follow these strangers?"

"They aren't strangers to me," he said. "Have you heard of Junipero Serra? No, I suppose not. The good news has only just come to your poor towns! Fra Serra —a priest, like Fra Palou here—took me in when my father died, and taught me his language."

"'Priest,'" I said. "Shaman, do you mean?"

Angelito frowned. "Well, perhaps. But—different! It's Serra who's building all the missions up and down the shores of Great Sea. He sent me to assist de Anza on his quest—that was when I first saw you—and now I guide Moraga and Palou."

"What's a mission?" Little Gull asked.

"A place the good fathers build where The People can live and learn about the Lord Jesus Christ."

"Why is this good?" I asked. "Don't we have homes already?"

"Of course it's good!" Angelito said, and I heard irritation in his voice.

Then I asked, "And your mother, Angelito. What about her?"

Angelito hesitated. "She accepted the mercy of God." His right hand made an odd fluttering movement over his chest. "Now the Chumash live in the mission Fra Serra built, in the valley of the bears."

"And do you like it with the bears?" Little Gull asked. "What games do you play?"

Angelito made a face. "No time to play! Too much work to do. And prayer! A lot of that, to find salvation."

His words made little sense to me. First Captain taught us to pray, too. But among all The People, Miwok and Chumash and others up and down the shores of Great Sea, only shamans undertook a quest to find their spirit voices.

"But why have so many come on this quest?"

Angelito wiped fish grease off his fingers in the dust. "Fra Serra says Saint Francis needs his mission here. And de Anza thinks this inland sea will make a fine harbor for the tall canoes."

Confusion filled me then. Angelito had spoken the

name of First Captain. Could it be that these strangers revered First Captain? How fine that would be!

"Angelito, that name—Francis. Our First Captain was named Francis. What does this mean?"

He stared at me, frowning. "You're a strange woman, Red Deer. Yes, and the Miwok are different from The People to the south! I heard Lieutenant Moraga tell Fra Palou, such a pattern your square fields and hedges make—and the houses!—he hasn't seen the like since he visited England in his youth!"

England! The old people tell stories of their ancestors, First Captain's men who stayed behind, and the land they came from, so far away in the direction of sunrise.

"What do you know about England?" I asked, eager for fresh information.

"Not much. Only what I overhear. Some men from England may be building somewhere to the east—a long, long way from here, on the sunrise coast! It doesn't worry the holy fathers."

He knew about the people First Captain had come from! It seemed like a dream to be hearing about them. I was full of questions, but Angelito knew little more than I myself. I took a morsel of honey cake and thought about this. Something bothered me, like getting a thorn stuck in a tender part of the foot. I wanted so much to believe all was well. Yet I was still uneasy in my mind. There was a word I could not remember.

"This Fra Serra you speak of," I said. "He comes from the land south of the Chumash?"

"Holy Virgin, Mother of God!" Angelito did not look up from the dust, where his fingers were very busy. "How little you know!"

"You must promise not to harm the ducks," Little Gull said sleepily.

Angelito laughed. "Go to bed, little bird lover!"

Little Gull wandered away, rubbing his eyes.

My heart won its struggle against my mind, and I leaned over and kissed Angelito on the cheek. He held me close, his lips against my hair, and both of us paid little attention to the feast.

"Our enemies are many but our Protector commandeth the whole world."

I awoke much later alone, screaming from a frightening dream.

The feasting had gone far into the night until there was no more wood to burn and no man who could stand upright long enough to fetch more. It seemed that the strangers' yellow drink softened the bones of the legs. Then Angelito and I lay down together in the darkness under the oak trees and became one. It was like fire and honey, violent as a storm on Great Sea and delicate as apple blossom. I gave up my soul to Angelito, and he his to me. As blood thundered through my veins I thought it must be possible to serve both love and the power that had chosen me, for I did not see how I could ever give up my love.

In the next room, I could hear Bear-With-One-Ear snoring. Even as the dream let go of my heart, I thought that now I was a medicine woman, I could not go on living in my uncle's house. I must soon build one for myself of oak wood and baked river mud colored white, with a thatched roof of tule reeds. Perhaps I would take Little Gull with me. For a while longer he could live with a woman. Then he must go to Hawk Wing's house to learn how to be a man.

At that, I realized Little Gull was not asleep on his mat beside me.

I should have guessed he would become sick from eating so much! As I knew that, I also knew the sight had given me my answer in a dream. Death had entered our town, and I had remembered its name.

I scrambled up from the mat, my hands shaking with fear.

My brother was outside his house, smoking a pipe, moonlight cloaking his bare shoulders like finest deerskin.

"Francis Hawk Wing!" I cried. "We're surrounded by enemies!"

He looked up, his expression ugly in the moonlight. "I saw you kiss the shaman's slave tonight. Have you come from his bed?"

I took in a quick gasp of cold night air. Then I raised my fist and hit my brother's cheek with all my strength. His hand flew up to touch the place, but he said nothing.

"Be silent, fool! Little Gull's gone. And I know the name of these strangers. They're Spaniards."

He stared at me. "First Captain fought Spaniards on land and sea! Burnt their ships. Took their treasure. Remember what he wrote? 'There was never anything that pleased me better than seeing the enemy flying with a southerly wind to the northwards!' "

"Yes, but do you know why he hated them?"

"The *papa*—and the lies he taught about Sky Father."

"More than that, Hawk Wing," I said. "Much more! Remember the stories from the long voyage of the Big Canoes?"

"He hated them for their cruelty to The People. He said every man had a right to be free, not a slave." Then he frowned. "How do you know this?"

"It came to me in a dream."

"A dream?" My brother's expression was incredulous. "Why should I take notice of such nonsense?"

"Because Lark Singing taught me to *see* before she died! I am the medicine woman of the tribe now. I tried to tell this to Bear-With-One-Ear— But we're wasting time!"

He gazed at me a moment longer while he thought it over. Then he jumped to his feet, his hand reaching for the crossbow which lay beside him. Hawk Wing ran fast, but I flew faster. Through the sleeping town we raced, to the place I had seen in my dream. Fires flickered where guards kept watch in the Spaniards' camp.

On the trampled grass where the feast had been held we found Little Gull, a clutch of duck feathers in his hand. His skull had been split open. Blood soaked into the earth around him.

I fell down on his small body, wailing. "Why? Why?"

Hawk Wing dragged me up again. "Later we'll find out why! Now we must avenge this Spanish killing!"

From across the lake, where the grey-robed priest camped under the oaks, came the smell of roasting flesh, and I gagged. Too much was happening, too quickly.

Inside my head, the voice of Elizabeth Lark Singing said, "*My time is over. Yours is coming.*"

No! I said to the vision. I wanted only to live with my lover and raise children on the shores of Great Sea.

"What can we do?" I cried. "We're a peaceful people. We're not ready for war!"

Hawk Wing grabbed me by the arms and thrust his face close to mine. It was mottled red with his anger. "Do you remember the teaching First Captain gave us?"

"Yes." I looked down at Little Gull's small body. "But we don't know how to fight an enemy like this."

"I know how to fight Spaniards," Hawk Wing said. "First Captain taught that as the lore of men. He warned us one day Spaniards would come up the coast, even to our peaceful land, and we must be ready. This is why young men spend so much time learning the skills of killing that we need. And we've spread this teaching to the men of all the tribes around Lesser Sea. We're ready!"

"Do you think arrows will suffice against monsters who kill children?" I asked scornfully. "For that's all you have. Men who wear metal clothes will fight with stranger weapons than you can dream of!"

At that Hawk Wing smiled. "You think so because you're a woman! That long metal stick they carry? That's an arquebus. Oh, better perhaps than the two First Captain left with us so long ago. I can't make one, but I know how a gun works, and if I get one from the Spaniards I'll use it against them! But, tell me, Red Deer. Do you truly know how to *see*? How to tell me where the advantage lies when I make war? Can you take Lark Singing's place? Will you do that?"

No one could take Lark Singing's place. I wept again, for Little Gull, for our people in the terrible days that the sight showed me would come, for the blood that would flow before we were rid of our enemies. And I wept for myself with the heavy burden of sight.

He was impatient with my tears. He shook me hard. "Well? Give me an answer!"

"I'll do it."

"Good." He released my arms. "Then I'll kill this Moraga before he knows what's happened! With him dead, the Spaniards—"

"No!" I said sharply. "You don't know as much as you think about these enemies. First you must kill their shaman, Palou."

"Red Deer—"

"I have *seen* this, Hawk Wing! Listen to what I say. And when that's done, seek south for the shaman called Junipero Serra, and kill him too! Serra is the *papa*'s wolf that would devour us as First Captain warned."

"I'll gather the men," my brother said. "We're ready. We'll kill all who travel under the Spaniards' banner!"

"Hawk Wing," I said as he turned to leave.

"Yes?"

"Spare Angelito."

"He's one of them!"

"Leave him for me."

> "Done by English who are well disposed if there be no cause to the contrary. If there be cause, we will be devils rather than men."

Thus began the years of blood and fire that I had seen in the smoke-dream in my grandmother's hut. My memory quails before the task of retelling the death and the suffering of the Miwok during those years.

(I tell it now only that you will understand that sometimes evil things must be done in order for good to come of them.)

The first arrow my brother shot took the priest Palou, and the second, the warrior Moraga. Then I learned the wisdom of my uncle Black Otter's remark, for we had the enemy surrounded. But even so, the Spaniards were not easily killed, though there were few of them. They fought like demons. The battle lasted three days and many of our own died too. I remember Bear-With-One-Ear was killed in that first battle, for he was old and slow-moving, and Black Otter with him. And when Hawk Wing and his warriors had finished in the river meadow outside our town, the dead lay in rows under the sun, their corpses crawling with flies, for there were too many to cremate all at once.

Angelito came to me, on the second day of the battle, begging shelter. I took him into the house that had been my uncle's but was mine now, and I concealed him from my brother's warriors, hiding him under the blankets on my own bed. First Captain had told us Spaniards were our enemies, but I thought that The People must defend each other. Angelito did not argue when I gave him back his own name. I held him close to my breast while Death stalked outside with his fellow riders, Famine, Pestilence and War. In spite of the danger outside, we lay in each other's arms and were happy. We spoke of children we would have together, how the rivers of our blood would run together and create a tribe that would stand proudly against all enemies. Miwok, Chumash, English—no mere Spaniard could frighten us!

When the battle was over at last and there was time to mourn the dead, I wrapped Little Gull's body in his blanket and laid him on the funeral platform. I took First Captain's knife that had hung over the hearth to cut wood for the fire, and White Cloud went with me. It was a hot day, the valleys clotted with the odor of death, the sky full of smoke from the funeral fires.

"Little bird lover, I tried to warn you," White Cloud said, laying pine branches on my brother's body. "This wouldn't have happened if you'd stayed in bed."

Something stirred in me then, like a blindworm in the cold earth. I felt my destiny rising to confront me as I looked at my lover. "Why do you say that?"

"Because he tried to save a duck Lieutenant Moraga wanted. I told you these Spaniards were meat-eaters." Then he laughed his easy laugh. "You should have served more than fish at your feast!"

"You saw this?" I said slowly. *No!* I said in my mind, *No! I will not accept this hard destiny!*

He nodded. "I had just gone back to camp."

"And did nothing?"

He gazed at me. "What could I do, Red Deer? I was only a priest's servant!" He turned back to heap more wood on the pyre.

Now I saw what it was First Captain had really warned us of. The real danger lay within us if we forgot ourselves, if we became slaves, smiling though we were bound. Even a man like White Cloud—so beautiful! so fine!—could become a slave in his heart.

I knew immediately what I must do, yet I fought it. The path of my life forked here, but I did not want to choose! *Why can I not have both?* I cried in my pain. *What meaning is there in this?* Once the power has taken a woman, her life is straight and clear, but very hard. And there is no going back.

So I closed my heart against my lover, and I filled my mind with the teachings of First Captain. While White Cloud's back was still turned I drew out First Captain's knife. My hand trembled so much I needed the other to steady it, but I stuck the knife deep into his ribs.

He gave a great, ragged gasp and half turned to me, dragging the knife out of my hands. "Red Deer!"

"You named yourself correctly, Angelito," I said. "You became one of them."

A stain as scarlet as the berries Little Gull had been picking when he first saw this man spread over his back where the knife still protruded.

"For the love of God—"

"For the love of The People, Angelito."

Blood bubbled at the corner of his mouth. He stared at me, his eyes already filming over. He stumbled, holding out his arms to me to steady him.

I stepped back and let him fall. *Enemy! Enemy!* I said over and over in my mind so that I would not cry.

I too could become a devil when there was cause.

After a few days, Hawk Wing gathered men from many tribes along the coast of Great Sea and the inland valleys all around Lesser Sea and at my urging led them south to find Junipero Serra. Grey Seal went south with my brother, but Fog-On-Water remained here to hold the tribes together when they were gone, teaching them to trust no Spaniard, nor show mercy to grey-robed priests who would have given them none. My brother's warriors found Serra a year later, with a party of Spaniards at the big mission he had built on the large bay where seals and sea otters played in the kelp and The People foraged for abalone. I had seen him there in a smoke-dream.

I was still in mourning for my uncles and for Little Gull, and I was nursing the infant when they brought Serra back to our town. I was surprised to see how small he was, and how frail. He walked with a limp, his shoulders bowed under the hot sun. I had thought this wolf must be a giant to have such power to harm us. It did not seem possible that such a weak man could create such havoc. But the sight showed me again that Suffering and Death would follow him wherever he went among The People, and I felt no pity for him. The power of an evil shaman is such that he can make himself appear harmless, like a coiled snake waiting to strike. I knew he was the one who was truly guilty of my lover's death, for it was his teaching that had corrupted White Cloud so that I had been forced to kill him.

"See," I said to the infant. "This is your father's murderer!"

But it did not help the pain.

We kept little Serra for a while in a hut, because Fog-On-Water said we should see if these Spaniards would trade for him, to get him back. My uncle sent a message to the mission in the valley of the bears where White Cloud had been born, but there was no answer. We began to see that although the Spaniards were wolves, the pack might be small or too far from the den to have power if we attacked them. We knew now that we could win.

So when the apples ripened on the trees and the breeze off the Inland Sea cooled the evenings, I made Hawk Wing kill Serra too. The Miwok rejoiced with a feast. But I held my infant close to my breast and mourned for White Cloud in secret in my house.

Even that was not the end of it. All that year and the next and the one after Spaniards came riding into Nova Albion with guns. But we had a few of the guns we had taken from Moraga's men in that first battle, though we soon ran out of powder for them.

I was wrong. The crossbow is strong and efficient, and arrows can kill as well as guns. And when that was not enough, I built fire and tipped the arrows with flame, and gave them to my brother to shoot. Our warriors followed up each flight of arrows, racing yipping and yelping like coyotes into the midst of the Spaniards, who did not know whether to beat out the fires or beat off our warriors. So we held them off.

My brother was the boldest of the warriors, merry in the face of every danger, taking risks that made lesser men tremble, always attacking the fiercest of the enemy, never satisfied until he had killed the leader with his own hands. The Miwok said of him that he was First Captain himself, come back to us in our time of need.

One day Hawk Wing too was felled by the guns and lay on the ground, half his stomach gone. It took him a long time to die, and little I knew to ease the pain. But by then we had taken many of these weapons from the bodies of our enemies, and even the young women had learned how to use them. The Spaniards were already in flight when I laid my brother on his funeral pyre.

"There must be a beginning of any great matter, but the continuing unto the end until it be thoroughly finished yields the true glory."

Nova Albion, 1840

I tell this long tale of killing and being killed that you who have never known anything but peace should understand what it is you have dreamed this night.

Nova Albion is free from the threat of its enemies. Friendship and trust have spread among The People of

a hundred towns around Lesser Sea. We have not forgotten to be vigilant, but until this night, you have known nothing of war or bloodshed. We have lived in peace under the laws First Captain gave us, showing friendship to all who are friends to us, and punishing those who would harm us. Each year that passes brings more of The People up and down the coast and far inland to accept our laws, for they are just and wise. Our houses rise up the hills; our harvests prosper; our canoes sail far out over Great Sea for fish and across Lesser Sea to trade with our neighbors. Nova Albion thrives! And "Spaniard" has become only a name to make naughty children behave.

Look in this mirror. Do you see how the child gives way now to the young woman? I will braid your beautiful red hair while we talk of the vision the smoke gave you. Sky Father answered my prayer, though not as I had expected. Many bloodlines run in your veins, and you will need the wisdom of all of them.

That evil men should once again lust after our land is not surprising. This time they come from the east, but what of that? The descendants of the once-proud Spaniards in the south are weak and disorganized; we have nothing to fear from them! And though this metal you saw puzzles me—yellow as the sun, you say?—even that perhaps I have seen in flecks of sand on the beach at low tide by the river's mouth.

Travellers carry tales of strife and bloodshed across a great land that stretches from sunset to sunrise. Everywhere outside the boundaries of Nova Albion people fight to protect their land from invaders. They are not as strong as we are. Since those days I have spoken of, we built more smoke towers across the mountains and deserts to our east so we might be warned when our enemies come. For, as First Captain taught, he whose eyes be open to the horizon shall not be taken unaware by storm.

I have outlived my daughter and I am glad my time is over and yours coming. The power has chosen you, and perhaps like me you will be called upon to sacrifice your desires and dreams. Yet I have learned something. Life itself is the answer, and a destiny larger than our petty wills drives us on, like the Big Canoes crossing Great Sea. We do what we do because of that.

I do not doubt there will be trouble. The smoke-dream does not lie. Your dream tells me we will continue to the end and take the victory once again.

Still, I am puzzled. This new pack of wolves, you say, speaks the tongue of First Captain. For his sake, we will hold our fire until we determine whether they be honorable men, and perhaps we shall make a treaty among equals. Have no fear. First Captain taught us well that though our enemies be many, yet we shall defeat them if there be cause. We shall remain free!

Yet I wonder what he would think if we have to kill English? ✦

Ready . . . Aim . . . Write!

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As much as we enjoy reading compliments, we're even more interested in criticism—so if you have a negative reaction to something about this magazine, don't keep it to yourself. Before we can fix a problem, we have to be told that it *is* a problem.

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Chasing the Dragon, Tibet

Robert Frazier

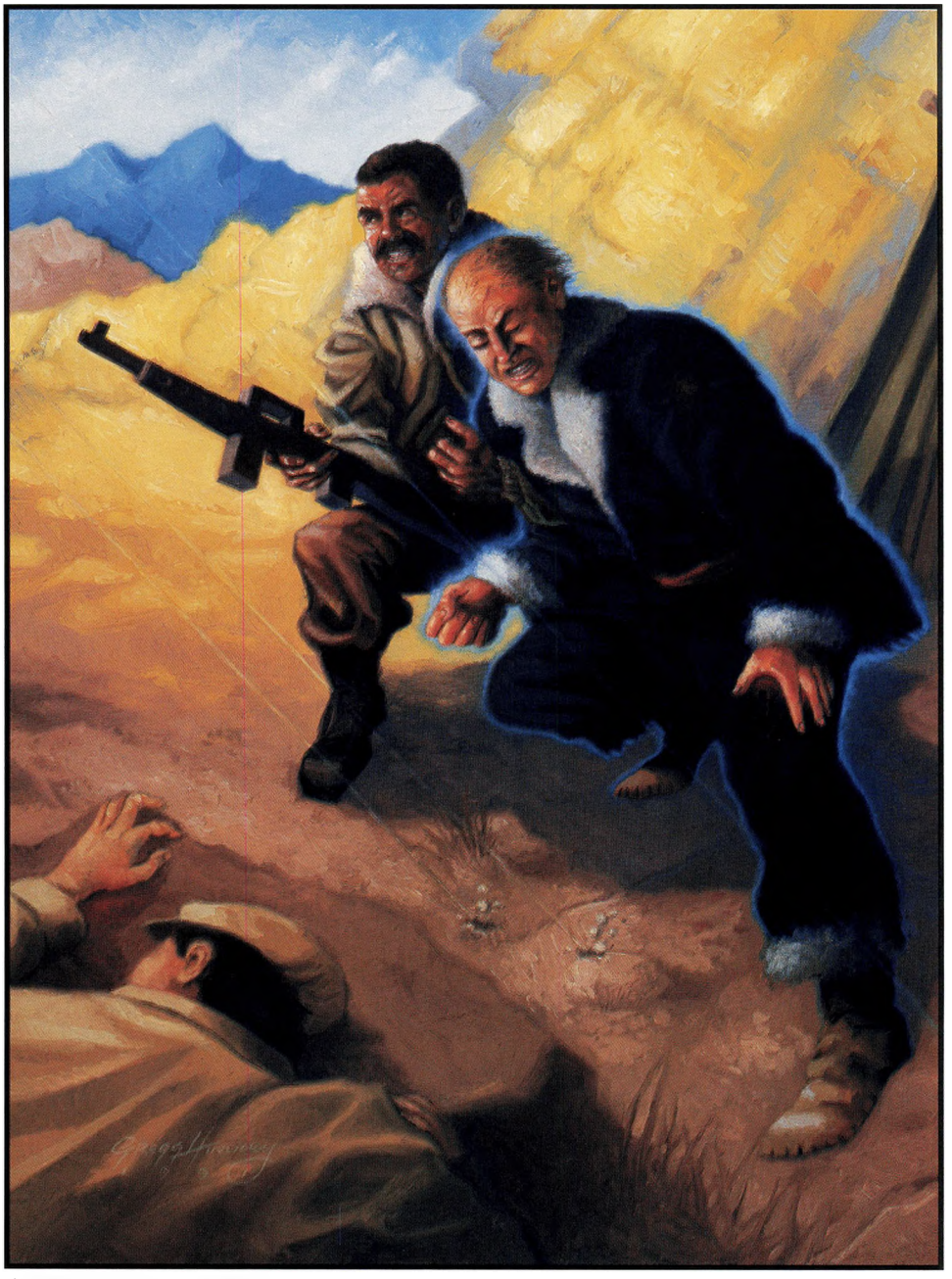

Illustration by Gregg Hinlicky

In 2006, late in his career, Lonnie Sharp wrote a stringer article for United Press International that opened:

I didn't know then how true the rumor was, but, as a war correspondent, I'd heard it from the stiffs in the field.

A gunnery sergeant in Saudi Arabia suffered intense dreams of troop movements and firefights and battles, and he gathered a power from these visions, a kind of familiarity with his future that saved many a squad and wasted many an Iraqi raider. A fisherman's kid from the Louisiana bayou was there when the gunny died, when his luck failed him, and the gunny gifted his sight to the

kid—who absorbed it by a trick of voodoo, the rumors said.

The kid, Eli Emmons, used the gift as an assassin on recon duty for Special Forces. "Scud" Emmons was the soldier every vet talked about, but most, like myself, had never laid eyes on him.

Lonnie knew only of Emmons's war legend. No interviews or articles existed. Emmons—it seemed—lost this uncanny gift after the Gulf War, drifted about the major cities of Asia, and disappeared somewhere into the Himalayas. In order to complete the story, which obsessed Lonnie as the breakthrough piece that he had let get away as a war correspondent, he tracked Emmons to China's mountainous West, where Emmons repaired helicopters and jeeps used in the nearly inaccessible region about Anye Machin. He lived among the Goloks of the Ice Mountain Commune on the emerald pastures skirting the lofty mountain range.

Lonnie flew into the Machin region from Radji Gompa in late May of 1994, the first black visitor allowed into China when its borders reopened, yet again, after their "black year" of rebellion. He started when the snow began to melt and before the spring monsoons turned the barren passes into glaciers of mud, and though his Tibetan guide assured him of a swift trip by chopper, the guide had Golok kinsmen in the Yellow River region: one third tundra desert, one third green expanse of pasture, one third mountain grazed by shrinking herds of gazelles, wild asses and musk deer. They landed at several tribal stops along the way, mostly at windswept shrines or loose hamlets of black tents that sold barreled fuel and yak burgers.

The Goloks possessed a complexion of smoky bronze, with hair and eyes black as flint. The men wore black, fleece-lined coats with sleeves that hung a foot past their hands, though often the right side was not worn, but tucked back to allow free movement with at least one arm. Red sashes were tied at the waist. Ancient AK-47s with full banana clips hung casually on their shoulders. Hats were traditionally grey and brimmed, though one of the youngest boys wore an oversized green Chinese military hat, either as a lark, or out of some allegiance to the red star that seeded into the youngest generation. Their hands, even the children's hands, were as weathered as the frost-broken tundra about them.

Lonnie found the women, with their long, finely braided black hair, particularly compelling. They wore quilted dresses and hardly smiled, but showed the ends of their tongues as greetings. The bronze skin looked smoother, softer in temper. Their wide faces possessed a childlike grace, and their dark eyes often brimmed with uncontained passion. They could be quiet, mysterious, gentle.

During their stop at Datsu, a hilltop Buddhist shrine surrounded by poles strung with shreds of red and white cloth, the harsher realities of the beautiful highlands became clear to Lonnie. He circumambulated the shrine with his insistent guide and stared up at the cobalt-blue shadows draping the ice of Anye Machin itself, the second highest peak in the world; and he discovered the head of a freshly slaughtered snow leopard piled among the broken tablets and sacred rocks. Chinese soldiers patrolled these parts, at times confiscating weapons from the most unruly nomads, but its natives still lived as they had since the seventh century of Tibet . . . as fierce warriors, especially with the Chinese taunting them, and sometimes threatening their women. His pilot drew a long knife, held it before Lonnie's face for a nervous moment, then cut a lock of Lonnie's wiry hair to mix with his own and a tuft of the leopard's. The man tied the talisman with the other offerings that flapped in the wind. Their final leg would be a success, he said.

Local scuttlebutt—bought from a game warden back in Radji Gompa for three thousand yuan—claimed that Emmons had gone native, that he wouldn't talk with outsiders like Lonnie about mechanics or helicopters or the war he left behind. After a day of work, Emmons would drink a few mugs of beer at a, quote, nearby tourist hotel and return to his tent in the steep ravines. Lonnie decided the hotel was his best shot, so he walked there as soon as his ride set down, planning to buy a round and let his nerves cool while he waited for a four o'clock look at the legendary vet.

A few stone huts with thatched roofs surrounded a tiny monastery, or actually its ruin reworked into the hotel. A pointed stupa had been incorporated into the front, and the walls were partly rebuilt from old mani stones carved with prayers. Burly, dressed in a green parka, Lonnie squeezed inside and took a booth with his back against the wall, a habit adopted by most previous travelers he'd interviewed. The tiny room, it appeared, was filled with local traders trying to bribe a Chinese official with gifts, but an occasional tribesman, wary and sporting his rifle, elbowed his way through the smoke-filled room to speak with a trader. Lonnie ordered rice beer from a raven-haired Golok with a loose Indian sarong and a Western attitude. Unlike the tribeswomen he'd met, she regarded his chocolate skin and wristwatch with cold disdain; yet he'd earned a few scars and some lean gristle reporting from the front lines in Third World countries, and this she seemed to approve of. With the cup to his lips, he spotted Emmons at the long bar before a long wall slit that for Tibetans must have been a picture window.

Even from the back, I sensed that Emmons was quick and powerful. The bald man's shoulders rounded with muscles under his Golok robe, and his hands, visible as he drank, looked as if they'd been broken and rebroken into gnarled claws. Emmons stared calmly out the small window while others avoided sitting within three stools of his position at the center of the bar. An almost visible tension haloed Emmons, a tension that called to me. I doubted that I'd ever been in the presence of a deadlier man, so much so that he felt no need to protect his backside as I had.

Lonnie abandoned his beer at the booth and sat beside Emmons's right elbow to order a new one from a bar-

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tender, who served it from the kegs to their left. This gave Lonnie a chance to inspect Emmons further. A scar puckered across the man's sunburnt forehead, and he bunched his eyebrows and huddled over his mug like an eagle protecting its brood. Tension not only clung to Emmons, it radiated from a reactor glowing deep in his core.

"About time you got your ass over here," Emmons said.

Lonnie's jaw dropped an inch. "What?"

"Don't play dumb bastard with me. You're the vet who's looking for another vet, right?"

"Yes." Lonnie swallowed, trying to compose himself. "I'm not here to hassle you, though."

Emmons laughed, spewing a mouthful of beer over the bar. "Hassle me. Shit! Nobody hassles me. Don't rub yourself raw over that one."

Lonnie felt a bubble burst in his chest; he relaxed. At least Emmons had a sense of humor.

"I suppose not," Lonnie said. "Truth is, I want an exclusive interview with Scud Emmons. I don't care what it takes."

"It takes balls, that's for sure. Plus paying your dues." He gave Lonnie a long appraisal. "I guess you're solid on both counts."

Lonnie covered his surprise. "Cheers," he said as he offered his mug for a toast.

Emmons frowned and finished his beer with one gulp instead. "Let's go somewhere, grunt. This place is lousy for talking."

Lonnie sucked his mug dry.

Outside, the thin air rifled their hair and blew cold over the treeless plains speckled with herds of sheep. It braced Lonnie like a jigger of pure grain alcohol, stinging his throat as he breathed. Ten minutes in this wind, and he'd be a popsicle. Emmons tightened his collar and motioned Lonnie to walk. They passed horses tied all along the town's only street, and turned the corner of a rockpile shrine to a battered yellow Land Rover parked on the side of a dirt trail leading into the steep hills. The hood was badly sprung. A line of rusted bullet holes stitched the fender and rear bumper.

