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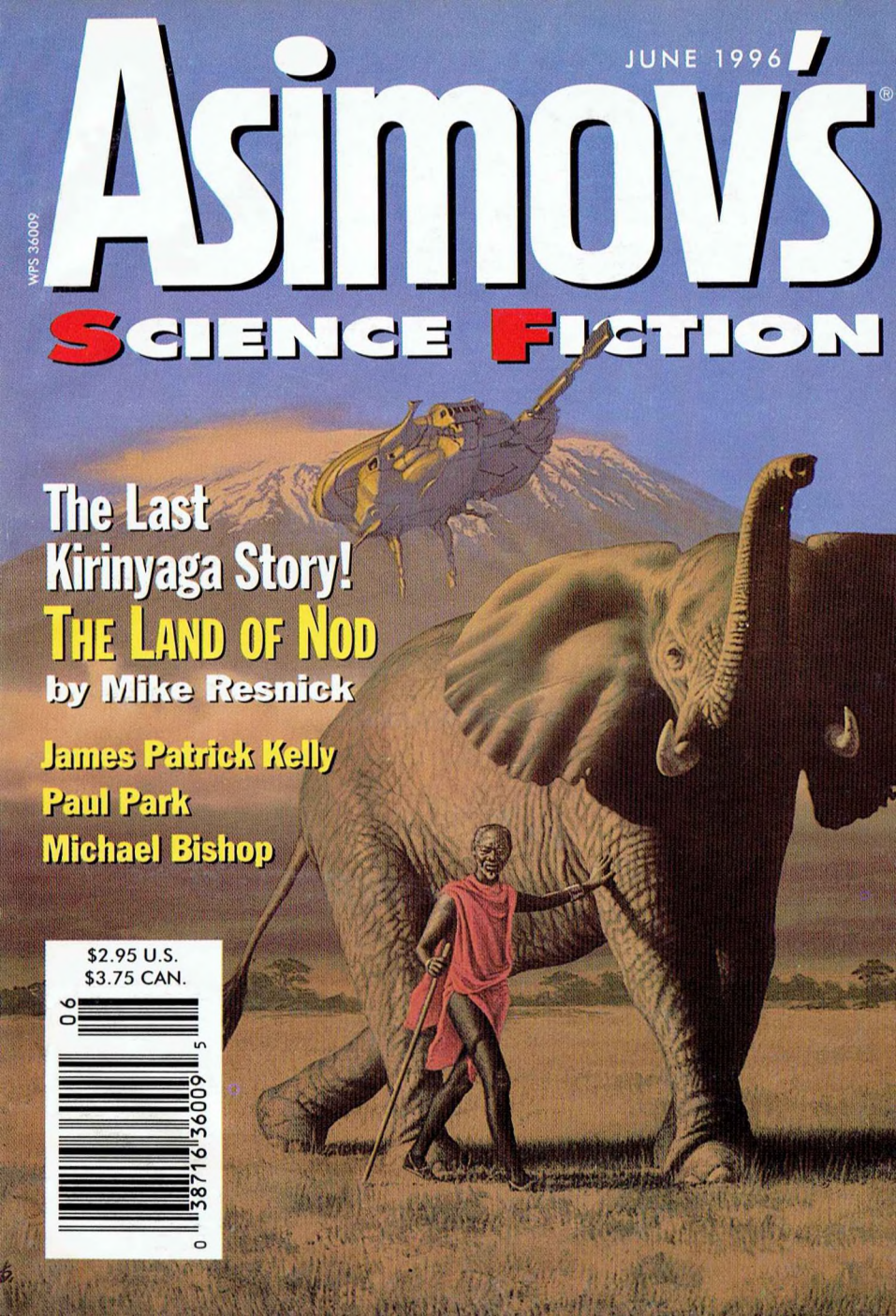

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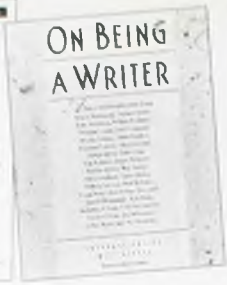

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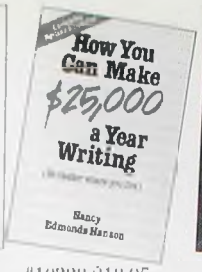

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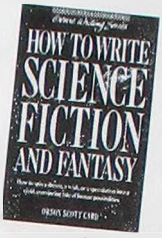

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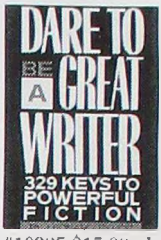

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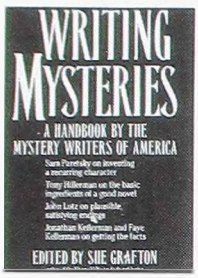

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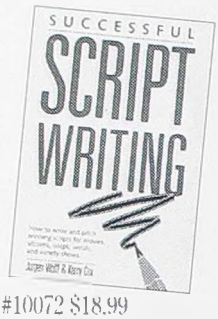

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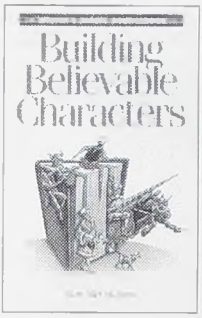

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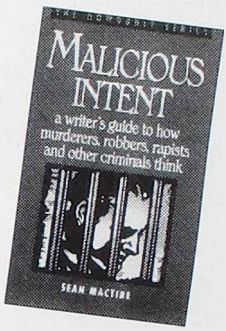

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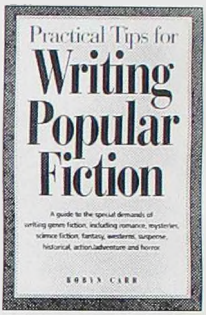

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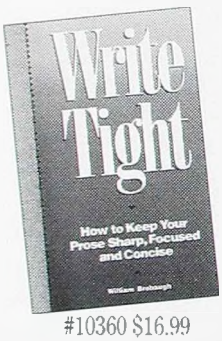

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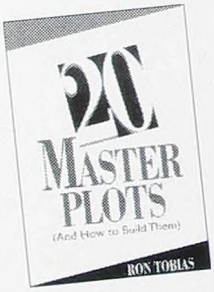

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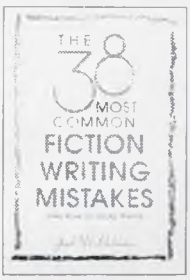

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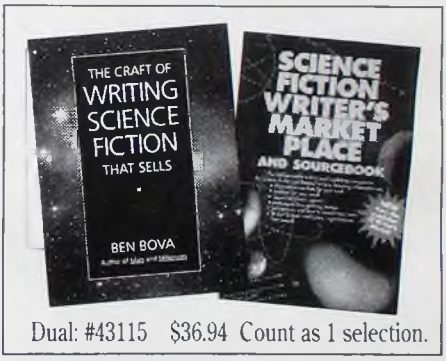

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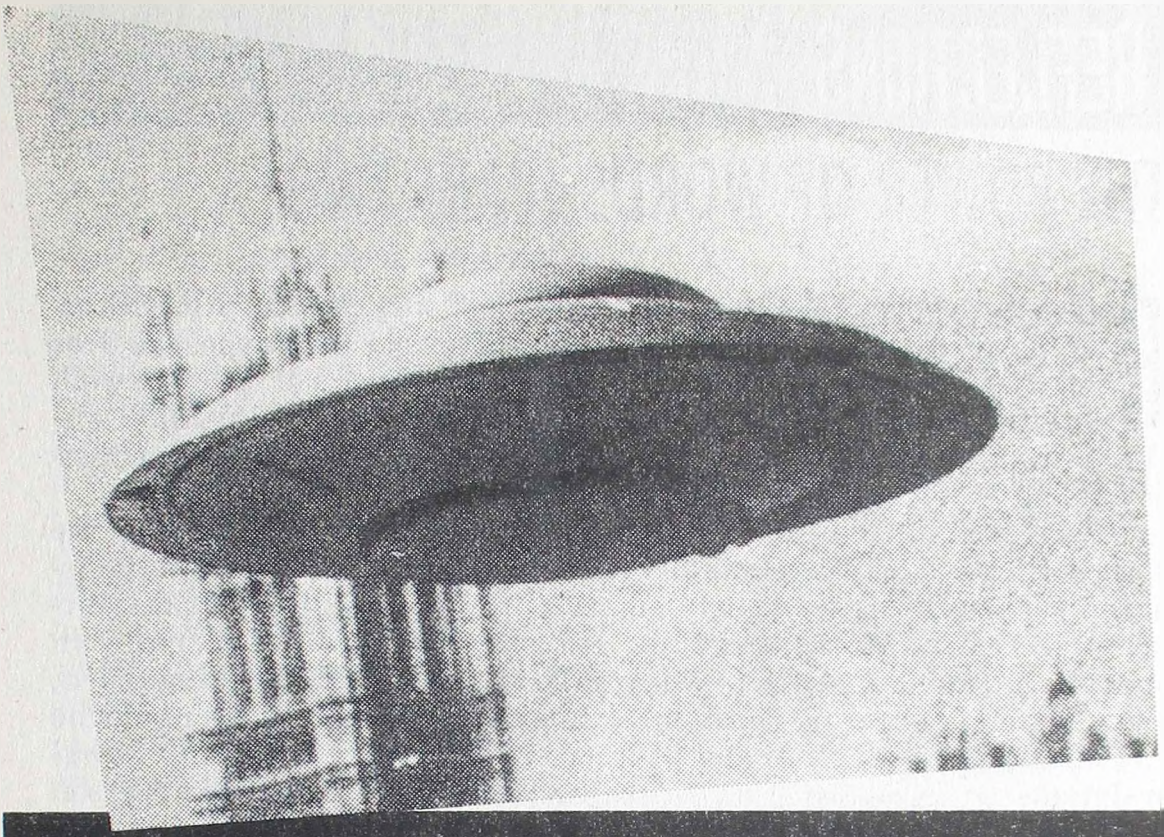

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REFLECTIONS

by Robert Silverberg

THE POWER OF WORDS (PART TWO)

A few months back I wrote about the power that "unprintable" words hold, even at a time when the taboos that make them unprintable are breaking down—how, even in this perhaps excessively liberated era, people still pay homage to the incantatory power of the terrible words by using such euphemisms as "shoot" in speech and "a--hole" or "f---" in print instead of coming right out and employing the actual and literal items.

I mentioned also my surprise, when visiting Paris a couple of years ago, at seeing conspicuous ads for a movie called *Fucking Bernard* on posters all over the city. That reminded me that words that are terribly shocking in one language often are totally innocuous in another. And now comes another reminder of the infinity of semantic distinctions on this small but complex planet, in the form of a piece in the New York *Times* about words that are taboo in Japanese newspapers and on Japanese TV. In this case, the taboo words aren't obscene, either here or in Japan: they are words that have come to be deemed insensitive to the feelings of the unfortunate—that is, words we would call "politically incorrect" to use. But the Japanese list has plenty of surprises for Americans, even after our own exposure over the past ten years or so to the well-meant but fuzzy-minded euphemisms of the political-correctness people.

For instance, according to the manual of 162 forbidden words issued by the giant TV Asahi network, "Research Materials on Word Usage," the word *mekura,* meaning "blind," must never be used. TV Asahi wants its newscasters to refer instead to a "person with seeing disability," which sounds like good old American political-correctness jargon to me, except that this is one that I don't think is taboo even here. I don't know why the Japanese are so troubled about using "blind"—it strikes me as a useful and non-insulting one-word way of saying "person with seeing disability"—but perhaps the explanation lies in the metaphorical transformations that "blind" has acquired. My dictionary gives "without the sense of sight" as the primary meaning of *blind,* but when I get down to the secondary meanings, I discover "lacking in intellectual, moral, or spiritual perception," followed by "purposeless," and then by "acting without intelligence or consciousness," and so on down to "closed at one end," as in a "blind" alley.

I suppose that those who are hypersensitive to the feelings of others are troubled by the possibility that if we speak of Stevie Wonder or Helen Keller or Jorge Luis Borges, say, as "blind," we may appear to be calling them "lacking in intellectual, moral, or spiritual perception." Perhaps the same pejorative set of secondary meanings for "blind" obtains in Japanese as it does in English, though, because it seems to be a really offensive term in Japan these days. TV Asahi won't let anyone use the Japanese equivalent of "blind alley," either, and a rubber stamp, which the Japanese call a "blind stamp," has to be called "a seal placed without thinking" on the air. One Japanese talk show, *Papepo TV,* will actually superimpose the character that means "forbidden" over the face of any guest who utters a word that's on the proscribed list—visual as well as audible bleeping!

I'm not convinced that such niceties are really necessary, though I am willing to concede certain points to the politically correct—for example, that a word like "dumb," which has two meanings of which one is most uncomplimentary, isn't ideal for describing people with speech disabilities. But in general I think they go too far in the direction of sensitivity, and the Japanese, evidently, have been going farther still.

We have been taught of late to speak of epileptic "seizures" instead of "fits," but in Japan even the word *tenkan*, which simply means "epilepsy," is now the target

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of criticism. The Japanese Epilepsy Association (which I suppose has another name for itself in Japanese) wants people to speak of "persons of paroxysmal cerebral problems" instead.

This particular euphemism has recently caused problems for a well-known Japanese science fiction writer, Yasutaka Tsutsui, who wrote a story about thirty years ago in which a robot policeman ordered a driver out of his car after detecting erratic brain waves coming from him. When the story was reprinted last year in a language textbook, the Epilepsy Association complained that the incident might encourage the view that people with unusual brain waves—including epileptics—should be hospitalized. The offending passage was deleted from the textbook, and Tsutsui, declaring, "Fear rules in Japan!" vowed never to write again. "Cleansing literature won't improve understanding," he said.

TV Asahi's list of newly *verboten* words in Japan includes *hage*—"bald"—and *chibi*—"short"—and *busu*—"ugly woman"—and *kichigai*—"crazy." The usual politically correct euphemisms must be employed instead—"mentally handicapped person," and such. *Urenokoru,* which means "unsold merchandise," can't be used because it's also a slang term for "unmarried woman." *Shizoku,* a term referring to the samurai class, is forbidden because it implies approval of the class system. And so forth, an ever-increasing list that quickly wins acceptance (superficially, at least) in fundamentally conformist Japan. Whether these pious circumlocutions have actually succeeded in getting anybody to think nicer thoughts about bald, short, ugly, blind, or involuntarily unmarried people is, of course, a different question, and I suspect you know what my answer to it would be.

A specifically Japanese verbal problem has to do with the group of people known as the *burakumin,* a low-prestige caste in officially classless Japan. The burakumin caste goes back hundreds of years, to a time when rigid class distinctions did in fact play a powerful role in Japanese society. It was created to include all those who engaged in "polluted" occupations—those who butchered animals or handled leather, for example, and beggars, and—well, entertainers, those vulgar folk who juggle or sing or write science fiction for a living.

The caste system in Japan was formally abolished in the nineteenth century, and officially there are no such people as burakumin anymore. In fact, though, the caste still exists, at least in the minds of the Japanese. Because burakumin generally have low incomes and low educational levels, they are regarded with distaste by Japanese of the officially nonexistent higher castes, who sometimes go to the extent of hiring private investigators to determine whether their prospective mates might be tainted by burakumin blood. (Thus, since intermarriage between burakumin and Japanese of other

classes is rare and burakumin have no one to marry but each other, the existence of the despised burakumin caste is permanently perpetuated.)

In the 1970s the burakumin themselves attacked this problem by urging that the term itself not be used—hoping, I suppose, to blend into Japanese society more effectively by eliminating all public reference to themselves. One result of this successful campaign was to proscribe, at least in formal usage, all sorts of peripheral burakumin-associated words. One can no longer use the word *eta,* an insulting term meaning "polluted," or *tosatsujo,* "slaughterhouse," because these might remind people of the burakumin. Thus, when a newscaster spoke of the drug violence turning American city streets into a "slaughterhouse," he was roundly rebuked. One does not speak of slaughterhouses; one speaks of "meat processing facilities," a term not as easily applied to the troubled neighborhoods of our land.

The burakumin have achieved their goal so thoroughly in the new politically correct Japan that publishers and broadcasters now automatically suppress all use of their name. But the burakumin have discovered that disappearing totally from public discussion is not always a beneficial thing for downtrodden people. No word may be used in print or on the radio that suggests to people that such folk as burakumin ever existed, but that doesn't mean that their lot in

Japanese society has gotten any better: unmentionable or not, they *still* remain a group whom members of more fortunate castes look down on. One example of this surfaced a couple of years ago when Michael Crichton's novel *Rising Sun* was translated into Japanese. A woman in Crichton's book, half black and half Japanese, speaking of herself as an outcast in Japan because she is of mixed race and has a deformed arm, compares herself with the lowly burakumin. The Japanese publisher, unwilling to use the dreadful word, edited the passage out—thereby, incidentally, glossing over the fact that the burakumin are still there, and still an oppressed class.

Thus the burakumin have learned an ironic lesson in the suppression of words: their own campaign has made them utterly invisible, to their own disadvantage. The ultimate paradoxical effect has been that the Buraku Liberation League, a group they founded to combat the discrimination against burakumin that still quietly goes on in Japan, was unable to advertise books calling attention to their plight because the books' own titles used the forbidden word that describes them. And when the same organization asked that the passage in the Crichton book be restored, the publisher refused.