"Hey, isn't worth much, but it reacts fine over the rock. And it took a hefty bribe to get it here."

"Do you really need it?"

He motioned back toward the tiny town with his hand. "I'm not a horseman. When you're in, slam the hatch or it pops."

Once they were inside, Emmons turned it over. The engine growled. The heater rattled. He pushed the stick into gear and tore from the shoulder along the trail, kicking gravel behind them. Soon they had been traveling in silence for three or four miles behind a herder pushing sheep and thick-horned yaks along the stony trail. Even a musk deer, a small tame one, kept pace behind the herder as his horse moved lazily over the rising, narrow trail. Emmons showed no signs of impatience. There was noplace else to go for either of them. The trail cut into a steep slope, and when Lonnie looked out his side window, he now saw a three-hundred-foot drop. To the west, the sun dropped low over the jagged Tibetan plateau, and Emmons turned on the headlights to penetrate the black shadows that knifed across the road. A coppery glow outlined the edgy slopes where unworn stone poked like great broken bones through the thin flesh of soil and grass.

Emmons said at last, "You're watching them, right?"

"Watching what?" Lonnie asked. Emmons jolted him from a spell cast by the hyperreal definitions of the immense land outside the windshield. Though the sun had set, the towering hills seemed alive with light.

"The aureoles, damn it! They glow on everything around here. Real mystic stuff. Like they teach in the lamaseries. Most people see them only at times like these."

"I'm most people, then," said Lonnie.

"No, sir. You'll see more. Plenty more."

Lonnie shook his head to clear the effects of the beer. He had found Emmons right away. Made contact. And now got him talking. It seemed too easy, too simple.

Emmons said, "Okay, grunt. You wanted an interview."

"I'm Lonnie. Lonnie Sharp."

"Okay, Sharp. Fire away."

The Golok moved his herd down a steep incline off of the ridge-running trail, and Emmons sped up. Lonnie fumbled for the minicassette recorder under his robes as the truck flew over a boulder and jolted him against the seat.

"Sorry about that. I've been drinking all morning while I waited for you."

"But I just got in a half-hour ago. How . . ."

Emmons ignored him. "Anyhow. It's okay to use it."

"Use what?"

"The cassette recorder. I think it's a fine idea. That way you'll be able to go over what I tell you. Fix it in your mind."

A little sheepishly, telling himself he should have guessed Emmons would know about the recorder, Lonnie untangled it from his robes and tried to steady the microphone end near Emmons's bobbing head.

"How did it begin?" It seemed like a vague opening, but before he could rephrase, Emmons started in.

"With the gunny. Gunnery Sergeant Pat Gomes. They called him Patch because he'd taken a liking to one of his uniforms. It was real camo on the sands inside Kuwait. He patched it instead of taking a fresh one. Couldn't get one the right size, or so he said."

"Then you knew him before the incident."

"Absolutely. He watched over me like a guardian angel. Many times he had my duty changed to protect me."

"Did that include Special Forces duty?"

"Nah. I joined that after. When I could see the aureoles of the Ragheads and knew what I had to do. What the future held for me."

The truck wove along a ridgeback that overlooked a grassy strip of valley beside a fast-moving stream of glacial melt. Near the stream, where the setting sun was not blocked by the hills, a black tent stood alone in a field of green foxfire and brilliant patches of snow.

"So. The aureoles helped you see the future?"

"Of course. Everything has them. Like coronas around

:clipsed suns. If I peek into the dancing light, I can see he images of fate. How lightning will strike in the lesert. What'll happen to a man's horse. The deaths of he bees that make honey under the rocky cliffs at the 'oot of Anye Machin. Even the rocks have futures."

"Inanimate objects?"

The story promised to be everything Lonnie hoped 'or. Emmons had delusions of grandeur.

"Yeah. When you get good at seeing it, the images run together like on a big colorful prayer wheel. Or a mandala. The whole future unfolds."

Lonnie stared down along the sharp dropoff that Emmons drove so close to. Several horses were tied to the poles of a tent. The sunset seemed to edge their flanks with fire.

"Can you pick out specific events?"

"When something big is about to happen, they usually pick me out. I see clues. You'll see them."

Lonnie noted that the tent now seemed edged in light also. Or perhaps it was truly on fire. Emmons didn't see it.

"Is that your home down there?"

"Yeah, somewhere." Emmons stretched up to look, but his line of sight appeared cut off by the hood of the jeep. "We'll drop down there through an erosion valley farther along this stretch."

Lonnie switched off the tape and shifted around in his seat for a better view. "It's bright down there. A bonfire, maybe. And it looks like you have visitors already."

"What?" Panic tinged Emmons's voice. "Not yet . . ."

"There's horses staked outside your tent."

As Emmons shifted into fourth gear, they struck a pothole that threw Lonnie hard against the unpadded panel in front of him. By the time he recovered, Emmons had parked with the nose of the vehicle canted toward the valley and begun a zigzagging run down a gully, an M-16 gripped in both hands. Lonnie pushed his way out the door and stumbled to his feet. He followed, picking his way awkwardly down the treacherous rocky ravine.

I arrived at the meadow bottom with several deep scratches in my palms and blood reddening the backs of my knuckles. My ankle had caught and turned against an unsteady boulder, so I hobbled over a low rise, attempting to run but also aware that expedience needed to be tempered with caution. I found a half-dozen Chinese militiamen dead around the tent and Emmons writhing on the ground, a deep wound bleeding into the fleece at his shoulder.

"Plug the fucking thing up," Emmons pleaded, his blue eyes bright with adrenaline.

I used his knife to tear open his coat and cut the bullet out with a crude incision above the heart, then bound the shoulder with strips of his coat lining. He laughed at the pain, but then his face clouded. I sat beside him as the urgency of my trip down the ridge washed from my system. I was waiting for an explanation to all this. When I looked up again, a halo surrounded him, a blue aura that crackled like the charge from an arc welder.

"Are you ready for this?" said Emmons.

A sniper fired a carbine on us from the rocks above. The fight wasn't over.

Emmons pulled Lonnie flat to the ground by his coat sleeve.

"You better get him. He won't give up until we're dead."

Lonnie saw the oily color of death flow about the wounded man, but he saw no sign of his own. Or need for it. He had the story he wanted, the story that would seal his career as a journalist. Now, he just had to fight hard to win it. With the M-16 in one hand, he supported Emmons under the arm and dragged him behind the rocks. Three more bullets whined by. A fourth slashed across Lonnie's good leg. The pain seared into him.

"All right, Sharp. You'll have to stay here and keep him occupied. I'm going around."

Emmons shed his coat and darted up the rocky cut that Lonnie had descended. For a wounded man, he moved with amazing agility. Lonnie covered him by systematically raking the rocks about the assailant above. The sniper shifted position, and Lonnie burned a series of shots very close to him, homing in on the obvious glow of his aura between two crags. Then the return fire stopped.

Lonnie heard Emmons calling him.

Holding a bandage tight to his leg, he reached the sniper's position behind a large knoll and found Emmons wedged against two boulders near where he'd mashed the soldier's head to a pulp. A new gunshot wound gaped in Emmons's side. He tried to sit up, but the pain overwhelmed him. He panted, in need of oxygen from the thin air.

"I can't make it," he whispered to Lonnie. "You got to take care of Mayta. You got to. She's been beaten and raped. But she's alive."

Mayta. Emmons had a woman.

I didn't know what to say. Except . . . "Inside the tent?"

"Yeah. The militia boys were chasing the dragon, and caught her napping. It was a punishment. They raped her for living with an American bastard like me."

"Chasing the dragon?"

"Unrefined heroin."

"Jesus, Emmons. There's no sense in this."

Emmons coughed, and it turned into a groan. He eased over on his good side. I could see blood soaking through his shirt on the other side like a spring bubbling up with dark water. Steam rose from it. His breath grew more irregular and labored, though he spoke louder to compensate.

"Don't have to make sense, Sharp. I saw something coming like this and couldn't avoid it. It just is. And it happens no matter what. Always was going to happen."

"What can I do?" I said.

"You can finish taking the power from me. You already started, you know. Used it to sense the danger."

I tensed and moved back from Emmons. The truth repulsed me.

"Playing dumbass again?" he said.

No, I understood. Emmons never lost his prescient sight. Not at all. "That's how you knew I'd be in the bar. How you knew about the recorder. About everything."

"Not just me," Emmons said and gritted his teeth. "You saw the fire too."

I remembered how the solarized edges of the landscape had transfixed me. I remembered how I'd seen the tent in flames, though it stood unscathed now, flapping in the wind like the wing of a great buzzard staked to the earth. I looked squarely at Emmons, whose aureole swirled like an oily scum that obscured his features. In the heart of the glow I saw a face something like my own staring back. I saw the choice I had to make.

Lonnie knelt by Emmons. The icy wind rustled the mottled collar of the man's shirt as he looked up and smiled. Emmons reached and gripped Lonnie's arm so tight that he almost cried out. He pulled himself up.

"You'll do fine. Better than I . . . I did." He coughed. "It all turned to violence for me. Even on poor Mayta, in the end."

"I'll take care of her," Lonnie told him.

"I know," he said as he let go, his arm giving out and his body falling back against the rocks. "I already know."

Emmons cried out as he landed on his wounded side. He gasped for breath, then fell silent when his body settled and his muscles relaxed. He looked relieved, almost smiling, like a man who'd lasted out a curse and ended with a moment of peace on his lips.

Lonnie knew Emmons was dead. The aureole about Emmons spun up from him in the form of a misshapen beast, a demon primate, a mad spirit that had found a homeland among a people who believed in spirits. It whirled and tightened about Lonnie, talking to him in the fluted vowels of a desert wind, sucking Lonnie's breath from his lungs until he saw flames leaping on the side of the tent below. He staggered to his feet, gasping, finally steadying his legs. For a moment he felt as if he'd explode; then all was calm. He forced himself into a hobbled run to the valley below.

There he found the woman bruised and bloodied, a tooth missing, yet she did not seem mortally hurt, no bones broken. As he stripped her clothes and bathed her at the stream, in fact, he discovered an indomitable strength that coursed through her. A fierce determination to recover quickly. And a beauty that radiated from her core like a homing signal to Lonnie . . . a face the shape of a heart, legs as deep brown as her eyes.

Later, Mayta helped him tie the dead militiamen on their horses, and set them bolting for the vacant plains farther up the valley. Then they buried Emmons.

The world has thought me dead, but I have never been more alive. Why have I waited a decade to write this? Wasn't this, after all, the article that brought me to China, and to this forsaken region?

You see, its telling lost all urgency. I had found the story I'd wanted so badly, yet I had also become that story. I nursed Mayta and coaxed out her inner strength. I played the recording of Emmons over and over, desperately hoping to understand the dark spirit that welled inside me. I somehow lost the cool objectivity and impassive attitude I had lived with until that time. And too I found a reason for my inheriting the gift of prescience, for I have become a governor here, someone who's forged a delicate balance between the Tibetans, the Chinese, and these tribes with no allegiance beyond the muzzles of our own rifles and the cold, barren tundra that no one but the Goloks have cared for. No longer do the damned Chinese raid our pasturelands or raid our herds for meat on the cold nights; no longer do the snow leopards die for superstitious reasons. I have channeled the violence into a fight for independence, for nationalization. And as country after country moves toward freedom—Eastern Europe after the failure of Communism, South Africa, even young China pushing against the tyranny of the old guard—I will forge it here with renewed vigor; though I am myself enslaved by the very power that invigorates me.

I live with Mayta on the bare highlands in a long tent beside Emmons's whitewashed headstone, and the pile of cobbles and broken tablets that conceal his fate. If you spoke to her, she'd cock her tiny neck and brush back her fine braids of jet and stick out her tongue and tell you this is all true. She'd tell you about Emmons. About our marriage. And about our golden-brown daughter—not yet married—who's named after the great snow-topped mountain towering above us; a girl whose fate is also tied into this web. Anye is a fact of eleven years. She helps me tend our herd of yaks, and will marry my successor, she says. She will make Emmons and Mayta and myself into a legend, she vows.

Yet I care little how many of you readers believe all this. I hope to reach just one of you. The one who will journey to this forgotten valley of Tibet some day. The one who will find me. I don't know your name yet, and I take great comfort in that, as I take comfort in knowing that some things may happen sooner than I expect, for even Scud was surprised that day I met him long ago. You see, this second sight is a weight on my back, and I feel that its weight is too much for me to bear any longer. Something unpleasant and regressive grows within me. I become impatient doing my daily chores in the black tent, watching the herds and doing errands for the few visiting Westerners. I scream out in anger at Mayta. At Anye.

Listen, my friend. My words here are your first clue that you are the next in line for transference, for your brief stint of glory before death. You will sense their truth.

I wait patiently for you among the glowing hills and aureoled pastures of Ice Mountain Commune.

This shadowy, untempered thing inside me awaits you also.

Come. You have no choice. . . . ✦

The Resurrectionist

Illustration by Nicola Cuti

William John Watkins

I used to be a Resurrection Man, but I'm retired now. I live alone at Government expense, just me and the love of my life. Every police department had at least one Resurrectionist back then, more than one if it was a big city. More than one even if it wasn't. Reading the minds of dead people burns you out pretty fast. Women tend to be better at it, but they burn out faster, so I got to be one of the best just on the basis of seniority. There's only so many times you can die a violent death and walk away from it. There's only so many times you can live through what led up to it and *want* to walk away.

I should've walked away from the Hartshorn case the minute they insisted on helicoptering me in. Most of the time, the coroner can tell

Homicide everything they need to know. But that takes hours, sometimes weeks, and nobody wants to wait around to find out why the Chairman of the Senate Military Operations Committee is dead in his own bed with a starburst hole burned in his chest, and his wife is in the next room the same way.

Senator Hartshorn was lying nude on the bed, face up; he was a squat, bald man in his late fifties, early sixties. The wound was strange, but oddly familiar, like I should have recognized it. It looked like a water lily had blossomed out of his solar plexus. The edges of the wound were burned, so a coroner's first guess would be somebody put a shotgun up against the skin and fired. Murder, suicide. The only question then is who killed whom. But there's no shotgun.

Double murder, then. But the grounds are full of security devices and armed guards, there's a staff of domestics in the house, and nobody heard a shot that loud. The guard down the hall only heard two faint thumps, several minutes apart, and you can't put a silencer on anything that would make a hole *that* big.

That leaves political assassination, inside job. The smart thing to do is say the bodies are too cold, I can't hook up with them, and walk away. Anybody who can kill a senator and his wife in their own beds is going to have no trouble getting to a Resurrection Man.

But nobody's going to buy that; the bodies are still warm, and if I walk away, people are going to say I was part of the coverup. Besides, I've hooked up to brains that would gag a coroner, so nobody is going to believe I can't get *some* kind of reading out of those two. I'm a prisoner of my own reputation. And of the Apparatus.

The Apparatus can scan the brain, apply the decay rates for each of the brain chemicals and reconstruct the pattern at the time of death.

When the brain dies, there are a number of chemical and electrical patterns that become fixed and then begin to deteriorate, some fast, some slow. Brain research has come a long way, and you can tell a lot about the topic of thought just by what parts of the brain are the most oxygen-rich, and what parts were burning the most sugar. And the Apparatus can tell you a lot more than that.

The overall chemical pattern generates an overall electrical pattern. The electrical pattern is the cross-section of a wave. If you have a cross-section of a wave, you can use Fourier Analysis to find all the waves it was made up of. You can extrapolate back to its formation.

Thought is a hologram. If you have one part, you have the whole as well; it's just a matter of projecting it back again, like shooting laser light through a hologram to reproduce the image. That's where I come in. The Apparatus reconstructs the pattern, entrains my brain waves, and superimposes the pattern of the corpse's last brain waves on mine.

The apparatus in my head starts making its own reconstructions and elaborations, and turns the whole thing into a living image. The Resurrectionist has to experience it and interpret it. That's the rub, of course; interpretation is always the bane of Science. You can gather the most elaborate data you want, but sooner or later, a human mind is going to have to interpret it. Interpretation varies.

That's the art of being a Resurrectionist. You have to let that iconic right hemisphere take a pattern and run with it. You have to live it. But at the same time, you have to be *thinking* about it. You have to maintain just the right amount of rational control. That's why so many Resurrectionists go under. They lose control and get immersed in it. That won't kill you, but it'll weaken your will to live. If you don't have a natural cynicism, the kind of stuff you find in most people's minds will drive you to despair. Most Resurrectionists who don't die of old age commit suicide.

I used to think I was going to die of old age; now I'm not so sure. You can never tell when you're going to hit that one experience of human perversity that'll drive you over the edge, so you're never anxious to put that headpiece on. I got pretty calloused to the sight of violent death, but I never put that little cap on without my hands shaking a bit. They were shaking a lot when I hooked Senator Hartshorn up to the Apparatus.

If you're lucky, there's no head trauma. That's why I started with the Senator. That, and the fact that he was smiling.

I went right over to him and set up the Apparatus. I had a little trouble putting the cap on him, but then I always do. I had a head come apart in my hands once, so I'm a little squeamish and I tend to rush that part of it. But once I stretched the cap over his head, it was all right. There was a little red line across his forehead where he must have had a toupee on, and the elastic band snapped right into it. It made a good tight fit.

I started my exercises to get a brain rhythm the Apparatus could latch onto, but it wasn't as easy as usual. I try to quiet my mind, make it like a still pond, and then wait for the reflections on the water. If I'm lucky, they sort of waver, and then the ripples die down, and there's a clear image and all the thoughts and feelings associated with it.

This one was like crashing into the water from a suspension bridge. Wham! Overwhelming longing. Guilt. Shame. Rage. Love. Cunning. Self-satisfaction. And absolute sexual ecstasy. I felt like I was drowning, and I kept trying to get a handle on what was happening. Usually, there's horror or surprise, tremendous pain, shock, anguish. But when the overall impression finally settled in, it was nothing but raw passion.

It was all I could do to keep my identity. The senator went out being ridden by a fantasy, at the absolute peak of sexual intensity, being matched pulsation for pulsation by the kind of woman you only find in dreams. There was no question in my mind that it wasn't his wife.

I never met the senator, but his taste in women was exactly like mine. She was the most beautiful woman I could imagine. Voluptuous, refined, all those contradictions of lady and whore, madonna and harlot, sleaziness and innocence men can't resist. Eyes, neck, breasts, thighs. If I'd described the perfect woman to him, he couldn't have done better. He even had the hair color exactly right.

But the most remarkable thing about her was her ardor. She relished everything they did. It was that kind of passion you hit with somebody you're frantically in love with maybe a dozen times before familiarity sets in. But this felt like it was *regularly* that unforgettable, and he couldn't imagine it being anything less. When his stomach exploded, I don't think he even really felt it. It just got swallowed up in the waves of ecstasy. He didn't know what hit him.

I almost missed it myself. But when I backed the experience up in my mind, there it was. Just like his solar plexus blew out. That wasn't the true epicenter of the blast, but you don't want to dwell on *that* kind of pain. Going through it once probably shot my blood pressure up into the red zone, and I thought I would let the coroner determine the exact location of the impact.

After the pain there was a lot of spasming and twitching but it didn't last long, and he wasn't really aware of it. I thought maybe there'd be a vision of who shot him, but his eyes were rolled up into his head when they did it, and he never got them down again. I listened, but he was past hearing, and there weren't any other clues.

I put the Apparatus on hold for a minute and tried to analyze what had happened, but instead of thinking about the murder, the strangest thought came into my mind. I thought that if I could only *record* that and play it back, people would give up real sex entirely, and I'd be a millionaire in a week. That kind of pleasure is like pain, you can remember having it, but you can't relive it, and the Apparatus wasn't advanced enough to process all that complexity and still make a record of it. That's why Resurrectionists are at such a premium, and why they have to be gotten to the scene so fast.

It struck me because I don't usually think things like that, and I don't usually get carried away with the erotic fantasies of the victims. Actually, Resurrectionists don't get called in on the pleasant deaths, so I had never run into one who died in the middle of pleasurable sex before, but there are a lot of collateral images you get that are pretty close, and none of them ever turned me on like *this* one.

It embarrassed me a little that I enjoyed it so much, and it worried me a little that I wanted to relive it, but I had long since accepted that I must have a debased character to go poking around in the minds of dead people anyway, so I wasn't too ashamed of myself. Certainly not as ashamed as the senator had been. I thought that was a little strange. It wasn't just old-fashioned adulterer's guilt either; it was a lot deeper than that. Real junkie self-loathing, revulsion coupled with an absolute inability to resist. I could see why he found her irresistible.

It was a struggle to get my mind back on the case. It had to be murder, or there would have been at least an undercurrent of apprehension while he waited for the gun to go off, and that was the least of the problems. The senator was lying on his back. The woman was on top of him. It would have been impossible for some third party to shoot him without shooting her, and fantastic as the sex was, it was impossible that she could have shot him without his noticing that she had a gun.

The gun would have had to be on the bed with them. She couldn't have reached the nightstand from the middle of the bed, so it had to have been in her hand all along, and there was no way even a man that enraptured wouldn't notice a thing like that. Barring an accident during some sort of kinky sex with a sawed-off shotgun, it wasn't credible that the girlfriend shot him.

In fact, the bedrooms were adjoining, with a connecting door that was open. Even shut, it seemed unlikely that the senator's wife wouldn't have heard the racket the senator and his girlfriend must've been making. Even if they had a political marriage with some sort of arrangement, she would at least have heard the shot. If she came to see what was going on, why make her get back in bed before shooting her? And how did the other woman get out?

I knew there was more to it, and I let the Apparatus trace that experience back through what led up to it. Your whole life doesn't flash before your eyes when you die, but a lot of important images do, and I had to see what they were. After the last moment before death, everything else was usually jumbled. The farther back the extrapolation went, the more unclear the images were. Still, it surprised me that the first image the Apparatus could reconstruct was a committee hearing.

There were five older men sitting around a horseshoe table and one guy who looked like the Geek of the Month sitting at the open end of the horseshoe answering questions. I thought I was mixing up the image with some fantasy of my own because the Geek was holding what looked like an Apparatus, except it was a little bigger and the cap was more elaborate and red instead of black. "It's better than drugs," he said. "Better than sex. We haven't found anybody who can hold out against it." And then Senator Hartshorn said, "We'll see about that." The whole image was layered over with regret and a feeling of crushing irony, so I knew it was something he thought about a lot of times, and would have changed if he could have.

I should have paused the Apparatus and followed that up, but I didn't, and the image dissolved into the bedroom again, and the senator lying there nude on the bed, fitting that red cap over his head. It was obvious that it had made the little line I thought came from a toupee.

He was filled with shame, and guilt, and at the same time his mind ran rich with rationalizations. He worked hard, he was entitled to a little relaxation. He and his wife weren't intimate very often anyway. He had to be sure before he voted to fund a machine like that. And saturating all his excuses was the fear that they were going to take the machine away from him, mixed in with revulsion at himself for wanting that experience again, a feeling of overwhelming desire mixed with intense humiliation. And longing, most of all, longing for the illusion of perfect erotic love.

The image broke up and dissolved. It disintegrated much faster than they usually did, like it was never real to begin with. Deep down, I knew why even then, just like I knew why that perfect woman was *my* dream

woman as well as Hartshorn's. But I didn't want to know; I didn't have the clearance to know things like that, and if anybody found out I'd figured out what had really happened, I knew I wouldn't live to see retirement.

I couldn't get anything more out of the senator, but I didn't need to. I had a good idea of the why, I just didn't know *how*. But I was sure the senator's wife would know.

I didn't relish finding out. The minds of women are always alien and confusing. Everything is skewed, and I never understand what's really going on. There's always this bewildering richness to things, and nothing is ever what it seems. Nothing is ever simple and straightforward. There are always nuances and complexities I can feel but never quite put my finger on.

I unhooked the senator and carried the Apparatus through the door to his wife's room. I suppose if I had looked in there first, I would have figured out a lot of it sooner, but it was the senator they were worried about; his wife was secondary. But I knew by the way she had everything laid out that it was no double murder. The gunshot had made a bloody mess of her nightgown, but you could see she had picked that one intentionally, and her hair was too perfect for somebody just going to sleep.

Her hands were folded across her abdomen well below the wound, and her face was contorted with pain. But there was resignation in it, and serenity, and despair as well. I knew there were going to be a dozen even more complex emotions inside, and I wasn't going to be able to tell which one was the most important one. She was fifteen years or so younger than the senator, more classy than beautiful. One of those perfectly outfitted, perfectly made up women. She had good features, and she would have passed for beautiful if you didn't think too much about it.

I had to force myself to put the cap on her. My fingers touched her hair, and the strands seemed very brittle and stiff. I had some idea what I was going to find, and I knew it wasn't going to be pleasant. I told myself maybe I'd be able to find it out from the senator instead if I went back in and hooked him up again, but I was afraid that what I really wanted was to have that woman again, even if I had to have her through a dead man. There was something secondhand about her anyway. But I didn't want to think about that.

I put the cap on Mrs. Hartshorn and did my relaxation exercises. In a minute or so, there was the pond, unbroken, serene, but with a vague feeling like something terrible was moving below the surface waiting to leap up. Slowly the pond began to ripple, and the broken image grew more and more coherent until I was lying there, full of fear but with an unshakable intent to die.

I had done suicides before, and they aren't all cries for help, but I never felt anyone more determined to die, more certain of it as an escape from something worse. There was a kind of conflicting triumph there as well, and revenge, sweet revenge, thick enough almost to cover the hurt and disillusionment that had caused it. I knew I was only scratching the surface.

She kept thinking about a bomb in her belly. And about a dinner party, and a young man, erratic, brilliant, slipping away and coming up to that very bed. Brief mechanical sex, from which she was aloof, almost disinterested. He was behind her pounding away, squeezing her breasts, but she was intent on something else. A little vial filled with tiny brown beads suspended in a thick gel. An explosive. The young man wanted funding. Everybody wanted funding. He was using her to get it. She was using him to get the explosive.

It was a fuel actually, highly unstable outside the gel. He told her that, drawing little wet circles around her nipples, and she was thinking that the beads were tiny, you could put a dozen of them in a time-release capsule, a red-and-black one, the kind the senator took every night to help him sleep.

Her brow furrowed, she was afraid, very afraid, but there was a sense of having passed the point of no return. Of resolution. *She* felt the pain the senator didn't. But then, she was anticipating it. Was waiting for the capsule to reach the stomach, waiting for the acid to dissolve the gel and detonate the beads. The pain was so intense I tried to pull back. Her stomach just split apart, like somebody grabbed a handful of it and ripped it out, and she paid attention to the whole thing. She lasted a lot longer than he did, but any coroner would have said her death was instantaneous. The last thing she felt was relief.

I stopped the Apparatus, and let the pain cool out of me. I could see why the wound had looked so strangely familiar, not because I'd seen wounds like that before, but because they were inside out. The flesh had been blown outward, not driven in. They both looked like they'd swallowed a small hand grenade, but that was so unlikely even the coroner would have missed it.

I had the how, but I still needed the why, and the only way to get it was let the Apparatus extrapolate what it could of her collateral images. But I didn't relish being her again.

The second pain was worse than the first. She had a genuine love for Hartshorn, at least the remnants of one; most of it had decayed into a respect that made her suffer more than simple disappointed love would have. There was hatred there as well, for corrupting his position, for being part of the making of the new Apparatus, and for being part of something else I couldn't quite get a handle on.

There are always so many emotions, all tangled up, equally intense. I can never understand which one it is that makes a woman act. There was pity too. She had watched his addiction to the Apparatus grow. Every night she would go in and give him his pill, and kiss him good night, and he would more and more often look like he wanted her gone so he could begin. He would lie there with that red cap on, and when she looked back in on him from the doorway, she could see that look of ecstasy on his face even before she left the room.

It tore her apart. I don't think seeing a real woman in there with him would have hurt her as much. There was a feeling of unfairness, of contempt and sorrow, and overriding grief for him and for herself. And there was

above all, hard as she tried to hide it from herself, curiosity, the fascination of the abomination.

I couldn't help feeling that if she had just left it alone, she wouldn't have killed him. Or herself. She might have divorced him. She might have exposed him, but she wouldn't have killed him. But she *had* to know what that Apparatus did, she had to know what put that look on his face, and one day, weeks before the bomb boy came to dinner, she went into the senator's room at midday and lay down on his bed and put the red cap on.

I couldn't help reliving that. It surprised me at first that the woman was exactly the same as my dream girl, but it shouldn't have. She was never really there. The government's Apparatus had recorded her, and even secondhand, my brain was elaborating on what the machine provided, mixing real sensation with fantasy, just like the senator had done.

I don't think Mrs. Hartshorn really saw the same woman I did, but she felt the same thing. And the hunger that flowed out of the girl who straddled her, rubbing against her flesh to flesh, the passion, the insatiability was more than she could stand.

At first, I thought it was jealousy, and then I thought she recognized that hunger as her own from her first weeks with Hartshorn, and having the loss of it brought home to her that strongly was intolerable. But there was something worse. As she lingered under the spell of the Apparatus, she began to enjoy it.

She loathed herself for it, but she couldn't take that cap off, and the ecstasy of her husband's dream girl flowed into and touched off her own. There was no intensity to match it in her memory. She lay there sweaty and shaken, unable to get up, afraid the dream would start again, revulsed when it did, but unable to take off the cap and put an end to it until it had wrung the last drop of bliss out of her. What the girl felt, she felt—that absolute love that generates absolute surrender, the abandon that comes from total trust.

I believe she figured it out before I did, and at first I thought that when she managed to drag herself out of the room, flushed and exhausted, it was jealousy that motivated her, that set in motion that cold, calculating plot to get some means to destroy her husband.

But I was wrong as usual. She realized that she would never get the senator off the Apparatus. And worse, that she would never be able to stay away from it herself, and that if the government found out she knew about it, they would use it to get her under their control. Men made it; she doubted that they had thought to record a man's response. She doubted a man could even feel that kind of abandon. So they would use the image they had, and she would swallow her last shreds of self-respect and use it.

I don't think she blamed the senator for using it in the end; she knew how hard it was to resist. Time after time she would go up to her room and linger in the doorway before she forced herself back into her own room away from the Apparatus. And always she was drawn back to it, and it wasn't until the second time she tried it, when she could not resist trying it, when she enjoyed it so much it was hours before she could force herself away from it and back into her room, and she knew, filled with self-loathing, that she would keep going in there until they found out, that she hit upon her plan.

I could feel the overpowering need and the equally overwhelming revulsion, and underlying both, a feeling of horrible, unspeakable betrayal, and disgust. A hatred for the men who had made that machine and for her husband for being one of them. But I had the reason for her revulsion completely wrong. I thought it was because the image was another woman. But it wasn't. Everybody knew how the Apparatus worked for Resurrectionists, and she picked up right away what I missed, the greatest betrayal of all.

I turned off the Apparatus and thought about it a long time. It struck me finally that the betrayal that tormented her was not the betrayal of her but of the girl. That image recorded and played back could only have come from a girl deeply in love giving herself totally to the passion her lover aroused in her, and it could only have been captured if they had killed her at the height of her passion.

That was what Mrs. Hartshorn couldn't bear, knowing her pleasure came at the cost of that betrayal, and still not being able to resist it. Every time she put on that cap, she must've thought of that girl, before the passion swept her away. And it must've always been the first thing she thought of afterwards.

I know it is for me.

When the men in gray suits showed up and wanted to know what the hell a person without proper clearance was doing accessing the senator's mind, I said that the images had been vague and disjointed, but that the senator's wife had found out about a torrid affair with a younger woman and, in a fit of jealousy, killed him with a shotgun and then commited suicide. I knew it was what they'd get the coroner to swear to anyway.

But they didn't believe me, and they whisked me out of there to a little room where there was just me and the walls and their version of the Apparatus with its little red cap. Nothing to do. Nobody to talk to. Nothing to read. I'd like to say it was weeks before I put it on, but it was only days.

I hardly ever take it off now.

And when I do, I have this wandering ache that never seems to settle anywhere, and I think of Mrs. Hartshorn, and the girl. ✦

Roatán

Mark Budz

Illustration by David Martin

When I think of her eyes, looking up into mine, I see an aerial view of this island: emerald green surrounded by pure white, the edges vanishing into layered depths the way French Harbour Hotel's glaring, phosphorescent beaches slip quietly into the Caribbean.

Roatán.

In the eighteenth century, Henry Morgan, the pirate, established a base here. Safe, secluded, but close enough to the northern coast of Honduras for him to keep tabs on it, feel the vast hum of money and commercial goods vibrating along his nerves, infiltrating his soul.

Now, I can't seem to forget her. Tanja. At night I still feel her warm breath against my cheek, and I remember her

soft skin cooling on a penthouse balcony of the Honduras Maya. Tegucigalpa's night sky was a silky sheet of black drawn over us. In the city below, white stucco houses with red clay-tile roofs sprouted the dull, moonlit metal of old TV antennas. Around them, curtain-glass office buildings reflected the headlights of late-night traffic, the inkblot shadows of trees snared in the yellow, high-pressure sodium lights that lined the streets.

They call Tegucigalpa "the City of the Silver Hills," and that evening silver was also the color of her hair, delicate strands clinging to her forehead, pulled back behind her ears. We lay cradled in each other's arms, neither one of us speaking, and I had the feeling she was trying to hold onto something she knew would never happen again, embrace it one last time.

I ran my hands down her back, along the goose-pimpled curve of her buttocks and thighs, and tried to quell the spasmodic quivering I felt there, running through her muscles and bones. I tried not to think about what she had done, the symbiotic combination of artificial and natural intelligence that she hoped would be born inside her while the rest of her nerve cells were dying. I didn't want to believe it was true, didn't want to think about what she might become, cocooned in my arms.

Later, after I thought she might be dead, I felt her press the Lancetilla Research Labs vial into the palm of my hand, close my fingers around the smooth glass cylinder of sticky white neural net macromolecules I'd helped to develop, before she drifted away for good.

I shivered then and disentangled myself from her arms, got up from where we lay and told her I would only be a few minutes, even though I doubted she could hear me. I told myself all I needed was a short walk to clear my head. And then left her there.

Because I knew she wanted me to go with her, and I was afraid.

Afraid of what I might find when I got there.

Afraid of what I might leave behind.

Some essential part of me absolutely and irrevocably lost.

Watery light ripples around the sun-bleached collection of shabby houses on stilts, barnacle-covered docks, and pastel blue, red, and green shrimp boats that clutter the lagoon of Roatán. I squint at the moss-green hills hunched beneath a tatter of clouds, watch gulls dance around a collection of half-eaten papaya and empty beer bottles that someone has dumped on the sand, listen to an ancient ghetto blaster blare tinny salsa through the tarpaper walls of a nearby shanty.

"She took advantage of you," doña Flor tells me in her tobacco-scratched *curandera* voice, sliding another Dos Equis across the scuffed and stained bar she sometimes tends when she's not out curing the sick, dispelling evil spirits. "To get what she wanted."

"No," I say. I take a swallow of warm foam, and she lets me stare out the window for a while, a tourist poster of pure French Harbour sand, wild palms and reef-calm water. It's like someone has pasted a travel hologram on the wall at the end of the countertop, then overlaid it with the shrill cry of the competing gulls, the garbage reek of flotsam, and the quiet gentle fingers of an offshore breeze caressing my cheek.

"That one, she was a *tabayuku*," doña Flor says after a while, the words wrapped in the stale smell of cigarette smoke, pepper-tree branches and cheap Siete Machos perfume, the three items she most commonly uses to affect her cures. "A she-devil who was paid to steal your soul and everything you know. Cause you trouble."

"No," I say again. "If she was working for someone else, she wouldn't have done what she did." But sometimes I wonder if what Flor says is true. If the odd metaphorical reality she lives in actually exists, apart from my own.

Doña Flor is a Christian *adivina*, what the mainland Indians call a *curandera*. A Spiritist healer. In the three years since I first discovered the tiny curative hostel she runs, a kind of spiritual boarding house for people who want to free themselves from the electronic hiss of everyday life, I have seen her cure people the local hospital could not by simply passing an unbroken egg over them, rubbing their bodies with herbs and a paste she prepares from her own spit.

Flor is an anachronism whose goal is to release me from one past by immersing me in another, unaware that her system of belief has been tainted by the century we live in, new technology that has seeped into the customs and rituals she still practices.

Now, only her memories are uncontaminated. When I see the smoke she blows into the face of a person who is sick, the rosemary-treated perfume or saliva paste she applies, I think of the long strands of information-encoded molecules and tiny ribosomelike assemblers that have seeped into the environment, infiltrated the cell structure of the plants she uses, making them physiologically active.

The same assemblers that crept into Tanja.

"She's still looking for you," Flor says. "I can sense it. You should let me protect you from her. Before she comes back."

"Flor, she's in Tegucigalpa somewhere, over a hundred kilometers away. I don't even know if she's the same person anymore. If she remembers me. She might not even be alive, for Christ's sake."

"She's alive, Miguel, and she remembers. A *tabayuku* never forgets her lover. And she's not going to rest until she finds you again. Takes your life away and makes you go crazy." Her eyes hold mine, hard gray flecks of concern in a stone face as ancient and cracked as a Mayan bas relief.

I tip the beer bottle, stare into the tiny dark hole it makes, and shake my head. "You don't know that," I say.

"She's eating you up already. From the inside. Even now I can see it happening."

And she's right. I can feel my own detached curiosity tugging at me, wanting to know how it turned out. And when I remember her face, the feeling of her body stiffening against mine, I get the sudden urge to go back and find her, enter her one more time and lose myself in the long hard pull of her arms, and the mysterious life they reached out to embrace.

"She was dying," I tell Flor, bringing the bottle to my lips. "There was nothing else she could do."

I met Tanja for the first time at a small café near the Plaza Morazan in the Parque Central. It was early evening, the sky a tapestry of neon graffiti above newly refurbished colonial facades and clusters of dust-covered acacia trees. All around me the sound of brass horn music mingled with the smell of coffee, warm tortillas, and exhaust fumes. I went there mostly when I wanted to think but didn't exactly feel like being alone, wanted to immerse myself in the strange psychic anonymity and social belonging imparted by a crowd.

She found me at a corner table, pulled up a patio chair and sat down, like I'd been waiting there for her all along. Casual but purposeful in her taupe sharkskin jacket and khaki parachute pants over Milano sandals. No makeup, but then she didn't need any. I had the feeling I'd seen her before, but I couldn't remember where. I saw forced calm in her face and the movement of her hand as she set her purse on the wrought-iron mesh tabletop and settled into the hard metal seat. Her fingers trembled momentarily on the thin leather shoulder strap, knotted around it until the faint chaotic twitching stopped.

"Buy me a drink?" she said, and I could feel myself falling into those eyes, vertigo spinning inside me like an off-kilter gyroscope. She looked at the empty glass in front of me, the ice it had held melted in the warm evening air. "You might want to get another one for yourself, too."

"All right," I said, trying to put my finger on the glossy but faded magazine memory I had of her. "What would you like?" I picked up the glass, idly swirled what was left of the diluted rum, and finished it.

"Lancetilla Labs MOLI-AI14," she said. Her eyes held mine as she reached for something inside her purse, and I felt my stomach go suddenly queasy as it tightened around the trickle of warm rum that had settled there.

"A trade," she said, tossing a small, diamond-sheathed chip onto the table between us, her hand quivering again, out of nervousness maybe, or fear. "One classified program for another."

I looked at the chip—square, thin, featureless—and set the glass down as calmly as I could.

I build models for a living. Neural nets constructed out of artificially engineered molecules instead of nerve cells, assembled from seed programs in small cubes of electroconductive gelatin. In some ways what I do isn't all that different from a hobbyist assembling the toy-sized representations you can sometimes still find sitting on shelves and hanging from ceilings—scaled-down reproductions of cars, ships, and airplanes glued together out of die-cast plastic parts. The materials might be different, and the level of detail, but the basic shape and elements are still there.

Speed. Miniaturization. Memory capacity. Three hardware Grails that more than a few research scientists in the pursuit of an independently intelligent machine would do almost anything to possess. . . .

Which was what I was thinking about when Tanja reached into her purse.

Because the lab team I worked with was getting close to finding all three.

And I had been a fool to think that I could walk the streets of Tegucigalpa, alone.

"Half now," Tanja said. "Half later, when we make the exchange."

I picked up the diamond case, sharp-edged and virtually weightless, no larger than the palm of my hand. Inside, the iridescent sheen of an MED chip. Molecular Electronics Device. Binary information stored in millions of redundant, molecule-sized logic gates, the data read in and out through laser beams instead of wires. The latest in information storage. Available to only a very few.

I shook my head. "I don't even know what's on here. It could be totally useless."

That was bullshit, and she knew it.

"Direct synaptic interface," she told me, her face a beautiful clay mask, fired and glazed in the kiln of lights around us. "Basically, a neural placenta. Developed by Noögenics in the United German Republic to isolate and study a wide range of untreatable mental diseases. If you're not interested, I'll try someone else."

I remembered then where I had seen her, a journalist looking out at me from a satellite news broadcast, while in the background naked children played on the rain-puddled streets of some Indonesian shantytown built out of old bedsprings, refrigerators, and the side panels of cars, welded together in some life-sized parody of functional, abstract sculpture.

"Okay," I said, my fingers tightening around the hard, cutting edge of synthetic diamond.

"She was desperate, Flor," I say, trying to explain, staring out across calm motionless water undisturbed by the currents circulating through me.

"So? A *tabayuku* is always desperate. That doesn't mean you have to give your life up for hers."

"I had no choice."

"That is what everyone thinks." She wipes the counter one last time, drops the rag into a bucket she keeps on the floor behind the bar, and picks up a brown-speckled chicken egg that has been sitting on the shelf behind her, wedged between bottles of Bacardi, Jack Daniels, and Smirnoff vodka.

It is still early. The bar is empty, and I let Flor rub the unbroken egg across my forehead, down my arms. She believes that the egg will absorb some of the illness inside me. The cleansing rite is known as a *limpia*, and I have seen her perform it more than a dozen times over the past few years, watched her break an egg into a glass of water and make her diagnosis from the pattern it creates.

She breaks this egg.

I stare at the glass in front of me, the slow swirl of egg white and tiny bubbles coagulating on the surface.

"*Yeyecatlcihuatl*," she says after a time. Evil air from a promiscuous woman.

"She had something I wanted," I say. "Needed."

Flor dumps the glass of cloudy, putrid water into the sink beside her. "That is what all she-devils would like for you to believe," she says. "Otherwise they would never get what they're looking for."

"I'm afraid," Tanja said as I got up to leave, the metal legs of my chair scraping loudly on the red brick of the patio.

I slipped the MED chip into the front pocket of my jeans. "You're not the only one."

"No," she said, standing. "I'm not. But sometimes it seems like it."

I felt the twinge of panic that had been lurking in the back of my mind suddenly surface, and glanced around at the time-lapse blur of faces moving in slow procession around the square, half expecting to see the taut, choreographed movement of the people Noögenics would have sent after her, paid to bring back what she'd stolen.

"They don't know yet," she said, watching me. "Won't for a while. Trust me." She picked up her purse from the tabletop, her hand still quivering erratically. "Before you leave, there's something I want to show you."

Cool fingers against the warm night, she threaded her way through the nighttime maze of Tegucigalpa's tumultuously lit gift shops, restaurants and museums until we came to the white, domed Cathedral of San Miguel. Twin bell towers framed the massive colonial front, the deep arched doorway leading in and the huge stained-glass rose window above it. Inside, the walls were plain smooth stone, the tiled floor worn and dusty beneath pews of polished, oily-smelling wood. The place was empty and dimly lit, the air heavy and solemn, reverberating with silence.

"The sense of peace here is wonderful," Tanja said, running her hand along one of the pews. "Now I know why so many people come." She walked slowly down the main aisle, sandals scraping softly in the enormous volume. I followed her down to the silver altar, looked up into the dark hollow space of the dome above it.

"Xiang's syndrome," she said softly, walking toward a large wooden statue of St. James that stood off to one side, arms outspread and palms turned up, face carved with eternal compassion and hope.

Xiang's syndrome. It was one of a number of new prion-related subviruses that inserted their own genetic material into a specific gene. I'd heard they had evolved as a result of environmental contamination and increased radiation, random mutations in a changing world. Xiang's was one of the more debilitating. The gene it altered coded for a protein necessary for the proper functioning of certain central nerve cells. The disease led to the progressive and irreversible deterioration of one's motor skills, short-term memory, and, in the final stages, autonomic nervous system.

"Ever feel like your life's slipping away?" she said after a few minutes. "Like there's nothing left to live for?" Her voice was distant, lost, and I realized how small and fragile she had become, standing there beside me.

"Yes," I said. More than I wanted to admit. Because I had spent most of my life trying to build something that might never materialize, aware that if it never did I'd be left with nothing. No one to turn to, hold onto.

She moved away, and I breathed in the smell of freshly washed hair and rose-water perfume, felt it drifting through a part of me I'd closeted away, sealed myself off from for as long as I could remember.

"It was my choice," I tell Flor. I take a deep breath and uncap another bottle of beer, wrap my fingers around the smooth, condensation-beaded neck.

"She made you believe that, Miguel. Made you desire her so you'd do what she wanted. A *tabayuku* always wants you to believe that she lusts after you the way all men hope to be wanted by a beautiful woman." Her voice is harsh, steel-edged, and I shut my eyes trying to piece together her logic. But either I've had too many beers or there isn't any logic, and nothing seems to make sense.

Flor washes the glass and then calmly places it in the rack beneath the counter.

"If you go back," she says after a long pause, "you're going to give up everything you have. Including your soul."

I took the chip Tanja had given me to Mizuho Aoki, the head of my research team. She held the diamond case in her short, stubby fingers and frowned slightly, skin crinkling like fifty-year-old paper beneath outdated wire-rim glasses and a cloud of steel-wool hair.

"Where did you find this?" she asked. She turned the chip slightly, and it gave off an insect-wing shimmer in the bright swath of morning light that knifed across her desk.

"A reporter," I said. "She gave it to me last night."

"This reporter. Did she say what's on it?"

"Direct neural interface and feedback. Developed by Noögenics."

Aoki swung her chair over to a sleek laser/diode unit and slid the chip in, watched the program scroll down the tilt-up screen next to the black anodized processor. It went on for a long time, and Aoki sat there mesmerized, as if she was watching the unfolding of some eternal truth she had thought would never be revealed, now being given to her in one single moment of electronic satori.

"There's more," I said, when the screen finally went blank. "She only gave me half."

Aoki clicked the chip out. "Why'd she give it to you? What's she want in return?"

"Artificial intelligence," I said. "She wants me to build a neural net inside her head."

"So you gave her back her life," Flor says. She pours herself a glass of whisky, sits down across from me, thick arms resting heavily on the scuffed and stained countertop, marred by the small dark circles of cigarette burns. "Only she wanted you to go with her, and now the people you work for are looking for you also."

"They wanted to study her in a controlled environment, monitor the results."

"Maybe you should have let them." She raises the glass to her lips. "Maybe if you knew how it turned out, then you wouldn't be haunted by her, and she wouldn't have the power over you that she does."

I stare at the beer bottle in front of me, empty now except for a few bubbles clinging to the inside surface of the dark brown glass, and shake my head. "If she's alive, she's probably not even human anymore," I say, my face numb, the black-and-gold label in front of me beginning to blur. "She's either dysfunctional or something completely alien, a totally new kind of life form."

Flor gives what might be a shrug beneath the cotton print layers of her dress. "She asked for it, no? She was dying and you gave her what she wanted, and now she wants to take you with her and turn you into a machine, too. So she won't be alone."

"I don't know what she's feeling, Flor. I don't even know if she can feel."

"It was her choice."

"Yes," I say, meeting her gaze. "But it was my decision."

Tanja called two days after that first evening. We met in La Leona, the Old Quarter, a hillside of tangled streets that looked out over blocks of red-tiled colonial roofs, shabby bungalows, and white concrete office buildings that rose above oak and yellow-blossomed San Juan trees. It was a little before noon, but the air was already hazy, filled with exhaust and the smoke from slash-and-burn agriculture in the surrounding hills. My eyes stung as I breathed in the fumes, the heavy odor of geraniums and street dust. A mongrel dog barked at us from an open doorway, and chickens flapped out of our way, shards of broken glass glinting out of the dirt they kicked up.

I had the most recent model I'd built with me, and a proposal from Aoki. She wanted to work with Tanja directly, use her to develop a molecular net that would mimic the human brain and still be able to run traditional software. It was Aoki's attempt to come up with a unifying theory of intelligence, a paradigm that would complete the synthesis between biological and electronic systems.

Aoki's Grail.

One that she told me would improve Tanja's chances of success.

"Forget it," Tanja said, lips pressed tightly together. "I played that game at Noögenics. I'm not going to become a case study again. That's why I'm here."

"You don't have to do this," I said. "There's always a chance someone will come up with a cure."

"Not in less than a month." She paused in the middle of the sidewalk and squinted at me.

"There's no guarantee it'll work," I said.

"But there's a chance."

"Yes. But if it doesn't, what you're asking me to give you is no different from a lethal injection."

Tanja laughed. "I don't believe it," she said. "An ethicist." Then she started to walk again, heading for a small scenic park that had been built at the crest of the hill.

I was sweating when we reached the top, shirt and pants clinging uncomfortably to my hot, sticky skin as I listened to the dissonant symphony of Tegucigalpa's congested midday traffic below us.

Tanja walked over to a wrought-iron bench beneath the low branches of a wide-spreading oak and sat down. "I'll make a deal with you," she said. "Don't tell me how to end my life, and I won't tell you how to live yours. All right?" She slid a bulky spectral chromatograph out of the shoulder bag she had been carrying and positioned it on the curved seat next to her.

"This is the only way I have of checking what you're giving me," she said. "Making sure you don't hang me out to dry. I may not be able to decode and analyze the assembler program, but I can determine if all of the correct chemical components are there."

I nodded, handed her the sample vial I'd been carrying in my shirt pocket. So far Lancetilla Labs had been able to isolate only a small number of chained macromolecules that could be used as improved functional analogs of excitatory and inhibitory neurons in the brain. Aoki and the upper-management personnel who pulled her strings had wanted to give Tanja a placebo solution, betting she wouldn't be able to tell the difference and wasn't working for someone who could. She was going to die anyway, they said. Why risk losing years of proprietary work when they could probably get something for nothing?

I watched Tanja prepare a slide of the assembler fluid, then feed it into the unit, and hated them for that. Hated myself for even considering it and for what I had become, a detached automaton without a life of its own, following the set of programmed instructions given to me. Like Aoki, not really alive, but not really dead either.

Now, I didn't want to know that I was responsible for her death. I wanted to be able to tell myself that I hadn't knowingly killed her, the way someone on a firing squad can, when it's over with, ease his conscience by thinking that maybe his gun was the one that held the blank.

Because of that, and because some part of me wanted to see her succeed, wanted to go with her, the program I handed over was real.

No turning back.

I stood and listened to the quiet hum of the portable unit, the stiff leaves rustling above me in a dry, smoldering breeze, and when it finally stopped I thought I could hear her begin to breathe again, as if she had finally allowed herself to come up for air, had broken through the surface tension of all-consuming desperation she'd submerged herself in for weeks or months.

"I don't have the program with me," she said, her hands trembling as she tried to slip the chromatograph into the handbag, fingers fumbling at the canvas corners and strap. "I thought you might try something, so I hid it in the right palm of St. James." A few seconds later she let her hands fall into her lap, closed her eyes and bit her lower lip as both hands twitched uncontrollably, tiny spasms that sent tremors through the rest of her body.

"You don't have to stay," Tanja said, opening her eyes, staring at me with emerald-green islands of isolation.

Don't have to see this, I thought, the unspoken words stirring up a mixture of pain, guilt and pity inside me. I reached out to touch her, saw her flinch, and realized that she had already shut herself off from everything she hated and desired in the world she was trying to leave behind. The same way I had isolated myself in a research lab, turned my life into an empty theoretical abstraction that had starved me of all physical contact.

"Where are you staying?" I asked, slipping the gray plastic case into the shoulder bag.

"Aren't you afraid of becoming infected?"

"Should I be?"

Tanja stared blankly at the horizon, blinked, and then shook her head. "No," she said finally. "I'm not contagious anymore."

There was a kind of painful irony there, mixed in with the bleakness, because normally that would have meant she was recovering. Instead, the virus had left behind a post-mortem time bomb, a noncommunicable legacy that no one had been able to figure out.

Tanja could barely walk, so I took her to the Honduras Maya in a dusty combustion-engine bus that smelled of overripe fruit, urine, and raw gasoline. In between the harsher jolts and rattles of the loose metal siding and windows, I could feel tiny tremors running through her arm and shoulder where it touched mine, taste the dry metallic residue of the fumes and fear that had begun to coat my tongue.

She stumbled on the last step leading down to the grimy concrete curb, clutched at my arm with her hand and steadied herself, nails digging into my skin. I rode that grip all the way to the penthouse floor, then felt it relax as we stepped out of the elevator and made our way through the plush, new-carpet smell of the hall to her room.

The door opened into gold-edged glass, reflected marble and crystal chandeliers set against a window backdrop of hazy afternoon mountains and sepia-tinted sky. Expensive, but then she hadn't planned to stay long.

I put the shoulder bag on a Danish-style sofa, soft brown leather slung low on a sleek frame of polished chrome tubing, and followed Tanja into the bedroom, watched her unzip a small cosmetic case on the bedspread beside her, take out a dermal syringe and carefully transfer the fluid from the vial, her hands quivering.

"Help me," she said, raising the syringe to her neck, feeling tremulously with the fingers of her other hand for the artery pulsing just beneath the skin.

I think I shook my head. My throat had clenched up tight. I'd been telling myself all along that it might work, but now I didn't know what to believe. Even if the molecules distributed themselves into a neural net patterned after her own, responded to the same sensory input as her own failing neurons, it seemed unlikely that who and what she was now would be preserved. That she would remain the same.

"No," I told her, my voice a strained, barely audible whisper. I didn't want to see her die, but I didn't want to see her psuedo-survive either. I didn't want to see her become one of those shadow-entities exiled by technology to some mindless purgatory somewhere between life and death.

"Help me," she said again, "and I'll give you what you came for."

"So you stayed with her," Flor says. "Spent the night. Out of pity."

"I took advantage of her," I say. My arms and legs are heavy, my vision constricted, blurred around the edges. I take a deep breath and think about what Flor said earlier about wanting to be loved by a beautiful woman and tell her, "It's true."

And it is.

Flor takes the empty beer bottle from my hands. When she comes back, she steadies me by the arm and leads me outside, and I have some idea of what Tanja must have felt like those last few days and hours, trying to walk, to get her body to do what she wanted.

The air beneath the corrugated sheet-metal awning of the front porch feels like hot breath against my skin; the bright phosphorescent white of the beach brings tears to my eyes, and I can feel her smooth frail body fusing to mine, pulling me into her.

"You have a fever," Flor says, sitting me down on a bleached wooden chair that smells faintly of dry sweat and creosote. "*Yeyecatlcihuatl*. Evil air."

"I'm drunk," I tell her, the words heavy and thick. At the end of the porch I can hear the soft rustle of sea grape leaves, see wild-haired palms leaning toward the water like bodiless heads on thin, supple necks.

"We went to church," I tell her, closing my eyes as the scent and feather-light touch of pepper-tree twigs, rue, and red geraniums brushes across my face, down my neck and arms.

We went to church.

Closed San Miguel's heavy wood doors on Tegucigalpa's neon dusk, and entered into expansive silence that seemed to breathe on its own. A few scattered parishioners sat by themselves in separate pews, old women with scarves around their heads, fingers dutifully counting out Our Fathers and Hail Marys on the ancient, worn beads of rosaries.

Tanja took a seat close to the front, the side of her face flickering in the light of the votive candles that had been placed at the feet of St. James. The chiseled robes seemed to shift as I stared at them, the statue brought to life by the faith of the people who believed in the spirit it contained.

Next to me, Tanja had become a statue too. Face rigid, body unmoving. Even the quiver in her hands had stopped. I wondered, then, what she was looking for, if she believed in anything beyond herself, or if she was trying to make that leap for the first time. Maybe she had already made it, had decided to put her faith in something else. Something she would never know the answer to until it was either too late or didn't matter anymore.

I'd never been able to do that, and sometimes it felt like I was missing something important. Something that

would fill in all the little voids in my atomistic and rationalist world; the empty gaps between all the simple quantifiable elements—molecules, memes and electric impulses—that I had built my life out of.

The Music of the Spheres. There have been times when I thought I could almost hear it, half believed I had touched some mental finger to its vibrating chord and felt it sing, however briefly, through my body.

In her own way, I think that's what Tanja was after. Which was why she had put the MED chip in the upturned palm of a saint and then gone back to place herself in those same hands, to discover some measure of salvation and commit her soul to the new life she hoped to be born into the way the people who filled those pews around us during a mass wanted to be reborn.

An act of faith.

And hope.

If she prayed, I never heard her. The words were spoken privately, in the silent cathedral of her thoughts.

Flor lights a cigarette and blows a thin cloud of white smoke across my sticky, sweat-covered face, sprinkles Siete Machos over me. The smoke is supposed to prevent the evil spirit that has been banished from my body from infecting others, possessing them the same way.

Flor intones one of her prayers, steps back and makes the sign of the cross. The sharp smell of perfume makes my head swim, and when it clears, when the ritual is finally complete the way Tanja's was that last night in San Miguel, I know a little bit more about what she was going through, the fear and the loneliness she faced, and why she needed me the same way I still wanted and needed her.

To ease the terrible sense of isolation and uncertainty she'd felt, standing at the edge of a dark abyss that no one had leapt into before, trying to choose between death and an artificial synthesis of life that might or might not be able to recreate whatever it is we call human.