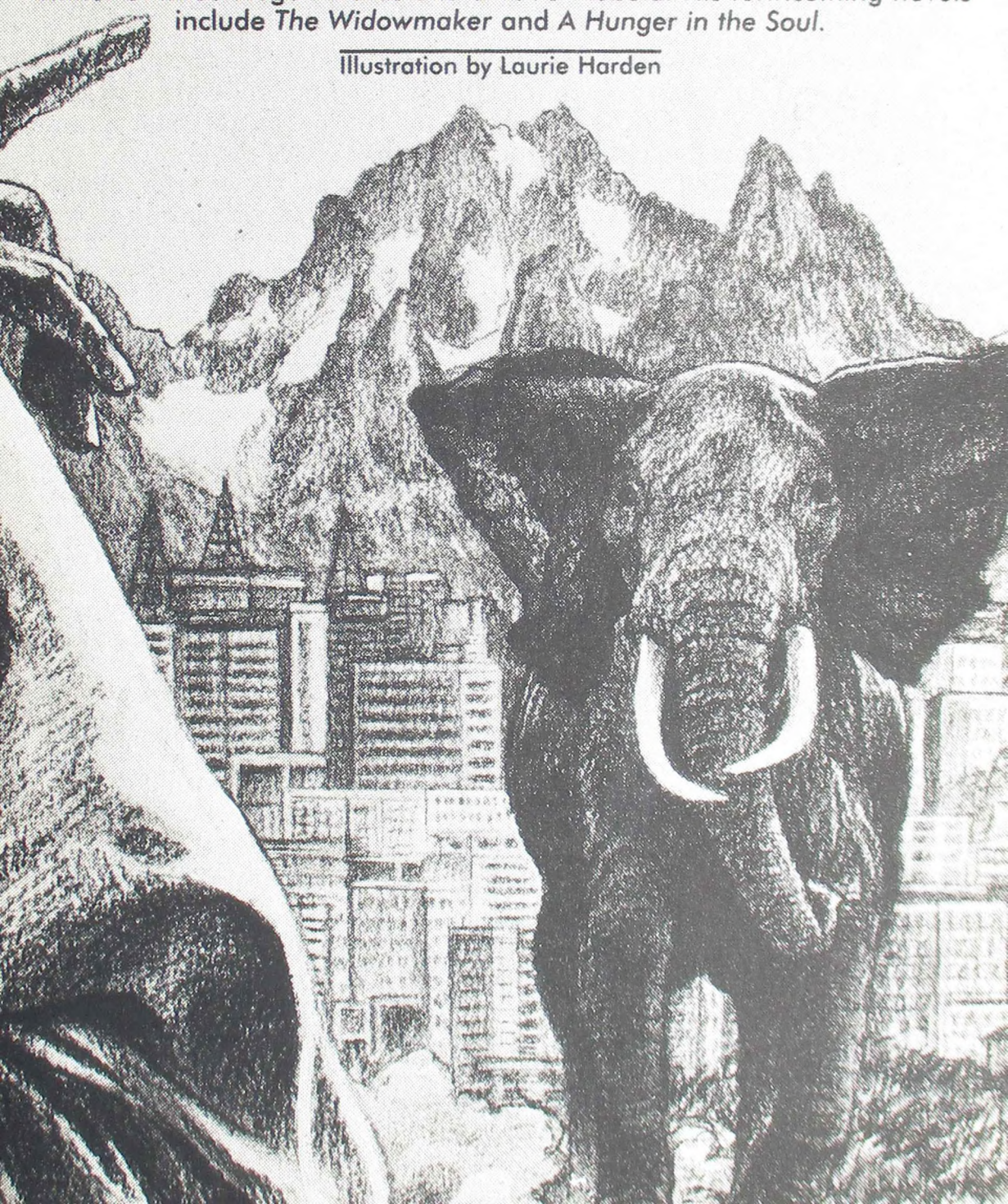
Meanwhile, we over here in the science fiction field blithely send our space explorers out to alien planets equipped with semantic converters that efficiently translate Earth-speech into Rigelian or Betelgeusean, and vice versa. Which is very convenient not only for the explorers but for the people who make up the stories about them, but I wonder just how easy it's going to be for the programmers who design those semantic converters to make them work properly. As we have learned in the era of political correctness, it's only too easy to give offense through the use of words that sound innocent to us but are scabrously offensive to somebody else. It'll probably be a good idea to equip those thought-converters with an automatic disclaimer phrase to begin every conversation—something like "Please forgive me if I inadvertently transgress against your verbal sensitivities." That may do the trick—except if we run up against a culture for whom asking forgiveness for unintended offenses is so mighty an insult that it calls for an immediate lethal response. Words are such mighty things that you never can tell that will happen when you begin unleashing them in all their terrible, if inadvertent, power. ●

Mike Resnick

THE LAND OF NOD

"The Land of Nod" is the tenth, and last, story in Mike Resnick's highly acclaimed Kirinyaga series. Thus far, the tales have garnered forty-four greater and lesser awards and nominations. The author, himself, is the winner of three Hugo Awards and a 1995 Nebula. His forthcoming novels include *The Widowmaker* and *A Hunger in the Soul*.

Illustration by Laurie Harden



Once, many years ago, there was a Kikuyu warrior who left his village and wandered off in search of adventure. Armed only with a spear, he slew the mighty lion and the cunning leopard. Then one day he came upon an elephant. He realized that his spear was useless against such a beast, but before he could back away or find cover, the elephant charged.

His only hope was divine intervention, and he begged Ngai, who rules the universe from His throne atop Kirinyaga, the holy mountain that men now call Mount Kenya, to find him and pluck him from the path of the elephant.

But Ngai did not respond, and the elephant picked the warrior up with its trunk and hurled him high into the air, and he landed in a distant thorn tree. His skin was badly torn by the thorns, but at least he was safe, since he was on a branch some twenty feet above the ground.

After he was sure the elephant had left the area, the warrior climbed down. Then he returned home and ascended the holy mountain to confront Ngai.

"What is it that you want of me?" asked Ngai, when the warrior had reached the summit.

"I want to know why you did not come," said the warrior angrily. "All my life I have worshipped you and paid tribute to you. Did you not hear me ask for your help?"

"I heard you," answered Ngai.

"Then why did you not come to my aid?" demanded the warrior. "Are you so lacking in godly powers that you could not find me?"

"After all these years you still do not understand," said Ngai sternly. "It is *you* who must search for *me*."

My son Edward picked me up at the police station on Biashara Street just after midnight. The sleek British vehicle hovered a few inches above the ground while I got in, and then his chauffeur began taking us back to his house in the Ngong Hills.

"This is becoming tedious," he said, activating the shimmering privacy barrier so that we could not be overheard. He tried to present a judicial calm, but I knew he was furious.

"You would think they would tire of it," I agreed.

"We must have a serious talk," he said. "You have been back only two months, and this is the fourth time I have had to bail you out of jail."

"I have broken no Kikuyu laws," I said calmly as we raced through the dark, ominous slums of Nairobi on our way to the affluent suburbs.

"You have broken the laws of Kenya," he said. "And like it or not, that is where you now live. I'm an official in the government, and I will not have you constantly embarrassing me!" He paused, struggling with his temper. "Look at you! I have offered to buy you a new wardrobe. Why must you wear that ugly old *kikoi?* It smells even worse than it looks."

"Is there now a law against dressing like a Kikuyu?" I asked him.

"No," he said, as he commanded the miniature bar to appear from beneath the floor and poured himself a drink. "But there *is* a law against creating a disturbance in a restaurant."

"I paid for my meal," I noted, as we turned onto Langata Road and headed out for the suburbs. "In the Kenya shillings that you gave me."

"That does not give you the right to hurl your food against the wall, simply because it is not cooked to your taste." He glared at me, barely able to contain his anger. "You're getting worse with each offense. If I had been anyone else, you'd have spent the night in jail. As it is, I had to agree to pay for the damage you caused."

"It was eland," I explained. "The Kikuyu do not eat game animals."

"It was *not* eland," he said, setting his glass down and lighting a smokeless cigarette. "The last eland died in a German zoo a year after you left for Kirinyaga. It was a modified soybean product, genetically enhanced to *taste* like eland." He paused, then sighed deeply. "If you thought it was eland, why did you order it?"

"The server said it was steak. I assumed he meant the meat of a cow or an ox."

"This has got to stop," said Edward. "We are two grown men. Why can't we reach an accommodation?" He stared at me for a long time. "I can deal with rational men who disagree with me. I do it at Government House every day. But I cannot deal with a fanatic."

"I am a rational man," I said.

"Are you?" he demanded. "Yesterday you showed my wife's nephew how to apply the *githani* test for truthfulness, and he practically burned his brother's tongue off."

"His brother was lying," I said calmly. "He who lies faces the red-hot blade with a dry mouth, whereas he who has nothing to fear has enough moisture on his tongue so that he cannot be burned."

"Try telling a seven-year-old boy that he has nothing to fear when he's being approached by a sadistic older brother who is brandishing a red-hot knife!" snapped my son.

A uniformed watchman waved us through to the private road where my son lived, and when we reached our driveway the chauffeur pulled our British vehicle up to the edge of the force field. It identified us and vanished long enough for us to pass through, and soon we came to the front door.

Edward got out of the vehicle and approached his residence as I followed him. He clenched his fists in a physical effort to restrain his anger. "I agreed to let you live with us, because you are an old man who was thrown off his world—"

"I left Kirinyaga of my own volition," I interrupted calmly.

"It makes no difference why or how you left," said my son. "What mat-

ters is that you are *here* now. You are a very old man. It has been many years since you have lived on Earth. All of your friends are dead. My mother is dead. I am your son, and I will accept my responsibilities, but you *must* meet me halfway."

"I am trying to," I said.

"I doubt it."

"I am," I repeated. "Your own son understands that, even if you do not."

"My own son has had quite enough to cope with since my divorce and remarriage. The last thing he needs is a grandfather filling his head with wild tales of some Kikuyu Utopia."

"It is a failed Utopia," I corrected him. "They would not listen to me, and so they are doomed to become another Kenya."

"What is so wrong with that?" said Edward. "Kenya is my home, and I am proud of it." He paused and stared at me. "And now it is *your* home again. You must speak of it with more respect."

"I lived in Kenya for many years before I emigrated to Kirinyaga," I said. "I can live here again. Nothing has changed."

"That is not so," said my son. "We have built a transport system beneath Nairobi, and there is now a spaceport at Watamu on the coast. We have closed down the nuclear plants; our power is now entirely thermal, drawn from beneath the floor of the Rift Valley. In fact," he added with the pride that always accompanied the descriptions of his new wife's attainments, "Susan was instrumental in the changeover."

"You misunderstood me, Edward," I replied. "Kenya remains unchanged in that it continues to ape the Europeans rather than remain true to its own traditions."

The security system identified us and opened his house to us. We walked through the foyer, past the broad winding staircase that led to the bedroom wing. The servants were waiting for us, and the butler took Edward's coat from him. Then we passed the doorways to the lounge and drawing room, both of which were filled with Roman statues and French paintings and rows of beautifully bound British books. Finally we came to Edward's study, where he turned and spoke in a low tone to the butler.

"We wish to be alone."

The servants vanished as if they had been nothing but holograms.

"Where is Susan?" I asked, for my daughter-in-law was nowhere to be seen.

"We were at a party at the Cameroon ambassador's new home when the call came through that you had been arrested again," he answered. "You broke up a very enjoyable bridge game. My guess is that she's in the tub or in bed, cursing your name."

I was about to mention that cursing my name to the god of the Europeans would not prove effective, but I decided that my son would not like to hear that at this moment, so I was silent. As I looked at my surround-

ings, I reflected that not only had all of Edward's belongings come from the Europeans, but that even his house had been taken from them, for it consisted of many rectangular rooms, and all Kikuyu knew—or should have known—that demons dwell in corners and the only proper shape for a home is round.

Edward walked briskly to his desk, activated his computer and read his messages, and then turned to me.

"There is another message from the government," he announced. "They want to see you next Tuesday at noon."

"I have already told them I will not accept their money," I said. "I have performed no service for them."

He put on his Lecture Face. "We are no longer a poor country," he said. "We pride ourselves that none of our infirm or elderly goes hungry."

"I will not go hungry if the restaurants will stop trying to feed me unclean animals."

"The government is just making sure that you do not become a financial burden to me," said Edward, refusing to let me change the subject.

"You are my son," I said. "I raised you and fed you and protected you when you were young. Now I am old and you will do the same for me. That is our tradition."

"Well, it is our government's tradition to provide a financial safety net to families who are supporting elderly members," he said, and I could tell that the last trace of Kikuyu within him had vanished, that he was entirely a Kenyan.

"You are a wealthy man," I pointed out. "You do not need their money."

"I pay my taxes," he said, lighting another smokeless cigarette to hide his defensiveness. "It would be foolish not to accept the benefits that accrue to us. You may live a very long time. We have every right to that money."

"It is dishonorable to accept what you do not need," I replied. "Tell them to leave us alone."

He leaned back, half sitting on his desk. "They wouldn't, even if I asked them to."

"They must be Wakamba or Maasai," I said, making no effort to hide my contempt.

"They are Kenyans," he answered. "Just as you and I are."

"Yes," I said, suddenly feeling the weight of my years. "Yes, I must work very hard at remembering that."

"You will save me more trips to the police station if you can," said my son.

I nodded and went off to my room. He had supplied me with a bed and mattress, but after so many years of living in my hut on Kirinyaga, I found the bed uncomfortable, so every night I removed the blanket and placed it on the floor, then lay down and slept on it.

But tonight sleep would not come, for I kept reliving the past two months in my mind. Everything I saw, everything I heard, made me remember why I had left Kenya in the first place, why I had fought so long and so hard to obtain Kirinyaga's charter.

I rolled onto my side, propped my head on my hand, and looked out the window. Hundreds of stars were twinkling brightly in the clear, cloudless sky. I tried to imagine which of them was Kirinyaga. I had been the *mundumugu*—the witch doctor—who was charged with establishing our Kikuyu Utopia.

"I served you more selflessly than any other," I whispered, staring at a flickering, verdant star, "and you betrayed me. Worse, you have betrayed Ngai. Neither He nor I shall ever seek you out again."

I laid my head back down, turned away from the window, and closed my eyes, determined to look into the skies no more.

In the morning, my son stopped by my room.

"You have slept on the floor again," he noted.

"Have they passed a law against that now?" I asked.

He sighed deeply. "Sleep any way you want."

I stared at him. "You look very impressive . . ." I began.

"Thank you."

". . . in your European clothes," I concluded.

"I have an important meeting with the Finance Minister today." He looked at his timepiece. "In fact, I must leave now or I will be late." He paused uneasily. "Have you considered what we spoke about yesterday?"

"We spoke of many things," I said.

"I am referring to the Kikuyu retirement village."

"I have lived in a village," I said. "And that is not one. It is a twenty-story tower of steel and glass, built to imprison the elderly."

"We have been through all this before," said my son. "It would be a place for you to make new friends."

"I have a new friend," I said. "I shall be visiting him this evening."

"Good!" he said. "Maybe he'll keep you out of trouble."

I arrived at the huge titanium-and-glass laboratory complex just before midnight. The night had turned cool, and a breeze was blowing gently from the south. The moon had passed behind a cloud, and it was difficult to find the side gate in the darkness. Eventually I did find it, though, and Kamau was waiting for me. He deactivated a small section of the electronic barrier long enough for me to step through.

"*Jambo, mzee*," he said. *Hello, wise old man.*

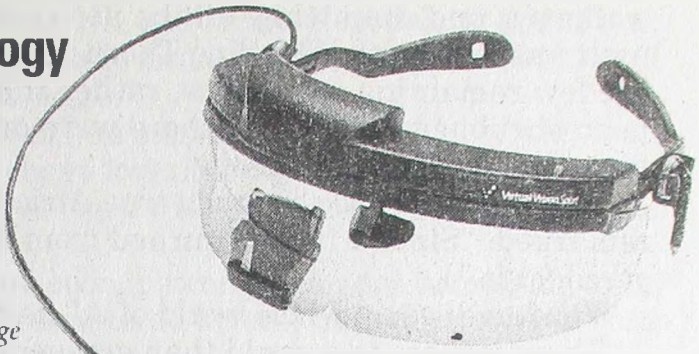
"*Jambo, mzee*," I replied, for he was almost as old as I myself was. "I have come to see with my own eyes if you were telling the truth."

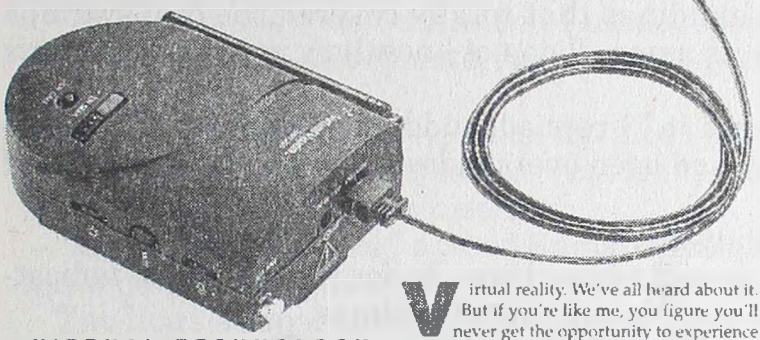
He nodded and turned, and I followed him between the tall, angular

Virtual Reality technology creates the world's first portable big-screen television

Breakthrough portable TV from Virtual Image Displays, Inc. creates a virtual image that simulates a 60" big-screen image at a distance of six to 15 feet away.

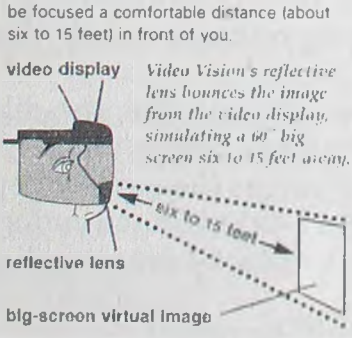
by Timothy B. Arnett





VIRTUAL TECHNOLOGY

How does Virtual Vision Sport create a virtual image that floats in space? Within the eyeware is a miniature video display and a sophisticated reflective optical system. Part of the optical system is a small, specially-engineered reflective lens which is mounted slightly below your normal field of vision on your dominant-eye side. (Your brain gives priority to whatever image is viewed by your dominant eye, so the image will seem to appear in both of your eyes. See the inset box at the right to determine which eye is your dominant eye.) The lens bounces the video image from the video display so that it appears to be focused a comfortable distance (about six to 15 feet) in front of you.



Video Vision's reflective lens bounces the image from the video display, simulating a 60" big screen six to 15 feet away.

Virtual reality. We've all heard about it. But if you're like me, you figure you'll never get the opportunity to experience it in your lifetime. Think again! The Virtual Vision Sport 200 is a breakthrough invention that uses virtual reality (VR) technology to bring big-screen virtual images to a portable TV.

The Sport eyeware is easy to wear, and it lets you see your environment as well as the TV image.

Virtual Vision Sport is the ultimate portable television. You can wear it on the beach, in the gym, wherever you want. And because the TV image is part of the eyeware, *it moves with you.* With the Sport, you can maintain your active lifestyle without missing your favorite shows!

How it works. The Sport's portable battery-operated tuner picks up TV signals from the airwaves and transmits images to a miniature LCD video display in the eyeware. The image is reflected to your dominant eye, resulting in a floating virtual image that appears to be a comfortable distance away. The farther away you focus your vision, the larger the image appears. Special color optics provide projection TV-style imagery. The eyeware contains a pair of high-fidelity earphones. It also comes with an AC adapter for indoor use!

Monocular technology. The Sport uses monocular technology to create the virtual image. While your retinas are presented with different images, they are not so different that the brain can't fuse them together. The process of fusing two slightly different retinal images into a single picture with depth, called *stereopsis*, is the way most of us see the world around us.

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buildings that hovered over us, casting eerie shadows along the narrow walkways and channeling all the noises of the city in our direction. Our path was lined with Whistling Thorn and Yellow Fever trees, cloned from the few remaining specimens, rather than the usual introduced European shrubbery. Here and there were ornamental displays of grasses from the vanished savannahs.

"It is strange to see so much true African vegetation here in Kenya," I remarked. "Since I have returned from Kirinyaga, my eyes have hungered for it."