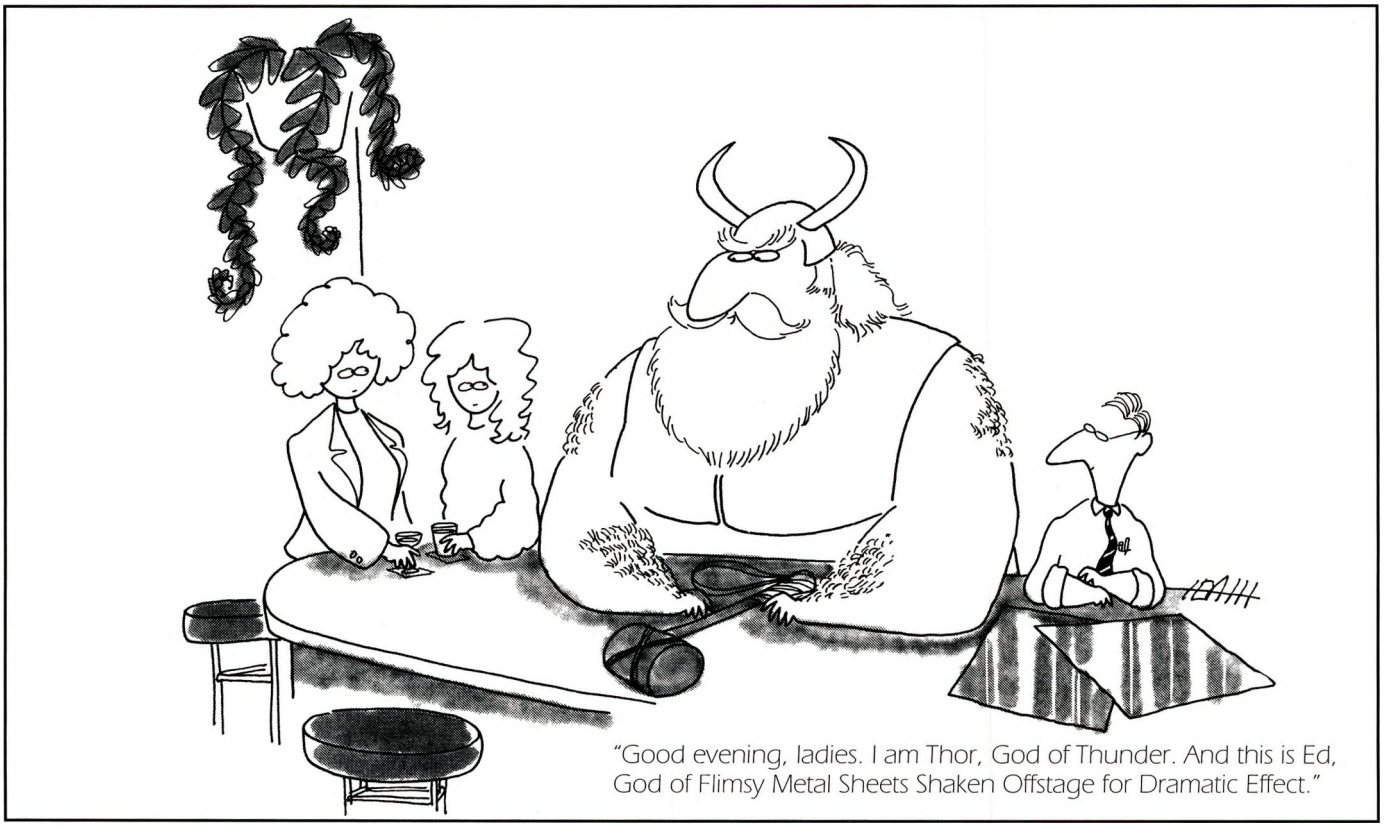
The same edge where I stand now: thinking of how she's gone where I want to go, remembering the sudden sharp intake of breath, nails pressing into my back, and the smooth glass invitation she placed in my hand.

I squint at the sun glinting off the stained-glass blue of French Harbour and imagine myself in Henry Morgan's place, perched on the edge of the Caribbean, drawn to Roatán by passion and the lure of the unknown, the freedom to live and die as I choose.

Aoki is hunting me, marionette strings being pulled from somewhere high above her in Lancetilla Labs' executive stage set. The MED chip is still in St. James's upturned palm, and I know I can do what Tanja did. Exchange my old life for a new one. When I close my eyes I can see the chip, along with the flickering robes and the outstretched arms. Tanja's arms, waiting to embrace me, and her hands held out. An offering.

I squeeze the empty vial she gave me and the promise of rebirth it represents. It's mine if I want it. All I have to do is reach out and take hold of it, like the hand I left behind.

I'm praying for you, Tanja. Be there. Catch me when I leap. ✦



"Good evening, ladies. I am Thor, God of Thunder. And this is Ed, God of Flimsy Metal Sheets Shaken Offstage for Dramatic Effect."

The Thirties: Escape from Oblivion

Mike Ashley

The Amazing Story Part 2

The last issue of *Amazing Stories* under Hugo Gernsback's editorship was dated April 1929. Following the bankruptcy of his publishing company, Gernsback was ousted from control. The receiver eventually refloated the company and it was sold to a new publisher, Mackinnon-Fly (later renamed Teck).

Gernsback, never one to rest on his laurels, formed a new company and launched a stream of science-fiction and technical magazines. The first, *Science Wonder Stories* (which started with its June 1929 issue), was modeled closely on *Amazing Stories* and even contained stories that had been sent to Gernsback for *Amazing*. In the next six months came *Air Wonder Stories, Science Wonder Quarterly,* and *Scientific Detective Monthly,* plus a series of sf booklets.

It was at this time that Gernsback began using the term "science fiction." His old term, "scientifiction," had been registered as a trademark by his former company, and he was advised that he could not use it to promote his new publications. His phrase (which, unknown to him, had been coined eighty years earlier by a long-forgotten Englishman, William Wilson) rapidly came into common usage.

This flurry of activity attracted the attention of other pulp publishers. William Clayton set his editor, Harry Bates, the task of preparing a new magazine, which appeared in December 1929 (cover date January 1930), entitled *Astounding Stories of Super-Science.* Bates was aware of the science fiction in *Amazing Stories,* though he wasn't enamored of it. "What awful stuff, I'd found it!" he later wrote. "Cluttered with trivia! Packed with puerilities. Written by unimaginables."

In thinking about the possibilities of science fiction Bates, alas, latched onto the lowest common denominator—the superscience extravaganza—and because Clayton's company was a popular market for pulp writers (as distinct from Gernsback's visionaries), the new writers of sf concentrated on the adventure angle to the detriment of sound scientific speculation. It was the Clayton *Astounding,* more than any Gernsback magazine, that lowered the quality of science fiction and stereotyped it as man-vs.-monster/rescues-damsel stuff—a stigma with which it was long thereafter associated (and with which, thanks to series such as *Doctor Who,* it is still associated by some today).

Before 1930 was many months old, it was clear that a division was emerging in science fiction. *Science Wonder Stories* (soon to become simply *Wonder Stories)* on the one side strove to publish the more purist form of technological science fiction. *Astounding Stories,* on the other side, cared little for the accuracy of its science, provided it was the basis for an exciting adventure. In neither case were the stories of a high literary standard, and consequently science fiction's image was suffering on both fronts.

So where did this leave *Amazing Stories?* When Gernsback left, the magazine and its companion *Quarterly* remained in the editorial hands of Thomas O'Conor Sloane, his former assistant.

Sloane was not like Gernsback. For a start, he was seventy-seven years old (Gernsback was forty-four at the time), and while he was well grounded in Victorian science, he was not a visionary. He had been employed by Gernsback to run the administrative side of the magazine, specializing in proofreading and spotting scientific errors. He was a benign, amiable old graybeard who tolerated science fiction as an amusing diversion, but had no belief in what he published. He expected that no human would climb Everest, let alone travel into space. His editorials were stodgy essays on such exciting subjects as the light bulb. As a consequence, the stimulus and inspiration provided by Gernsback vanished from the magazine.

Nevertheless, science fiction fans—who were emerging in the hundreds, and starting to organize themselves—are nothing if not loyal, and they welcomed this diversification in their favorite reading matter. They continued to support *Amazing Stories*, and for a time the magazine continued to publish stories that were close to the Gernsbackian mold.

Amazing became as much a market for space opera as the other magazines, and it was in *Amazing* that this branch of the genre reached its "cultural" peak. During 1930, the magazine not only published "Skylark Three," E. E. Smith's sequel to "The Skylark of Space," but also Edmond Hamilton's "The Universe Wreckers" and the series by John W. Campbell, Jr., about superscientists Arcot, Wade, and Morey. These were better than any equivalents in *Wonder Stories* or *Astounding*.

Having scaled that peak, *Amazing* was prepared to consider less cosmic alternatives. Hamilton, one of the earliest perpetrators of space opera, used *Amazing* as the market for a change of pace in "The Man Who Saw the Future" (October 1930), which developed one of Gernsback's throwaway ideas to consider how a man from the past would see the modern day. Likewise, Campbell, who had been a Sloane discovery, revealed he also had a subtler side, and though this would emerge more potently in *Astounding Stories* in 1934 in stories such as "Twilight" and "Night," it had its origins in *Amazing* in "The Last Evolution" (August 1932), in which robots supersede humankind as masters of the earth.

In addition, Sloane relied on other Gernsback originals, including David H. Keller and Miles J. Breuer. Keller's stories, such as "The Metal Doom" (May through July 1932), "No More Tomorrows" (December 1932), and "Unto Us a Child Is Born" (July 1933) are thoughtful speculations on the effects of scientific development (or lack of it) on society and the individual. Breuer continued to write his stories about the fourth dimension, including "The Book of Worlds" (July 1929) and "The Gostak and the Doshes" (March 1930), while with Clare Winger Harris, one of the few female sf writers of the day, he wrote "A Baby on Neptune" (December 1929), a clever story about space-time differentials.

Sloane sustained a few regular writers. Most of those who are closely associated with his magazine are, by and large, forgotten today except for the singularity of their names, such as Isaac R. Nathanson, Abner J. Gelula, Henry J. Kostkos, J. Lewis Burtt, Charles Cloukey, and Joe W. Skidmore. The one significant exception, apart from Campbell, was Neil R. Jones.

Jones was good with ideas, but struggled to convert them into stories. He was not much of a writer, but he was a good storyteller, and he struck gold with his series about Professor Jameson. The professor had constructed a spaceship in his old age and planned to launch his body into space, where it would remain perfectly preserved. Forty million years later, long after life on Earth had passed away, the space coffin is found by a benevolent race of space explorers, the Zoromes. They are also superscientists, and have found a way of preserving their brains in robot bodies. They revive Jameson and transfer his brain to a robot. Thereafter he joins them on their exploration of the universe.

The series began with "The Jameson Satellite" (July 1931), and eleven more stories in the same vein followed in *Amazing*, concluding with "The Music Monsters" (April 1938). Jones wrote thirty Jameson stories in all, including a number in the late sixties that remain unpublished.

There was a belief at the time, as *Amazing*'s circulation began to fall, that it was the Jameson stories that were keeping the magazine alive. One little-known fact about the series is that the first story had originally been submitted to Gernsback at *Science Wonder Stories*. In that version, the story consisted of a lot of boring detail about how Jameson planned and built his space coffin. Jones boldly ended the story by revealing that the sequel would be entitled "After 40,000,000 Years." In rejecting the story, Gernsback gave the sound advice that it should be edited to form the preface to the sequel. This Jones did, but, due to his dissatisfaction with the slowness and amount of Gernsback's payments, he submitted the revised story to *Amazing*. Had Gernsback's payment practices been better, he would have had the classic Jameson series, and one can only speculate what effect that turn of events might have had on *Amazing*'s circulation.

By 1932, America was in the grips of the Depression. The economic crisis was having an effect on many publishers, even though the public would still scrape together its dimes to purchase its favorite magazines. At this time, perhaps there was no better escape than into the worlds of science fiction. Nevertheless, the publishers of *Amazing Stories* could not ignore or avoid the effects of the Depression. The companion *Quarterly* slipped to semiannual publication in 1932 and ceased altogether in 1934. *Amazing*, which had so far retained its large pulp format, shifted to the standard pulp size with the October 1933 issue to minimize production costs, though it then became lost among other bookstore pulps.

By now the magazine's circulation had dipped to around 25,000, and it was doing little to attract new readers. Its covers were, for the most part, subdued. The mainstay artist was Leo Morey, Frank R. Paul having followed Gernsback to his *Wonder* stable, and though Morey's covers were arguably better executed, they were drab and uninspiring compared to Paul's. *Amazing* did try one bold experiment during 1933, with a series of surreal symbolic covers rendered by an artist called Sigmond. Today these covers may be seen as revolutionary, but they met a cold reception from the readers of sixty years ago, and probably harmed *Amazing*'s circulation.

Sloane did little to enliven the magazine internally. He had passed his eightieth birthday in November 1931 and, despite a surprisingly agile mind, he seemed to exist in a timeless cocoon, oblivious of what else was happening in the science fiction world. He frequently held onto manuscripts for several years before publishing them, so that the general tone of his magazine was

out of synch with developments elsewhere. During 1932 and 1933, Gernsback, through his editor David Lasser, was pumping new respectability into science fiction, encouraging writers to include more realism in their stories. Many writers took up this challenge, initially Nathan (Nat) Schachner, Laurence Manning, P. Schuyler Miller, and Edmond Hamilton, but few of these were selling regularly to *Amazing,* and when they did their stories often failed to appear for some years. Sloane was becoming increasingly remiss at notifying authors that stories had been accepted. This practice caused him one particular embarrassment when he published Malcolm Afford's "The Ho-Ming Gland" in the February 1933 *Amazing*—unaware that the story had already appeared in the January 1931 issue of *Wonder Stories.* Afford, not knowing Sloane had accepted the story, and possibly thinking the manuscript had been lost, had tired of waiting to hear from Sloane and had submitted the story to Gernsback, who published it promptly.

By 1934 *Astounding Stories* was eclipsing *Wonder* as the leading science fiction magazine. William Clayton's company had gone bust in 1933, due as much to his delight in gambling as to the Depression, and *Astounding* had been purchased by the venerable firm of Street & Smith. That company's editor, F. Orlin Tremaine (who had some time before worked for Clayton, though not at *Astounding*), radically improved the magazine. Many writers, including Nat Schachner, Donald Wandrei, Jack Williamson, John Russell Fearn, Murray Leinster, Thomas Calvert McClary, C. L. Moore, and E. E. Smith, plus John W. Campbell, Jr. (writing as Don A. Stuart), noted the restraint shown by the new Gernsbackian sf, and fired it with the sense of wonder of the original scientific romances to produce a new strain of cosmic realism. Science fiction was born anew in the pages of *Astounding* during 1934 and 1935.

Those who solely read *Amazing* would have been ignorant of this phenomenon. Writers submitted their stories to *Astounding* first, because it paid promptly and was the place to be, and to *Wonder Stories* second, for, although Gernsback paid poorly, *Wonder* remained a fun magazine, supported by a vocal fan community in the newly established Science Fiction League. *Amazing* was the last resort, and had become the backwater of science fiction.

On the whole, *Amazing* was boring. In order to save money, Sloane was reprinting ancient stories by Jules Verne, Fitz-James O'Brien, Edgar Allan Poe, and Edward Everett Hale. (O'Brien's "The Diamond Lens" appeared in the October 1933 issue—less then seven years after it had been printed during the Gernsback era, in December 1926. Reprints of Poe stories were used in four of six consecutive issues beginning in November 1933. In the middle four months of 1934, Sloane spent considerable space serializing Verne's "Measuring a Meridian.") Few of these rehashed stories were science fiction even by Gernsback's original standards: Poe's "The Gold Bug" (April 1934), for instance, being a story of cryptography.

Worse still, Sloane published some new stories that were the real nadir of science fiction. Take "The Romance of Posi and Nega" (September 1932), the first of a series by Joe W. Skidmore that treated electrons as sentient beings. Or, what could arguably be called the worst story ever published in an American sf magazine, "The Universal Merry-Go-Round" by Roger Bird (April 1933). This story is so bad as to be compulsive reading, and no plot summary can do it justice. For starters, consider that it involves two men intent on a trip into space but who believe confinement in their capsule will drive them mad. They propose to take along the professor's daughter
—not for company, or anything else you might imagine, but to play the violin!

Merely by the law of averages, Sloane should have published some good stories, but his quota of decent material was woefully small, and probably arrived more through luck than through design. These included several stories by S. P. Meek, such as his adventures in a lost South American city, "The Drums of Tapajos" (November 1930 through January 1931) and "Troyana" (February through April 1932), plus his Ray Cummings-like stories in a subatomic world, "Submicroscopic" (August 1931) and "Awlo of Ulm" (September 1931). Meek's stories weren't particularly well written but were nonetheless lively and fascinating.

From Charles R. Tanner came "Tumithak of the Corridors" (January 1932) and "Tumithak in Shawm" (June 1933), about mankind's subterranean resistance movement against the Venusian shelks who now dominated the Earth.

"The Lost Machine" (April 1932) was a poignant robot story by John Beynon Harris (better known in later years as John Wyndham).

Howard Fast, a name more readily associated with the novels *Freedom Road* and *Spartacus,* made his first story sale to *Amazing* with "Wrath of the Purple" (October 1932), about a virulent cellular lifeform that destroys all other living things.

"Omega, the Man" (January 1933) by Lowell Howard Morrow was a moving story of the last humans alive on Earth. Sloane had held onto this story for at least two years before publishing it, and had it appeared in 1930 it would have been heralded as a major breakthrough in realism.

Sloane could have made up for this omission had he accepted Edmond Hamilton's "Colonists of Mars" in 1934, but he rejected it as being "well written, but too horrible." The story lay in a back drawer for twenty years before Hamilton resurrected it and revised it under the title "What's It Like Out There?" It appeared in *Thrilling Wonder Stories* in 1952, at which time it was heralded as a bold new treatment of the realism of space colonization.

Harl Vincent established himself in the early *Amazing* but went on to become an *Astounding* regular. His "Parasite" (July 1935) is an overlooked classic about an invisible alien intelligence that takes control of humans.

Finally, there was "He Who Shrank" (August 1936) by Henry Hasse, a noted classic about smallness that was the author's first solo appearance in a professional magazine.

These are most of the few stories of merit or interest that *Amazing* published in the early to mid-1930s. To his credit Sloane did manage to nurture a few writers who would later develop significant reputations. He published several stories by Eando Binder, the name used by the writing team of Earl and Otto Binder. Earl later moved away from writing but Otto continued to sell stories under the original name and others. Sloane bought their first story, "The First Martian" (October 1932).

John Russell Fearn made his debut with "The Intelligence Gigantic," a serial in the June and July 1933 issues which set the tone for his cosmic career. Fearn became a regular contributor to *Amazing,* often under pen names, and became one of the most prolific writers of science fiction in the 1940s and 1950s.

Finally, although he could not have known at the time what a service he was performing, Sloane used a poem entitled "Elegy to a Dead Satellite: Luna" in the October 1937 issue. This was the first appearance in print of Elton V. Andrews, a pseudonym used by a young man who would later be known to one and all by his real name: Frederik Pohl.

But these discoveries were hardly enough, at the time they occurred, to measurably alter *Amazing*'s course. The magazine, which had been a monthly publication from the start, went bimonthly after the August 1935 issue, and there the real downward spiral began. Readers faded away until, by 1937, the circulation was only about 15,000. Its publishers sold the magazine to William B. Ziff, a former World War I pilot, who had established the Ziff-Davis Publishing Company in Chicago in 1935 with Bernard G. Davis. The company initially published magazines aimed at rich hobbyists, such as *Popular Photography* and *Popular Aviation,* but Davis wanted to expand into the pulp fiction field. *Amazing* was an opportune choice. The deal was made in January 1938, with the June 1938 issue the first one that was fully under Ziff-Davis's control.

Bernard Davis was in overall editorial control of the magazine, but as managing editor he appointed Raymond A. Palmer, one of the most active fans in the sf field, to whom he entrusted the task of procuring material. Palmer was twenty-seven years old, sixty years Sloane's junior. A change in style was inevitable, but it was even more dramatic than the age gap would suggest. Palmer threw out the old Teck material and established a new policy for lively, adventurous stories aimed at a young market.

Hugo Gernsback must have winced at what was happening to his brainchild. Two years earlier, Gernsback had given up *Wonder Stories,* his poor financial management once again having endangered one of his publications. *Wonder Stories* had been bought by Standard Magazines and converted into *Thrilling Wonder Stories,* which also aimed at the younger reader. Now *Amazing* was pitching for an even younger readership, basically the young teenager. The magazine was given a facelift with striking front and back covers by local Chicago artists Robert Fuqua, Howard McCauley, and Julian S. Krupa. All of these illustrators had an eye for action, and the magazine was instantly attractive.

The interior artwork was also beefed up, and stories were given more sensationalistic titles. Palmer almost habitually changed authors' titles, not always for the better, but his methods gave the magazine a consistency that was easily recognizable and with which many of its readers could associate.

However, the older generation of readers was horrified. A few remained loyal, but most shifted their allegiance to *Astounding* where, since December 1937, John W. Campbell, Jr., had been the editor and was leading science fiction into its Golden Age.

Palmer, being based in Chicago, was able to call upon a new stable of writers to build his own brand of science-fiction entertainment. He scored several early successes.

Robert Bloch had always been a fan of science fiction, but heretofore had concentrated on weird and mystery fiction. Palmer bought Bloch's first science-fiction story, "Secret of the Observatory" (August 1938), and published his powerful psychological sf story, "The Strange Flight of Richard Clayton" (March 1939).

Palmer also published Eando Binder's "I, Robot" (January 1939), a touching story about a selflessly noble machine. This story made an impression on the young Isaac Asimov, and it was in *Amazing* that Asimov first appeared professionally in print, with "Marooned Off Vesta" (March 1939).

Palmer also acquired William F. Temple's "The Four-Sided Triangle" (November 1939), an ingenious story about two men in love with the same woman and how the situation is complicated with a matter-duplicator.

Nelson S. Bond, a more talented writer than he is usually judged to be, appeared with a superior consideration of a future feudal society in "The Priestess Who Rebelled" (October 1939).

By the end of the 1930s, *Amazing Stories* was firmly reestablished. It was back on a monthly schedule—which was reinstated after the October 1938 issue, and it had a new companion magazine, *Fantastic Adventures* (first issue dated May 1939). In a little more than a year Palmer had turned the magazine's fortunes around, but at the risk of alienating the more serious members of the sf community.

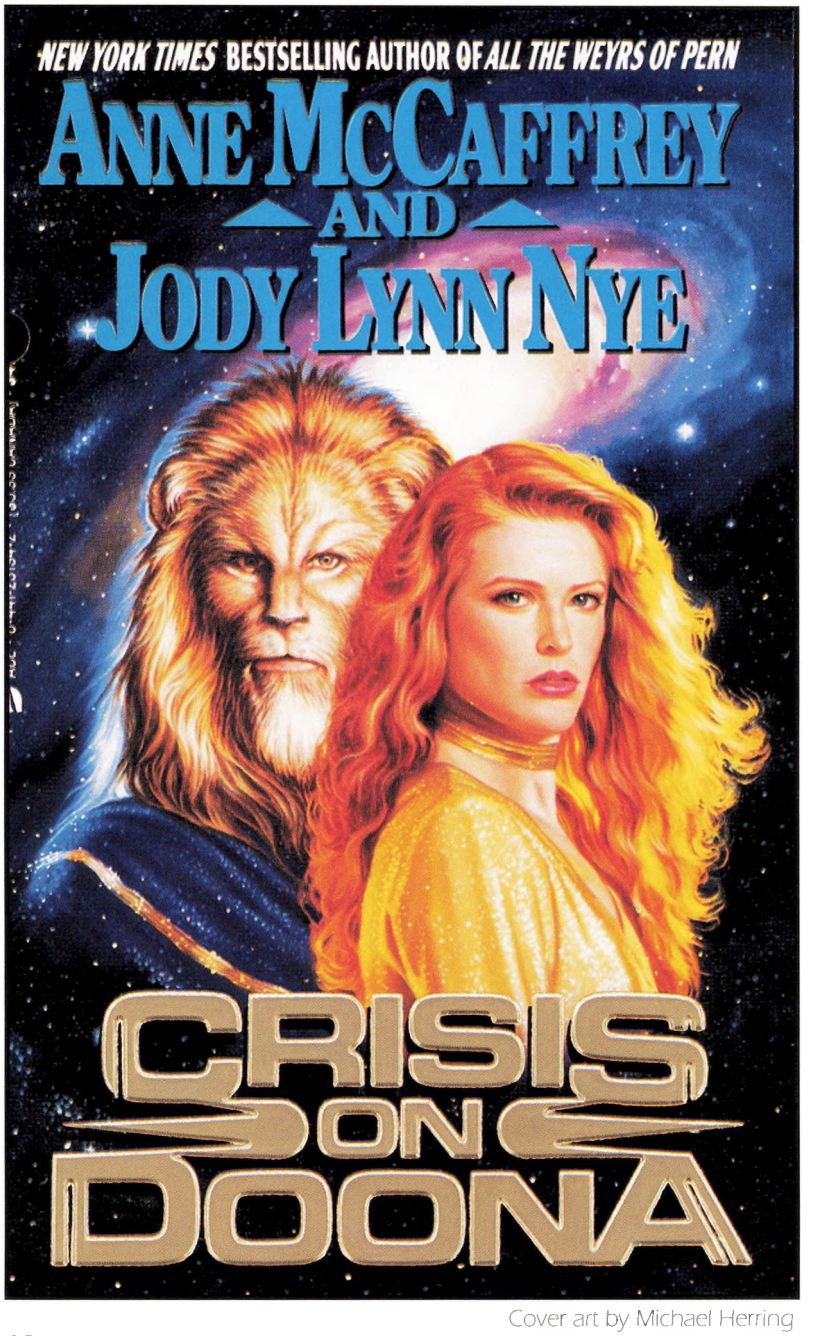
But Palmer was undeterred. He was rapidly building *Amazing*'s new reputation. Even if history records that it was *Astounding* that led the science-fiction revolution and published more sf classics than the other magazines put together, in terms of sales it was Palmer who won the race. The magazine's circulation soon exceeded *Astounding*'s and continued to rise. *Amazing* was ready to face all odds, and as war clouds gathered, Palmer prepared the magazine for its third decade. ✦

Looking Forward:

Crisis on Doona

by Anne McCaffrey and Jody Lynn Nye

Coming in March 1992 from Ace Books



Cover art by Michael Herring

Introduction by Bill Fawcett

Anne McCaffrey and Jody Lynn Nye have collaborated twice before on the *Dragonlover's Guide to Pern* and *The Death of Sleep,* both of which were best sellers. This new novel begins a portrayal of the seminal events in the starting of the Federation of Sentient Planets (FSP), which is the basis for the background of nearly all of Anne McCaffrey's novels.

On the planet of Doona, the first world to be inhabited by both humans as well as the catlike Hrrubans, we see through the eyes of Todd, Kelly and Hrriss the struggle of those with a higher vision to prevent bigots and the greedy from ruining the cooperation between the two species. The treaty under which humans and Hrrubans have shared Doona is about to come up for renewal, and those with darker motives will stop at nothing to prevent this from occurring.

This excerpt, taken from early in the book, depicts an incident in which the major characters try to deal with a recurring local problem.

—

The giant reptiles of Doona made their way to spawning grounds on the plains once a year, but for some reason returned from the sea along the river. They were fearsome to behold one at a time, but when they swarmed, as they did during this season, it was a sight beyond terror. The largest ones, "Great Big Mommy Snakes" in Doonian parlance, were the stuff of campfire stories to terrify small brothers and sisters on moonless nights. The most horrifying thing about the stories was that they were true. The snakes could reach lengths of twenty meters, with maws that could ingest a full-grown horse. Their smooth-muscled bodies were as large as tree trunks and covered by tough protective scales. Fortunately the snakes were not invincible.

Biologists had arguments over whether or not the snake stench stunned smaller creatures. Or whether, after all, the snakes were smart enough to hunt upwind of their intended prey. The young snakes, the two-year-olds, making their first return trip to the plains, were the most dangerous, because they weren't canny enough to avoid trouble. The small ones were only small by comparison. Even in their second year, they measured three meters, usually more. The combination of their youthful energy and inexperience and their pangs of wild hunger made them deadly adversaries. A young snake could bring down one of the fierce mdas all by itself. Weaker animals were snapped up as tidbits.

Doonans and Rralans had the advantage of knowing the terrain, the horses they rode, and of having witnessed many Hunts. But for outworlders who arrived with more bravado than training, the objective could be fatal. The prey was tricky and very dangerous. The contest was even weighted somewhat on the side of the young snakes. After all, none of the Hunters were five meters long and muscled in every inch, Then some wit decided to add an extra fillip, awarding "coup" points for using the least technology or hardware possible in making the capture.

Every year, a few of the would-be heroes got hurt while trying to capture a young snake that was too big or too wily. Todd didn't remember who had started the newest nonsense, but it had come to be a big headache for him and the other Hunt team leaders. He sympathized belatedly with the original masters, who had been in charge when he passed the adulthood ritual himself years before. He had pulled off a highly pointed coup by using a fire-hardened lance and a garrote to finish off the snake, and carried home more eggs than anyone else that year.

Every reach had its own defenders, well prepared with bazookas, rifles, even shoulder-mounted missiles to discourage reptiloid invasions. It was preferable to deter entry rather than kill. Some said that snakes remembered where they'd been deflected and stayed away.

The snake stench was fierce along the river embankment, where the snakes had passed on their way to the spawning ground. The Appaloosa mare rolled her eyes and twitched, but showed none of the other signs of hysteria displayed by the younger mounts. Kelly patted her neck and settled into the comfortable saddle. Kelly favored the style invented by the gauchos of old Earth, which protected rider from horse with layers of soft padding between each and the saddle frame. The fluffy sheepskin which Kelly bestrode on top of all made the contraption look heavy and ridiculous. In reality, it was lighter than most leather saddles, and held her so snugly it ws almost impossible for her to fall off. She was grateful for her choice, feeling her tailbones where she had lost her saddle calluses. If she rode a day on leather now, after four years' absence, she'd be crippled for a week. Chaps, like the ones worn by Todd and most of the other Hunters, protected her legs from trees and scrub.