"You have seen a whole world of it," he replied with unconcealed envy.

"There is more to a world than greenery," I said. "When all is said and done, there is little difference between Kirinyaga and Kenya. Both have turned their backs on Ngai."

Kamau came to a halt, and gestured around him at the looming metal and glass and concrete buildings that totally covered the cool swamps from which Nairobi took its name. "I do not know how you can prefer *this* to Kirinyaga."

"I did not say I preferred it," I replied, suddenly aware that the ever-present noises of the city had been overshadowed by the droning hum of machines.

"Then you *do* miss Kirinyaga."

"I miss what Kirinyaga might have been. As for these," I said, indicating the immense structures, "they are just buildings."

"They are European buildings," he said bitterly. "They were built by men who are no longer Kikuyu or Luo or Embu, but merely Kenyans. They are filled with corners." He paused, and I thought, approvingly, *How much you sound like me! No wonder you sought me out when I returned to Kenya.* "Nairobi is home to eleven million people," he continued. "It stinks of sewage. The air is so polluted there are days when you can actually see it. The people wear European clothes and worship the Europeans' god. How could you turn your back on Utopia for this?"

I held up my hands. "I have only ten fingers."

He frowned. "I do not understand."

"Do you remember the story of the little Dutch boy who put his finger in the dike?"

Kamau shook his head and spat contemptuously on the ground. "I do not listen to European stories."

"Perhaps you are wise not to," I acknowledged. "At any rate, the dike of tradition with which I had surrounded Kirinyaga began to spring leaks. They were few and easily plugged at first, but as the society kept evolving and growing they became many, and soon I did not have enough fingers to plug them all." I shrugged. "So I left before I was washed away."

"Have they another *mundumugu* to replace you?" he asked.

"I am told that they have a doctor to cure the sick, and a Christian minister to tell them how to worship the god of the Europeans, and a computer to tell them how to react to any situation that might arise," I said. "They no longer need a *mundumugu*."

"Then Ngai has forsaken them," he stated.

"No," I corrected him. "*They* have forsaken Ngai."

"I apologize, *mundumugu*," he said with deference. "You are right, of course."

He began walking again, and soon a strong, pungent odor came to my nostrils, a scent I had never encountered before, but which stirred some memory deep within my soul.

"We are almost there," said Kamau.

I heard a low rumbling sound, not like a predator growling, but rather like a vast machine purring with power.

"He is very nervous," continued Kamau, speaking in a soft monotone. "Make no sudden movements. He has already tried to kill two of his daytime attendants."

And then we were there, just as the moon emerged from its cloud cover and shone down on the awesome creature that stood facing us.

"He is magnificent!" I whispered.

"A perfect replication," agreed Kamau. "Height, ten feet eight inches at the shoulder, weight seven tons—and each tusk is exactly 148 pounds."

The huge animal stared at me through the flickering force field that surrounded it and tested the cool night breeze, striving to pick up my scent.

"Remarkable!" I said.

"You understand the cloning process, do you not?" asked Kamau.

"I understand what cloning *is*," I answered. "I know nothing of the exact process."

"In this case, they took some cells from his tusks, which have been on display in the museum for more than two centuries, created the proper nutrient solution, and this is the result: Ahmed of Marsabit, the only elephant ever protected by Presidential Decree, lives again."

"I read that he was always accompanied by two guards no matter where he roamed on Mount Marsabit," I said. "Have they also ignored tradition? I see no one but you. Where is the other guard?"

"There are no guards. The entire complex is protected by a sophisticated electronic security system."

"Are you not a guard?" I asked.

He kept the shame from his voice, but he could not banish it from his face: even in the moonlight I could see it. "I am a paid companion."

"Of the elephant?"

"Of Ahmed."

"I am sorry," I said.

"We cannot all be *mundumugus*," he answered. "When you are my age in a culture that worships youth, you take what is offered to you."

"True," I said. I looked back at the elephant. "I wonder if he has any memories of his former life? Of the days when he was the greatest of all living creatures, and Mount Marsabit was his kingdom."

"He knows nothing of Marsabit," answered Kamau. "But he knows something is wrong. He knows he was not born to spend his life in a tiny yard, surrounded by a glowing force field." He paused. "Sometimes, late at night, he faces the north and lifts his trunk and cries out his loneliness and misery. To the technicians it is just an annoyance. Usually they tell me to feed him, as if food will assuage his sorrow. It is not even *real* food, but something they have concocted in their laboratories."

"He does not belong here," I agreed.

"I know," said Kamau. "But then, neither do you, *mzee*. You should be back on Kirinyaga, living as the Kikuyu were meant to live."

I frowned. "No one on Kirinyaga is living as the Kikuyu were meant to live." I sighed deeply. "I think perhaps the time for *mundumugus* is past."

"This cannot be true," he protested. "Who else can be the repository of our traditions, the interpreter of our laws?"

"Our traditions are as dead as *his*," I said, gesturing toward Ahmed. Then I turned back to Kamau. "Do you mind if I ask you a question?"

"Certainly not, *mundumugu*."

"I am glad you sought me out, and I have enjoyed our conversations since I returned to Kenya," I told him. "But something puzzles me: since you feel so strongly about the Kikuyu, why did I not know you during our struggle to find a homeland? Why did you remain behind when we emigrated to Kirinyaga?"

I could see him wrestling with himself to produce an answer. Finally the battle was over, and the old man seemed to shrink an inch or two.

"I was terrified," he admitted.

"Of the spaceship?" I asked.

"No."

"Then what frightened you?"

Another internal struggle, and then an answer: "*You* did, *mzee*."

"Me?" I repeated, surprised.

"You were always so sure of yourself," he said. "Always such a perfect Kikuyu. You made me afraid that I wasn't good enough."

"That was ridiculous," I said firmly.

"Was it?" he countered. "My wife was a Catholic. My son and daughter bore Christian names. And I myself had grown used to European clothes and European conveniences." He paused. "I was afraid if I went with you—and I wanted to; I have been cursing myself for my cowardice ever since—that soon I would complain about missing the technology and

comfort I had left behind, and that you would banish me." He would not meet my gaze, but stared at the ground. "I did not wish to become an outcast on the world that was the last hope of my people."

You are wiser than I suspected, I thought. Aloud I uttered a compassionate lie: "You would not have been an outcast."

"You are sure?"

"I am sure," I said, laying a comforting hand on his bony shoulder. "In fact, I wish you had been there to support me when the end came."

"What good would the support of an old man have been?"

"You are not just *any* old man," I answered. "The word of a descendant of Johnstone Kamau would have carried much weight among the Council of Elders."

"That was another reason I was afraid to come," he replied, the words flowing a little more easily this time. "How could I live up to my name—for everyone knows that Johnstone Kamau became Jomo Kenyatta, the great Burning Spear of the Kikuyu. How could I possibly compare to such a man as that?"

"You compare more favorably than you think," I said reassuringly. "I could have used the passion of your belief."

"Surely you had support from the people," he said.

I shook my head. "Even my own apprentice, who I was preparing to succeed me, abandoned me; in fact, I believe he is at the university just down the road even as we speak. In the end, the people rejected the discipline of our traditions and the teachings of Ngai for the miracles and comforts of the Europeans. I suppose I should not be surprised, considering how many times it has happened here in Africa." I looked thoughtfully at the elephant. "I am as much an anachronism as Ahmed. Time has forgotten us both."

"But Ngai has not."

"Ngai, too, my friend," I said. "Our day has passed. There is no place left for us, not in Kenya, not on Kirinyaga, not anywhere."

Perhaps it was something in the tone of my voice, or perhaps in some mystic way Ahmed understood what I was saying. Whatever the reason, the elephant stepped forward to the edge of the force field and stared directly at me.

"It is lucky we have the field for protection," remarked Kamau.

"He would not hurt me," I said confidently.

"He has hurt men whom he had less reason to attack."

"But not me," I said. "Lower the field to a height of five feet."

"But . . ."

"Do as I say," I ordered him.

"Yes, *mundumugu,*" he replied unhappily, going to a small control box and punching in a code.

Suddenly the mild visual distortion vanished at eye level. I reached out

a reassuring hand, and a moment later Ahmed ran the tip of his trunk gently across my face and body, then sighed deeply and stood there, swaying gently as he transferred his weight from one foot to the other.

"I would not have believed it if I had not seen it!" said Kamau, almost reverently.

"Are we not all Ngai's creations?" I said.

"Even Ahmed?" asked Kamau.

"Who do *you* think created him?"

He shrugged again, and did not answer.

I remained for a few more minutes, watching the magnificent creature, while Kamau returned the force field to its former position. Then the night air became uncomfortably cold, as so often happened at this altitude, and I turned to Kamau.

"I must leave now," I said. "I thank you for inviting me here. I would not have believed this miracle had I not seen it with my own eyes."

"The scientists think it is *their* miracle," he said.

"You and I know better," I replied.

He frowned. "But why do you think Ngai has allowed Ahmed to live again, at this time and in this place?"

I paused for a long moment, trying to formulate an answer, and found that I couldn't.

"There was a time when I knew with absolute certainty why Ngai did what He did," I said at last. "Now I am not so sure."

"What kind of talk is that from a *mundumugu*?" demanded Kamau.

"It was not long ago that I would wake up to the song of birds," I said as we left Ahmed's enclosure and walked to the side gate through which I had entered. "And I would look across the river that wound by my village on Kirinyaga and see impala and zebra grazing on the savannah. Now I wake up to the sound and smell of modern Nairobi and then I look out and see a featureless grey wall that separates my son's house from that of his neighbor." I paused. "I think this must be my punishment for failing to bring Ngai's word to my people."

"Will I see you again?" he asked as we reached the gate and he deactivated a small section long enough for me to pass through.

"If it will not be an imposition," I said.

"The great Koriba an imposition?" he said with a smile.

"My son finds me so," I replied. "He gives me a room in his house, but he would prefer I lived elsewhere. And his wife is ashamed of my bare feet and my *kikoi*; she is constantly buying European shoes and clothing for me to wear."

"*My* son works inside the laboratory," said Kamau, pointing to his son's third-floor office with some pride. "He has seventeen men working for him. Seventeen!"

I must not have looked impressed, for he continued, less enthusiasti-

cally, "It is he who got me this job, so that I *wouldn't* have to live with him."

"The job of paid companion," I said.

A bittersweet expression crossed his face. "I love my son, Koriba, and I know that he loves me—but I think that he is also a little bit ashamed of me."

"There is a thin line between shame and embarrassment," I said. "My son glides between one and the other like the pendulum of a clock."

Kamau seemed grateful to hear that his situation was not unique. "You are welcome to live with me, *mundumugu,*" he said, and I could tell that it was an earnest offer, not just a polite lie that he hoped I would reject. "We would have much to talk about."

"That is very considerate of you," I said. "But it will be enough if I may visit you from time to time, on those days when I find Kenyans unbearable and must speak to another Kikuyu."

"As often as you wish," he said. "*Kwaheri, mzee.*"

"*Kwaheri,*" I responded. *Farewell.*

I took the slidewalk down the noisy, crowded streets and boulevards that had once been the sprawling Athi Plains, an area that had swarmed with a different kind of life, and got off when I came to the airbus platform. An airbus glided up a few minutes later, almost empty at this late hour, and began going north, floating perhaps ten inches above the ground.

The trees that lined the migration route had been replaced by a dense angular forest of steel and glass and tightly bonded alloys. As I peered through a window into the night, it seemed for a few moments that I was also peering into the past. Here, where the titanium-and-glass courthouse stood, was the very spot where the Burning Spear had first been arrested for having the temerity to suggest that his country did not belong to the British. And there, by the new eight-story post office building, was where the last lion had died. Over there, by the water recycling plant, my people had vanquished the Wakamba in glorious and bloody battle some three hundred years ago.

"We have arrived, *mzee,*" said the driver, and the bus hovered a few inches above the ground while I made my way to the door. "Aren't you chilly, dressed in just a blanket like that?"

I did not deign to answer him, but stepped out to the sidewalk, which did not move here in the suburbs as did the slidewalks of the city. I preferred it, for man was meant to walk, not be transported effortlessly by miles-long beltways.

I approached my son's enclave and greeted the guards, who all knew me, for I often wandered through the area at night. They passed me through with no difficulty, and as I walked I tried to look across the centuries once more, to see the mud-and-grass huts, the *bomas* and *shambas*

of my people, but the vision was blotted out by enormous mock-Tudor and mock-Victorian and mock-Colonial and mock-contemporary houses, interspersed with needle-like apartment buildings that reached up to stab the clouds.

I had no desire to speak to Edward or Susan, for they would question me endlessly about where I had been. My son would once again warn me about the thieves and muggers who prey on old men after dark in Nairobi, and my daughter-in-law would try to subtly suggest that I would be warmer in a coat and pants. So I went past their house and walked aimlessly through the enclave until all the lights in the house had gone out. When I was sure they were asleep, I went to a side door and waited for the security system to identify my retina and skeletal structure, as it had on so many similar nights. Then I quietly made my way to my room.

Usually I dreamed of Kirinyaga, but this night the image of Ahmed haunted my dreams. Ahmed, eternally confined by a force field; Ahmed, trying to imagine what lay beyond his tiny enclosure; Ahmed, who would live and die without ever seeing another of his own kind.

And gradually, my dream shifted to myself: to Koriba, attached by invisible chains to a Nairobi he could no longer recognize; Koriba, trying futilely to mold Kirinyaga into what it might have been; Koriba, who once led a brave exodus of the Kikuyu until one day he looked around and found that he was the only Kikuyu remaining.

In the morning I went to visit my daughter on Kirinyaga—not the terraformed world, but the *real* Kirinyaga, which is now called Mount Kenya. It was here that Ngai gave the digging-stick to Gikuyu, the first man, and told him to work the earth. It was here that Gikuyu's nine daughters became the mothers of the nine tribes of the Kikuyu, here that the sacred fig tree blossomed. It was here, millennia later, that Jomo Kenyatta, the great Burning Spear of the Kikuyu, would invoke Ngai's power and send the Mau Mau out to drive the white man back to Europe.

And it was here that a steel-and-glass city of five million inhabitants sprawled up the side of the holy mountain. Nairobi's overstrained water and sewer system simply could not accommodate any more people, so the government offered enormous tax incentives to any business that would move to Kirinyaga, in the hope that the people would follow—and the people accommodated them.

Vehicles spewed pollution into the atmosphere, and the noise of the city at work was deafening. I walked to the spot where the fig tree had once stood; it was now covered by a lead foundry. The slopes where the bongo and the rhinoceros once lived were hidden beneath the housing projects. The winding mountain streams had all been diverted and redirected. The tree beneath which Deedan Kimathi had been killed by the British was only a memory, its place taken by a fast food restaurant. The

summit had been turned into a park, with tram service leading to a score of souvenir shops.

And now I realized why Kenya had become intolerable. Ngai no longer ruled the world from His throne atop the mountain, for there was no longer any room for Him there. Like the leopard and the golden sunbird, like I myself many years ago, He too had fled before this onslaught of black Europeans.

Possibly my discovery influenced my mood, for the visit with my daughter did not go well. But then, they never did: she was too much like her mother.

I entered my son's study late that same afternoon.

"One of the servants said you wished to see me," I said.

"Yes, I do," said my son as he looked up from his computer. Behind him were paintings of two great leaders, Martin Luther King and Julius Nyerere, black men both, but neither one a Kikuyu. "Please sit down."

I did as he asked.

"On a chair, my father," he said.

"The floor is satisfactory."

He sighed heavily. "I am too tired to argue with you. I have been brushing up on my French." He grimaced. "It is a difficult language."

"Why are you studying French?" I asked.

"As you know, the ambassador from Cameroon has bought a house in the enclave. I thought it would be advantageous to be able to speak to him in his own tongue."

"That would be Bamileke or Ewondo, not French," I noted.

"He does not speak either of those," answered Edward. "His family is ruling class. They only spoke French in his family compound, and he was educated in Paris."

"Since he is the ambassador to our country, why are you learning *his* language?" I asked. "Why does he not learn Swahili?"

"Swahili is a street language," said my son. "English and French are the languages of diplomacy and business. His English is poor, so I will speak to him in French instead." He smiled smugly. "*That* ought to impress him!"

"I see," I said.

"You look disapproving," he observed.

"I am not ashamed of being a Kikuyu," I said. "Why are you ashamed of being a Kenyan?"

"I am not ashamed of anything!" he snapped. "I am proud of being able to speak to him in his own tongue."

"More proud than he, a visitor to Kenya, is to speak to you in *your* tongue," I noted.

"You do not understand!" he said.

"Evidently," I agreed.

He stared at me silently for a moment, then sighed deeply. "You drive me crazy," he said. "I don't even know how we came to be discussing this. I wanted to see you for a different reason." He lit a smokeless cigarette, took one puff, and threw it into the atomizer. "I had a visit from Father Ngoma this morning."

"I do not know him."

"You know his parishioners, though," said my son. "A number of them have come to you for advice."

"That is possible," I admitted.

"Damn it!" said Edward. "I have to live in this neighborhood, and he is the parish priest. He resents you telling his flock how to live, especially since what you tell them is in contradiction to Catholic dogma."

"Am I to lie to them, then?" I asked.

"Can't you just refer them to Father Ngoma?"

"I am a *mundumugu*," I said. "It is my duty to advise those who come to me for guidance."

"You have not been a *mundumugu* since they made you leave Kirinyaga!" he said irritably.

"I left of my own volition," I replied calmly.

"We are getting off the subject again," said Edward. "Look—if you want to stay in the *mundumugu* business, I'll rent you an office, or"—he added contemptuously—"buy you a patch of dirt on which to squat and make pronouncements. But you cannot practice in my house."

"Father Ngoma's parishioners must not like what he has to say," I observed, "or they would not seek advice elsewhere."

"I do not want you speaking to them again. Is that clear?"

"Yes," I said. "It is clear that you do not want me to speak to them again."

"You know exactly what I mean!" he exploded. "No more verbal games! Maybe they worked on Kirinyaga, but they won't work here! I know you too well!"

He went back to staring at his computer.

"It is most interesting," I said.

"What is?" he asked suspiciously, glaring at me.

"Here you are, surrounded by English books, studying French, and arguing on behalf of the priest of an Italian religion. Not only are you not Kikuyu, I think perhaps you are no longer even Kenyan."

He glared at me across his desk. "You drive me crazy," he repeated.

After I left my son's study I left the house and took an airbus to the park in Muthaiga, miles from my son and the neighbors who were interchangeable with him. Once lions had stalked this terrain. Leopards had clung to overhanging limbs, waiting for the opportunity to pounce upon

their prey. Wildebeest and zebra and gazelles had rubbed shoulders, grazing on the tall grasses. Giraffes had nibbled the tops of acacia trees, while warthogs rooted in the earth for tubers. Rhinos had nibbled on thornbushes, and charged furiously at any sound or sight they could not immediately identify.