Fastened by her knees, she had two small crossbows, loaded with the safety catches on, and half a gross of quarrels, some of them explosive. She also had a spear with a crosspiece for protecting her hand at close quarters, and the traditional paint-capsule gun for marking troublesome snakes she couldn't reach, for the next teams to pick out.

Kelly noticed that Jilamey had an almost dainty-looking slug-throwing revolver slung on the horn as well as a number of the approved weapons and that cumbersome quarterstaff. Clicking her tongue at his naivete, Kelly smiled. Wait until he saw one of the Great Big Mommy Snakes. His pistol would do no more harm than flicking sand at a leviathan would.

They passed one of the snake blinds that lay next to the path. The reek of the citrus perfume, like citronella, was powerful enough to divert humans as well as snakes. Kelly was glad to see that the newer snake blinds were situated close to thick, climbable trees. If one of the Hunters got hurt, there was a quick haven available.

Above them, Saddle Ridge was nearly invisible through the trees. As soon as they reached a landmark rock, they turned inland away from the river path and cut through the forest into hilly grasslands. Todd was leading them up as close as possible to the dunes without breaking cover. Once the snakes finished laying their eggs, they headed in whatever direction they thought led to food on the way back to their territories. The job of the teams was to cut off their other options, riding alongside the bulk of the snake swarm, guiding it back to the sea without giving it a chance to stop.

"The safest thing," Todd reminded the guests, "is to expedite the snakes' passage. There's plenty for them to eat in the water. We try not to kill the snakes that are willing to go peacefully. We want the wild young ones that endanger other creatures. It'll be easy to pick out the rogues and mark them if we run with them. We have to keep our distance from the main group, though, or they'll just gang up on us and eat us all."

Kelly could almost have repeated his speech word for word. It was the same one he had been giving for years. She smiled impishly at his back, which he held straight in the saddle, wondering what he would do if she chimed in. She was fond of Todd, and equally fond of Hrriss. Of course it was nearly impossible to think of one without the other, they were so inseparable. A pity. She couldn't help but think that their united front was what had kept both of them single all these years.

Ahead of them, a streak of brown and gray as quick as a blink broke out of the undergrowth and showed them a patterned back. Jilamey let out a yell, and Errala jumped, making her horse dance back out of the way. The snake, a tiddler at four meters, seemed just as surprised to see them. It doubled in its own length and scooted back into the brush.

"That one is afraid of us," Hrriss said, holding up a hand to forestall pursuit. "It may already have eaten, or it has learned discretion in the last years."

"I always like a Hunt that begins with a well-fed one," Jan said grimly, calming her mount. The radio crackled into life: Teams Six and Seven were in pursuit of snakes that had left the spawning grounds in the opposite direction, but the majority were coming Team One's way.

More snakes followed the first one, but these attempt-

ed to slither past the horses without stopping. The snakes were normally solitary creatures, but at this particular moment of their life cycle, they did seem to understand safety in numbers. When pressed too closely, they split up and headed in several directions, hoping to elude pursuit. The team formed a wall with spears and flashing lights, heading off snakes and scaring them into the direction they wanted them to go. The Hunters and Beaters stationed along the way would repeat the actions, keep them moving toward the river route. Suddenly a Mommy Snake, not one of the GBMSs, but still more than respectable in size, appeared between the outcroppings of rock. It was followed by a swarm of smaller snakes that quickly outdistanced it.

Yelling into his radio, Todd wheeled his horse after them and kicked the animal to a canter. "We got some biggies on the road!"

The others followed, falling into position behind him. The team formed a cordon along the front edge of the swarm, following it downstream into the trees, keeping it contained with pain and noise. With the blunt end of spears, flashguns, whips, even brooms, they pushed, prodded, and drove the snakes back into line. The Hunters had to stay spread out, since their quarry ran anywhere between twice a man's height in length and fifteen meters long. A single snake could endanger several riders. Somewhere behind them, as the stream of reptiles advanced forward, Teams Two, Three, and Four were joining the wall of Hunters. The river acted as a natural barrier on the other side, saving manpower. Still more teams were spotted in the forests and meadows, driving stragglers that broke out between the teams where the Beaters' threshers couldn't go.

"Now we ride them into the sea," Jilamey crowed, brandishing the staff above his head like an Amerind he must have seen in the Archive Pictures.

"It is *not* that easy," Kelly yelled back, losing her composure at last. Jilamey was just begging to be killed. Or thrown. His mount really didn't like all that brandishing.

A tiddler, probably returning from its first spawning, catching the scent of the lathered mare, slithered toward her with amazing speed. Calypso saw it coming and swapped ends to buck, lashing her hind feet out at it. Kelly hung on. Calypso might be accustomed to the stink but she retaliated in proper equine fashion to the direct assault. Landreau, thinking he was being heroic, spurred his mount toward it and slammed the staff down on its nose. Abruptly his horse ran backward as the tiddler reared up, ready to lunge forward, jaws wide and eager to swallow horse and rider in one gulp.

Cursing Landreau and her horse in one breath, Kelly swung Calypso about with the strength of her legs alone and leveled one of her crossbows at the predator. The snake was all bunched to strike when Kelly discharged the bolt. She'd lost none of her marksmanship in her four years away. The quarrel struck right through the creature's forehead. Sheer momentum kept the snake moving toward its prey while Jilamey's terrified mount managed incredible speed backward until it was jarred to a halt by a tree. Then, with a squeal of fear, the horse jumped off its hocks to one side and took off in a panicked run, Jilamey clinging desperately to his saddle. Then the tiddler fell sideways, a wavy line that quickly disappeared under the mass of snakes. No doubt one of the other reptiles would stop and eat the corpse while it was still twitching. Team Two or Three would have to deal with it.

Kelly and Calypso resumed their position as they passed one of the pairs of margin Hunters, who waved them a salute with spear and flashgun. They were positioned well, on a small natural upthrust of rock overlooking the well-worn river path. The snakes disappeared from Kelly's view briefly as the Hunters looped around the far side of the ridge and the snakes followed their own old road. It was to the Hunters' advantage that their quarry preferred to slither on smooth dirt and stone rather than over the uneven floor of the jungle. Kelly guided Calypso among the huge, ridged rla trees, keeping her eye on the young snakes. Before and behind her, flashguns popped, distracting the snakes who might break out of line.

Snarling yips and growls erupted behind them, amid the sound of two horses whinnying in fear. Kelly risked a quick glance over her shoulder. One of the bigger reptiles was coming up behind them, followed by a pair of horses crashing through the undergrowth. Two of the Hrruban visitors from Team Two had earmarked a Mommy Snake and were riding it down, without regard for the organization of the Hunt or their own safety. They wore only their equipment belts and helmets, without a stitch of clothing over their furred limbs and tails to protect against the branches whipping at them.

Their quarry had slipped out of line and was now on the outside of the Hunters' cordon. The experienced riders in Team One knew that the snake was only waiting to get far enough ahead of its pursuers to turn about and strike. Hrrubans had superlatively fast reflexes, but they were slow as falling snowflakes compared with the teeth and coils of a Mommy Snake. Only experience countered speed.

The snake was tiring. The species was made for sprinting and quick striking, not long-distance runs, and it had recently laid its eggs. The Hrrubans had probably surprised it coming directly off the hot sands through the narrow gap. It was in search of a wider place where it could make a stand. Kelly didn't like the situation she could see developing. Couldn't the Hrrubans see that those meter-wide jaws could engulf one or both of them?

Todd turned his head and exchanged glances with Hrriss. The Hrruban abruptly edged his horse out of the line and slipped between and ahead of the two endangered Hunters. Kelly was sure she hadn't seen either one of the leaders lift his radio. It was this sort of instantaneous cooperation which gave them their reputation for telepathy. Todd raised his rifle to his shoulder and fired.

He was using an explosive shell. The shot went off against the ground in front of the Mommy Snake. It slid to a rapid halt in a heap of coils to see what had kicked up the dirt just as Hrriss gathered himself in his saddle and sprang. ✦

Looking Forward:

PartnerShip

by Anne McCaffrey and Margaret Ball

Coming in March 1992 from Baen Books

Introduction by Bill Fawcett

Perhaps the most compelling story ever told by Anne McCaffrey is not a Pern novel, but *The Ship Who Sang*. This novel is the first in a series of coauthored books featuring the "shell people" first introduced in that story.

The shell people are humans who because of birth defects or injuries are unable to live ordinary lives. They choose instead to have their consciousnesses vested in the computer controls of ships, cities, or space stations whose corridors and hulls are more real to them than their machine-maintained, crippled forms hidden inside nearly invulnerable metal shells. Each shell person ("brain" in the local vernacular) is matched with a normal human (the "brawn" of the pair). In *PartnerShip*, the major characters are Nancia—a ship, designation NX-928—and her brawn, a cynical human named Forister.

In this scene, we get a look inside Nancia's thoughts as she prepares to embark on her first mission.

—

He never did know when to stop. And the idea of shutting down her own nodes made Nancia so uncomfortable that she couldn't bear to discuss it with him.

"Listen, softshell, I'd have to cut off more than one node to bring myself down to your computational level!"

"Oh, yeah? Come outside and say that again!"

"Sure, I'll come outside. I'll take you right up to the singularity point and let you find your own way out of the decomposition!"

"Aha, relying on brute force again. It's not fair," Flix appealed to the ceiling, "two big sisters, and they both pick on me all the time!"

"We had to do *something* to keep you under control—" Nancia shut down her vocal transmissions abruptly. There was an incoming beam from Central.

Cover art by Stephen Hickman

"XN? Message relay from Rigellian subspace." A brief pause, then the image of Nancia's father appeared oin the central screen opposite her pillar. On the left hand screen Flix's brainship icon flipped and rotated in an endless, mindless loop against the glittering stars of deep space; on the right, Troll Slayer stood frozen with one foot lifted to step across the threshold of the hidden cave. Between them, a tired man in a conservative green and blue pinstripe tunic smiled at Nancia.

"Sorry I couldn't come to your graduation, Nancia dear. This meeting on Rigel IV is vital to keeping Central's economy on the planned graph for the next sixteen quarters. I couldn't let them down. Knew you'd understand. Hey, congratulations on all those awards! I didn't have time to read the program in detail yet, but I'm sure you've done House Perez y de Gras proud, as always. And I think you'll like your first assignment. It'll be a chance for you to get to know some of the younger members of the High Families—a very fitting start for our own Courier Service star. Eh? What's that?" He turned towards his left, so that he seemed to be speaking to the frozen Troll Slayer icon. "The Secretary-Particular? Oh, very well, send him in. I'll need to brief him before the next session."

Eyes front again. "You heard that, I suppose, Nancia? Sorry, I have to go now. Good luck!"

"Daddy, wait—" Nancia began, but the screen went blank for a moment. The old image of the snow bridge and the trolls reappeared and she heard the voice of the CenCom operator.

"Sorry, XN. That was a canned message beam. There's no more. And your passengers are ready to board now."

"Thank you, Central." Nancia discovered to her horror that she had lost all control over her vocal channels; the trembling overtones that surrounded her speech made her emotional state all too apparent. *A Perez y de Gras does not weep.* And a brainship *could not* weep. And Nancia had been well trained to repress the sort of unseemly emotional displays that softpersons indulged in. All the same, she very much did not want to talk to anybody just now.

Flix seemed to have sensed her mood; he silently packed up the basket of fruit and sparkling wine and patted Nancia's titanium column as if he thought that she could feel the warmth of his hand. For a moment she had the illusion that she did feel it.

"I'd better get out of the way now," he said. "Can't have a Perez y de Gras brainship caught *partying* on her maiden voyage, can we?"

He paused on the stairs. "Y'know, Nancia, there's no regulation says you have to greet your passengers the minute they step aboard. Let 'em find their cabins and unpack on their own. There'll be plenty of time for social chitchat on the way out."

Then he was gone, a redheaded blur vanishing into the darkness, a whistled melody lingering on the night air outside; and moments later, the bright lights of a spacepad transport shone in Nancia's ground-level sensors and a party of young people tumbled out, laughing and talking all at once and waving glasses in the air. One of them stumbled and spilled the liquid over Nancia's gleaming outer shell; from a fin sensor she could see the snail-trail of something green and viscous defacing her side. The boy swore and shouted, "Hey, Alpha, we need a refill on the Stemerald over here!"

"Wait till we're inside, can't you?" called back a tall girl with ebony skin and features sharp and precise as an antique cameo. Right now her handsome face was etched with lines of anger and dissatisfaction, but as the fair-haired boy looked back over his shoulder at her she gave him a bright smile that wouldn't have deceived Nancia for a minute.

They were all still talking—and drinking that sticky green stuff—as they crowded together into the airlock lift without even asking permission to board. Well, she *had* left the entry port open after Flix's departure; maybe they considered that an implied welcome. And Nancia had heard that softpersons—at least those outside the Academy—didn't observe the formality that governed greetings and official exchanges in the Courier Service and other branches of Central's far-flung bureaucracy. She wasn't one to take offense yet, not when she herself was hardly ready for introductions to this bunch of strangers.

As they trooped out of the airlock and into the central cabin, Nancia played a game of matching faces to the names Central had given her. The short red-haired boy with a face like a friendly gargoyle had Flix's coloring and the flashing smile that reeled girls in to Flix like trout on a hook; he must be one of the two related to Nancia's family. "Blaize?" the black girl called. "Blaize, I can't *open* this." She held out a plastic pouch full of shimmering green liquid, and Nancia winced in anticipation as the redhead tore off the sealstrip with two short, strong fingers. But not a drop spilled on her new, official-issue beige carpeting—not now, anyway.

"Here you are, Alpha," the boy said as he handed it back, and Nancia matched their faces with the names and descriptions that had come in CenCom's databurst. The red-haired boy must be Blaize Armontillado-Perez y Medoc, of a family so high that they barely deigned to recognize the Perez y de Gras connection. And for some puzzling reason his first posting was to a lonely Planetary Technical Aid position on the remote planet of Angalia; she would have expected anybody from a three-name Family to start off somewhere near the top of whatever Central bureaucracy he chose. As for the ebony princess, with her sharp clever face that would have been beautiful if not for the discontented expression, she had to be Alpha bint Hezra-Fong. The short burst transmitted from CenCom identified her as a native of the warm, semi-desert world of Takla, with high marks in her medical research program, and no hint as to why she'd chosen to take a five-year sabbatical in the midst of training to run the Summerlands Clinic on Bahati.

As they passed the pouch of Stemerald back and forth, Nancia was able to identify the other three from their casual conversation without having to introduce herself. The slightly pudgy boy with a halo of overlong brown curls clustering around his red face was Darnell

Overton-Glaxely, going to Bahati to take charge of OG Shipping from the cousin who'd been administering the business during Darnell's minority. The other girl, the sleek black-haired beauty whose delicate bones and slightly tilted eyes suggested a family connection with the Han Parma branch of the family, would be Fassa del Parma y Polo. The del Parma y Polo clan controlled all the major space construction in this subspace, and now it appeared they were sending this delicate thing out to establish the family's rights in Vega subspace as well. The girl was probably, Nancia reflected, stronger than she looked. At any rate she was the only one refusing the pouch of Stemerald as it went around the circle, and that was a good sign.

And the last one—Nancia let her sensors take in the full glory of Polyon de Gras-Waldheim, the cousin she'd never met. From the crown of his smoothly cropped yellow hair to the gleaming toes of his black regulation-issue shoes, he was the epitome of the perfect Space Academy graduate: standing straight but not stiff, eyes moving in full awareness of what each of his companions was doing, even in this moment of repose conveying a sense of dangerous alertness. Like Nancia, he was newly graduated and commissioned. And like her, he'd ranked high in his class but not first; first in technical grades, the databurst said, but only second overall because of an inexplicable low mark in Officer Fitness—whatever that might be.

When she'd first scanned the databurst, during Flix's silly computer game, Nancia had been looking forward to meeting her cousin Polyon. He was the only one of the group with whom she felt that she had much in common. As two High Families members trained for a life of service to Central, just setting out to meet their destinies, they should have felt an instant sense of kinship. Now, though, she felt strangely reluctant to introduce herself to Polyon. He was so tense, so watchful, as though he considered even this laughing group of other young people in the light of potential enemies.

And, she reminded herself, he had personally consumed at least two-thirds of the recently opened pouch of Stemerald, plus Central only knew what else before coming on board. No, it wasn't a good time to introduce herself and tell Polyon of their family connections. She would just have to wait.

"Hey, guys, look at the welcoming committee!" Blaize interrupted the chatter. He was staring past Nancias's titanium column, at the triple-screen display of the SPACED OUT game that Nancia had absentmindedly left up after Flix's abrupt departure. The concealed visual sensors between the screens showed Blaize's freckled, snub-nosed face alight with pure, uncomplicated joy.

Blaize moved slowly across the soft carpet until he sank into the empty pilot's chair that should have been reserved for Nancia's brawn. "This," he said reverently, "has got to be the biggest, best SPACED OUT I've ever seen. Two weeks will go like nothing with this setup to play with." The game control channels were still open, and as Blaize identified himself and took control of the brainship icon, Nancia let the underlying game program alter the brainship's course to zoom in on Troll Slayer's world. The brilliance of the graphic display drew the other passengers to look over Blaize's shoulder, and one by one, with half-ashamed comments, they let themselves be drawn into the game.

"Well, it beats watching a bunch of painbrains dose themselves silly in the clinic," Alpha murmured as she took a seat beside Blaize.

Nancia had hardly recovered from the shock of this callous comment when Darnell, too, joined the game. "I'll have to copy the mastergraphics off this program and have somebody install it on all OG Shipping's drones," he said, animating Troll Slayer. "Anybody know how to break this code protection?"

"I," said Polyon de Gras-Waldheim, "can break any computer security system ever installed." He favored Darnell with a slanting, enigmatic side glance. "If it's worth my while . . ."

Oh, you can, can you? thought Nancia. *We'll see about that.* Software game piracy wasn't exactly a major crime, but a newly commissioned Space Academy officer ought to have a stronger ethical sense than some commoner who hadn't had the benefit of a High Families upbringing and an Academy training. She felt distinctly less eager than she had been to introduce herself to her handsome cousin.

Polyon turned his head and treated Fassa del Parma y Polo, still lingering beside the door, to a brilliant smile. "Now you, little one, could make just about anything worth my while."

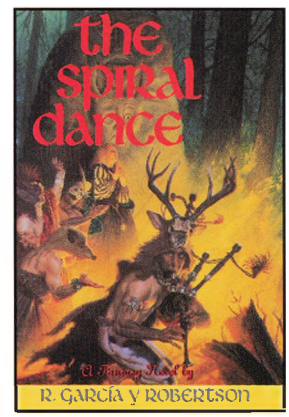
Fassa moved towards the game controls with a sinuous, gliding motion that riveted Blaize's and Darnell's attention as well as Polyon's. "Forget it, yellowtop," she said in a voice as sweet as her words were stinging. "A second-rate Academy officer with a prison-planet posting doesn't have enough to keep me interested. I'm saving it for where it'll do me some good."

Nancia briefly shut down all the cabin's sensors. How had she gotten stuck with these greedy, amoral, spoiled brats? She had a good mind to put off introducing herself indefinitely. From the freedom of their comments, they must be assuming she was only a drone ship with no power to understand or act on anything but a limited set of direct commands.

But she would still need to know what they were up to. She opened one auditory channel and heard Blaize leading Darnell and Polyon in a raucous chorus of, "She never sold it, she just gave it away!" whiole Fassa glowered and slithered off to her cabin.

Nancia had the feeling that this would be one of the longest two-week voyages any brainship had ever endured. ✦

Book Reviews



Remaking History
by Kim Stanley Robinson
Tor Books, December 1991
256 pages, $18.95 (hardcover)

Remaking History is a collection of short fiction. Fourteen of the fifteen stories are reprints, the only original story being "Vinland the Dream."

The focus of this volume, which should be obvious from the title, is the alternate history story. Robinson, however, doesn't seem to be as interested in writing alternate histories as exploring the implications that an alternate history creates.

The title piece, "Remaking History," is a good example. At one level, it's about a filmmaker on the Moon making a docudrama about the rescue of the hostages from the U. S. Embassy in Iran. The story actually seems to be questioning the idea of alternate histories in general, because the film crew isn't as interested in reality as it is in telling a good story, and they're willing to change things around to fit if necessary. This can also be true for alternate history writers, since what they do is make a few tweaks to the past and then interpolate what happens.

This thought is repeated in "A History of the Twentieth Century, with Illustrations," only this time we have a historian looking back on a period of time that looks very similar to the world of today and trying to write a coffee-table book about it.

"A Sensitive Dependence on Initial Conditions" takes this idea one step further, becoming more an extrapolation of the thinking processes of writing an alternate history than a story itself.

Reading this volume brought to mind the question of whether alternate history is a valid fictional form. Robinson's answer is a definitive yes, as he shows shows how it's a useful and interesting tool when used with some thought, some care, and a lot of research.

Other stories in the collection stand outside the primary theme. The one original story, "Vinland the Dream," is a look at the discovery of a major, sophisticated hoax on historians: that the Vikings never landed on North America. "Down and Out in the Year 2000," while set in the future, really isn't SF, but an examination of what happens to a person when he falls so far out of society he can't claw his way back. Clearly influenced by the country's current homeless problem, it's a disturbing, powerful piece. "Glacier" moves us into the future of the next ice age, and brings it home by seeing how something devastating on a global scale ends up affecting a family on a very personal and intimate level.

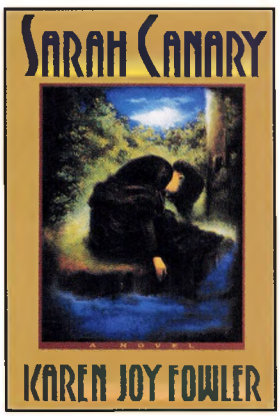
This tendency in Robinson's writing—taking large, world-changing events and using very small, personal reactions to them—is what gives his fiction the power and intensity that makes it so successful. Robinson is a major voice in the field, and this collection is another example of why. — *C. Von Rospach*

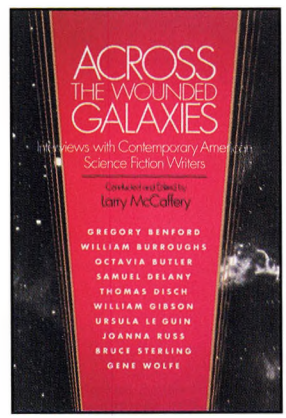
The Spiral Dance
by R. García y Robertson
Morrow Books, October 1991
227 pages, $20.00 (hardcover)

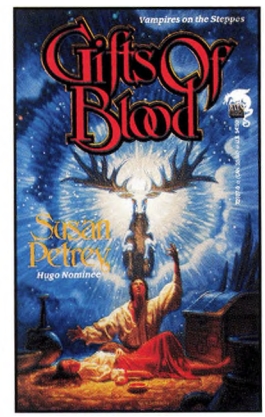
This was evidently my month for historical fiction. First alternate history, and now historical fantasy. R. García y Robertson's first novel, *The Spiral Dance*, takes us to the borderlands between England and Scotland in the 1500s. Mary, Queen of Scots, has been imprisoned, and Anne Percy, Countess of Northumberland and an ally, is riding with her husband to raise an army to free her.

If you know anything about English history, you'll realize that this ride will be futile, a bitter defeat for Anne and her followers. She doesn't know, but everyone realizes that the road will be a hard one. It turns out to be much harder than anyone could imagine, though, as they suffer defeats, treacheries and bad luck that take them from the linen sheets and warming fires of the high-bred to dependence on the outlaws on the Scottish border. Anne perhaps suffers worse, going from the life of a soft, protected gentlewoman to accusations of witchcraft, torture and being burned at the stake as a witch (from which she is rescued at the last moment).

This intense, severe dehumanization of a person is difficult for Anne as well as for the reader. Anne survives through all her ordeals thanks to her faith and the encouragement, through visions, of the Virgin Mary.







It is with this element where we begin to see the shift in this book from straight historical novel to historical fantasy.

Mary visits Anne and encourages her to continue the path she has chosen. It will be difficult, but only through its completion will Anne be able to properly serve her. Along the way, Anne becomes involved with some of the Scottish magic-users, and in one instance makes a close escape by being shape-changed into a deer. The use of heathen magic disturbs her until Mary explains that all religions are artifacts of the true religion, and so those that serve one serve them all.

This is an important point for the story, and Robertson takes some care to get it across clearly and unambiguously: there is only one God/Goddess, and whether you worship Jesus, or Mary, or practice hedge-magic or Wicca, everyone worships different aspects of the same god. This will be a controversial point to some, but it's a key to the ultimate redemption of Anne, who goes from soft castle-wife to being penniless and friendless on the moors of Scotland, to accepting all aspects of the Virgin Mary and choosing to serve Her. The book becomes not so much an attempt to rescue Mary, Queen of Scots, as a trip through enlightenment and redemption.

Unlike many historical fantasies, where the fantasy elements are seemingly grafted on because straight historical fiction is hard to sell, the fantastic elements are carefully integrated into the story and play an integral part of the success of the work. The book is exceptionally well researched, detailed and very accurate, except where Robertson chooses to diverge and bring in the elements of the fantastic.

Robertson is a fascinating writer, and this first novel is a strong, well-written work. — *C. Von Rospach*

Sarah Canary
by Karen Joy Fowler
Henry Holt, October 1991
290 pages, $21.95 (hardcover)

And here's one step further into historical fiction.This long-awaited first novel by acclaimed short fiction writer Karen Joy Fowler can't really be called historical fantasy. There are a very few, ambiguous fantastic references—a woman who might or might not be a vampire, a man who thinks he is immortal—but they're ultimately McGuffins that go nowhere. This book is straight historical fiction, and that is, in fact, how Henry Holt is marketing it.

The story is set in the Washington territories in 1873, a time of great growth and transition. The railroads are coming in, and there is gold and timber and fur in abundance. There are also a large number of immigrants, especially Chinese immigrants doing railroad work, and a society that goes beyond intolerant to actively hostile.

Into this environment comes Chin Ah Kin, a Chinese man traveling through the hills in a small group to a new job. While at the fire one night, he suddenly sees what he initially thinks is a ghost lover—the Chinese equivalent of the Sidhe that lures men off to Faerie for a few evenings of fun, only to return to the real world years or decades later. No ghost lover could be as ugly as this woman, though. A white woman in a Chinese camp is a major problem for all involved, and so Chin is ordered by his uncle to return her to her people.

As they travel, they pick up a growing entourage of people who seem to be attracted to Canary for their own personal reasons, including a man who wants her for his traveling freak show and a woman doing a lecture tour on female suffrage and orgasms in the lumber camps.

This is a fascinating novel, a disturbing look at an earlier age in our society that many of us would like to pretend never happened. This is a time when the only thing more fun than killing an Indian is killing a Chinaman, when people are locked up in asylums for being different and not let loose because it'd be bad for business. Sarah Canary is above, or perhaps beyond, all of this, but acts as a catalyst that brings out what is good, and what is bad, in the people who fall into her sphere of influence.

I found this book both engrossing and disturbing. It's well written (I

expect no less from Fowler, whose short SF has been uniformly wonderful), but it brought up issues and described situations that I really wasn't sure I wanted to read about. But read about them I did, though, because Fowler's story carried me through the high and low points. It's a very literate work, but accessible, and even though it's not genre work, Fowler's fans and those who like fiction with a historical bent should give this one a try. Let's hope her next work doesn't take so long to hit the shelves. — *C. Von Rospach*

Across the Wounded Galaxies
by Larry McCaffery
University of Illinois Press, 1990
267 pages

Finally, a history of a different sort. *Across the Wounded Galaxies* is a series of interviews conducted with some of the most important authors in the SF field by McCaffery, a professor of English at San Diego State University.

The authors involved in this volume include Gregory Benford, William S. Burroughs, Octavia E. Butler, Samuel R. Delany, Thomas M. Disch, William Gibson, Ursula K. Le Guin, Joanna Russ, Bruce Sterling, and Gene Wolfe.

Each interview is prefaced by an introduction that discusses the author and his or her work, and puts it into a societal and fictional context. McCaffery has obviously done a lot of research into each subject prior to the interviews and has the ability to ask incisive, penetrating questions while never making the mistake of stepping in front of the subject and becoming the focus of the interview himself or overtly turning the interview into an attempt to forward his own theories or agendas.

There's a lot of meat in this volume, and if you're interested in reading about the genre as well as reading in it, then you should consider having your bookstore order this for you, since because it is a university press book, it's unlikely you'll find it sitting on a shelf except at the more complete specialty shops. — *C. Von Rospach*

After the King
edited by Martin H. Greenberg
Tor Books, January 1992
448 pages, $24.95 (hardcover)

Here's another anthology with a high frustration factor. Most of the stories in *After the King* are well-crafted, absorbing reading. But a persistent voice in the back of my head wants to know why they all belong in the same volume—and I'm not certain I believe any of the answers.

The book's subtitle is "Stories in honor of J. R. R. Tolkien," and its publication commemorates the hundredth anniversary of his birth. This is not, however, a "shared world" collection featuring stories about characters drawn from *The Hobbit* and *The Lord of the Rings*. Rather, contributors were asked to write stories that in some way expressed or acknowledged Tolkien's influences on their own work.

The responses are notable for their diversity. Emma Bull's "Silver or Gold" is a spidery fairy-tale, wispy yet less fragile than it appears. Charles de Lint blends bustling modern cityscapes and starry-eyed simplicity in his offering, while John Brunner mixes hints of dark ritual with a sedate country-village romance. A full company of adventurers populates Patricia McKillip's riddle-filled quest yarn, while Robert Silverberg probes the conscience of a solitary priest. And where Jane Yolen's "Winter's King" is quietly unnerving, Mike Resnick's "Revolt of the Sugar Plum Fairies" revels in its sardonic tone.

Unfortunately, the stories that stretch the anthology's borders furthest are also its least successful entries. Gregory Benford's "Down the River Road," written as SF rather than fantasy, is the most striking example; I found the protagonist unappealing and the atmosphere more reminiscent of a black-tempered Mark Twain than of Tolkien. Dennis McKiernan's "Halfling House" is initially clever, but takes a discordant left turn into a Charles Dickens plot and ends with more flash than satisfaction. And the soul-searching in Silverberg's piece feels unnecessarily self-conscious at times.

Yet just as many well-told tales seem out of place in this company. Karen Haber's "Up the Side of the Air" is kindly and wise, but would be much more at home in a *Sword & Sorceress* anthology than in this book. Mike Resnick's is rather like a Weird Al Yankovic number dropped into a London Symphony concert. And Peter Beagle's "The Naga" is an eminently pleasing story whose literary echoes simply resonate in a different key.

I don't doubt that contributors to *After the King* can draw personal connections between J R.R. Tolkien's works and the stories written for this celebratory volume. And I do highly recommend the anthology, for the stories mentioned above and for notable works by Stephen Donaldson, Judith Tarr, Terry Pratchett, and others. But the book's merits lie in the individual works rather than any effort to tie them together—and that in itself may be the best hundredth birthday present Tolkien could ask for. — *J. Bunnell*

Gifts of Blood
by Susan Petrey
Baen Books, February 1992
$4.50 (paperback)

The history of this book is nearly as intriguing, and as poignant, as the book itself. Yes, *Gifts of Blood* is significant as a memorial volume (royalties will go to a scholarship fund for participants in the noted Clarion and Clarion West SF writers' workshops). But that shouldn't detract from the appeal of the stories themselves; Susan Petrey's fiction is both distinctive and sensitive, and well worth making available for the first time in mass market form.

The book is a short-story collection representing virtually all of Petrey's published work, roughly half of which appeared in print before her death in 1980. Editors Debbie Cross and Paul Wrigley, with the assistance of SF writer Steve Perry, arranged for magazine publication of three of the remaining stories, with just one piece reserved exclusively

for this collection. For most readers, though, *Gifts of Blood* will provide the first (and regrettably, last) contact with Petrey's writing.

Perhaps not surprisingly, that writing isn't always polished. Especially in the seven stories devoted to the Varkela, a race of benign but reclusive healers native to the wild steppe country of northern Asia, Petrey's prose is rough around the edges. But that's not a disadvantage in this case, because the Varkela stories draw their impact from a sense of vulnerable intimacy that's actually enhanced by the occasional break in the writing. There's character and color in Petrey's creation, and her not-quite vampires are people worth meeting.

Petrey's characteristic bluntness is also an asset to "The Neisserian Invasion," a story that is probably more timely now than it was when it was written. The ending of this tale about an interspecies venereal disease may smack a bit too much of "punchline," but the events that lead up to it are an all-too-perceptive prediction on Petrey's part of society's handling of the AIDS epidemic.

"Spidersong" is another matter entirely. This is the story that won Petrey nominations for a Hugo and a John W. Campbell award, and deservedly so. Here Petrey's style neatly captures the music about which she writes, and she has firm control of a multifaceted plot involving a musical spider, a gifted human performer, and their distinct romances.

Gifts of Blood is worth reading for the sensitivity of its visions, and worth buying for the memorial scholarship it supports. Susan Petrey's pen may be silent, but the scholarship fund that bears her name may help to nurture a new generation of writers to take up where she left off.

(Collectors should note that a 500-copy limited hardcover edition of the collection was published by Oregon Science Fiction Conventions Inc. in the summer of 1990. That edition also includes essays by Ursula Le Guin, Vonda McIntyre, and Kate Wilhelm; inquiries about available copies should be directed to editors Paul Wrigley and Debbie Cross at 8001A SW Powell Blvd., Portland, OR 97206.) — *J. Bunnell*

Q-in-Law
by Peter David
Pocket Books, October 1991
252 pages, $4.99 (paperback)

Timewyrm: Genesys
by John Peel
Doctor Who Books (UK), Fall 1991
230 pages, $5.95 (paperback)

Locus, the SF trade magazine, would call both these books "novelizations" despite the fact that neither story has ever seen the inside of the television studios where the "Star Trek" and "Doctor Who" series are produced. That's an injustice to Peter David and John Peel; both volumes are clearly novels—and entertaining novels—on their own merits, and the differences between them are a striking illustration of just how far the institution of the tie-in novel has come since the form was invented.

Q-in-Law is one of the newest in a long line of original "Star Trek" novels, and Peter David's stylistic choice is to make his story look and feel as much like an episode of the current "Next Generation" series as he can. To this end, he takes two of that show's most popular guest players—John de Lancie's annoying but omnipotent Q, and Majel Barrett's perennial matchmaker, Lwaxana Troi—and builds one of his two major plots around their meeting, in the course of which Q and Lwaxana proceed to fall in love.

The result is exactly the sort of inspired lunacy you might expect. For once, Captain Picard has no apparent reason to kick Q off the *Enterprise*; he's on his best behavior, even if it is still rather pyrotechnic at times. And ship's counselor Deanna Troi, whose character has rarely been developed to best effect in the TV series itself, gets an effective spotlight as she tries to figure out how to disentangle her mother from Q's affections.

Part of the winning formula is David's ear for his characters; this is one case where you can practically hear the actors behind the author's dialogue. (Lwaxana: "Just because I'm omnipotent, that doesn't mean I'm no longer a nice person." Q, rather later: "Picard, get some hair. Your brain has caught cold.") The accuracy extends to the rest of the cast as well, especially in a subplot involving Wesley and an unexpected romance.

The plot, in fact, is thick with romances, and David manages to make the right ones believable even through the manic recklessness that characterizes Q's appearances. But this isn't really a plot-driven story; it's a story driven by scene and event, with a visual, cinematic quality that successfully emulates the "stage presence" of a movie or television episode unfolding on the screen.

That's a rare commodity in "Star Trek" fiction, and David's successful execution makes his novel thoroughly entertaining reading. (It may also be entertaining listening; as I write, an audio cassette version of *Q-in-Law* is being considered, possibly to be read by Barrett and de Lancie.)

By contrast, John Peel's *Timewyrm: Genesys* isn't cinematic at all. Peel, though, is in a rather different literary position. Until now, "Doctor Who" books have been novel-length adaptations of the original British television serials—Peel's is the first wholly new tale of the Doctor to see professional publication, in a period when the TV series isn't even in production. And where each "Star Trek" novel stands on its own, this book begins a cycle of four linked novels written by different hands.

Rather, Peel gives readers a story they would never be likely to see in televised form. It's been a long time since the Doctor's screen adventures have wandered through Earth history, yet we return in *Genesys* to the dawn of civilization, where the mythic hero Gilgamesh rules a Mesopotamian city-state. And where the TV serials deliberately strive to be "family programming," Peel provides a relatively frank portrayal of such ancient details as harems, female costume or the lack thereof, and the participants in ancient fertility rites. None of this treatment is gratuitous

or even in questionable taste, but it's striking in the Doctor Who universe.

The novel picks up where the now-dormant TV adventures left off. A mysterious warning from the Doctor's past sends the Time Lord and his companion Ace into Gilgamesh's world in search of an entity known only as the Timewyrm. Meanwhile, the lone survivor of a crashed alien vessel is gathering power in a city ruled by Gilgamesh's closest rival, and introducing anachronistic technology in the process. If her machinations aren't nipped in the bud, Earth's history may be altered to disastrous effect.

Peel does a competent job of managing the various intrigues, and spreads them over a plot that ranges more widely than it could have in a TV script. The new threat of the Timewyrm is balanced by a careful sprinkling of references and lore from the Doctor's past. If there's a problem, it's that Peel tries to introduce too many protagonists and plot threads, but for the most part, the novel is a credible time-thriller, and a strong setup for its forthcoming successors.

Neither *Q-in-Law* nor *Genesys* is classic literature. But they're both decently crafted, lively stories that add a measure of depth to the TV universes from which they're drawn, and both are books that fans of the *Tardis* or the *Enterprise* are likely to enjoy. — *J. Bunnell*

Now We Are Sick
edited by Neil Gaiman
and Stephen Jones
DreamHaven Books
93 pages, $20.00

In the last few years, a number of book dealers have begun experimenting with publishing their own books. They have produced titles by Thomas Disch, Ray Garton, Joe Lansdale, and many more. Mark V. Ziesing is currently the main bookseller-turned-publisher; he produces four or five titles each year. A relative newcomer is DreamHaven, which owns a bookstore in Minneapolis and is also one of the largest book and comic distributors to science fiction specialty stores in the midwest.

DreamHaven, as a distributor, certainly has the connections to get a book into stores where fans can find it. Book publishing seems a natural step in the retail book business, as booksellers try to control both production and distribution.

Waldenbooks, one of the two largest chains of booksellers, tried such an experiment in conjunction with Crown Books several years ago, under the imprint Pageant Books. As I understand it, in exchange for substantial discounts, every Waldenbooks store automatically bought large quantities of Pageant books. The idea flopped. Chief among the reasons for its failure: Copies that didn't sell [normally half to two-thirds of a book's print run is destroyed] weren't allowed to be returned. The result? The storage areas of every Waldenbooks in the country filled up with crates of unsold Pageant titles.

The Waldenbooks/Crown deal was an example of how to do everything wrong. In the specialized market of small print-run hardcovers, however, publishing a book you yourself sell can add considerably to its profitability. Consider these (very rough) figures:

Distributors buy books at 50% off cover price.

Distributors sell books at 30-40% off cover price (making 10-20% of the cover price in profit).

Distributors who publish books make the publisher's profit *and* the distributor's profit. For high-priced hardcovers which sell a thousand copies (or more) to specialty bookstores, these profits can rapidly become quite large.

So much for the economic theory of booksellers-turned-publishers. What about this particular title?

Now We Are Sick is a collection of macabre poetry: if you like the Addams Family, this is more in the same, er, jugular vein, with such topics as cannibalism, dirty habits, night fears, and so on.

The poets collected are primarily British (as might be expected, since the editors are British, too), though there is a sprinkling of Americans as well. Many of their names are familiar: Diana Wynne Jones, Stephen Gallagher, Terry Pratchett, Ramsey Campbell, Garry Kilworth, John M. Ford, Storm Constantine, Jo Fletcher, Jessica Amanda Salmonson, R.A. Lafferty, Gene Wolfe, S.P. Somtow, and Robert Bloch, among many others.

I found some of the poems a bit too British for my taste (laying on the "mums" and "telly" rather heavily at times), but for the most part it's a very morbid, very funny collection. Fantasy readers with a taste for dark humor should enjoy it.

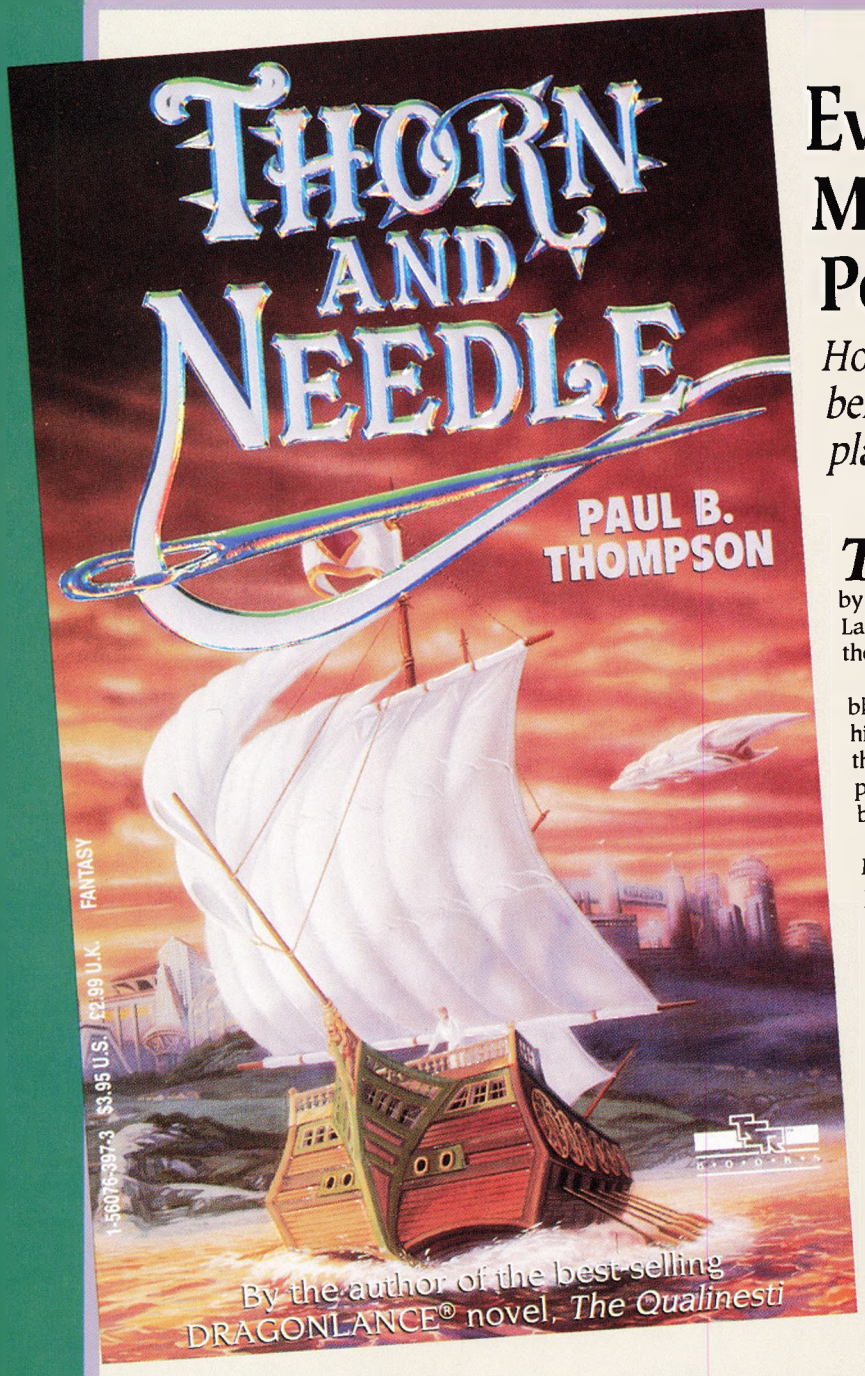
If your local specialty bookstore doesn't carry copies, you can order directly from the publisher: DreamHaven Books, 1309 4th St. SE, Minneapolis MN 55414. Add a couple of bucks for postage. — *J. Betancourt*

Scavenger's Newsletter
edited by Janet Fox
26 pages per issue, $15.50 per year (first class) or $1.50 per copy

Scavenger's Newsletter is a small-press market guide, with commentary, interviews, reviews, market listings and updates, average response times for many magazines and anthologies, and plenty of feedback from writers about the treatment—good or bad—they have received from various editors.

If you are a new fantasy, science fiction, or horror writer, it would definitely be worth your time and money to check this publication out. Editor Fox does a remarkable job in publishing the newsletter on a monthly basis (93 issues thus far), and *Scavenger's Newsletter* provides a wealth of information for anyone trying to write.

You can purchase a sample copy or a subscription by writing to: Janet Fox, 519 Ellinwood, Osage City, KS 66523-3538. Make checks or money orders payable to Janet Fox. — *J. Betancourt* ✦



Everyone Said Miyesti was a Perfect Place....

However, disaster boils beneath the surface of this placid land

Thorn and Needle reveals Miyesti, a city where marvels transpire daily. Wagons roll by without horses. Voices emerge from clouds. Lamps blaze without wicks. This and more are the handiwork of a wondrous new god.

Then two mysterious travelers enter the fabled city — a seedy, arrogant nobleman and his sullen manservant. What brings them to this mystical place? Is it the new deity and its powers? Or the fear of what the nobleman left behind and is running from?

Soon two powerful forces lying beneath the Miyesti's veneer will collide: tradition versus progress. And the destiny of this marvelous land is held in the hands of the puzzling strangers.

Thorn and Needle is an imaginative new science-fantasy novel by Paul B. Thompson. He is author of several best-selling novels, including *The Qualinesti* and *Red Sands*. Look for this new novel at bookstores everywhere.

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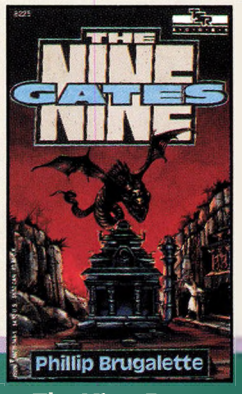
Kingslayer
L. Dean James
Available in June



The Nine Gates
Phillip Brugalette
Available in August

Half-Light
Denise Vitola
Available in December

Plate Tectonics, Oceans, and Life: The Planets Earth

Stephen L. Gillett

So far as we know, plate tectonics is unique to the Earth. ("Tectonics" is geology-speak for the processes that deform the crust.) In plate tectonics, new "plates" are formed at spreading centers, such as at the mid-Atlantic ridge. The plates move away from the spreading centers and are eventually consumed at "subduction zones," where they dive back into the mantle. Island arcs with their parallel oceanic trenches offshore, such as Japan and the Japanese trench, are the fingerprints of subduction zones. In all this, the continents ride along passively atop the plates, and the edges where the plates jostle together are the sites of most earthquakes and volcanos.

So far as we also know, life too is unique to the Earth. Before space exploration, everybody "knew" that there was probably primitive life on Mars, and possibly on Venus. Now we know that Venus is certainly dead, and Mars is almost certainly dead as well. Places for finding life keeping moving farther and farther away. In our own Solar System, Titan and Europa are longshots—but few now would be surprised to learn that the next life-bearing place is a planet circling another star.

It now looks as though these two unique Earthly phenomena are related. Life on Earth, of course, relies on liquid water: the oceans were vital in both the origin and evolution of living things. And oceans almost certainly are also vital to plate tectonics, because they lubricate the plates. When the plates subduct at oceanic trenches, they carry some seawater down into the mantle. There, it has a profound effect on that hot rock; it makes it flow much more easily, so that the plates can slide over it. Even though at ordinary time scales this "flowing" rock is perfectly solid, over geologic time it acts as an extremely viscous liquid. It forms the "asthenosphere" ("astheno" from the Greek word for "weak").

Plate tectonics and life are more intimately associated than merely being parallel consequences of the oceans, however. Plate tectonics also keeps our planet fit for life, in at least two ways. First, the continual slow stirring of the crust keeps vital nutrient elements, such as phosphorus, in circulation. Instead of becoming buried and useless as the oceans slowly filled in, these nutrients eventually come popping back to the surface, either from volcanoes, or as former ocean floor is uplifted as it becomes plastered onto a continent.

In fact, over geologic time plate tectonics has sweated rare elements out of the Earth. Elements that don't fit particularly well into the compact iron-magnesium silicates that make up most of the mantle become concentrated into the crust, and especially into the continents. Earth, with its restless, churning crust, is a giant chemical fractionating plant.

The absence of such fractionation is likely to be a problem elsewhere, as we start colonizing now-lifeless worlds. For example, mining geologist David Kuck has pointed out that potassium is likely to be much rarer, on the average, in Mars's crust than the Earth's, because Mars has no plate tectonics. Since potassium is a vital nutrient element, potassium mines may be necessary to supply Martian settlements.

Plate tectonics also lets our planet's climatic thermostat work. Everyone's heard by now of the "greenhouse effect," by which certain gases in the atmosphere keep the Earth warmer than it otherwise would be by trapping some incoming solar heat. Carbon dioxide is the second-most important such gas (the most important is water vapor), and it probably regulates Earth's temperature via the "carbonate cycle," which works as follows.

Virtually all of Earth's carbon is locked in the crust in limestone, which consists mostly of calcium carbonate, $CaCO_3$. Now, $CaCO_3$ precipitates easily from water solution, if enough calcium ions are present, and if the water contains some dissolved CO_2. Furthermore, the more CO_2 in the air, the more that dissolves in water exposed to that air. So, if too much atmospheric CO_2 accumulates so that things get too warm, efficient weathering under the warm conditions releases lots of calcium, which sooner or later brings the CO_2 level down. On the other hand, if things cool too much because too much CO_2 is removed, limestone precipitation stops, and CO_2 reaccumulates from sources

such as volcanic gases. Hence, over geologic time the carbonate formation acts exactly like a thermostat, tending to keep Earth at a constant temperature—but for the thermostat to work, plate tectonics must continually be raising raw new rock for weathering, and also be driving volcanoes.

(Humanity is currently enhancing the level of CO_2, and hence its greenhouse effect, by the burning of fossil fuels. Geologically, this is ephemeral. Over the next few thousand years all the extra CO_2 will be extracted into new limestone. But it might be awkward for the next few millennia.)

You might be able to arrange a planet that has surface water but no plate tectonics. However, for it to be an abode of life (to quote Percival Lowell), you'd still need a way to keep it stirred up over geologic time. That's likely to be hard.

Ocean planets like the Earth also change over time, and many people don't realize how very alien our own Earth has been in the geologic past. The continents are always drifting around, fragmenting, coalescing, sliding from pole to equator and back again—all with profound consequences for global climate and ecology, as well as geography. For example, glaciations are possible only when (as at present) there is restricted circulation of seawater from the equator to the poles, so that the poles can stay cold. During lots of Earth's history there has been no polar ice at all. (The oceans are very different then, too—with no cold polar water to sink, they're warm clear through. Warm and also anoxic, since warm water can hold little air in solution.)

More than that, though, plate tectonics is not a steady process; it goes in fits and starts, like hiccups. Over a century ago geologists first noted that sea level has fluctuated widely. In fact, at present sea level stands unusually low: more commonly, vast low-lying tracts of the continents are flooded by shallow seas. These so-called "marine transgressions" apparently occur when plate tectonics is more active than it is at present. During such times the spreading ridges under the oceans swell greatly, so that the ocean basins have less volume. Hence, the displaced water has to spill over the continents.

Where do continents come from in the first place? They're also products of plate tectonics. As I described above, they're rich in elements that were chemically fractionated out of the mantle over geologic time. In fact, continental crust is even different from oceanic crust, being more fractionated yet: it is thicker, and it is made of rock somewhat richer in aluminum, silicon, sodium, and potassium, and somewhat less rich in iron and magnesium. This composition is typical of granite. Oceanic crust, by contrast, is richer in iron and magnesium and is termed "basaltic," after an extremely common type of lava. Made of lighter rock, continental crust actually floats on the mantle below.

But still, why is continental rock gathered into continents? They *are* real features of the crust. If you divide up the Earth into a bunch of little squares, and plot the average elevation of each square on a histogram, you'll find that the elevations fall into two main groups: one centered around the average height of the continents, and the other around the average depth of the oceans.

What is happening is that plate tectonics scrapes the continental rock together. Remember, the continents just passively ride around on top the plates. But when the plates collide at a subduction zone, the continental rock simply piles up. (The Himalayas, where India has plowed into Asia, are a spectacular example.) Continental rock won't subduct, for the same reason a balloon won't stay underwater; it's too buoyant.

But there's a limit to how high the continental rock can be heaped up. Once the heap clears the sea surface, it becomes subject to very effective erosion, which tries to tear down the pile. Too, when the debris is carried off by rivers to the sea and redeposited, it can't build up above sea level. So that also limits the continent's height.

Probably the most effective erosional agent, over geologic time, is glaciation. Sooner or later—say, every billion years or so—every piece of continental rock above sea level will find itself hosting a continental glacier, like the ones in Antarctica and Greenland today. (Even northern Africa, present-day site of the Sahara, underwent a glaciation about 500 million years ago.) And continental glaciers are continental bulldozers; they scrape everything down, nearly to sea level.

So overall, the continents are pushed together and flattened down, rather like dough kneaded over and over again. This is a much more active planetary surface than an ancient, passive cratered surface such as on the Moon or Mars. In fact, till the discovery of plate tectonics we did not quite realize how profoundly different the Earth is from the other rocky planets.

Let's pursue some other SF-related consequences of oceans. Writer and scientist David Brin has emphasized that ocean-worlds such as the Earth, while perhaps being great places to evolve life, may not be great places to evolve technology. To get technology, you probably need fire, metal, and ultimately electricity—and that means a land-based species. But you need enough land; if the only land area that existed were a few island chains, or even a large island or two, you probably wouldn't have critical mass for developing a tool-using species, much less a sophisticated technology.

Hence, Brin suggests that Earth may be unusually water-poor for an ocean-world, and so has an anomalously large amount of land area. This is an excellent idea—but realize that, say, doubling Earth's water won't flood the continents forever. It will just double the continental freeboard, since as I just described the height of the continents is ultimately set by the depth of oceans. On the other hand, remember also that during a marine transgression Earth itself becomes largely sea. So even Earth at certain times is not a good bet for land-based intelligence.

Not just any land area will do, either. As the stately churning of the plates shoves continents around, it occasionally happens that most of Earth's land area gets scraped to-

gether in one place to form a single land mass—a supercontinent. This happened most recently about 250 million years ago, when the continent Pangea (from the Greek for "all land") coalesced. Before that, another supercontinent seems to have split up just before the beginning of the classic geologic record, when creatures with hard parts (which make good fossils) first appeared—a bit over 550 million years ago.

Supercontinents were not very pleasant places, climatewise. Away from the coast, the climate would have made Siberia look like Hawaii. Far from the mellowing influence of the sea, temperatures would have soared in summer—over 120°F., by some estimates—and plummeted in winter. Rainfall would also have been meager, so far from the sea. A supercontinent would have lots of land area, to be sure, but it was not very congenial land area. (In fact, as I've described in another column, the assembly of Pangea seems to have coincided with the most catastrophic extinction ever.)

Perhaps fortunately then, supercontinents aren't stable for any length of time, geologically speaking. They disrupt the spreading patterns too much. The energy to run plate tectonics (and any tectonic process, for that matter) comes from heat escaping from the Earth. A supercontinent acts just like a giant insulating bandage plastered to the side of the Earth, keeping the heat in.

So, before too long, they split up. Rifts develop across the supercontinent; the sites of new spreading centers, the rifts eventually grow into new oceans. In the case of Pangea, for example, South America rifted away from Africa, North America from Europe, and India, Australia, and Antarctica from Africa and each other. In fact, this coalescence and subsequent fragmentation of supercontinents may drive the hiccuping of plate tectonics. An era of supercontinents tends to be followed by a time of vigorous seafloor spreading.

Last, life itself drastically and continually changes an ocean-world. In a previous column I described the release of oxygen, way back in the Precambrian. Some primitive cyanobacterium "learned" to extract hydrogen from water, and released the toxic, highly reactive waste product: oxygen. This deadly gas built up in the atmosphere, corroding rocks beyond recognition, and slaughtering all life forms that could not adapt or hide: the consequences for the future of Earthly life and Earth itself were momentous.

One probable geologic consequence was that iron chemistry at the Earth's surface was vastly rearranged. In its compounds, iron has two stable oxidation states, iron (II), which has lost two electrons, and iron (III), which has lost three. Without much oxygen around, most iron is in the (II) state. In this state it's very soluble, and probably there was a lot in the ancient oceans. Iron (III), by contrast, is insoluble.

In the mid-Precambrian, iron was precipitated into so-called banded-iron formations (affectionately BIF), vast layered deposits consisting of little but iron oxides. Photosynthetic microbes living in shallow water may have been the cause. As they released oxygen, it immediately combined with the dissolved iron to make iron (III) oxides—which then settled out. Although small iron formations are found in younger rocks, nothing on that scale has formed since (the vast iron mines of northern Michigan are all BIF). Once oxygen built up into the atmosphere, though, virtually all the iron (II) in solution went away—and so did the BIF. Now we have what a geologist calls "redbeds"—sandstones stained red by a little iron (III) oxide, like all that spectacular scenery you see in *Arizona Highways*. Redbeds form slowly as iron in minerals is oxidized by oxygen dissolved in groundwater.

But oxygen's only one example, albeit a spectacular one. Life has also largely taken over the carbonate cycle I described above. Many critters in shallow tropical seas use calcium carbonate to build shells and skeletons. (Coral reefs are a spectacular example.) So, most limestone for the last 550 million years or so has been made of biological debris.

Old rock types vanish, too, when life evolves new capabilities—as the vanishing of BIF shows. For another example, in the Precambrian, before the beginning of the classical fossil record, a type of thinly layered sedimentary rocks called "stromatolites" are found. Most stromatolites appear to be formed by algae growing in mats in shallow seawater, layer by layer. But modern stromatolites are extremely rare. Today they're only found in unusual environments where no higher life forms exist. The reason is that in the modern world algal mats can't exist, because they're grazed on by higher lifeforms such as snails.