Then the Kikuyu had come and cleared the land, bringing with them their cattle and their oxen and their goats. They had dwelt in huts of mud and grass, and lived the life that we aspired to on Kirinyaga.

But all that was in the past. Today the park contained nothing but a few squirrels racing across the imported Kentucky Blue Grass and a pair of hornbills that had nested in one of the transplanted European trees. Old Kikuyu men, dressed in shoes and pants and jackets, sat on the benches that ran along the perimeter. One man was tossing crumbs to an exceptionally bold starling, but most of them simply sat and stared aimlessly.

I found an empty bench, but decided not to sit on it. I didn't want to be like these men, who saw nothing but the squirrels and the birds, when I could see the lions and the impala, the war-painted Kikuyu and the red-clad Maasai, who had once stalked across this same land.

I continued walking, suddenly restless, and despite the heat of the day and the frailty of my ancient body, I walked until twilight. I decided I could not endure dinner with my son and his wife, their talk of their boring jobs, their continual veiled suggestions about the retirement home, their inability to comprehend either why I went to Kirinyaga or why I returned—so instead of going home I began walking aimlessly through the crowded city.

Finally I looked up at the sky. *Ngai,* I said silently, *I still do not understand. I was a good mundumugu. I obeyed Your law. I honored Your rituals. There must have come a day, a moment, a second, when together we could have saved Kirinyaga if You had just manifested Yourself. Why did You abandon it when it needed You so desperately?*

I spoke to Ngai for minutes that turned into hours, but He did not answer.

When it was ten o'clock at night, I decided it was time to start making my way to the laboratory complex, for it would take me more than an hour to get there, and Kamau began working at eleven.

As before, he deactivated the electronic barrier to let me in, then escorted me to the small grassy area where Ahmed was kept.

"I did not expect to see you back so soon, *mzee,*" he said.

"I have no place else to go," I answered, and he nodded, as if this made perfect sense to him.

Ahmed seemed nervous until the breeze brought my scent to him. Then he turned to face the north, extending his trunk every few moments.

"It is as if he seeks some sign from Mount Marsabit," I remarked, for the great creature's former home was hundreds of miles north of Nairobi, a solitary green mountain rising out of the blazing desert.

"He would not be pleased with what he found," said Kamau.

"Why do you say that?" I asked, for no animal in our history was ever more identified with a location than the mighty Ahmed with Marsabit.

"Do you not read the papers, or watch the news on the holo?"

I shook my head. "What happens to black Europeans is of no concern to me."

"The government has evacuated the town of Marsabit, which sits next to the mountain. They have closed the Singing Wells, and have ordered everyone to leave the area."

"Leave Marsabit? Why?"

"They have been burying nuclear waste at the base of the mountain for many years," he said. "It was just revealed that some of the containers broke open almost six years ago. The government hid the fact from the people, and then failed to properly clean up the leak."

"How could such a thing happen?" I asked, though of course I knew the answer. After all, how does *anything* happen in Kenya?

"Politics. Payoffs. Corruption."

"A third of Kenya is desert," I said. "Why did they not bury it there, where no one lives or even thinks to travel, so when this kind of disaster occurs, as it always does, no one is harmed?"

He shrugged. "Politics. Payoffs. Corruption," he repeated. "It is our way of life."

"Ah, well, it is nothing to me anyway," I said. "What happens to a mountain five hundred kilometers away does not interest me, any more than I am interested in what happens to a world named after a different mountain."

"It interests *me*," said Kamau. "Innocent people have been exposed to radiation."

"If they live near Marsabit, they are Pokot and Rendille," I pointed out. "What does that matter to the Kikuyu?"

"They are *people*, and my heart goes out to them," said Kamau.

"You are a good man," I said. "I knew that from the moment we first met." I pulled some peanuts from the pouch that hung around my neck, the same pouch in which I used to keep charms and magical tokens. "I bought these for Ahmed this afternoon," I said. "May I. . . ?"

"Certainly," answered Kamau. "He has few enough pleasures. Even a peanut will be appreciated. Just toss them at his feet."

"No," I said, walking forward. "Lower the barrier."

He lowered the force field until Ahmed was able to reach his trunk out over the top. When I got close enough, the huge beast gently took the peanuts from my hand.

"I am amazed!" said Kamau when I had rejoined him. "Even I cannot approach Ahmed with impunity, yet you actually fed him by hand, as if he were a family pet."

"We are each the last of our kind, living on borrowed time," I said. "He senses a kinship."

I remained a few more minutes, then went home to another night of troubled sleep. I felt Ngai was trying to tell me something, trying to impart some message through my dreams, but though I had spent years interpreting the omens in other people's dreams, I was ignorant of my own.

Edward was standing on the beautifully rolled lawn, staring at the blackened embers of my fire.

"I have a beautiful fire pit on the terrace," he said, trying unsuccessfully to hide his anger. "Why on earth did you build a fire in the middle of the garden?"

"That is where a fire belongs," I answered.

"Not in *this* house, it doesn't!"

"I shall try to remember."

"Do you know what the landscaper will charge me to repair the damage you caused?" A look of concern suddenly crossed his face. "You haven't sacrificed any animals, have you?"

"No."

"You're sure none of the neighbors is missing a dog or a cat?" he persisted.

"I know the law," I said. And indeed, Kikuyu law required the sacrifice of goats and cattle, not dogs and cats. "I am trying to obey it."

"I find that difficult to believe."

"But *you* are not obeying it, Edward," I said.

"What are you talking about?" he demanded.

I looked at Susan, who was staring at us from a second-story window.

"You have two wives," I pointed out. "The younger one lives with you, but the older one lives many kilometers away, and sees you only when you take your children away from her on weekends. This is unnatural: a man's wives should all live together with him, sharing the household duties."

"Linda is no longer my wife," he said. "You know that. We were divorced many years ago."

"You can afford both," I said. "You should have kept both."

"In this society, a man may have only one wife," said Edward. "What kind of talk is this? You have lived in England and America. You know that."

"That is their law, not ours," I said. "This is Kenya."

"It is the same thing."

"The Moslems have more than one wife," I replied.

"I am not a Moslem," he said.

"A Kikuyu man may have as many wives as he can afford," I said. "It is obvious that you are also not a Kikuyu."

"I've had it with this smug superiority of yours!" he exploded. "You deserted my mother because she was not a true Kikuyu," he continued bitterly. "You turned your back on my sister because she was not a true Kikuyu. Since I was a child, every time you were displeased with me you have told me that I am not a true Kikuyu. Now you have even proclaimed that none of the thousands who followed you to Kirinyaga are true Kikuyus." He glared furiously at me. "Your standards are higher than Kirinyaga itself! Can there possibly be a true Kikuyu anywhere in the universe?"

"Certainly," I replied.

"Where can such a paragon be found?" he demanded.

"Right here," I said, tapping myself on the chest. "You are looking at him."

My days faded one into another, the dullness and drudgery of them broken only by occasional nocturnal visits to the laboratory complex. Then one night, as I met Kamau at the gate, I could see that his entire demeanor had changed.

"Something is wrong," I said promptly. "Are you ill?"

"No, *mzee,* it is nothing like that."

"Then what is the matter?" I persisted.

"It is Ahmed," said Kamau, unable to stop tears from rolling down his withered cheeks. "They have decided to put him to death the day after tomorrow."

"Why?" I asked, surprised. "Has he attacked another keeper?"

"No," said Kamau bitterly. "The experiment was a success. They know they can clone an elephant, so why continue to pay for his upkeep when they can line their pockets with the remaining funds of the grant?"

"Is there no one you can appeal to?" I demanded.

"Look at me," said Kamau. "I am an eighty-six-year-old man who was given his job as an act of charity. Who will listen to me?"

"We must do something," I said.

He shook his head sadly. "They are *kehees,*" he said. "Uncircumcised boys. They do not even know what a *mundumugu* is. Do not humiliate yourself by pleading with them."

"If I did not plead with the Kikuyu on Kirinyaga," I replied, "you may be sure I will not plead with the Kenyans in Nairobi." I tried to ignore the ceaseless hummings of the laboratory machines as I considered my options. Finally I looked up at the night sky: the moon glowed a hazy orange through the pollution. "I will need your help," I said at last.

"You can depend on me."

"Good. I shall return tomorrow night."

I turned on my heel and left, without even stopping at Ahmed's enclosure.

All that night I thought and planned. In the morning, I waited until my son and his wife had left the house, then called Kamau on the vidphone to tell him what I intended to do and how he could help. Next, I had the computer contact the bank and withdraw my money, for though I disdained shillings and refused to cash my government checks, my son had found it easier to shower me with money than respect.

I spent the rest of the morning shopping at vehicle rental agencies until I found exactly what I wanted. I had the saleswoman show me how to manipulate it, practiced until nightfall, hovered opposite the laboratory until I saw Kamau enter the grounds, and then maneuvered up to the side gate.

"*Jambo, mundumugu!*" whispered Kamau as he deactivated enough of the electronic barrier to accommodate the vehicle, which he scrutinized carefully. I backed up to Ahmed's enclosure, then opened the back and ordered the ramp to descend. The elephant watched with an uneasy curiosity as Kamau deactivated a ten-foot section of the force field and allowed the bottom of the ramp through.

"*Njoo, Tembo,*" I said. *Come, elephant.*

He took a tentative step toward me, then another and another. When he reached the edge of his enclosure he stopped, for always he had received an electrical "correction" when he tried to move beyond this point. It took almost twenty minutes of tempting him with peanuts before he finally crossed the barrier and then clambered awkwardly up the ramp, which slid in after him. I sealed him into the hovering vehicle, and he instantly trumpeted in panic.

"Keep him quiet until we get out of here," said a nervous Kamau as I joined him at the controls, "or he'll wake up the whole city."

I opened a panel to the back of the vehicle and spoke soothingly, and strangely enough the trumpeting ceased and the scuffling did stop. As I continued to calm the frightened beast, Kamau piloted the vehicle out of the laboratory complex. We passed through the Ngong Hills twenty minutes later, and circled around Thika in another hour. When we passed Kirinyaga—the true, snow-capped Kirinyaga, from which Ngai once ruled the world—ninety minutes after that, I did not give it so much as a glance.

We must have been quite a sight to anyone we passed: two seemingly crazy old men, racing through the night in an unmarked cargo vehicle carrying a six-ton monster that had been extinct for more than two centuries.

"Have you considered what effect the radiation will have on him?" asked Kamau as we passed through Isiolo and continued north.

"I questioned my son about it," I answered. "He is aware of the incident, and says that the contamination is confined to the lower levels of the mountain." I paused. "He also tells me it will soon be cleaned up, but I do not think I believe him."

"But Ahmed must pass through the radiation zone to ascend the mountain," said Kamau.

I shrugged. "Then he will pass through it. Every day he lives is a day more than he would have lived in Nairobi. For as much time as Ngai sees fit to give him, he will be free to graze on the mountain's greenery and drink deep of its cool waters."

"I hope he lives many years," he said. "If I am to be jailed for breaking the law, I would at least like to know that some lasting good came of it."

"No one is going to jail you," I assured him. "All that will happen is that you will be fired from a job that no longer exists."

"That job supported me," he said unhappily.

The Burning Spear would have no use for you, I decided. *You bring no honor to his name. It is as I have always known: I am the last true Kikuyu.*

I pulled my remaining money out of my pouch and held it out to him. "Here," I said.

"But what about yourself, *mzee?*" he said, forcing himself not to grab for it.

"Take it," I said. "I have no use for it."

"*Asante sana, mzee,*" he said, taking it from my hand and stuffing it into a pocket. *Thank you, mzee.*

We fell silent then, each occupied with his own thoughts. As Nairobi receded further and further behind us, I compared my feelings with those I had experienced when I had left Kenya behind for Kirinyaga. I had been filled with optimism then, certain that we would create the Utopia I could envision so clearly in my mind.

The thing I had not realized is that a society can be a Utopia for only an instant—once it reaches a state of perfection it cannot change and still be a Utopia, and it is the nature of societies to grow and evolve. I do not know when Kirinyaga became a Utopia; the instant came and went without my noticing it.

Now I was seeking Utopia again, but this time of a more limited, more realizable nature: a Utopia for one man, a man who knew his own mind and would die before compromising. I had been misled in the past, so I was not as elated as the day we had left for Kirinyaga; being older and wiser, I felt a calm, quiet certitude rather than more vivid emotions.

An hour after sunrise, we came to a huge, green, fog-enshrouded mountain, set in the middle of a bleached desert. A single swirling dust devil was visible against the horizon.

We stopped, then unsealed the elephant's compartment. We stood back

as Ahmed stepped cautiously down the ramp, his every movement tense with apprehension. He took a few steps, as if to convince himself that he was truly on solid ground again, then raised his trunk to examine the scents of his new—and ancient—home.

Slowly the great beast turned toward Marsabit, and suddenly his whole demeanor changed. No longer cautious, no longer fearful, he spent almost a full minute eagerly examining the smells that wafted down to him. Then, without a backward glance, he strode confidently to the foothills and vanished into the foliage. A moment later we heard him trumpet, and then he was climbing the mountain to claim his kingdom.

I turned to Kamau. "You had better take the vehicle back before they come looking for it."

"Are you not coming with me?" he asked, surprised.

"No," I replied. "Like Ahmed, I will live out my days on Marsabit."

"But that means you, too, must pass through the radiation."

"What of it?" I said with an unconcerned shrug. "I am an old man. How much time can I have left—weeks? Months? Surely not a year. Probably the burden of my years will kill me long before the radiation does."

"I hope you are right," said Kamau. "I should hate to think of you spending your final days in agony."

"I have seen men who live in agony," I told him. "They are the old *mzees* who gather in the park each morning, leading lives devoid of purpose, waiting only for death to claim another of their number. I will not share their fate."

A frown crossed his face like an early morning shadow, and I could see what he was thinking: he would have to take the vehicle back and face the consequences alone.

"I will remain here with you," he said suddenly. "I cannot turn my back on Eden a second time."

"It is not Eden," I said. "It is only a mountain in the middle of a desert."

"Nonetheless, I am staying. We will start a new Utopia. It will be Kirinyaga again, only done right this time."

I have work to do, I thought. *Important work. And you would desert me in the end, as they have all deserted me. Better that you leave now.*

"You must not worry about the authorities," I said in the same reassuring tones with which I spoke to the elephant. "Return the vehicle to my son and he will take care of everything."

"Why should he?" asked Kamau suspiciously.

"Because I have always been an embarrassment to him, and if it were known that I stole Ahmed from a government laboratory, I would graduate from an embarrassment to a humiliation. Trust me: he will not allow this to happen."

"If your son asks about you, what shall I tell him?"

"The truth," I answered. "He will not come looking for me."

"What will stop him?"

"The fear that he might find me and have to bring me back with him," I said.

Kamau's face reflected the battle that was going on inside him, his terror of returning alone pitted against his fear of the hardships of life on the mountain.

"It is true that my son would worry about me," he said hesitantly, as if expecting me to contradict him, perhaps even hoping that I would. "And I would never see my grandchildren again."

You are the last Kikuyu, indeed the last human being, that I shall ever see, I thought. *I will utter one last lie, disguised as a question, and if you do not see through it, then you will leave with a clear conscience and I will have performed a final act of compassion.*

"Go home, my friend," I said. "For what is more important than a grandchild?"

"Come with me, Koriba," he urged. "They will not punish you if you explain why you kidnapped him."

"I am not going back," I said firmly. "Not now, not ever. Ahmed and I are both anachronisms. It is best that we live out our lives here, away from a world we no longer recognize, a world that has no place for us."

Kamau looked at the mountain. "You and he are joined at the soul," he concluded.

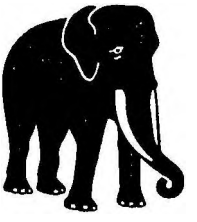
"Perhaps," I agreed. I laid my hand on his shoulder. "*Kwaheri*, Kamau."

"*Kwaheri, mzee,*" he replied unhappily. "Please ask Ngai to forgive me for my weakness."

It seemed to take him forever to activate the vehicle and turn it toward Nairobi, but finally he was out of sight, and I turned and began ascending the foothills.

I had wasted many years seeking Ngai on the wrong mountain. Men of lesser faith might believe Him dead or disinterested, but I knew that if Ahmed could be reborn after all others of his kind were long dead, then Ngai must surely be nearby, overseeing the miracle. I would spend the rest of the day regaining my strength, and then, in the morning, I would begin searching for Him again on Marsabit.

And this time, I knew I would find Him. ●



Paul Park

THE LAST HOMOSEXUAL

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Illustration by Steve Cavallo

At my tenth high school reunion at the Fairmont Hotel, I ran into Steve Daigrepont and my life changed.

That was three years ago. Now I am living by myself in a motel room, in the southeast corner of the Republic of California. But in those days I was Jimmy Brothers, and my wife and I owned a house uptown off Audubon Park, in New Orleans. Our telephone number was (504) EXodus-5671. I could call her now. It would be early evening.

I think she still lives there because it was her house, bought with her money. She was the most beautiful woman I ever met, and rich too. In those days she was teaching at Tulane Christian University, and I worked for the *Times-Picayune.* That was why Steve wanted to talk to me.

"Listen," he said. "I want you to do a story about us."

We had been on the baseball team together at Jesuit. Now he worked for the Board of Health. He was divorced. "I work too hard," he said as he took me away from the bar and made me sit down in a corner of the Sazerac Room, under the gold mural. "Especially now."

He had gotten the idea I had an influence over what got printed in the paper. In fact I was just a copy editor. But at Jesuit I had been the starting pitcher on a championship team, and I could tell Steve still looked up to me. "I want you to do a feature," he said. "I want you to come visit us at Carville."

He was talking about the old Gillis W. Long Center, on River Road between New Orleans and Baton Rouge. Formerly the United States National leprosarium, now it was a research foundation.

"You know they're threatening to shut us down," he said.

I had heard something about it. The New Baptist Democrats had taken

over the statehouse again, and as usual they were sharpening the axe. Carville was one of the last big virology centers left in the state. Doctors from all over Louisiana came there to study social ailments. But Senator Rasmussen wanted the buildings for a new penitentiary.

"She's always talking about the risks of some terrible outbreak," said Steve. "But it's never happened. It can't happen. In the meantime, there's so much we still don't know. And to destroy the stocks, it's murder."

Steve's ex-wife was pregnant, and she came in and stood next to the entrance to the lobby, talking to some friends. Steve hunched his shoulders over the table and leaned toward me.

"These patients are human beings," he said, sipping his orange crush. "That's what they don't understand." And then he went on to tell a story about one of the staff, an accountant named Dan who had worked at Carville for years. Then someone discovered Dan had embezzled two hundred and fifty thousand dollars from the contingency fund, and he was admitted as a patient. "Now I'll never leave you. Now I'm home," he said when he stepped into the ward.