Only when microbes are the only living things in the environment can stromatolites be abundant. Such an Earth may strike us as boring, but our planet was in that condition for most of its history. (The Earth is over 4.5 billion years old, but multicelled lifeforms—"metazoans"—didn't show up till about 600 million years ago.) In fact, since Earth has been such a "scumworld" for almost 90 percent of its existence, you can bet that most other ocean-worlds are still at the scumworld stage—although you wouldn't know it from reading SF.

Higher life forms had other unexpected effects. For one thing, in ancient sedimentary rocks, thin, platy shales are quite common. They result from mud deposited in still water. Platy shales are quite rare in younger rocks, though, probably because of the evolution of burrowing organisms. Muddy rocks now tend to be homogeneous, because they have been thoroughly stirred up. But before there were burrowers, the individual layers of mud were left intact, to become layers in the shale.

It took more than just the evolution of metazoans to take the Earth completely out of the scumworld phase, too. Land life evolved only after about another 150 million years or so. Hence, even though the oceans teemed, the continents were still thinly populated merely with microbes for millions of years later.

This finally changed, of course, in a big hurry geologically—a few tens of millions of years or so. Land plants in particular have rearranged things beyond recognition. What did

humid areas look like beforehand? It's hard to tell, because now any area that gets any rain at all becomes heavily vegetated. It's hard even to find a rock in such areas! But with heavy rainfall and no higher plants to take advantage of it, soil development, erosion, drainage—all would have been vastly different.

Changes are still going on, too—it's not just human beings that are changing the Earth! About 100 million years ago, for example, a group of one-celled critters called foraminifera (forams for short) developed the ability to secrete tiny calcium carbonate shells, or "tests." Because of this, much calcium carbonate is now deposited in the deep ocean, because the shells sink when the organisms die, instead of being confined to shallow seas as it formerly was. Hence, lots of calcium carbonate is now being carried down subduction zones. No doubt, over the next few hundred million years, we'll see effects on volcanism as a result, because the calcium carbonate will yield lots of carbon dioxide.

Over the last 70 million years or so, too, those shallow tropical marine environments have been invaded by a new competitor: a true grass, turtle grass (scientific name *Thalassia*). The grasses, members of the class of monocotyledons, are the youngest major group of higher plants. They had a profound effect on mammal evolution through the Cenozoic, as grazers developed to deal with them. So, the latest thing in higher plants, a grass, is invading the ancient shallow-water environment—the cradle of life itself—to compete with the single-celled plants such as algae that remain there. Who knows what the effect of this biological innovation will be?

Real ocean planets are complicated and intimately interconnected. And most importantly, they change! This complexity is not always appreciated in SF; Earth in the past has been a lot stranger than many authors' "alien" planets! Before you try designing an alien planet, first look into the diversity shown by our own Earth. ✦

About the Authors

The writing career of **Brian Stableford** has about as many facets as a finely cut gem: he's a novelist, a contributor to reference books on science fiction, fantasy, and horror, an editor of anthologies . . . the list goes on. When we last heard from him, he was finishing his last scheduled obligation for 1991—translating a collection of short stories by Remy de Gourmont from the original French.

Fortunately for the rest of us, he also manages to find time to create some of the most imaginative short stories we've seen recently. "Complications" is his second appearance in the new-format AMAZING® Stories, following on the heels of "Skin Deep" (October). We suspect we'll be seeing more of his work in the months to come . . . which means you'll be seeing it, too.

Ever since **Kathe Koja** made her debut in this magazine with "Command Performance" (November 1990), we've been after her to follow that performance with another short story. The bad news is she's been too busy writing novels lately. The good news is we've arranged to use a small slice of her upcoming book, *Bad Brains*, in this issue. It's not an original short story, but it's the next best thing—and where Kathe's writing is concerned, that's more than good enough for us.

Avram Davidson was the recipient of the Life Achievement Award given out at the 1976 World Fantasy Convention. If it were possible for someone to win that award twice, he'd probably be the leading candidate, because the quantity and quality of his work have not lessened a bit in the intervening 15 years. We welcome him back to these pages with "In Brass Valley," his twelfth piece of short fiction for this magazine and his first appearance since the July 1987 issue.

Sheila Finch, another old friend of this magazine, is back after an absence of "only" a year and a half with "If There Be Cause," the latest in our short series of "Alternate Americas" stories—which is, in fact, the subtitle of the next *What Might Have Been* anthology, scheduled for October release, in which Sheila's story will appear. She has had six other fiction pieces in these pages, most recently "Sequoia Dreams" (July 1990).

The versatile **Robert Frazier**, who writes poetically even when he isn't composing award-winning verse, returns with "Chasing the Dragon, Tibet," his third story in the ten-issue history of the new format.

When he's not teaching American Literature (at Brookdale Community College in Lincroft, N. J.), **William John Watkins** spends a lot of time adding to it. "The Resurrectionist" is his second story for us, following "In the Lowerarchy of the Underpinning" (August 1991).

Mark Budz doesn't have an extensive bibliography yet as a writer—"Roatán" is his second published story—but as an editor he has already accumulated a shelf full of credits. Mark is one of the people responsible for the prolific output of Pulphouse Publishing, as the editor of the Short Story Paperback line and the managing editor of *Pulphouse: A Fiction Magazine* as well as the Axolotl and Author's Choice Monthly lines of books. He was a second-place winner in the 1991 *Writers of the Future* contest, and will have a story in an upcoming issue of *Science Fiction Review*.

Phil Jennings might be able to put together the outline of his biography from these blurbs in another few years, if he sustains his current rate of turning out good stories. But this time, instead of talking about Phil, we'll yield the floor to him so he can talk about his story: "'The Final Page' isn't just any old Arthurian rehash," he wrote in his cover letter. "It's my own, *different* Arthurian rehash!"

Different, yes. Rehash, no. Turn the page and check it out. ✦

The Final Page

Illustration by Hannah M. G. Shapero

Phillip C. Jennings

"Hold! The way's bad here."

Miles drew his stallion's reins. Young Bauto imitated the grizzled decurion in whom his safety rested, and the mare obeyed, as he hoped she would. True, she'd rarely heeded him this last hour, and had fixed him with an evil eye, but he'd learned her measure on the ride: she was always happy to stop and tear at foliage, a slave to her belly. And so now the bishop's second best copyist squinted ahead through a snaking mist.

His face fell. *Mother of God, see me humbled by fear! How quickly I forget my glimpses of heaven!*

"We're almost there," Miles continued. His voice was rough, like Bauto's father in former days. Like a father, he spoke to cheer his two companions. So Bauto guessed, unmanned and in need of Christian comfort.

Was Miles either Christian or father? Certainly he was more than courage, cloaked in whatever made soldiers of middle age content with silence. Something warmer in his character took pity on Bauto and Cosmas.

True it was that the Villa Sestria lay just yonder along the cobbled road. Yet that road was hemmed by bluffs, forced to cross the swollen river. It was as

wet a winter as Bauto remembered all the years of his life, and the Lota was in flood *over* the bridge! A bridge that hungered for blood, so rustics liked to whisper.

But famished water-demons clutched only feebly at the legs of living steeds. Miles pointed to the evidence. On this side, cold muck showed traffic from the bishop's lands to his city.

Holy Mother, give me heart! Bauto prayed. What had been crossed most likely was crossable, and death was no end, but a blessed transition. Splashing over the dire bridge, Miles's entourage tracked mud up to the gate.

Bauto breathed relief, older by a hundred pounding heartbeats. One of the bishop's rustics swung open the courtyard door and shouted for the houseman. "I've come for more horses," Miles announced, showing his ring. "This pair of doves need proper mounts and something other than city gowns to wear. They're your masters' copyists."

"I know Cosmas," said the fat houseman, giving Bauto a scant glance. He puffed into the open and his breath steamed the air. "Well, then, Nigros and Balericos—"

"None of your runty Gaulish animals for this adventure. I want the pair sired by Philomel, horses of size and spirit!"

From where he clung behind the soldier, Cosmas shot Bauto a look of dismay. "Sir Miles! We two are not the men for great horses! I, for one, will need help off this beast of yours."

"Help him, then," Miles ordered. The rustic came up and bent his back to Cosmas's foot. Clumsily the copyist descended to the courtyard, then gathered up his gown against the mud and studied it for damage.

Shorter, but less inclined to think he was breakable, Bauto swung off the mare. "It's as Cosmas says," the young scholar agreed. "I've never commanded a horse even to gallop. I doubt I can, no matter how I kick."

"These horses will do as I wish," Miles answered. He swung down himself, and spoke again. "Our prey won't be pleased to see us. Your copy-work will delay him, and however great among the Britons in Armorica, he has no security south of the Liger. Houseman, does Osgeir still odd-job around the countryside?"

"Only because his star is none too high, though the Goths here might yet count him worthy to marry some third daughter. A German of whatever tribe—yes, I'll send for him and he'll thank us all. He'd rather go adventuring than ambush poachers."

"Good. But let's hope this adventure is without event, except for Cosmas and Bauto squinting their eyes and crabbing their fingers." As talkative as he was mute before, Miles turned to his companions. "Young masters of the written word, were there so many ravens in the trees, back when our Emperors ruled Gaul?"

"Truly the times go ill," Cosmas answered. "The Devil has his thousand years to test our piety."

"Schoolboys!" Miles laughed without joy. "The bishop has trained you to such answers, yet he is a comfortable magister, with power and lands remaining. Too comfortable to bare his teeth against Gothic heresy. He might have done so, once. This man we're chasing, this Riocatus—his uncle was the son of Vortigern, Britain's King in former times. And that uncle has written of such events as might have chastened the Goths, widened Roman rule in Gaul, and made us a new Emperor. It was, I think now, our last chance."

The scufflings of two rustics distracted Miles: one bore a small keg. The other set up a stand and passed out wooden cups. Miles filled his with unmixed wine. Cosmas and Bauto waited, seeing in the man's expression a willingness to speak and delay their journey. How could he name half-legendary Britain and then revert to silence? Dark Britain, reliquary of an empire, first province of Constantine the Great!

Against their wishes, the clip-clop of hooves announced the steeds sired by great Philomel, whoever he was. Bauto prepared to ask, but Miles spoke without prompting: "In former times, Romans recorded only what came to pass, counting it fruitless to pine over what might have been. This once we weep, and remember the hopes that ache in our hearts, because they'll never come again."

"Not so! Satan's years are numbered, and an Emperor still reigns in the east," Bauto said. "Even here, where the land is fruitful, the old ways are remembered. Where barbarians extinguish knowledge and neglect the watercourses, they find less to feed their broods. They know this is true! It's every Goth's dream to become a Roman."

"Aye. And I know two scholars willing to teach them, for a price. Oh, what we do in these times! Housekeeper! Any fresh bread?"

As they ate, Osgeir rode up to the gate, pounded, and bellowed in grunt-Latin. "Miles! That old pervert, given escort over two fine bishop's boys? Has he ravished them yet? I know that dog! Aha!"

The rustic who opened the gate sprung back. Osgeir rode down on the group, reining in at the last moment. Flinched halfway around to protect his crust from flying mud, Bauto felt the spatters that made his gown a mess.

His taller fellow-copyist, Cosmas, was a pale crane with a bird's fluttery courage. He was only held from flight by the decurion's quick grip upon his wrist. "Osgeir," Miles barked. "Is that the usual spit that fouls your beard, or have you been at the sheep from the wrong end again?"

Whatever this meant, it prevailed in their war of insults, for Osgeir shook his head ruefully and swung down to clasp arms with the decurion. "Where are we for?"

Bauto was involved in the decurion's answer. He listened closely. "We catch our prey on the fork to Burdigala, whence he sails to Armorica. Or if he's a fool, he'll horse it north and make our task easy. But no fighting. Riocatus is the bishop's friend. He left the city just yesterday. Not until vespers did we learn he carried a book, which our lord bishop must copy for his own."

"So we're put to trouble. For what? The life of some puke saint?"

"A history of battle. A would-be emperor from far Britain. A *Restitutor Orbis* betrayed by the prefect Arvandus."

"Him." Osgeir shrugged. "The world is tired of emperors. The boys—How fast are their hands?"

"Each will copy half the text and correct his work at leisure. Houseman! Cloaks for these two, and fur to line their sandals. Tunics and trousers. Make Goths of them."

"Where can we change?" Cosmas asked.

Miles looked around, as if to say the world was full of places. This was the second time he'd asked clothes of the houseman. The response was prompt; bundles thrust into the copyists' arms, except for the sandal furs, which sent him inside.

Bauto used a manger to shield his modesty. He looked longingly after the vanished houseman, remembering what it was to be warm. The Villa Sestria was rectangular, with an upper window. There'd be two interior floors, rooms ranked around a central court. And in that court, a fire. Convert the lower rooms to chapels and sacristies. Add a bell-tower, substitute candles for the hearth, and you had a church. In that church, back in the city, men avowed to Christ chanted a service, innocent of any need to venture toward Burdigala in a mad German's company.

Horseman's robes converted Bauto from a town-bred scholar to a fit companion for wild quests. If only his loins didn't ache, he'd have wiggled onto his new steed with a will. Unfortunately, this back was even wider than the mare's. Taking measure as he climbed, Bauto looked longingly at her.

So did his horse, whose nose for romance led him on a meander around the yard while Bauto was only half seated. More quickly mounted, Miles grabbed the beast's reins, turned him from temptation, and held him while Bauto composed his almost crippled legs. So must the carnal body be ruled by the spirit, or the world would become a place of rut and gormandry.

What wonderful examples horses made! And how they exalted their riders! As four travelers and five steeds clopped out the villa's gate, Bauto continued his meditation. In times past, those who first subdued beasts to the saddle took that mastery and applied it to men, turning them into slaves and rustics. Bauto thought he too might grow dangerously proud, if he learned to command his horse these next days, and win his respect.

But for now the animal tried to use the trees by the road to scrape him off, like an irritating parasite. "See if I brush flies from your neck in the day's heat," Bauto muttered, ducking low. "Let them bite! I'll be first to cheer!"

Withal, his horse was interested in the pretty rump of the mare ahead, and kept to the party's pace. To Bauto's relief they rode up from the river into a country of lighter soil, thoroughly tilled. Here the trees were trimmed back from the paving stones the way they should be, to hinder robbers. This ascent, and the declivity that followed, were the last features to shape the land so sharply that the road was obliged to compromise. Afterward their course ran straight. The bishop's city lay on the waning edge of hill country, merged now into a province whose bogginess was betrayed in the name Aquitania.

From this wet Goth-land the Goths made mischief, seeking better estates. In it, Roman justice was a lifetime forgotten. What the Goths fancied was useless to a churchling with neither a strong sword nor a rich family. Better lawlessness than a perversion that gave all rights to victors in combat, or counted the cost of murder in something called wergeld!

In the city, Romans still found law. But not here, where the thin winter sun peeped out, and stunted orchards gave way to desert forests, and birds flocked darkly.

The stones of the road lay furrowed by the passage of wagons, a relic of lives past—in too many places now the pavement was broken, and the rubble beneath was death to wheels. Horses preferred mud and grass, so often as not, the Via Burdigala served only to point the direction. But since it stood higher than the ground surrounding, wretches on foot trod the course faithfully, and they saw one up ahead, hobbling toward them.

"Heighaa!"

This German noise made Osgeir's horse canter ahead. "Peace, stranger! Have you crossed the river this day?"

The wretch was gap-toothed, ragged, and amused by Osgeir's interest. "Eh? Eh?"

"He may be a Gascon," Miles shouted. "He may speak the mountain tongue."

"But none of us do," Osgeir answered. He tried Gothic, a wild improbability. "Churl, do you speak the speech?"

Incomprehension. As they closed, Miles tried a different babble. In all Gaul, a few clowns might recognize his obscure Gaulish: "One picks up words on campaign," he muttered after his failure. Bauto's horse flirted with the mare while the copyist made an attempt, the Latin of Cicero. Cosmas laughed. He tried his Greek, half stressed and half sung.

To all these the wretch returned a wondering stare. He shook his head, grinned gratitude for the entertainment, and hobbled on, a sack over his shoulder.

"Is there another bridge?" Bauto asked, quick on the uptake. "A crossing we're worried about?"

Miles nodded. "Hours away, the Lota bends around to vex us again. I hope it vexed Master Riocatus yesterday and holds him trapped. If so, he won't resent our company. But if he's braved the flood, then we must too."

They rode on. To the left, a mound piled up by long-dead Gaulish hands was crowned by a villa, burned and then repaired, now a barnyard compassed by a stout wooden fence. Inside, hammer rang on iron, an intermittent smithy-song. Osgeir turned as they passed, perhaps expecting a wave, but the pigs were somnolent and the humans kept busy indoors. Two Gothic horses ignored them. They continued, ignored in turn by sheep, a man binding hillside vines, and some ravens plucking at a dead brown thing—ignored by everyone until they reached a crossroads where a dwarfish entrepreneur stood inside a booth.

Osgeir dismounted, wove through the tethers that held the awning in place, bought cider, and asked again about the river. The dwarf wiped his apron and shook his head dismally. His reedy voice carried to the riders outside. "High water south, west and north. What market will we see this year, I ask you? Three knaves for the gallows, and have they begun to build it? So much for Saint Agnes Day! I made it clear my last candle that we're minded to turn to Saint Patroclus for patronage, but does Agnes pay heed? Can you imagine worse weather?"

"We'll be back," Osgeir told him. "We may even fetch those we find at the crossing, if they listen to reason. Cheer up!"

They rode on, encountering new sheep, protected by noisy dogs. A girl emerged from a sty and stared at them —if not for her gravid belly Bauto would have thought her a child. Ahead, more desert. Woody branches wove malevolently over the road, half vanished under layers of leaf mold. Osgeir and Miles drew their swords. Bauto heard a scrabbling noise—some felon beating a retreat? How did they know anyone was here?

Oh. A large limb lay on the road, shed by a dead oak that gleamed whitely without its bark. Just the place for an ambush. Bauto's horse picked his way around, while the copyist inventoried his favorite saints. Saint Anthony —yes, he haunted wild places and lived protected by holiness. *Blessed Anthony, shield me from all snares and pitfalls, and . . . and fears, and from the devils that Goths and pagans feed foully in these parts. . . .*

The sun grew warmer without lifting the darkness that lay upon Bauto's spirit. The road rose, allowing an occasional view. They reached what may have been fields in former times, covered in new growth, heaven for deer. After more time, the road plunged again. The wide Lota showed a dull metal color through gaps in the foliage.

Smoke ahead. The party reached an encampment. Men scrambled to their feet, martial men the equal of Miles and Osgeir, with lank black hair trimmed to a style not used by Goth or Roman. "Is Riocatus here? We come from the bishop," the decurion announced.

The men exchanged a look. They instructed a lad in their own language. The boy ran downhill, around a bend.

In episcopal establishments not lavishly endowed, copyists were more welcome if they could paint apostles and saints in proper regalia, which skill they carried into making beautiful books. Bauto and Cosmas were students of art. They knew the line that cuts a man's face. Angels were the same on both sides of that line. Great Men expressed right and left virtues, unlike but complementary, one eye rounder to signify the Look to Heaven, while the other rested on Things Below. Bauto wondered if the rules of asymmetry had arisen to excuse inept work in early churches, but he'd never seen a work as inept as the living flesh of the princely Riocatus, when that bear-man came up the road and pulled back his cope!

What curse, what disease? What meant the warning God had shaped? Riocatus had two faces, left and right. One was warty, both were ugly and debauched! Could this be any bishop's friend? Yet his words were smooth and proud: "How may I help you, and serve His Grace, who has been good to me?"

Miles answered: "You carry a book by your uncle Faustus, on the labors of King Riothamus and his general Ambrose. I bring two clerks to copy it, as speedily as they may."

Riocatus caught his breath and smiled a smile of evil import. "Ambrose is a bitter old crow. He rides Britain and prevents the sitting of a new high king, so our unity must perish when he dies. All this for the love of his dear master. He's a widow who will not bury her husband, praying for a miracle until her children come to hate the corpse for its stink. My uncle wrote when we remembered Arthur with love, but to praise him now is to ape madness, to Britain's woe and ruin."

"Arthur?" Osgeir the German asked, holding to horseback.

"'Riothamus' is just his crown name," the man answered. "Like 'Vortigern' before him. Like 'Riocatus.' Two forfeit kings, and one would-be king, kept in exile. Such is the history of my nation, where we do things oddly. Are these two your monks?"

"Call them so," Miles said. "Their vows aren't perfect. Cosmas, Bauto, what do you need? Charcoal for ink? We can build a fire, and the same time warm your hands."

"Theirs is a labor not worth doing," Riocatus objected.

Miles answered. "Sir, when I was young and hot, I saw twelve thousand Britons muster against the Goths. Were Euric not warned by a traitor—had Riothamus time to join forces with Syagrius—this man who tamed the Saxons might have won that day and marched for the purple. As it was, I fought for him. Others died for him, no matter how outnumbered. Fifteen years later, two boys can scribble for him."

Riocatus grew dark, but could not answer the decurion's argument. "Come, then. I'd give the book to your master to save the trouble, but he'd have more copies made, proved against the original, and Arthur would become a god. Do this if you must. For as long as the river stands at crest."

The mare carried skins for a windbreak and shelter. Miles unpacked her burdens and set to work while Osgeir built a fire. All this was done on sloping meadow grass between road and river, next to their host's pavilion, a site chosen so the breeze blew the smoke away from that ugly man's nose. Meanwhile, Bauto broke the seals and unstrung Riocatus's book, taking half for himself and giving the rest to Cosmas.

He felt his spirits shift. A shiver ran up his spine, a sign that the Holy Mother had not forgotten him, a Queen beyond emperors who'd gifted him six times since he'd entered the bishop's service. Six visions of heaven! The thought warmed him with gratitude—and anticipation?

Holy Mary, if you will! He got out their supplies: ink and quills, parchment and sand. In waning sunlight Bauto and Cosmas began to copy, muttering the words for their own ears. If phrases had meaning, that was enough, but they did not expect to get caught up in the narrative, nor retain much sense of events. Sometimes a felicitous expression lodged in Bauto's head and put him in a trance, copying by rote until another startling usage brought him back to the world again. Faustus was that kind of writer, but after several pages, the young clerk was seduced by Arthur Riothamus, the strangely compromised champion of Greater Britain, who had locked off that island's heart and preserved it against the Saxon foe.

All this, despite his half-Saxon wife! And somehow his stratagems and her high blood won the Saxons' admiration, so that his two sons ruled separate companies of Germans, in separate lands.

These claims were meant to tease the reader's interest.

What followed was less exciting, two or three rambling family trees. No way could Bauto keep this in his head, except for one peculiar principle which governed inheritance among the British: titles passed from father to son-in-law! That stuck out, a compromise from ancient days when queens passed everything to their daughters.

King Vortigern was the son-in-law of Emperor Maximus. Arthur was Vortigern's son-in-law by his second wife, Sevira having died without a daughter. But Vortimer her first son asserted his own kingship . . . too many people in this story had similar names, Bauto thought to himself. Doddering Vortigern, his relatives tainted by the Pelasgian heresy, who failed to understand the Saxon threat. Old V versus his natural son, thuggish V, Saxon-slayer, who gave not a damn for the world beyond the British seas. Likewise, Rio-thamus and Rio-catus. And second wife Ro-wena.

'Old crow' Ambrose he kept straight. And Arthur's sister, Matrona. Pagans both, but Matrona honored the feral devils of her race, while Ambrose honored *Romanitas,* the genius of the imperial city he'd never seen. Bauto took time to rest his fingers and eyes, and counted back through a flock of ineffectual emperors. Could it be? If the old man was still generaling, he'd been forty-eight years with sword in hand! He must die soon, and his death would be a tragedy. Britain must have forgotten how to live without him!

"The light's grown dim," Cosmas complained. "How many pages have you done?"

Bauto counted. "Fourteen," he said, astonished. The tale had seduced him more than he thought. Could such hurried strokes be read? He held his last work up, thick with Greek ciphers that made quick work of long names.

Cosmas leaned and looked. "I should have used signs as you've done. I'm only on my ninth."

"'Only!' If I finish first, I'll take some pages from you," Bauto volunteered. He smelled stew. "We've penned enough. We'll be crippled tomorrow. Let's eat."

They ate and slept. In the dark outside their shelter, men spoke in the language of Britain. Bauto's eyes slit open. Did Faustus's book give him any hope of understanding? Was "Riagath" the same as Riocatus? (Whose birth name was surely other than the Latinized "Medrautus.") He scratched for fleas and tried to compose himself. Words tumbled through his head, images of fire and blood. Son lay siege against father. Son Vortimer died of poison on the cusp of victory—Rowena's doing, the Saxon queen. Was she still alive? Bauto was enslaved to questions. The answers he might never learn.

Next morning he and Cosmas set to copying again. Bauto doubted anyone but himself would make headway through these scribbled pages. Adding to the press for haste, Riocatus spoke within his hearing, lashing Miles with words: he was an important man. Events waited his attendance in far Armorica. The river had fallen an inch in the night. . . .

The day was warm. On the bad side, Cosmas's ink began to blot. The first time he recopied the page. After that he wrote around the stains, complaining that the bishop would never get this far anyhow. "Matrona, Matrona. And all her devil-schemes. She's our host's mother, did you know? And Vortimer's his father."

Bauto shivered. "So much hate mounting in his blood! No wonder he looks as evil as he does!"

"Have you seen him this morning? Really *looked?*" Cosmas asked.

"Um?" The sound of a distracted copyist.

Cosmas's voice dropped. "He used that messenger boy last night. They did unnatural things in his tent. He stole the lad's youth, and this morning his face is almost handsome. It's a spell. People remember him this way, not the other. Not as he really is."

Bauto's eyes widened. "God preserve us to see beyond false semblance, or Satan will snare us in!"

In a spasm of piety the copyists chanted a litany. Far paces away, Riocatus muttered an oath and left to check the river again. Perhaps his foul ears could not bear their praise to God. Yet it was hard to mouth one word and write another. Soon the copyists returned to normal procedure.

Miles sat to feed the fire. Clearly their monotones pleased him. He did nothing to interrupt until Bauto chose to rest his fingers. "How far along are you?"

"I'll be done by nightfall," the copyist answered. "Cosmas works more carefully, but if I help him tomorrow morning . . ."

"It's not a long book, then."

"It gets longer as we work," Cosmas complained. "If people like us ruled the world, short words would replace all the flowery verses."

"We do rule," Bauto said. "That's why as they age, books turn brief and dense. Only it takes centuries to make our authors concise. Still, for a modern, Faustus isn't bad. Our poet-bishop would tell his story in three hundred pages. Perhaps he's ambitious to do so."

Riocatus stalked by as he spoke. The copyist was relieved to see he was ugly as ever. Either their prayers worked, or Cosmas had let his mind run this last hour, constructing a hysterical fancy, as men cloistered from the world were prone to do. But a vice nonetheless. Whether demonic arts existed or not, it was wrong to dwell on them; rather on Christ, whose powers were infinitely great. *Christ, the Sun of my soul!* Just this brief appeal brought heat into Bauto's cold fingers.

Riocatus shook out his robe and vanished into his pavilion. Bauto bent back to work. Clouds passed across the sky, cooling the air, but he scribbled on. A long time later, he woke again to the outer world. He was done.

Sunset. He collected his work and Cosmas's, and put it in order. Up near the road, Osgeir and one of the Britons played knife-toss, their legs straddling wider with each dirtward throw as they took turns toeing up to the blade. After hours of close focus, Bauto saw two of both contenders. The fingers of his right hand were like claws: he rubbed his eyes with his left.

Cosmos offered him half his remaining work, the final six pages, hard now to read except when the outdoor fire flared with the dropping of a log. Bauto made the attempt, curious what players remained on stage for the final act.

Syagrius. Daniel, King of the Alamanni. Euric the Visigoth. No women? Ah, Matrona. But now Bauto set down his pages and rose to see what was the matter up by the road. And nearly toppled, because his calves were numb. Cosmas lent him his shoulder and he was spared humiliation, embarrassed rather to see Osgeir and the Briton screeching insults, their swords half out of their scabbards.

Already things had gone so far that Bauto couldn't tell who nicked whose toe—neither was speaking anything like Latin. Nor did Miles, when he raced up to Osgeir's side. Nor did Riocatus. These worthies labored among their own, until both swords were sheathed again. But then Riocatus turned. "We'll be fording the river at dawn, after we pack. It can't be helped."

"Can you finish by then?" Miles asked Bauto and Cosmas, who had hobbled half the distance to the melee.

A message was written in his stance, the way he looked at them. Bauto read that message. "Yes, I'm sure." *If they give me an hour more. Prayers? A collation?* Some nations started the day with a meal. Or if that could not be hoped, he and Cosmas might be ambitious enough to work by firelight in the pre-dawn.

But for now, the copyists badly needed new hands, new eyes, new knees. Not to mention food and sleep. Events the next hours sought to wreck their rest, comings and goings by foot and horse. Travelers thronged the far side of the Lota and shouted inquiries. With terrestrial fatigue went mud, embers and wet smoke, cold wind and a brief patter of rain. Impure mixtures and compounds! Earth, fire, air and water were the purities, offered by the Holy Mother as she descended to Bauto in a halo of light; the water of life in a golden font, music of the sweetest harmonies, and a fire that burned all about, clean flame, no fuel blackened nor consumed.