"Sort of like Father Damien," I murmured. While I wasn't sure why my old friend wanted this story in the newspaper, still I admired his passion, his urgency. When we said goodbye, he pressed my hand in both of his, as if he really thought I could help him. It was enough to make me mention the problems at Carville to my boss a few days later, who looked at me doubtfully and suggested I go up there and take a look around on my day off.

"People have different opinions about that place," he said. "Although these days it would be hard for us to question the judgment of a Louisiana state senator."

I didn't tell Melissa where I was going. I drove up alone through the abandoned suburbs and the swamps. Once past the city, I drove with the river on my left, behind the new levee. I went through small towns filled with old people, their trailers and cabins in sad contrast to the towers of the petro-chemical and agricultural concerns, which lined the Mississippi between Destrehan and Lutcher.

Carville lay inside an elbow of the river, surrounded by swamps and graveyards and overgrown fields. In the old days, people had grown sugar cane. Now I drove up along a line of beautiful live oaks covered with moss and ferns. At the end of it, a thirty-foot concrete statue of Christ the Redeemer, and then I turned in at the gate beside the mansion, a plantation house before the civil war, and the administration building since the time of the original leprosarium.

At the guardhouse, they examined my medical records and took some blood. They scanned me with the lie detector and asked some questions. Then they called in to Steve, and I had to sign a lot of forms in case I had

to be quarantined. Finally they let me past the barricade and into the first of many wire enclosures. Soldiers leaned against the Corinthian columns of the main house.

I don't want to drag this out with a lot of description. Carville was a big place. Once you were inside, past the staff offices, it was laid out in sections, and some were quite pleasant. The security was not oppressive. When he met me at the inner gate, Steve was smiling. "Welcome to our Inferno," he said, when no one else could hear. Then he led me down a series of complicated covered walkways, past the hospital, the Catholic and Protestant chapels, the cafeteria. Sometimes he stopped and introduced me to doctors and administrators, who seemed eager to answer questions. Then there were others who hovered at a respectful distance: patients, smiling and polite, dressed in street clothes. They did not shake hands, and when they coughed or sneezed, they turned their faces away.

"Depression," murmured Steve, and later, "alcoholism. Theft."

It had been around the time I was born that Drs. Fargas and Watanabe, working at what had been LSU, discovered the viral nature of our most difficult human problems. I mean the diseases that even Christ can't heal. They had been working with the quarantined HIV-2 population a few years after independence, during the old Christian Coalition days. Nothing much had changed since then in most of the world, where New Baptist doctrine didn't have the same clout as in Louisiana. But those former states that had been willing to isolate the carriers and stop the dreadful cycle of contagion had been transformed. Per capita income rates showed a steady rise, and crime was almost non-existent. Even so, thirty years later there was still much to learn about susceptibility, about immunization, and the actual process of transmission. As is so often the case, political theory had outstripped science, and though it was hard to argue with the results, still, as Steve Daigrepont explained it, there was a need for places like Carville, where important research was being done.

"If only to keep the patients alive," he muttered. His voice had softened as we progressed into the complex, and now I had to lean close to him to understand. After the second checkpoint, when we put our masks on, I had to ask him to speak up.

We put on isolation suits and latex gloves. We stood outside some glassed-in rooms, watching people drink coffee and read newspapers, as they sat on plain, institutional couches. "Obesity," whispered Steve, which surprised me. No one in the room seemed particularly overweight.

"These are carriers," he hissed, angry for some reason. "They aren't necessarily infected. Besides, their diet is strictly controlled."

Later, we found ourselves outside again, under the hot sun. I stared into a large enclosure like the rhinoceros exhibit at the Audubon zoo. A ditch protected us, and in the distance I could see some tarpaper shacks and rotted-out cars. "Poor people," mumbled Steve through his mask.

"Chronic poverty." Children were playing in the dirt outside one of the shacks. They were scratching at the ground with sticks.

Again, I don't want to drag this out. I want to move on to the parts that are most painful to me. Now it hurts me to imagine what a terrible place Carville was, to imagine myself walking numbly through. That is a disease as well. In those days, in Louisiana, we were all numb, and we touched things with our deadened hands.

But for me, there was a pain of wakening, as when blood comes to a sleeping limb. Because I was pretending to be a reporter, I asked Steve a lot of questions. Even though as time went on I hoped he wouldn't answer, but he did. "I thought this was a research facility," I said. "Where are the labs?"

"That section is classified. This is the public part. We get a lot of important guests."

We were standing outside a high, wrought-iron fence. I peered at Steve through my mask, trying to see his eyes. Why had he brought me here? Did he have some private reason? I stood in the stifling heat with my gloved hands on the bars of the fence, and then Steve wasn't there. He was called away somewhere and left me alone. I stood looking into a small enclosure, a clipped green lawn and a gazebo. But it was dark there, too. Maybe there were tall trees, or a mass of shrubbery. I remember peering through the bars, wondering if the cage was empty. I inspected a small placard near my eye. "Curtis Garr," it said. "Sodom-ite."

And then suddenly he was there on the other side of the fence. He was a tall man in his mid-fifties, well-dressed in a dark suit, leaning on a cane. He was very thin, with a famished, bony face, and a wave of grey hair that curled back over his ears. And I noticed that he also was wearing gloves, grey leather gloves.

He stood opposite me for a long time. His thin lips were smiling. But his eyes, which were grey and very large, showed the intensity of any caged beast.

I stood staring at him, my hands on the bars. He smiled. Carefully and slowly, he reached out his gloved forefinger and touched me on my wrist, in a gap between my isolation suit and latex hand.

Then as Steve came up, he gave a jaunty wave and walked away.

Steve nodded. "Curtis is priceless," he muttered behind my ear. "We think he might be the last one left in the entire state. We had two others, but they died."

Last of all, Steve took me back to his air-conditioned office. "We must get together for lunch," he said. "Next time I'm in the city."

Now I can wonder about the Father Damien story he had told me at the Fairmont. I can wonder if in some way he was talking about himself. But at the time I smiled and nodded, for I was anxious to be gone.

I didn't tell Steve the man had touched me. Nor did I tell the doctors who examined me before I was released. But driving back to New Orleans, I found myself examining the skin over my left wrist. Soon it was hot and red from rubbing at it. Once I even stopped the car to look. But I didn't tell Melissa, either, when I got home.

She wouldn't have sympathized. She was furious enough at what she called my "Jesuit liberalism," when I confessed where I had been. I hated when she talked like that. She had been born a Catholic like me and Steve, but her parents had converted after the church split with Rome. As she might have explained it, since the differences between American Catholic and New Baptist were mostly social, why not have the courage to do whatever it took to get ahead? No, that's not fair—she was a true believer. At twenty-eight, she was already a full professor of Creationist biology.

"What if somebody had seen you? What if you had caught something?" she demanded as I rubbed my wrist. I was sitting next to the fireplace, and she stood next to the window with the afternoon light in her hair. All the time she lectured me, I was thinking how much I wanted to make love to her, to push her down and push my penis into her right there on the Doshmelti carpet—"I don't know how you can take such risks," she said. "Or I do know: It's because you don't really believe in any of it. No matter what the proofs, no matter how many times we duplicate the Watanabe results, you just don't accept them."

I sat there fingering my wrist. To tell the truth, there were parts of the doctrine of ethical contagion that no educated person believed. Melissa herself didn't believe in half of it. But she had to pretend that she believed it, and maybe it was the pretense that made it true.

I didn't want to interrupt her when she was just getting started. "Damn those Jesuits," she said. "Damn them. They ruined you, Jim. You'll never amount to anything, not in Louisiana. Why don't you just go on up to Massachusetts, or someplace where you'd feel at home?"

I loved it when she yelled. Her hair, her eyes. She loved it too. She was like an actress in a play. The fact is, she never would have married one of those Baptist boys, sickly and small and half-poisoned with saltpeter. No matter how much she told her students about the lechery vaccines, no matter how many times she showed her slides of spirochetes attacking the brain, still it was too late for her and me, and she knew it.

The more she yelled at me, the hotter she got. After a while, we went at it like animals.

Two months later, I heard from Steve again. I remember it was in the fall, one of those cool, crisp, blue New Orleans days that seem to come out of nowhere. I had been fired from the paper, and I was standing in my vegetable garden looking out toward the park when I heard the phone ring. I thought it was Melissa, calling back to apologize. She had gone up

to Washington, which had been the capital of the Union in the old days, before the states had taken back their rights. She was at an academic conference, and lonely for home. Already that morning she had called me to describe a reception she had been to the night before. When she traveled out of Louisiana, she always had a taste for the unusual—"They have black people here!" she said. "Not just servants; I mean at the conference. And the band! There was a trombone player, you have no idea. Such grace, such raw sexuality."

"I'm not sure I want to hear about that," I said.

She was silent for a moment, and she'd apologized. "I guess I'm a little upset," she confessed.

"Why?"

"I don't like it here. No one takes us seriously. People are very rude, as if *we* were to blame. But we're not the only ones"—she told me about a Dr. Wu from Boise who had given a paper the previous night on Christian genetics. "He showed slides of what he called 'criminal' DNA with all the sins marked on them. As if God had molded them that way. 'With tiny fingers,' as he put it."

I wasn't sure what the New Baptists would say about this. And I didn't want to make a mistake. "That sounds plausible," I murmured, finally.

"You would think that. Plausible and dangerous. It's an argument that leads straight back to Catholicism and original sin. That's fine for you—you want to be guilty when everybody else has been redeemed. But it completely contradicts Fargas and Watanabe, for one thing. Either the soul is uncontaminated at birth or else it isn't. If it isn't, all our immunization research is worthless. What's the point of pretending we can be healed, either by Christ or by science? That's what I said during the Q&A. Everybody hissed and booed, but then I found myself supported by a Jewish gentleman from New York. He said we could not ignore environmental factors, which is not quite a New Baptist point of view the way he expressed it, but what can you expect? He was an old reactionary, but his heart was in the right place. And such a spokesman for his race! Such intelligence and clarity!"

That was the last time I spoke to Melissa, my wife. I wish we had talked about another subject, so that now in California, when I go over her words in my mind, I might not be distracted by these academic arguments. Distracted by my anger, and the guilt that we all shared. I didn't want to hear about the Jewish man. So many Jews had died during the quarantine—I can say that now. But at the time, I thought Melissa was teasing me and trying to make me jealous. "That's the one good thing about you getting yourself canned," she said as she hung up. "I always know where to find you."

Sometimes I wonder what might have happened if I hadn't answered the phone when it rang again a few minutes later. I almost didn't. I

sulked in the garden, listening to it, but then at the last moment I went in and picked it up.

But maybe nothing would have been different. Maybe the infection had already spread too far. There was a red spot on my wrist where I'd been rubbing it. I noticed it again as I picked up the phone.

"Jimmy, is that you?" Steve's voice was harsh and confused, and the connection was bad. In the background was a rhythmic banging noise. Melissa, in Washington, had sounded clearer.

After Steve was finished, I went out and stood in my vegetable garden again, in the bright, clean sun. Over in the park, a family was sitting by the pond having a picnic. A little girl in a blue dress stood up and clapped her hands.

What public sacrifice is too great, I thought, to keep that girl free from contamination? Or maybe it's just now, looking back, that I allow myself a thought. Maybe at the time I just stared numbly over the fence, and then went in and drank a Coke. It wasn't until a few hours later that I got in the car and drove north.

Over the past months, I had looked for stories about Carville in the news. And Melissa had told me some of the gossip—there were differences of opinion in Baton Rouge. Some of the senators wanted the hospital kept open, as a showpiece for foreign visitors. But Barbara Rasmussen wanted the patients shipped to a labor camp outside of Shreveport, near the Arkansas border. It was a place both Steve and I had heard of.

Over the phone he'd said, "It's murder,"—a painful word. Then he'd told me where to meet him. He'd mentioned a time. But I knew I'd be late, because of the slow way I was driving. I wasn't sure I wanted to help him. So I took a leisurely, roundabout route, and crossed the river near the ruins of Hahnville. I drove up old Route 18 past Vacherie. It was deserted country there, rising swamps and burned-out towns, and endless cemeteries full of rows of painted wooden markers. Some had names on them, but mostly just numbers.

I passed some old Negroes working in a field.

Once I drove up onto the levee, and sat staring at the great river next to a crude, concrete statue of Christ the Healer. The metal bones of His fingers protruded from His crumbling hands. Then over the Sunshine Bridge, and it was early evening.

I first met them on River Road near Belle-Helene plantation, as they were coming back from Carville. There was a patchy mist out of the swamp. I drove slowly, and from time to time I had to wipe the condensation from the inside of my windshield.

In the middle of the smudged circle I had made with my handkerchief, I saw the glimmer of their Coleman lanterns. The oak trees hung over the car. I pulled over to the grass and turned off the ignition. I rolled

down my window and listened to the car tick and cool. Soon they came walking down the middle of the road, their spare, pinched faces, their white, buttoned-up shirts stained dirty from the cinders. One or two wore masks over their mouth and nose. Some wore civil defense armbands. Some carried books, others hammers and wrecking bars.

The most terrifying thing about those New Baptist mobs was their sobriety, their politeness. There was no swagger to them, no drunken truculence. They came out of the fog in orderly rows. There was no laughter or shouting. Most of the men walked by me without even looking my way. But then four or five of them came over and stood by the window.

"Excuse me, sir," said one. He took off his gimme cap and wiped the moisture from his bald forehead. "You from around here?"

"I'm from the *Times-Picayune*. I was headed up to Carville."

"Well," said another, shaking his head. "Nothing to see."

"The road's blocked," offered a third. He had rubber gloves on, and his voice was soft and high. "But right here you can get onto the Interstate. You just passed it. Route 73 from Geismar. It will take you straight back to the city."

Some more men had come over to stand next to me along the driver's side. One of them stooped to peer inside. Now he tapped the roof lightly over my head, and I could hear his fingernails on the smooth plastic.

"I think I'd like to take a look," I said. "Even so."

He smiled, and then looked serious. "You a Catholic, sir? I guess New Orleans is a Catholic town."

I sat for a moment, and then rolled up the window. "Thank you," I murmured through the glass. Then I turned on the ignition, and pulled the car around in a tight semi-circle. Darkness had come. I put on my headlights, which snatched at the men's legs as I turned around. Illuminated in red whenever I hit the brakes, the New Baptists stood together in the middle of the road, and I watched them in my rear view mirror. One waved.

Then I drove slowly through the crowd again until I found the connecting road. It led away from the river through a few small, neon-lit stores. Pickup trucks were parked there. I recognized the bar Steve had mentioned, and I slowed up when I passed it. I was too late. From Geismar on, the road was deserted.

Close to I-10 it ran through the cypress swamps, and there was no one. Full dark now, and gusts of fog. I drove slowly until I saw a man walking by the side of the road. I speeded up to pass him, and in my high-beams I caught a glimpse of his furious, thin face as he looked over his shoulder. It was Curtis Garr.

I wish I could tell you how I left him there, trudging on the gravel shoulder. I wish I could tell you how I sped away until the sodomite was swallowed up in the darkness and the fog, how I sped home and found

my wife there, unexpectedly waiting. The conference might have let out early. She might have decided to surprise me.

These thoughts are painful to me, and it's not because I can never go back. My friend Rob tells me the borders are full of holes, at least for white people. Passports and medical papers are easy to forge. He spends a lot of time at gun shows and survivalist meetings, where I suppose they talk about these things.

But I left because I had to. Because I changed, and Curtis Garr changed me. Now in California, in the desert night, I still can't forgive him, partly because I took such a terrible revenge. If he's dead or in prison now, God damn him. He broke my life apart, and maybe it was fragile and ready to break. Maybe I was contaminated already, and that's why I stopped in the middle of the road, and backed up, and let him into my car. Melissa's car.

He got into the back seat without a word. But he was angry. As soon as we started driving again, he spoke. "Where were you? I waited at that bar for over an hour."

"I thought I was meeting Steve."

"Yes—he told me. He described your car."

I looked at him in the rearview mirror. His clothes were still immaculate, his dark suit. He was a fierce, thin, handsome man.

"Where are you going?"

He said nothing, but just stared on ahead through the windshield. I wondered if he recognized me. If he felt something in me calling out to him, he didn't show it. At Carville, I'd been wearing a mask over my nose and mouth.

But I wanted to ask him about Steve. "You're Curtis Garr," I said.

Then he looked at me in the mirror, his fierce eyes. "Don't be afraid," I said, though he seemed anything but frightened.

"I thought I was meeting Steve," I said after an empty pause. "He didn't say anything about you."

"Maybe he didn't think you would come." And then: "We had to change our plans after Rasmussen's goons showed up. Don't worry about Steve. You'll see him later. No one on the staff was hurt."

Garr's voice was low and harsh. I drove with my left hand. From time to time I scratched the skin over my left wrist.

Soon we came up to the Interstate. The green sign hung flapping. I-10 was a dangerous road, and ordinarily I wouldn't have taken it. Most of the way it was built on crumbling pontoons over the swamp. In some places the guard rail was down, and there were holes in the pavement. But it bypassed all the towns.

Curtis Garr rolled down his window. There was no one on the road. In time we felt a cool draught off the lake.

Once past the airport, we could go faster, because the road was care-

fully maintained from Kenner to the bridge. The city lights were comforting and bright. We took the Annunciation exit and drove up St. Charles, the great old houses full of prosperous, happy folk.

In more than an hour, Garr and I had not exchanged a word. But I felt a terrible tension in my stomach, and my wrist itched and ached. I kept thinking the man would tell me where to drop him off. I hoped he would. But he said nothing as I drove down Calhoun toward Magazine, toward Melissa's house on Exposition Boulevard.

"Where are you going?" I asked.

He shrugged.

I felt my guts might burst from my excitement. My fingers trembled on the wheel. "Can I put you up?" I said. "It's past curfew. You'll be safer in the morning."

"Yes. I'm meeting Steve at ten."

And that was all. I pulled into the parking slip and turned off the car. Then I stepped outside into the cool, humid night, and he was there beside me. I listened to him breathe. Almost a hissing sound.

"Nice house."

"It's my wife's. She's a professor at Tulane."

Again that harsh intake of breath. He looked up at the gabled roof. For a moment I was afraid he might refuse to come inside. Something in him seemed to resist. But then he followed me onto the porch.

"You don't lock your doors?"

"Of course not."

"Hunh. When I was in school, New Orleans was the murder capital of the entire country."

"It hasn't all been bad," I said.

Then he was in the living room, standing on the Doshmelti carpet. I excused myself to wash my face and hands in the kitchen bathroom, and when I returned he was looking at the bookcase. "Can I get you something to eat?" I asked. "I'm famished."

"Something to drink," by which he meant alcohol. So I brought out a bottle of white bourbon that we had. I poured him a glass. I really was very hungry. I'd scarcely eaten all day.

"How can you stand it?" he asked suddenly. He had moved over to a case full of biology and medical texts, a collection Melissa had gathered during her trips.