With Mary's help, Bauto's soul soared through angelic powers and principalities, from describable things to the indescribable. He attained—not the highest Eternity, but the lesser eternity that lay before Creation, when God's light had not yet penetrated the darkness. Mere time was poised to dawn, and it did, and Eden became Gaul. Mary the God-Bearer spoke without words, telling him that even Gaul was Eden to eyes rightly open. Ungentle Gaul! Bauto's seventh ecstasy came to an end when Miles shook off his robe and thwacked his shoulder to get him up. The soldier massaged his writing arm. No prayers, coddled wine thrust down his gullet, a rising wind that threatened new rain.

All this was rough beauty, and almost Bauto sang aloud as he set to work, loving Cosmas for his dull, tousle-headed equipoise; Cosmos whose plodding habits made this morning's haste so necessary. Not many feet away, Riocatus paced his pavilion, giving packing instructions in a language that ran to terminal consonants. "Miles! Miles!" he shouted. "Where's that man of the bishop gone to? Are his boys still working on my book?"

This could not be spoken for his own men's benefit, it was Latin, meant to be overheard. If hate were possible, Riocatus was a candidate far more suitable than Cosmas or Miles, but this morning Bauto loved even that ugly man, if a bit more carefully than the others. In this fulsome mood he scribbled, reaching a page he hadn't read last night. And four to go. Three and a half. Three.

Riocatus's tent came down, air gusting to brighten the fire. "Miles!" the exile trumpeted.

Miles stepped from darkness, carrying a wineskin. "Something to ease your rising?" he asked, holding it out. "A crowd of rustics on route to Saint Agnes Fair are about to test the river for you. Shall we see how they do?"

The Briton left, appeased. The next page passed quickly while the east brightened. Dawn gave color to scudding clouds. Bauto blinked at the pink-gold sky, at a troupe of shrill wet fairgoers. "God loves you," he whispered and bent back to work. All Riocatus's belongings were packed now, but the pressure was off. The British prince even laughed at some joke as he climbed back to the fire.

"What? One more page?" Cosmas nodded and Riocatus turned to reproach Miles: "You promised you'd be done!" But he was hardly inclined to make enemies for the sake of one page, and these words were softened by a false and warty smile.

"*. . . to come . . . yet home . . . from Avalon . . . across . . . the Ocean Sea . . . and take up . . . his sword . . . again.*" The end! And plenty of blotting sand left over. Bauto flung his quill to the grass with a loud "So be it!" He pounded his legs, then tidied up, old book and new. He found Uncle Faustus's strings and covers, and began the needlework, inserting Cosmas's pages when his fellow copyist also finished his final paragraph.

Cosmas got off lightly. He had nothing left to do but blot and tisk and shake his head, and bind the new pages with plates and straps. His was a slapdash job: they'd have time later to turn it into a real book. Rain held off until both copyists were done. Final goodbyes were said, and the British visitors rode off. The grass was wet from dew not burnt away by the weak winter sun, but Bauto ran giddy loops around the meadow to limber his knees.

"You have spirit, lad," Miles said, beginning his own packing. "Too many churchlings are heavy in their legs, except to bow and rise on cue. I'd make you a soldier if your ears could bear the German noise."

"I'd not care to be brave. To sell my life in blood."

"No? To sell it in battle, when your own martyrs give theirs away for free? I call them braver than any soldier. But you've been a martyr these last days. You deserve a treat. Shall we look in on Saint Agnes Fair on the way back to the city? Osgeir would like that: in fact he'll insist. It's not as if the bishop expects us, not for another week or more."

It could hardly be true that Miles was asking Bauto's permission, but the copyist nodded anyhow. Events were happily out of his hands, his responsibilities were over. He went to make friends with his horse while Miles and Cosmas did most of the packing.

They rode off, trailing a second crowd of river-soddened fairgoers. Osgeir entertained them with a song in his own language, almost tuneless, but strong in beat and alliteration. If it were a chant to invoke devils, Bauto

could not have known the difference. He crossed himself, finding it unlovely. Gaul was less Eden with every hour, as if he'd been drunk, and was now sober again.

Miles rode to his left, waiting until Osgeir foundered, the German's enthusiasm greater than his memory for verses. "You seem to have found something in Uncle Faustus's history to make you happy," the soldier spoke, knowing nothing of the Holy Mother's visitation. "Was it in this morning's last page? When King Riothamus was slain by the Goths fifteen years ago, I'd never have taken it for anything but tragedy."

"*Slain?*" Bauto repeated, wrinkling his brow in surprise. "But you were there! He was only injured, if the book is worth believing. By the saints, if he'd died we'd never had to write this morning!" The copyist heard his own words and laughed. "In living on, King Arthur has put us to great inconvenience!"

Miles raised his arm to signal a halt. He bent closer. "What do you mean? He was gutted! I saw it! Wounded past hope, on a hill slick with the dead. The battle moved north, all flight and pursuit, and we heard he was carried off to the care of some nurses, but he could hardly have lived with those wounds."

Bauto shrugged. "Faustus thought it miraculous. He thought the nurses must be other than human, for they were jealous of his care, and as you say, he was not expected to live. But what they gave him was a poor sort of health. For years he's hung between death and life. He's not much better, even now."

"And where? Where was this? Not back in Britain."

"At first in Burgundy, because the Burgundians were part of the alliance against the Goths. They took him by boat up the Liger to what the British call Avalon, having their own names for places. Arthur chose this route. His son Daniel is King of the Alamanni, and that country lies just north. That's where Arthur lives to this day, praying for strength. Praying for the cure that will let him return to his kingship."

Miles went through transformations, his face mapping his thoughts. "Riocatus spoke of a stinking corpse. He spoke of Ambrose the fool, holding Britain against Arthur's impossible return. I see now. Enemies, enemies, plots still at work! Not just history, not yet. My times are not over, my oaths not yet forfeit, nor am I yet so old that my sword is useless!"

Osgeir shook his head. "Old enough for a fool, if you give up your tenure with the bishop for any purpose, my friend! When you return from yet another defeat, you'll be scarred rags and bones, not worth feeding in this land of short rations."

Miles sighed, hardly acknowledging the German's words. "Britain, yet Arthur's under good old Ambrose! And a quarter part of Gaul! With the Alamanni to help, and the Burgundians." He pondered. "It might be done. The Goths might be humbled, as Aëtius humbled the Huns. But it will take strength and energy. And the Franks are great now, a new power to complicate the issue."

"Your hopes will take the very miracle they pray for among Arthur's coterie. His strange, small court." Cosmas spoke while struggling to keep his horse from wandering further off the road. He looked to Bauto as he tugged at his reins. "How has that come out? In my final page, they'd sent to Glastonbury for the most sacred of relics—"

"The Grail was never delivered," Bauto said. "Lost to piracy, a boatload of dead monks beaching on the shores of Lesser Britain. Men sought it and offered rewards, but Faustus speaks only of rumors that it may be here or there."

"Does he suspect his nephew? Riocatus may have it," Miles speculated. "Stolen and concealed to frustrate a cure. Uncle Faustus may not suspect that usurper of such evil, but I do." The soldier shook his head. "What will the bishop think, when I tell him Riothamus is still alive! His Grace tries to befriend every warring faction: anything to hold his own estates." Miles looked around him, up and down the road. "We're wasting time. Let's be off to see how well Saint Agnes is honored today, and three felons hung."

When they reached the fair two booths were up, several more under assembly. They rode by a butcher's shambles, dismounted, and moved from the clangor of some Gothic duel, back to the dwarf's place for a taste of cider. The little pavilion was emptied. Rustics preferred the spectacle of possible mayhem to these few wobbly benches, and so they found room to sit.

The dwarf served them, and Bauto unlaced his sandals with a sigh of relief. After rubbing his calves he lifted his pot in salute to Miles. "The bishop might send his decurion with letters for King Arthur, is that what you're thinking? To renew his contacts?"

Miles nodded thoughtfully. "It's quite a trip. Hill country, Gothic now, each former villa a tyranny held by the sword. Then the Rhone, and Burgundy beyond. I'll polish my German there, because the wild Alamanni know nothing else. And no doubt I'll use my blade more than once, and sleep with both eyes open."

"To take service with a sick old man," Osgeir mocked.

Miles ignored him. "Lads, your part is to stay and copy that book so others learn our empire's last *Restitutor* is not dead. The bishop will see no need to hazard your lives in the ways of secular men. But tell me from your reading, either of you—what should I know? How can I prepare myself?"

"You should know . . ." Bauto choked and tried again. "When Arthur was in the hands of the three nurses—"

"Witches. Lamia. Saints." Cosmas shook his head. "He should have died."

"He should have died. Some thought he did, so vanished was he from the world's attentions, for a year or more, and when he had visitors again, it was too late for some, who decided they saw his substitute, or an animated corpse. And they'd reason to doubt. Much was at stake. That year, Arthur's queen married again! So now, if that marriage be legitimate, *Riocatus* is dead Vortigern's son-in-law, and—"

"God's Oath! That ugly man again!" Miles swore.

"But when the queen learned she might have two husbands, she took to a convent," Bauto explained. "So it means more than a little for the bishop to acknowledge

Arthur by an exchange of letters. It serves the old king against Riocatus's plots. He may use you as a former soldier who can vouch for him."

"When I'm not hunting the Grail!" Miles swilled some cider. He dropped his voice to ask a question, expecting no answer: "Why do witches always come in threes?"

"'All men are mortal,'" Cosmas intoned. And hiccuped. "To keep a man from dying when his guts are spilled and his lungs lie spread like the wings of a bird—to quote dear Uncle Faustus—it might be necessary to make him no longer a man. Angels can make angels, and demonesses can make demons. But if by their wiles Arthur is a monster, let a priest serve him with the very grail used by Our Lord Jesus Christ. When it touches his lips, all will be known. And Arthur, who certainly didn't ask to become a thing accursed, will be grateful to have a holy end."

"Christ!" Miles stood up, animated by some violence in his soul. "Miracles and saints!" He sat again, color deep in his face. "Cosmas, I cannot travel long with you. You'd seduce me. Your business is with heaven and hell, mine is with Britons and Goths. Our ways part when we get back to the city."

"You're going, then?" Bauto asked.

"With letters I'll beg from the bishop. And any you forge for me, from the Emperor in the east, and from lands where black men hop on one foot. Whatever serves our cause. And when I'm an old man—keep your mouth shut, Osgeir!—I'll come back from my prize estates and recite tales to finish the book you've just copied! I'll want a hot fire and good wine, Bauto. If the Church uses your talents as it ought, you'll be bishop enough to indulge me."

The air was heady with incense from Arabia Felix. Though the weather blustered outside, candles burned steadily in front of mustered images, hardly flickering when the distant door creaked open or thudded shut. The bishop had a large head for his small body, and large features beneath a wide brow, a philosopher's eyes, the nose of a drunk. His loose lips worked as he ruminated: he pulled at them, and plucked, brought them together, and popped them apart again. "I've had correspondence with dear Faustus. We even supped together this last council. And nothing said at all! Nothing about our noble Riothamus being alive, albeit at death's door." He reached for a scroll tube, his hand hesitating. Etiquette, versus the rigors of travel. One honored a true king with silver or gold, but precious metal was scant in these times of hoarding.

"I can think of reasons. His nephew Riocatus, for one," Miles answered. "Consider Faustus's position. If we were obliged as he is, to wager which of the two is likelier to prevail, and keep the right friends—"

"Your Grace?" Bauto interrupted hesitantly, from near the door to the modest sacristy.

The bishop turned. "Are you to dress me? —No, I know you. And I've given you work to keep you busy these hours. Is your share not great enough?"

"Forgive me." Bauto bowed and took a step back, but the bishop waved him forward again. "Very well, you've interrupted. Finish what you have to say."

Bauto blushed. "—About Faustus's mind. Preparing to copy the book a second time, and going over Cosmas's work, I have to say—well, Arthur befriended British pagans, because godless Saxons were the greater threat. Prudence, but was it Christian prudence? His services to faith were strangely private, and Faustus mistrusted that. Where would the Church be, if kings favored no public policies?"

"If the Gothic king favored heresy any more strongly hereabouts, I'll tell you where your Church would be!" Miles answered. "We'd be forfeit, impoverished, martyred or apostasized!"

The bishop raised his hands like Pontius Pilate, baring arms for an absolving wash. "No need to speculate on these things, Miles. Riothamus lives, and when his twelve thousand men ranged the Liger, did I not send you to him? With letters on matters important at the time? Naturally I'll send you again, and please meantime see how the Alamanni are disposed. And learn what you may about the Franks. I'm told they have an ambitious new king. Attend me after vespers tonight. I'll give you my letter then, and bid you go with God. But now we are finished here." The bishop held out his hand, and Miles kissed his ring.

The soldier strode off, Bauto's steps a softer echo as he followed to the church door. "I'll pray for you, Miles," Bauto said. "Arthur's story is nearly played out. He's old and sick and barely a memory, and the Church has better men to love. I'd not have you die for the sake of the final page."

"That's the only page that matters," Miles answered, and stepped out into the teeth of winter.

"Wait!" Tightening his gown against the gale, Bauto followed, squinting in the gray daylight. He screwed up his courage. "I'm a fool! These Alamanni—men of letters are rare in their country. Arthur and his son would have more presence in the world if they had clerks to copy treaties, codify their laws, keep their chronicles—do you understand? I'll know you do, if when you come tonight for the bishop's letter, you bring a spare horse with you."

"You'd abandon your place here?" Miles asked.

Bauto looked around. "Don't judge me. It's not apostasy. My oaths are incomplete. I'm not irrevocably a monk, and I think now God means me for something else. Bring a horse for me, Sir Miles, or tell me I can only be useless to you and this cause you love. And that's a lie! Far more useless to stay and copy our lord bishop's wretched flowery poems, while Satan stalks the world."

Miles smiled and shook his head. "You give me much to think about. Too much for this blustery moment. Well then, the horse decides it. Pack and keep an open eye." The decurion gave Bauto a hearty thump on the shoulders, bobbed his head to his benediction, and hurried off.

Bauto reentered the church with a smile. He knew the horse would be there. This was a great corner to turn, a bridge to cross, a door to open. All the language of his visions . . . visions! *Holy Mother, I dedicate what comes to you! Thanks to a sick old man I've never seen, my life's adventures are soon to begin.* ✦

Back Issues: Going, going . . .

The AMAZING® Stories "garage sale" that began three issues ago, with an announcement in the December magazine, has been pretty popular. Most of the back issues that were in short supply to begin with are sold out, and our stock of many other issues is dwindling rapidly.

The following page-and-a-half listing mentions every old issue that's still in our inventory, along with some information that might help you decide which ones you want: the quantity of each issue we have, plus a partial description of each magazine's contents.

Most of the magazines are in mint condition, with the others varying from fine to good. Among the copies of any particular issue, the magazines in mint condition will be sold first, so the sooner you place an order, the better the condition of the issues you'll receive. Every magazine carries a money-back guarantee—if you aren't satisfied with the condition of an issue you receive, or if your order isn't what you expected for any other reason, send us the merchandise you don't want and we'll reimburse you for the price of the item(s) plus the cost of the return postage.

Prices vary according to age, with the older issues costing less than the newer ones (because the cover price of the older magazines was lower). Each group of issues carries a price at the head of that section: From June 1966 through August 1973, each magazine costs $1.25; from September 1975 through May 1979, the price is $1.50; and from January 1983 through March 1991, it's $1.75 each.

After you've totaled the prices for the magazines you want, add on a postage charge of $1.00 for the first issue and 50¢ for each additional issue up through the tenth one. Thus, the postage charge for an order of 10 magazines is $5.50—and that's the maximum; if your order is for more than 10 magazines, you don't pay any additional postage charge.

Of course, we also have copies of the new-format issues available. They're priced at a flat rate of $5.00 each, which includes postage.

To make an order, write out clearly and legibly the magazines you want, calculate the total cost, and enclose a check or money order for that amount. Send your order to the magazine's business office (P. O. Box 111, Lake Geneva WI 53147). All orders will be shipped via third-class mail or UPS within two days of receipt.

If you want a magazine of which 10 copies or less are available, give us an alternate choice in case we're sold out by the time we get your order. It's especially important to give us alternatives if this is the first time you've seen this list, because this information is going to be at least a month out of date by the time this magazine gets printed and distributed—which means that some of the issues in short supply might be sold out before you read this. If we can't fill your order because of sold-out issues and you didn't give us enough alternatives, we'll reserve for you the issues we can sell you; then we'll send back your check or money order and ask you to send us exact payment for the items we can provide for you.

Please don't order more than two copies of any particular issue, and be sure to enclose the correct amount of payment—including postage. If we receive an order that doesn't contain sufficient payment, we will send it back.

The list on the following pages will be updated every month, changing the quantities and deleting issues that sell out. Read on, and make your choices quickly—some of these issues aren't going to be around for long!

June 1966 through November 1988

— $1.25 each —

June 1966 6 copies
Stopover in Space (Part One) by Murray Leinster; *Secret of the Death Dome* by Walter M. Miller; *Encounter in the Dawn* by Arthur C. Clarke; *Or Else* by Henry Kuttner

June 1967 21 copies
The Mad Scientist by Robert Bloch; *Project Nightmare* by Robert Heinlein; *The Builder* by Philip K. Dick; *The Heaven Makers* (Conclusion) by Frank Herbert

April 1968 29 copies
(Cover says June 1968) *Send Her Victorious* by Brian Aldiss; *The Mechanical Heart* by H. I. Barrett

July 1968 30 copies
House A-Fire by Samuel R. Delany; *Locked Worlds* by Edmond Hamilton

March 1970 16 copies
Trial By Silk by Christopher Anvil; *I'm Too Big But I Love to Play* by James Tiptree, Jr.

May 1970 17 copies
The Balance by Terry Carr; *Blood of Tyrants* by Ben Bova; *Nobody Lives on Burton Street* by Gregory Benford

September 1971 17 copies
What Time Do You Call This? by Bob Shaw; *The Living Mist* by Ralph Milne Farley

September 1972 42 copies
Fat City by Ross Rocklynne; *Deflation 2001* by Bob Shaw; *Proof* by F. M. Busby

January 1973 58 copies
The Ascending Aye by Gordon Eklund; *Night Shift* by George R. R. Martin; *On Ice* by Barry N. Malzberg

June 1973 8 copies
Adventures of the Last Earthman in His Search for Love by Robert F. Young; *Seed* by William Rotsler; *Trullion-Alastor: 2262* (Conclusion) by Jack Vance

August 1973 67 copies
To Walk With Thunder by Dean McLaughlin; *The Once and Always War* by Gerard F. Conway; *Up Against the Wall* by Robert Thurston

— $1.50 each —

September 1975 5 copies
To Gain a Dream by William Rotsler; *Marune: Alastor 933* (Conclusion) by Jack Vance

September 1976 10 copies
Nobody Leaves New Pittsburg by George R. R. Martin; *Wilderness* by Fred Saberhagen; *Mrs. T.* by Lisa Tuttle; *The Dream Lions* by Jack Dann

December 1976 12 copies
Fundamental Issue by Philip Jose Farmer; *Patrick Henry, Jupiter, and the Little Red Brick Spaceship* by George R. R. Martin; *Martha* by Fred Saberhagen; *Search* by F. M. Busby

July 1977 7 copies
Nobody Home by F. M. Busby; *Odds* by Christopher Anvil; *Social Blunder* by Tom Godwin; *Spectator Sport* by Steven Utley

January 1978 8 copies
The Sleeping Beast by A. Bertram Chandler; *A Household Primer* by Christopher Anvil; *The Looking Glass of the Law* by Kevin O'Donnell, Jr.

August 1978 12 copies
The Winning of Gloria Grandonwheels by Robert F. Young; *Murder in Triplicate* by Charles Sheffield; *Tween* by J. F. Bone

November 1978 36 copies
While the North Wind Blows by Christopher Anvil; *Doggy in the Window* by A. Bertram Chandler; *Exigency & Martin Heidegger* by James Sallis; *Green Thumb* by Marion Zimmer Bradley; *Last Rocket from Newark* by Jack C. Haldeman II

May 1979 5 copies
I, Robot by Eando Binder; *Devolution* by Edmond Hamilton; *Toro* by Mack Reynolds

— $1.75 each —

January 1983 3 copies
Vulcan's Forge by Poul Anderson; *Monkey Business* by Jack C. Haldeman II; *Anna Medea* by Tanith Lee; *Cincinnatus* by Joel Rosenberg; *Aquila Meets Bigfoot* by Somtow Sucharitkul

March 1983 4 copies
In the Islands by Pat Murphy; *On the Rebound* by Jack C. Haldeman II; *Against Infinity* (Part One) by Gregory Benford

May 1983 2 copies
Aquila: The Final Conflict by Somtow Sucharitkul; *Operator Assisted Calls Are Charged at a Higher Rate* by Alan Dean Foster; *Wong's Lost & Found Emporium* by William Wu; *Against Infinity* (Conclusion) by Gregory Benford

July 1983 5 copies
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September 1985 2 copies
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July 1986 3 copies
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November 1988 4 copies
The Mental Man by Jack Williamson; *Transcendence* by Paul J. McAuley; *Homing Instinct* by Robert Frazier; *Stained Black* by Kristine Kathryn Rusch

September 1989 through January 1992

September 1989 7 copies
Of Course There Are Martians by John Brunner; *Her Virtues* by Ray Aldridge; *Dreamwalking Solo* by Nina Kiriki Hoffman

November 1989 6 copies
The Old Man and C by Sheila Finch; *Tool Dresser's Law* by Jack Clemons; *Fugue* by Kristine Kathryn Rusch

January 1990 4 copies
Memories That Dance Like Dust in the Summer Heat by N. Lee Wood; *In His Likeness* by Phillip C. Jennings; *Living with the Giants* by Paul Di Filippo; *Sweet, Savage Sorcerer* by Esther M. Friesner; *The Rose and the Scalpel* by Gregory Benford

May 1990
Giant, Giant Steps by Robert Frazier; *Computer Portrait* by Jayge Carr; *Fatal Disk Error* by George Alec Effinger

July 1990
Harvest by Kristine Kathryn Rusch; *The Secret of Life* by David Brin; *Sequoia Dreams* by Sheila Finch; *The First Since Ancient Persia* by John Brunner

September 1990
Harlem Nova by Paul Di Filippo; *At Vega's Taqueria* by Richard A. Lupoff; *Whoso List to Hunt* by Susan Shwartz

November 1990
When the Ship Comes In by R. Garcia y Robertson; *Command Performance* by Kathe Koja; *Behind the Eyes of Dreamers* by Pamela Sargent

January 1991
Stranger Suns (Part One) by George Zebrowski; *A Painting Lesson* by Nina Kiriki Hoffman; *Life in a Drop of Pond Water* by Bruce Bethke

March 1991
Dog's Life by Martha Soukup; *Voices in a Shelter Home* by Nina Kiriki Hoffman; *The Dragon of Aller* by John Brunner; *Stranger Suns* (Conclusion) by George Zebrowski

— $5.00 each (includes postage) —

May 1991
First new-format issue. *A Tip on a Turtle* by Robert Silverberg; *Change of Face* by Kristine Kathryn Rusch and Kevin J. Anderson; *The Ghost Taker* by Lawrence Watt-Evans; *Klepsit* by John Brunner

June 1991
Victoria by Paul Di Filippo; *Hitmen—See Murderers* by Timothy Zahn; *The Sixty-Five Million Year Sleep* by Sharon N. Farber; *The Galleon Gal* by Phillip C. Jennings

July 1991
Except My Life, Except My Life, Except My Life by John Morressy; *Arms and the Woman* by James Morrow; *The Perfect Hero* by Elizabeth Moon; *Holos at an Exhibition* by Bruce Boston and Robert Frazier

August 1991
Fantasies by Michael Swanwick and Tim Sullivan; *Plague Ship* by R. Garcia y Robertson; *The Number of the Sand* by George Zebrowski; *The Face of the Waters* by Robert Silverberg

September 1991
Death Link by Gene DeWeese and L. A. Taylor; *The Storming Bone* by Ian McDowell; *Thomas and the Wise Men* by Kristine Kathryn Rusch; *The Last Reich* by Don Tarbet

October 1991
Skin Deep by Brian Stableford; *The Drifter* by Lawrence Watt-Evans; *Wacky Jack 5.1* by W. R. Thompson; *Line Item on a Dead Grant* by Jack C. Haldeman II

November 1991 —Limited supply—
The Implanted Man by F. M. Busby; *The Year of the Guns—Part Two* by Rick Shelley; *The Character Assassin* by Paul Cook; *In the Land of No* by N. Lee Wood

December 1991
Word Salad by Phillip C. Jennings; *Touches* by Gregory Benford; *The Long Fall* by Ben Bova; *The Devil His Due* by Maya Kaathryn Bohnhoff; *Pay Any Price, Bear Any Burden* by Ted Reynolds and William F. Wu

January 1992
The Round-Eyed Barbarians by L. Sprague de Camp; *Natural Selection* by Lawrence Watt-Evans; *The Sleeping Serpent* by Pamela Sargent

Coming in March

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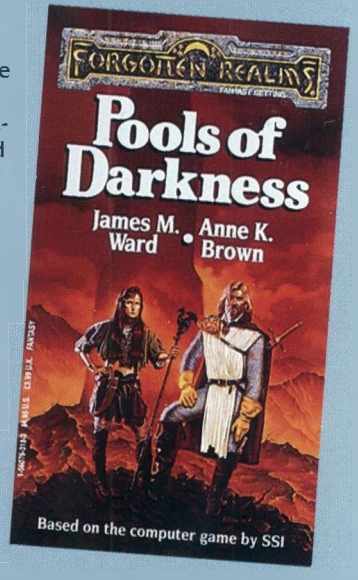

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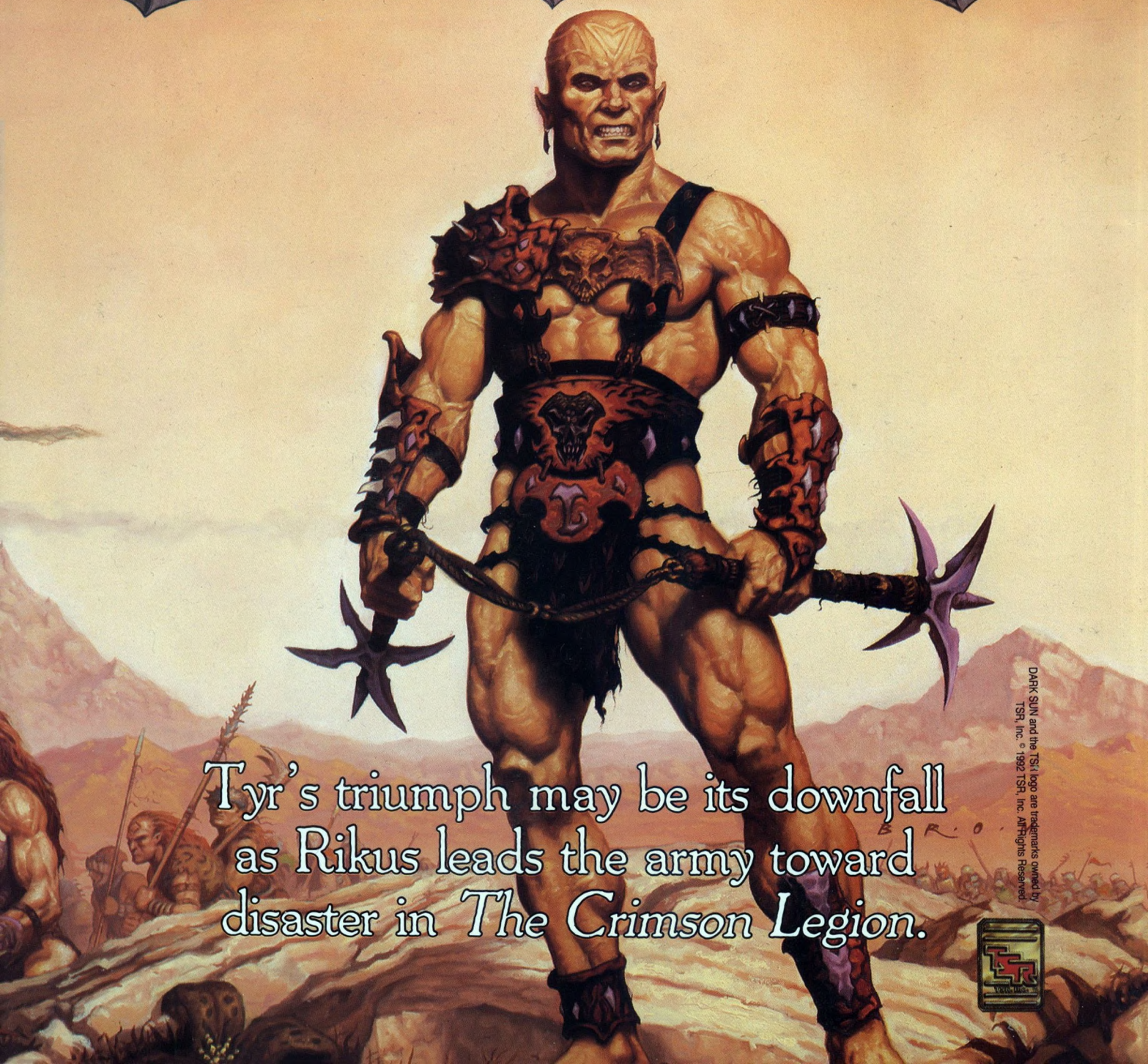

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