He had one of the books open in his hand. With the other, he gestured with his glass around the room. "All this. You're not a fool. Or are you?"

He put down the book and then walked over to stand in front of me, inches away, his face inches from my own. "I was at Carville," he said. "People died there. Aren't you afraid you're going to catch something?"

But I knew I had caught something already. My heart was shuddering. My face was wet.

I looked up at him, and I thought I could see every pore in his skin. I could see the way his teeth fit into his gums. I could smell his breath and his body when he spoke to me, not just the alcohol but something else. "This state is a sick joke everywhere," he said. "Those people who attacked the Center, they didn't have a tenth-grade education between them. How can you blame them?"

Curtis Garr had black hair in his ears. His lower face was rinsed in grey—he hadn't shaved. I stood looking up at him, admiring the shapes his thin lips formed around his words. "What does your wife teach?"

"Biology."

At that moment, the phone rang. It was on a table in a little alcove by the door. I didn't answer it. Garr and I stood inches apart. After three rings the machine picked up.

"Hi, sweetie," said Melissa. "I just thought I'd try to catch you before you went to bed. Sorry I missed you. I was just thinking how nice it would be to be in bed with you, sucking that big Monongahela. Just a thought. I'll be back tomorrow night."

The machine turned off, and Curtis Garr smiled. "That sounds very cozy." Then he stepped away from me, back to the bookcase again, and I let out my breath.

"A third of the population of Louisiana died during the HIV-2 epidemic," I said. "In just a few years. The feds told them not to worry. The doctors told them it couldn't happen. The New Baptists were the only ones who didn't lie to them. What do you expect?"

"Sin and disease," he said. "I know the history. Not everybody died of HIV. I knew some biology too—the real kind. And I said something about it. That's why I was at Carville in the first place. The other thing's just an excuse."

He was staring at the books as he spoke. But he must have been watching me as well, must have seen something in my face as he sipped his whisky, because he lowered the glass and grinned at me over the rim. "You're disappointed, aren't you?"

And then after a moment: "Christ, you are! You hypocrite."

But I was standing with my hands held out, my right hand closed around my wrist. "Please," I said. "Please."

He finished his drink and gave a little burp. He put his glass on one of the shelves of the bookcase, and then sat down in the middle of the couch, stretching his thin arms along the top of it on either side. "No, you disgust me," he said, smiling. "Everything about you disgusts me."

Often now I'll start awake in bed, wondering where I am. "Melissa," I'll say, still half-asleep, when I get up to go to the bathroom. So Rob tells me on the nights he's there. I used to sleep as soundly as a child. That night, when Curtis Garr stayed in the house on Exposition Boulevard, was the first I remember lying awake.

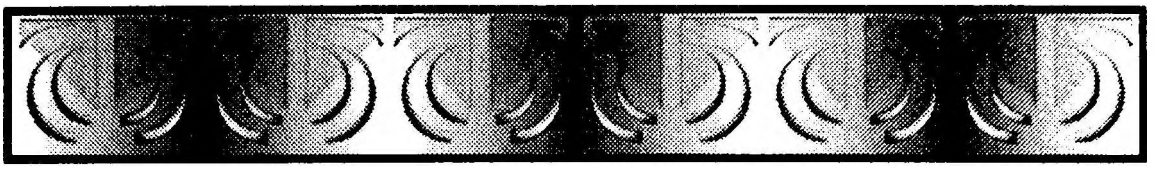
After I had gone upstairs, he sat up late, reading and drinking whisky on the couch. From time to time I would get up and stand at the top of the stairs, watching the light through the banisters, listening to the rustle of the pages. Near dawn I masturbated, and then, after I'd washed up, I went downstairs and stood next to him as he slept. He had left the light on and had curled up on the couch, still in his suit. He hadn't even taken off his shoes.

His mouth was open, pushed out of shape by the cushions. I stood next to him, and then I bent down and stretched out my left hand. I almost touched him. My left wrist was a mass of hectic spots. The rash had spread up the inside of my arm.

In my other hand, I carried a knapsack with some clothes. My passport, and a few small personal items. Almost everything in the house that actually belonged to me, I could fit in that one bag. A picture of Melissa, which is on my bedside still. I had the card to her bank account, and I stood by the couch, wondering if I should leave a note.

Instead, I went into the kitchen, and, from the kitchen phone, I dialed a number we all knew in Louisiana, in those days. Together with the numbers for the fire department and the ordinary police, it was typed on a piece of paper which was thumbtacked to the wall. The phone rang a long time. But then finally someone answered it, and there was nothing in his tone of voice to suggest he'd been asleep.

Within a few minutes, I was on my way. I walked up to St. Charles Avenue just as it got light, toward the streetcar line. The air was full of birds, their voices competing with the soft noise of the cars as they passed a block away, bound toward Melissa's house or somewhere else, I couldn't really tell. ●



LOVE SONG OF THE HOLO-CELEBS

All the world over, they searched for love.
They saw each other, below and above.
He took his hat off. She took his smile.
They met in a tea shop and tea-ed for awhile.

It's Chrysalis Crystal™ and Andiron Snow,™
those holo-celebs we all love and know.
Champagne for the lady! Scotch up for the joe!
That's Chrysalis Crystal™ and Andiron Snow.™

Their courtship was touted throughout the WorldNet.™
Their feuds and their make-ups ran through our sets.
He said he loved her. "Oh. . . , yes," she agreed.
At a spaceport on Luna—"ARRESTED FOR WEED!"

It's Chrysalis Crystal™ and Andiron Snow,™
those world-famous lovers we all love and know.
Hats off to the pair, boys! On with the show!
That's Chrysalis Crystal™ and Andiron Snow.™

Their flesh is unreal, their story spun gold.
They are virtual constructs, beautiful molds.
What does it matter? They've stolen our hearts.
We knew they were binary code from the start.

It's Chrysalis Crystal™ and Andiron Snow.™
We worship their image, its faint afterglow.
We know they're not real! But don't let it show!
That's Chrysalis Crystal™ and Andiron Snow.™

Now five years of sharing can change a love bed
from clover and laces, to thorns and cold lead.
He said, "It's over!" She said, "No use!"
Now Chrysalis Crystal™ is charging—"ABUSE!"

It's Chrysalis Crystal™ and Andiron Snow,™
those holo-creations we all love and know.
Sweet Chrysalis Crystal!™ Dear Andiron Snow!™
If it never existed, then where could it go?

—Bruce Boston

Tony Daniel

A DRY, QUIET WAR

The author tells us, "I began writing 'A Dry, Quiet War' on Vashon Island, Washington, and completed it in Prague, the Czech Republic. It was originally inspired by my favorite movie—John Ford's *The Quiet Man*. Obviously, though, this story turned out very differently from the movie."

Illustration by Darryl Elliot

I cannot tell you what it meant to me to see the two suns of Ferro set behind the dry mountain east of my home. I had been away twelve billion years. I passed my cabin to the pump well and, taking a metal cup from where it hung from a set-pin, I worked the handle three times. At first it creaked, and I believed it was rusted tight, but then it loosened, and within fifteen pulls, I had a cup of water.

Someone had kept the pump up. Someone had seen to the house and the land while I was away at the war. For me, it had been fifteen years; I wasn't sure how long it had been for Ferro. The water was tinged red and tasted of iron. Good. I drank it down in a long draught, then put the cup back onto its hanger. When the big sun, Hemingway, set, a slight breeze kicked up. Then Fitzgerald went down and a cold, cloudless night spanked down onto the plateau. I shivered a little, adjusted my internals, and stood motionless, waiting for the last of twilight to pass, and the stars—my stars—to come out. Steiner, the planet that is Ferro's evening star, was the first to emerge, low in the west, methane blue. Then the constellations. Ngal. Gilgamesh. The Big Snake, half-coiled over the southwestern horizon. There was no moon tonight. There was never a moon on Ferro, and that was right.

After a time, I walked to the house, climbed up the porch, and the house recognized me and turned on the lights. I went inside. The place was dusty, the furniture covered with sheets, but there were no signs of rats or jinjas, and all seemed in repair. I sighed, blinked, tried to feel something. Too early, probably. I started to take a covering from a chair, then let it be. I went to the kitchen and checked the cupboard. An old malt whisky bottle, some dry cereal, some spices. The spices had been my mother's, and I seldom used them before I left for the end of time. I considered that the whisky might be perfectly aged by now. But, as the saying goes on Ferro, we like a bit of food with our drink, so I left the house and took the road to town, to Heidel.

It was a five-mile walk, and though I could have enhanced and covered the ground in ten minutes or so, I walked at a regular pace under my homeworld stars. The road was dirt, of course, and my pant legs were dusted red when I stopped under the outside light of Thredmartin's Pub. I took a last breath of cold air, then went inside to the warm.

It was a good night at Thredmartin's. There were men and women gathered around the fire hearth, usas and splices in the cold corners. The regulars were at the bar, a couple of whom I recognized—so old now, wizened like stored apples in a barrel. I looked around for a particular face, but she was not there. A jukebox sputtered some core-cloud deak, and the air was thick with smoke and conversation. Or was, until I walked in. Nobody turned to face me. Most of them couldn't have seen me. But a signal passed and conversation fell to a quiet murmur. Somebody quickly killed the jukebox.

I blinked up an internals menu into my peripheral vision and adjusted to the room's temperature. Then I went to the edge of the bar. The room got even quieter. . . .

The bartender, old Thredmartin himself, reluctantly came over to me.

"What can I do for you, sir?" he asked me.

I looked over him, to the selection of bottles, tubes and cans on display behind him. "I don't see it," I said.

"Eh?" He glanced back over his shoulder, then quickly returned to peering at me.

"Bone's Barley," I said.

"We don't have any more of that," Thredmartin said, with a suspicious tone.

"Why not?"

"The man who made it died."

"How long ago?"

"Twenty years, more or less. I don't see what business of—"

"What about his son?"

Thredmartin backed up a step. Then another. "Henry," he whispered. "Henry Bone."

"Just give me the best that you do have, Peter Thredmartin," I said. "In fact, I'd like to buy everybody a round on me."

"Henry Bone! Why, you looked to me like a bad 'un indeed when you walked in here. I took you for one of them glims, I did," Thredmartin said. I did not know what he was talking about. Then he smiled an old devil's crooked smile. "Your money's no good here, Henry Bone. I do happen to have a couple of bottles of your old dad's whisky stowed away in back. Drinks are on the house."

And so I returned to my world, and for most of those I'd left behind it seemed as if I'd never really gone. My neighbors hadn't changed much in the twenty years local that had passed, and, of course, they had no conception of what had happened to me. They only knew that I'd been to the war—the Big War at the End of Time—and evidently everything turned out okay, for here I was, back in my own time and my own place. I planted Ferro's desert barley, brought in peat from the mountain bogs, bred the biomass that would extract the minerals from my hard ground water, and got ready for making whisky once again. Most of the inhabitants of Ferro were divided between whisky families and beer families. Bones were distillers, never brewers, since the Settlement, ten generations before.

It wasn't until she called upon me that I heard the first hints of the troubles that had come. Her name was Alinda Bexter, but since we played together under the floorplanks of her father's hotel, I had always called her Bex. When I left for the war, she was twenty, and I twenty-one. I still recognized her at forty, five years older than I was now, as she

came walking down the road to my house, a week after I'd returned. She was taller than most women on Ferro, and she might be mistaken for a usa-human splice anywhere else. She was rangy, and she wore a khaki dress that whipped in the dry wind as she came toward me. I stood on the porch, waiting for her, wondering what she would say.

"Well, this is a load off of me," she said. She was wearing a brimmed hat. It had ribbon to tie under her chin, but Bex had not done that. She held her hand on it to keep it from blowing from her head. "This damn ranch has been one big thankless task."

"So it was you who kept it up," I said.

"Just kept it from falling apart as fast as it would have otherwise," she replied. We stood and looked at one another for a moment. Her eyes were green. Now that I had seen an ocean, I could understand the kind of green they were.

"Well then," I finally said. "Come on in."

I offered her some sweetcake I'd fried up, and some beer that my neighbor, Shin, had brought by, both of which she declined. We sat in the living room, on furniture covered with the white sheets I had yet to remove. Bex and I took it slow, getting to know each other again. She ran her father's place now. For years, the only way to get to Heidel was by freighter, but we had finally gotten a node on the Flash, and, even though Ferro was still a backwater planet, there were more strangers passing through than there ever had been—usually en route to other places. But they sometimes stayed a night or two in the Bexter Hotel. Its reputation was spreading, Bex claimed, and I believed her. Even when she was young, she had been shrewd but honest, a combination you don't often find in an innkeeper. She was a quiet woman—that is, until she got to know you well—and some most likely thought her conceited. I got the feeling that she hadn't let down her reserve for a long time. When I knew her before, Bex did not have many close friends, but for the ones she had, such as me, she poured out her thoughts, and her heart. I found that she hadn't changed much in that way.

"Did you marry?" I asked her, after hearing about the hotel and her father's bad health.

"No," she said. "No, I very nearly did, but then I did not. Did you?"

"No. Who was it?"

"Rall Kenton."

"Rall Kenton? Rall Kenton whose parents run the hops market?" He was a quarter-splice, a tall man on a world of tall men. Yet, when I knew him, his long shadow had been deceptive. There was no spark or force in him. "I can't see that, Bex."

"Tom Kenton died ten years ago," she said. "Marjorie retired, and Rall owned the business until just last year. Rall did all right; you'd be sur-

prised. Something about his father's passing gave him a backbone. Too much of one, maybe."

"What happened?"

"He died," she said. "He died, too, just as I thought you had." Now she told me she would like a beer after all, and I went to get her a bottle of Shin's ale. When I returned, I could tell that she'd been crying a little.

"The glims killed Rall," said Bex, before I could ask her about him. "That's their name for themselves, anyway. Humans, repons, kaliwaks, and I don't know what else. They passed through last year and stayed for a week in Heidel. Very bad. They made my father give over the whole hotel to them, and then they had a . . . trial, they called it. Every house was called and made to pay a tithe. The glims decided how much. Rall refused to pay. He brought along a pistol—Lord knows where he got it—and tried to shoot one of them. They just laughed and took it from him." Now the tears started again.

"And then they hauled him out into the street in front of the hotel." Bex took a moment and got control of herself. "They burnt him up with a p-gun. Burned his legs off first, then his arms, then the rest of him after they'd let him lie there awhile. There wasn't a trace of him after that; we couldn't even bury him."

I couldn't take her to me, hold her, not after she'd told me about Rall. Needing something to do, I took some tangled banwood from the tinder box and struggled to get a fire going from the burnt-down coals in my hearth. I blew into the fireplace and only got a nose full of ashes for my trouble. "Didn't anybody fight?" I asked.

"Not after that. We just waited them out. Or they got bored. I don't know. It was bad for everybody, not just Rall." Bex shook her head, sighed, then saw the trouble I was having and bent down to help me. She was much better at it than I, and the fire was soon ablaze. We sat back down and watched it flicker.

"Sounds like war-ghosts," I said.

"The glims?"

"Soldiers who don't go home after the war. The fighting gets into them and they don't want to give it up, or can't. Sometimes they have . . . modifications that won't let them give it up. They wander the timeways—and since they don't belong to the time they show up in, they're hard to kill. In the early times, where people don't know about the war, or have only heard rumors of it, they had lots of names. Vampires. Hagamonsters. Zombies."

"What can you do?"

I put my arm around her. It had been so long. She tensed up, then breathed deeply, serenely.

"Hope they don't come back," I said. "They are bad ones. Not the worst, but bad."

We were quiet for a while, and the wind, blowing over the chimney's top, made the flue moan as if it were a big stone flute.

"Did you love him, Bex?" I asked. "Rall?"

She didn't even hesitate in her answer this time. "Of course not, Henry Bone. How could you ever think such a thing? I was waiting to catch up with you. Now tell me about the future."

And so I drew away from her for a while, and told her—part of it at least. About how there is not enough dark matter to pull the cosmos back together again, not enough mass to undulate in an eternal cycle. Instead, there *is* an end, and all the stars are either dead or dying, and all that there is is nothing but dim night. I told her about the twilight armies gathered there, culled from all times, all places. Creatures, presences, machines, weapons fighting galaxy-to-galaxy, system-to-system, fighting until the critical point is reached, when entropy flows no more, but pools, pools in endless, stagnant pools of nothing. No light. No heat. No effect. And the universe is dead, and so those who remain . . . inherit the dark field. They win.

"And did you win?" she asked me. "If that's the word for it."

The suns were going down. Instead of answering, I went outside to the woodpile and brought in enough banwood to fuel the fire for the night. I thought maybe she would forget what she'd asked me—but not Bex.

"How does the war end, Henry?"

"You must never ask me that," I spoke the words carefully, making sure I was giving away nothing in my reply. "Every time a returning soldier tells that answer, he changes everything. Then he has two choices. He can either go away, leave his own time, and go back to fight again. Or he can stay, and it will all mean nothing, what he did. Not just who won and who lost, but all the things he did in the war spin off into nothing."

Bex thought about this for a while. "What could it matter? What in God's name could be worth fighting *for?*" she finally asked. "Time ends. Nothing matters after that. What could it possibly matter who won . . . who wins?"

"It means you can go back home," I said. "After it's over."

"I don't understand."

I shook my head and was silent. I had said enough. There was no way to tell her more, in any case—not without changing things. And no way to *say* what it was that had brought those forces together at the end of everything. And what the hell do *I* know, even now? All I know is what I was told, and what I was trained to do. If we don't fight at the end, there won't be a beginning. For there to be people, there has to be a war to fight at the end of things. We live in that kind of universe, and not another, they told me. They told me, and then I told myself. And I did what I had to do so that it would be over and I could go home, come back.

"Bex, I never forgot you," I said. She came to sit with me by the fire. We

didn't touch at first, but I felt her next to me, breathed the flush of her skin as the fire warmed her. Then she ran her hand along my arm, felt the bumps from the operational enhancements.

"What have they done to you?" she whispered.

Unbidden the old words of the skyfallers' scream, the words that were yet to be, surfaced in my mind.

They sucked down my heart
to a little black hole
You cannot stab me.

They wrote down my brain
on a hard knot of space,
You cannot turn me.

Icicle spike
from the eye of a star
I've come to kill you.

I almost spoke them, from sheer habit. But I did not. The war was over. Bex was here, and I knew it was over. I was going to *feel* something, once again, something besides guile, hate, and rage. I didn't yet, that was true, but I *could* feel the possibility.

"I don't really breathe anymore, Bex; I pretend to so I won't put people off," I told her. "It's been so long, I can't even remember what it was like to *have* to."

Bex kissed me then. At first, I didn't remember how to do that either. And then I did. I added wood to the fire, then ran my hand along Bex's neck and shoulder. Her skin had the health of youth still, but years in the sun and wind had made a supple leather of it, tanned and grained fine. We took the sheet from the couch and pulled it near to the warmth, and she drew me down to her on it, to her neck and breasts.

"Did they leave enough of you for me?" she whispered.

I had not known until now. "Yes," I answered. "There's enough." I found my way inside her, and we made love slowly, in a way that might seem sad to any others but us, for there were memories and years of longing that flowed from us, around us, like amber just at the melting point, and we were inside and there was nothing but this present with all of what was, and what would be, already passed. No time. Finally, only Bex and no time between us.

We fell asleep on the old couch, and it was dim half-morning when we awoke, with Fitzgerald yet to rise in the west and the fire a bed of coals as red as the sky.

* * *

Two months later, I was in Thredmartin's when Bex came in with an evil look on her face. We had taken getting back together slow and easy up till then, but the more time we spent around each other, the more we understood that nothing basic had changed. Bex kept coming to the ranch and I took to spending a couple of nights a week in a room her father made up for me at the hotel. Furly Bexter was an old style McKinnonite. Men and women were to live separately and only meet for business and copulation. But he liked me well enough, and when I insisted on paying for my room, he found a loophole somewhere in the Tracts of McKinnon about cohabitation being all right in hotels and hostels.

"The glims are back," Bex said, sitting down at my table. I was in a dark corner of the pub. I left the fire for those who could not adjust their own internals to keep them warm. "They've taken over the top floor of the hotel. What should we do?"

I took a draw of beer—Thredmartin's own thick porter—and looked at her. She was visibly shivering, probably more from agitation than fright.

"How many of them are there?" I asked.

"Six. And something else, some splice I've never seen, however many that makes."

I took another sip of beer. "Let it be," I said. "They'll get tired, and they'll move on."

"What?" Bex's voice was full of astonishment. "What are you saying?"

"You don't want a war here, Bex," I replied. "You have no idea how bad it can get."

"They killed Rall. They took our *money*."

"Money." My voice sounded many years away, even to me.

"It's muscle and worry and care. You know how hard people work on Ferro. And for those . . . *things* . . . to come in and take it! We cannot let them—"

"—Bex," I said. "I am not going to do anything."

She said nothing; she put a hand on her forehead as if she had a sickening fever, stared at me for a moment, then looked away.

One of the glims chose that moment to come into Thredmartin's. It was a halandana, a splice—human and jan—from up-time and a couple of possible universes over. It was nearly seven feet tall, with a two-foot-long neck, and it stooped to enter Thredmartin's. Without stopping, it went to the bar and demanded morphine.

Thredmartin was at the bar. He pulled out a dusty rubber, little used, and before he could get out an injector, the halandana reached over, took the entire rubber and put it in the pocket of the long gray coat it wore. Thredmartin started to speak, then shook his head, and found a spray shooter. He slapped it on the bar, and started to walk away. The halandana's hand shot out and pushed the old man. Thredmartin stumbled to his knees.

I felt the fingers of my hands clawing, clenching. Let them loosen; let them go.

Thredmartin rose slowly to one knee. Bex was up, around the bar, and over to him, steadying his shoulder. The glim watched this for a moment, then took its drug and shooter to a table, where it got itself ready for an injection.

I looked at it closely now. It was female, but that did not mean much in halandana splices. I could see it phase around the edges with dead, gray flames. I clicked in wideband overspace, and I could see through the halandana to the chair it was sitting in and the unpainted wood of the wall behind it. And I saw more, in the spaces between spaces. The halandana was keyed in to a websquad; it wasn't really an individual anymore. Its fate was tied to that of its unit commander. So the war-ghosts—the glims—were a renegade squad, most likely, with a single leader calling the shots. For a moment, the halandana glanced in my direction, maybe feeling my gaze somewhere outside of local time, and I banded down to human normal. It quickly went back to what it was doing. Bex made sure Thredmartin was all right, then came back over to my table.

"We're not even in its time-line," I said. "It doesn't think of us as really being alive."

"Oh God," Bex said. "This is just like before."

I got up and walked out. It was the only solution. I could not say anything to Bex. She would not understand. I understood—not acting was the rational, the *only,* way, but not *my* way. Not until now.

I enhanced my legs and loped along the road to my house. But when I got there, I kept running, running off into the red sands of Ferro's outback. The night came down, and, as the planet turned, I ran along the length of the Big Snake, bright and hard to the southwest, and then under the blue glow of Steiner, when she rose in the moonless, trackless night. I ran for miles and miles, as fast as a jaguar, but never tiring. How could I tire when parts of me stretched off into dimensions of utter stillness, utter rest? Could Bex see me for what I *was,* she would not see a man, but a kind of colonial creature, a mash of life pressed into the niches and faultlines of existence like so much grit and lichen. A human is anchored with only his heart and his mind; sever those, and he floats away. Floats away. What was I? A medusa fish in an ocean of time? A tight clump of nothing, disguised as a man? Something else?

Something damned hard to kill, that was certain. And so were the glims. When I returned to my house in the starbright night, I half expected to find Bex, but she was not there. And so I rattled about for a while, powered down for an hour at dawn and rested on a living room chair, dreaming in one part of my mind, completely alert in another. The next day, Bex still did not come, and I began to fear something had happened to her. I walked part-way into Heidel, then cut off the road and

stole around the outskirts, to a mound of shattered, volcanic rocks—the tailings of some early prospector's pit—not far from the town's edge. There I stepped up my vision and hearing, and made a long sweep of Main Street. Nothing. Far, far too quiet, even for Heidel.

I worked out the parabolic to the Bexter Hotel, and after a small adjustment, heard Bex's voice, then her father's. I was too far away to make out the words, but my quantitatives gave it a positive I.D. So Bex was all right, at least for the moment. I made my way back home, and put in a good day's work making whisky.

The next morning—it was the quarteryear's double dawn, with both suns rising in the east nearly together—Bex came to me. I brought her inside and, in the moted sunlight of my family's living room, where I now took my rest, when I rested, Bex told me that the glims had taken her father.

"He held back some old Midnight Livet down in the cellar, and didn't deliver it when they called for room service." Bex rubbed her left fist with her right fingers, expertly, almost mechanically, as she'd kneaded a thousand balls of bread dough. "How do they know these things? How do they know, Henry?"

"They can see *around* things," I said. "Some of them can, anyway."

"So they read our thoughts? What do we have left?"

"No, no. They can't see in *there,* at least I'm sure they can't see in your old man's McKinnonite nut lump of a brain. But they probably saw the whisky down in the cellar, all right. A door isn't a very solid thing for a war-ghost out of its own time and place."

Bex gave her hand a final squeeze, spread it out upon her lap. She stared down at the lines of her palm, then looked up at me. "If you won't fight, then you have to tell *me* how to fight them," she said. "I won't let them kill my father."

"Maybe they won't."

"I can't take that chance."

Her eyes were blazing green, as the suns came full through the window. Her face was bright-lit and shadowed, as if by the steady coals of a fire. You have loved this woman a long time, I thought. You have to tell her something that will be of use. But what could possibly be of use against a creature that had survived—*will* survive—that great and final war—and so must survive *now?* You can't kill the future. That's how the old sergeants would explain battle fate to the recruits. If you are meant to be there, they'd say, then nothing can hurt you. And if you're not, then you'll just fade, so you might as well go out fighting.

"You can only irritate them," I finally said to Bex. "There's a way to do it with the Flash. Talk to that technician, what's his name—"

"Jurven Dvorak."

"Tell Dvorak to strobe the local interrupt, fifty, sixty tetracycles. It'll

cut off all traffic, but it will be like a wasp nest to them, and they won't want to get close enough to turn it off. Maybe they'll leave. Dvorak better stay near the node after that, too."

"All right," Bex said. "Is that all?"

"Yes," I said. I rubbed my temples, felt the vague pain of a headache, which quickly receded as my internals rushed more blood to my scalp. "Yes, that's it."

Later that day, I heard the crackle of random quantum tunnel spray, as split, unsieved particles decided their spin, charm, and color without guidance from the world of gravity and cause. It was an angry buzz, like the hum of an insect caught between screen and windowpane, tremendously irritating to listen to for hours on end, if you were unlucky enough to be sensitive to the effect. I put up with it, hoping against hope that it would be enough to drive off the glims.

Bex arrived in the early evening, leading her father, who was ragged and half-crazed from two days without light or water. The glims had locked him in a cleaning closet, in the hotel, where he'd sat cramped and doubled over. After the buzz started, Bex opened the lock and dragged the old man out. It was as if the glims had forgotten the whole affair.

"Maybe," I said. "We can hope."

She wanted me to put the old man up at my house, in case the glims suddenly remembered. Old Furly Bexter didn't like the idea. He rattled on about something in McKinnon's "Letter to the Canadians," but I said yes, he could stay. Bex left me with her father in the shrouds of my living room.

Some time that night, the quantum buzz stopped. And in the early morning, I saw them—five of them—stalking along the road, kicking before them the cowering, stumbling form of Jurven Dvorak. I waited for them on the porch. Furly Bexter was asleep in my parents' bedroom. He was exhausted from his ordeal, and I expected him to stay that way for a while.

When they came into the yard, Dvorak ran to the pump and held to the handle, as if it were a branch suspending him over a bottomless chasm. And for him it was. They'd broken his mind and given him a dream of dying. Soon to be replaced by reality, I suspected, and no pumphandle hope of salvation.

Their leader—or the one who did the talking—was human-looking. I'd have to band out to make a full I.D., and I didn't want to give anything away for the moment. He saved me the trouble by telling me himself.

"My name's Marek," he said. "Come from a D-line, not far down-time from here."

I nodded, squinting into the red brightness reflected off my hardpan yard.

"We're just here for a good time," the human continued. "What you want to spoil that for?"

I didn't say anything for a moment. One of Marek's gang spat into the dryness of my dirt.

"Go ahead and have it," I said.

"All right," Marek said. He turned to Dvorak, then pulled out a weapon—not really a weapon though, for it is the tool of behind-the-lines enforcers, prison interrogators, confession extractors. It's called a algorithmic truncheon, a *trunch*, in the parlance. A trunch, used at full load, will strip the myelin sheath from axons and dendrites; it will burn up a man's nerves as if they were fuses. It is a way to kill with horrible pain. Marek walked over and touched the trunch to the leg of Dvorak, as if he were lighting a bonfire.

The Flash technician began to shiver, and then to seethe, like a teapot coming to boil. The motion traveled up his legs, into his chest, out his arms. His neck began to writhe, as if the corded muscles were so many snakes. Then Dvorak's brain burned, as a teapot will when all the water has run out and there is nothing but flame against hot metal. And then Dvorak screamed. He screamed for a long, long time. And then he died, crumpled and spent, on the ground in front of my house.

"I don't know you," Marek said, standing over Dvorak's body and looking up at me. "I know *what* you are, but I can't get a read on *who* you are, and that worries me," he said. He kicked at one of the Flash tech's twisted arms. "But now you know *me*."

"Get off my land," I said. I looked at him without heat. Maybe I felt nothing inside, either. That uncertainty had been my companion for a long time, my grim companion. Marek studied me for a moment. If I kept his attention, he might not look around me, look inside the house, to find his other fun, Furly Bexter, half-dead from Marek's amusements. Marek turned to the others.

"We're going," he said to them. "We've done what we came for." They turned around and left by the road on which they'd come, the only road there was. After a while, I took Dvorak's body to a low hill and dug him a grave there. I set up a sandstone marker, and since I knew Dvorak came from Catholic people, I scratched into the stone the sign of the cross. Jesus, from the Milky Way. Another glim. Hard to kill.

It took old man Bexter only a week or so to fully recover; I should have known by knowing Bex that he was made of a tougher grit. He began to putter around the house, helping me out where he could, although I ran a tidy one-man operation, and he was more in the way than anything. Bex risked a trip out once that week. Her father again insisted he was going back into town, but Bex told him the glims were looking for him. So far, she'd managed to convince them that she had no idea where he'd gotten to.

I was running low on food and supplies, and had to go into town the following Firstday. I picked up a good backpack load at the mercantile and some chemicals for treating the peat at the druggist, then risked a quick look-in on Bex. A sign on the desk told all that they could find her at Thredmartin's, taking her lunch, should they want her. I walked across the street, set my load down just inside Thredmartin's door, in the cloakroom, then passed through the entrance into the afternoon dank of the pub.

I immediately sensed glims all around, and hunched myself in, both mentally and physically. I saw Bex in her usual corner, and walked toward her across the room. As I stepped beside a table in the pub's middle, a glim—it was the halandana—stuck out a long, hairy leg. Almost, I tripped—and in that instant, I almost did the natural thing and cast about for some hold that was not present in the three-dimensional world—but I did not. I caught myself, came to a dead stop, then carefully walked around the glim's outstretched leg.

"Mind if I sit down?" I said as I reached Bex's table. She nodded toward a free chair. She was finishing a beer, and an empty glass stood beside it. Thredmartin usually had the tables clear as soon as the last drop left a mug. Bex was drinking fast. Why? Working up her courage, perhaps.

I lowered myself into the chair, and for a long time, neither of us said anything to the other. Bex finished her beer. Thredmartin appeared, looked curiously at the two empty mugs. Bex signaled for another, and I ordered my own whisky.

"How's the ranch," she finally asked me. Her face was flush and her lips trembled slightly. She was angry, I decided. At me, at the situation. It was understandable. Completely understandable.

"Fine," I said. "The ranch is fine."

"Good."

Again a long silence. Thredmartin returned with our drinks. Bex sighed, and, for a moment, I thought she would speak, but she did not. Instead, she reached under the table and touched my hand. I opened my palm, and she put her hand into mine. I felt the tension in her, the bonework of her hand as she squeezed tightly. I felt her fear and worry. I felt her love.

And then Marek came into the pub looking for her. He stalked across the room and stood in front of our table. He looked hard at me, then at Bex, and then he swept an arm across the table and sent Bex's beer and my whisky flying toward the wall. The beer mug broke, but I quickly reached out and caught my tumbler of scotch in midair without spilling a drop. Of course, no ordinary human could have done it.

Bex noticed Marek looking at me strangely and spoke with a loud voice that got his attention. "What do you want? You were looking for me at the hotel?"

"Your sign says you're open," Marek said in a reasonable, ugly voice. "I rang for room service. Repeatedly."

"Sorry," Bex said. "Just let me settle up and I'll be right there."

"Be right there *now*," Marek said, pushing the table from in front of her. Again, I caught my drink, held it on a knee while I remained sitting. Bex started up from her chair and stood facing Marek. She looked him in the eyes. "I'll *be* there directly," she said.

Without warning, Marek reached out and grabbed her by the chin. He didn't seem to be pressing hard, but I knew he must have her in a painful grip. He pulled Bex toward him. Still, she stared him in the eyes. Slowly, I rose from my chair, setting my tumbler of whisky down on the warm seat where I had been.

Marek glanced over at me. Our eyes met, and, at that close distance, he could plainly see the enhancements under my corneas. I could see his.

"Let go of her," I said.

He did not let go of Bex.

"Who the hell are you?" he asked. "That you tell *me* what to do?"

"I'm just a grunt, same as you," I said. "Let go of her."

The halandana had risen from its chair and was soon standing behind Marek. It-she growled mean and low. A combat schematic of how to handle the situation iconed up into the corner of my vision. The halandana was a green figure, Marek was red, Bex was a faded rose. I blinked once to enlarge it. Studied it in a fractional second. Blinked again to close it down. Marek let go of Bex.

She stumbled back, hurt and mad, rubbing her chin.

"I don't think we've got a grunt here," Marek said, perhaps to the halandana, or to himself, but looking at me. "I think we've got us a genuine skyfalling space marine."

The halandana's growl grew deeper and louder, filling ultra and subsonic frequencies.

"How many systems'd you take out, skyfaller?" Marek asked. "A couple of galaxies worth?" The halandana made to advance on me, but Marek put out his hand to stop it. "Where do you get off? This ain't nothing but small potatoes next to what *you've* done."

In that moment, I spread out, stretched a bit in ways that Bex could not see, but that Marek could—to some extent at least. I encompassed him, all of him, and did a thorough I.D. on both him and the halandana. I ran the data through some trans-d personnel files tucked into a swirl in n-space I'd never expected to access again. Marek Lambrois. Corporal of a back-line military police platoon assigned to the local cluster in a couple of possible worlds, deserters all in a couple of others. He was aggression enhanced by trans-weblink anti-alg coding. The squad's fighting profile was notched to the top level at all times. They were bastards who were now *pre-programmed* bastards. Marek was right about them being small

potatoes. He and his gang were nothing but mean-ass grunts, small-time goons for some of the non-aligned contingency troops.

"What the hell?" Marek said. He noticed my analytics, although it was too fast for him to get a good glimpse of me. But he did understand something in that moment, something it didn't take enhancement to figure out. And in that moment, everything was changed, had I but seen. Had I but seen.

"You're some bigwig, ain't you, skyfaller? Somebody that *matters* to the outcome," Marek said. "This is your actual, and you don't want to fuck yourself up-time, so you won't fight." He smiled crookedly. A diagonal of teeth, straight and narrow, showed whitely.

"Don't count on it," I said.

"You won't," he said, this time with more confidence. "I don't know what I was worrying about! I can do anything I want here."

"Well," I said. "Well." And then I said nothing.

"Get on over there and round me up some grub," Marek said to Bex. "I'll be waiting for it in room forty-five, little lady."

"I'd rather—"

"Do it," I said. The words were harsh and did not sound like my voice. But they were my words, and, after a moment, I remembered the voice. It was mine. From far, far in the future. Bex gasped at their hardness, but took a step forward, moved to obey.

"Bex," I said, more softly. "Just get the man some food." I turned to Marek. "If you hurt her, I don't care about anything. Do you understand? Nothing will matter to me."

Marek's smile widened into a grin. He reached over, slowly, so that I could think about it, and patted my cheek. Then he deliberately slapped me, hard. Hard enough to turn my head. Hard enough to draw a trickle of blood from my lip. It didn't hurt very much, of course. Of course it didn't hurt.

"Don't you worry, skyfaller," he said. "I know exactly where I stand now." He turned and left, and the halandana, its drugs unfinished on the table where it had sat, trailed out after him.

Bex looked at me. I tried to meet her gaze, but did not. I did not look down, but stared off into Thredmartin's darkness. She reached over and wiped the blood from my chin with her little finger.

"I guess I'd better go," she said.

I did not reply. She shook her head sadly, and walked in front of me. I kept my eyes fixed, far away from this place, this time, and her passing was a swirl of air, a red-brown swish of hair, and Bex was gone. Gone.

They sucked down my heart
to a little black hole
You cannot stab me.

"Colonel Bone, we've done the prelims on sector 1168, and there are fifty-six class one civilizations along with two-hundred seventy rationals in stage one or two development."

"Fifty-six. Two hundred seventy. Ah. Me."

"Colonel, sir, we can evac over half of them within thirty-six hours local."

"And have to defend them in the transcendent. Chaos neutral. Guaranteed 40 percent casualties for us."

"Yes, sir. But what about the civs at least. We can save a few."

They wrote down my brain
on a hard knot of space.
You cannot turn me.

"Unacceptable, soldier."

"Sir?"

"Unacceptable."

"Yes, sir."

All dead. All those millions of dead people. But it was the end of time, and they had to die, so that they—so that we *all,* all in time—could live. But they didn't know, those civilizations. Those people. It was the end of time, but you loved life all the same, and you died the same hard way as always. For nothing. It would be for nothing. Outside, the wind had kicked up. The sky was red with Ferro's dust, and a storm was brewing for the evening. I coated my sclera with a hard and glassy membrane, and, unblinking, I stalked home with my supplies through a fierce and growing wind.

That night, on the curtains of dust and thin rain, on the heave of the storm, Bex came to my house. Her clothes were torn and her face was bruised. She said nothing, as I closed the door behind her, led her into the kitchen, and began to treat her wounds. She said nothing as her worried father sat at my kitchen table and watched, and wrung his hands, and watched because there wasn't anything he could do.

"Did that man . . ." Her father said. The old man's voice broke. "Did he?"

"I tried to take the thing, the trunch, from him. He'd left it lying on the table by the door." Bex spoke in a hollow voice. "I thought that nobody was going to do anything, not even Henry, so I had to. I had to." Her facial bruises were superficial. But she held her legs stiffly together, and clasped her hands to her stomach. There was vomit on her dress. "The trunch had some kind of alarm set on it," Bex said. "So he caught me."

"Bex, are you hurting?" I said to her. She looked down, then carefully spread her legs. "He caught me and then he used the trunch on me. Not

full strength. Said he didn't want to do permanent damage. Said he wanted to save me for later." Her voice sounded far away. She covered her face with her hands. "He put it in me," she said.

Then she breathed deeply, raggedly, and made herself look at me. "Well," she said. "So."

I put her into my bed, and he sat in the chair beside it, standing watch for who knew what? He could not defend his daughter, but he must try, as surely as the suns rose, now growing father apart, over the hard pack of my homeworld desert.

Everything was changed.

"Bex," I said to her, and touched her forehead. Touched her fine, brown skin. "Bex, in the future, we won. I won, my command won it. Really, really big. That's why we're here. That's why we're all here."

Bex's eyes were closed. I could not tell if she'd already fallen asleep. I hoped she had.

"I have to take care of some business, and then I'll do it again," I said in a whisper. "I'll just have to go back up-time and do it again."

Between the first and second rising, I'd reached Heidel, and as Hemingway burned red through the storm's dusty leavings, I stood in the shadows of the entrance foyer of the Bexter Hotel. There I waited.

The halandana was the first up—like me, they never really slept—and it came down from its room looking, no doubt, to go out and get another rubber of its drug. Instead, it found me. I didn't waste time with the creature. With a quick twist in n-space, I pulled it down to the present, down to a local concentration of hate and lust and stupidity that I could kill with a quick thrust into its throat. But I let it live; I showed it myself, all of me spread out and huge, and I let it fear.

"Go and get Marek Lambrois," I told it. "Tell him Colonel Bone wants to see him. Colonel Henry Bone of the 8th Sky and Light."

"Bone," said the halandana. "I thought—"

I reached out and grabbed the creature's long neck. This was the halandana weak point, and this halandana had a ceramic implant as protection. I clicked up the power in my forearm a level and crushed the collar as I might a tea cup. The halandana's neck carapace shattered to platelets and shards, outlined in fine cracks under its skin.

"Don't think," I said. "Tell Marek Lambrois to come into the street and I will let him live."

This was untrue, of course, but hope never dies, I'd discovered, even in the hardest of soldiers. But perhaps I'd underestimated Marek. Sometimes I still wonder.

He stumbled out, still partly asleep, onto the street. Last night had evidently been a hard and long one. His eyes were a red no detox nano could fully clean up. His skin was the color of paste.

"You have something on me," I said. "I cannot abide that."

"Colonel Bone," he began. "If I'd knowed it was *you*—"

"Too late for that."

"It's never too late, that's what you taught us all when you turned that offensive around out on the Husk and gave the Chaos the what-for. I'll just be going. I'll take the gang with me. It's to no purpose, our staying now."

"You knew enough *yesterday*—enough to leave." I felt the rage, the old rage that was to be, once again. "Why did you do that to her?" I asked. "Why did you—"

And then I looked into his eyes and saw it there. The quiet desire—beaten down by synthesized emotions, but now triumphant, sadly triumphant. The desire to finally, finally *die*. Marek was not the unthinking brute I'd taken him for after all. Too bad for him.

I took a step toward Marek. His instincts made him reach down, go for the trunch. But it was a useless weapon on me. I don't have myelin sheaths on my nerves. I don't have nerves anymore; I have *wiring*. Marek realized this was so almost instantly. He dropped the trunch, then turned and ran. I caught him. He tried to fight, but there was never any question of him beating me. That would be absurd. I'm Colonel Bone of the Skyfalling 8th. I kill so that there might be life. *Nobody* beats me. It is my fate, and yours, too.

I caught him by the shoulder, and I looped my other arm around his neck and reined him to me—not enough to snap anything. Just enough to calm him down. He was strong, but had no finesse.

Like I said, glims are hard to kill. They're the same as snails in shells in a way, and the trick is to draw them out—way out. Which is what I did with Marek. As I held him physically, I caught hold of him, all of him, *over there,* in the place I can't tell you about, can't describe. The way you do this is by holding a glim still and causing him great suffering, so that they can't withdraw into the deep places. That's what vampire stakes and Roman crosses are all about.

And, like I told Bex, glims are bad ones, all right. Bad, but not the worst. *I* am the worst.

Icicle spike
from the eye of a star
I've come to kill you.

I sharpened my nails. Then I plunged them into Marek's stomach, through the skin, into the twist of his guts. I reached around there and caught hold of something, a piece of intestine. I pulled it out. This I tied to the porch of the Bexter Hotel.

Marek tried to untie himself and pull away. He was staring at his insides, rolled out, raw and exposed, and thinking—I don't know what. I

haven't died. I don't know what it is like to die. He moaned sickly. His hands fumbled uselessly in the grease and phlegm that coated his very own self. There was no undoing the knots I'd tied, no pushing himself back in.

I picked him up, and, as he whimpered, I walked down the street with him. His guts trailed out behind us, like a pink ribbon. After I'd gotten about twenty feet, I figure this was all he had in him. I dropped him into the street.

Hemingway was in the northeast and Fitzgerald directly east. They both shone at different angles on Marek's crumple, and cast crazy, mazy shadows down the length of the street.

"Colonel Bone," he said. I was tired of his talking. "Colonel—"

I reached into his mouth, past his gnashing teeth, and pulled out his tongue. He reached for it as I extracted it, so I handed it to him. Blood and drool flowed from his mouth and colored the red ground even redder about him. Then, one by one, I broke his arms and legs, then I broke each of the vertebrae in his backbone, moving up his spinal column with quick pinches. It didn't take long.

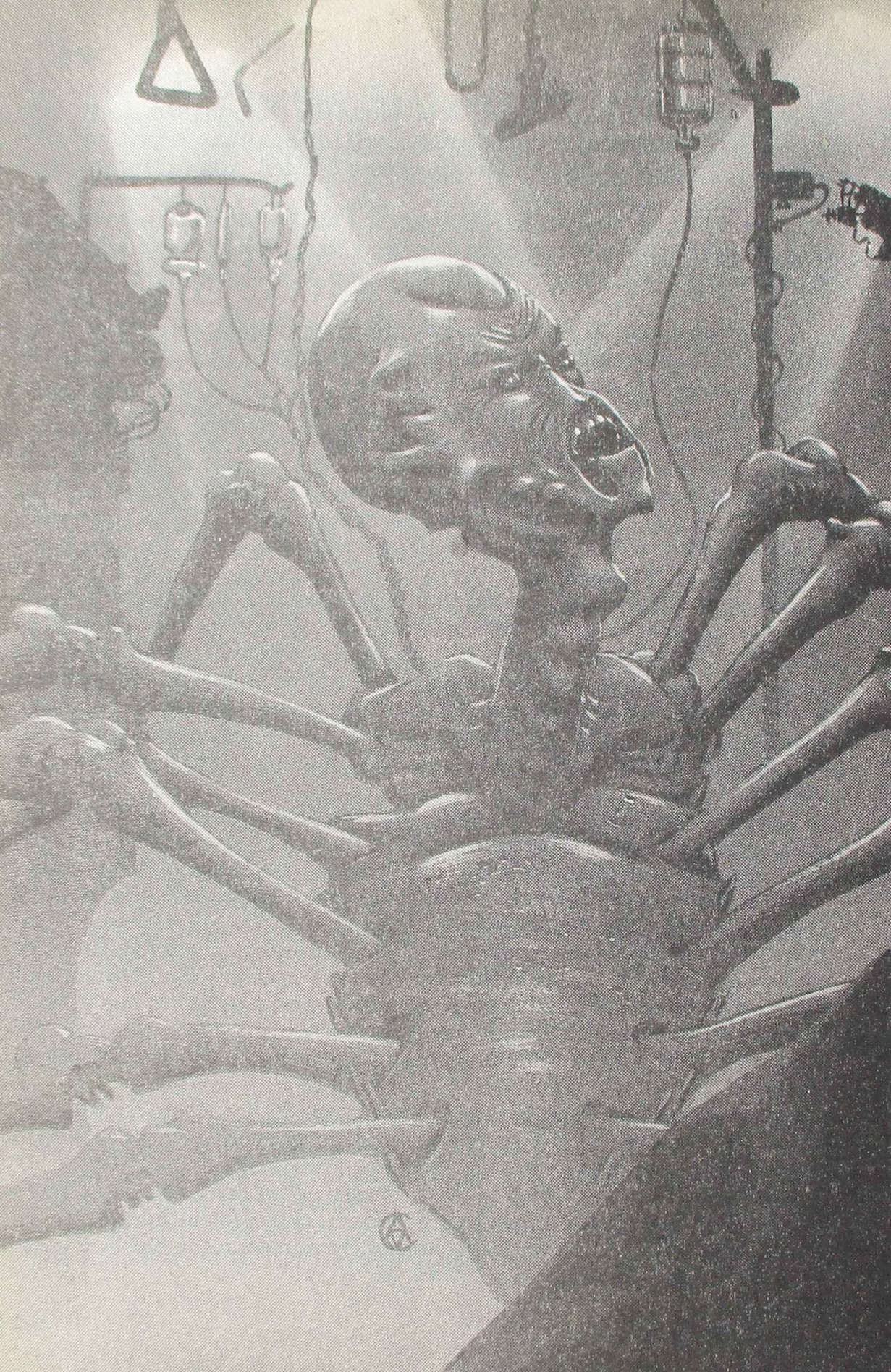
This is what I did in the world that people can see. In the twists of other times and spaces, I did similar things, horrible, irrevocable things, to the man. I killed him. I killed him in such a way that he would never come to life again, not in any possible place, not in any possible time. I wiped Marek Lambrois from existence. Thoroughly. And with his death. the other glims died, like lights going out, lights ceasing to exist, bulb, filament and all. Or like the quick loss of all sensation after a brain is snuffed out.

Irrevocably gone from this time-line, and that was what mattered. Keeping this possible future uncertain, balanced on the fulcrum of chaos and necessity. Keeping it *free,* so that I could go back and do my work.

I left Marek lying there, in the main street of Heidel. Others could do the mopping up; that wasn't my job. As I left town, on the way back to my house and my life there, I saw that I wasn't alone in the dawn-lit town. Some had business out at this hour, and they had watched. Others had heard the commotion and come to windows and porches to see what it was. Now they knew. They knew what I was, what I was to be. I walked alone down the road, and found Bex and her father both sound asleep in my room.

I stroked her fine hair. She groaned, turned in her sleep. I pulled my covers up to her chin. Forty years old, and as beautiful as a child. Safe in my bed. Bex. Bex, I will miss you. Always, always, Bex.

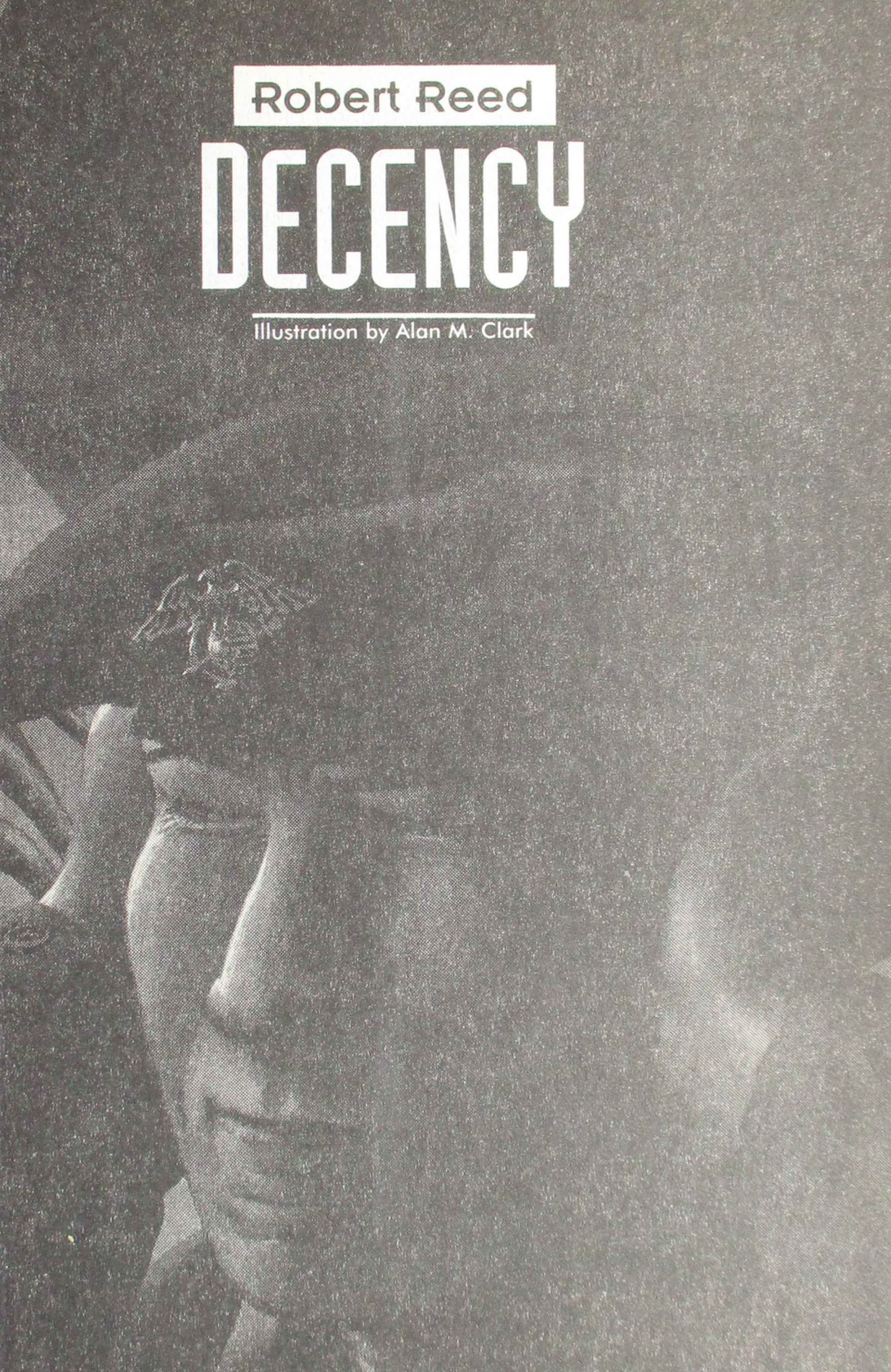
I went to the living room, to the shroud-covered furniture. I sat down in what had been my father's chair. I sipped a cup of my father's best barley malt whisky. I sat, and as the suns of Ferro rose in the hard iron sky, I faded into the distant, dying future. ●



Robert Reed

DECENCY

Illustration by Alan M. Clark



Robert Reed's latest book, *An Exaltation of Larks,* is just out from Tor, and he recently sold a sequel to his 1994 novel, *Beyond the Veil of Stars.* The following tale was inspired by a grisly incident. The author "found an injured squirrel—struck by a car, I gathered—" and discovered that the decent thing to do was "a good deal harder to manage than I'd ever guessed. I was left a bit shaken by the critter's indifference to my charity."

The venerable old Hubble telescope saw it first.

A silvery splash moving against the stars, the object proved enormous—larger than some worlds—and it was faster than anything human-built, still out among the comets but coming, the first touch of cold light just beginning to brake its terrific fall.

"It's a light sail," astronomers announced, giddy as children, drunk by many means. "Definitely artificial. Probably automated. No crew, minimal mass. Photons move the thing, and even accounting for deceleration, it's going to make a quick flyby of the earth."

By the time the sail crossed Saturn's orbit, a three-inch reflector cost its weight in platinum. Amateur astronomers were quitting their day jobs in order to spend nights plotting trajectories. Novice astronomers, some armed with nothing but binoculars or rifle sights, risked frostbite for the privilege of a glimpse. But it was the professionals who remained the most excited: Every topflight facility in the northern hemisphere studied the object, measuring its mass, its albedo, its vibrations, and its damage—ragged mile-wide punctures scattered across its vast surface, probably stemming from collisions with interstellar comets. The sail's likely point of origin was a distant G-class sun; its voyage must have taken a thousand years, perhaps more. Astronomers tried to contact the automated pilot. Portions of the radio spectrum were cleared voluntarily for better listening. Yet nothing was heard, ever. The only sign of a pilot was a subtle, perhaps accidental twisting of the sail, the pressure of sunlight altering its course, the anticipated flyby of the earth becoming an impact event.

Insubstantial as a soap bubble, the sail offered little risk to people or property. Astronomers said so. Military and political people agreed with them. And despite Hollywood conventions, there was no great panic among the public. No riots. No religious upheavals. A few timid souls took vacations to New Zealand and Australia, but just as many southerners came north to watch the spectacle. There were a few ugly moments involving the susceptible and the emotionally troubled; but generally people responded with curiosity, a useful fatalism, and the gentle

nervousness that comes with a storm front or a much-anticipated football game.

The world watched the impact. Some people used television, others bundled up and stepped outdoors. In the end, the entire northern sky was shrouded with the brilliant sail. In the end, as the earth's gravity embraced it, scientists began to find structures within its thin, thin fabric. Like a spiderweb, but infinitely more complex, there were fibers and veins that led to a central region—a square mile of indecipherable machinery—and the very last images showed damaged machines, the sail's tiny heart wounded by a series of swift, murderous collisions.

The impact itself was beautiful. Ghostly fires marked where the leading edge bit into the stratosphere. Without sound or fuss, the sail evaporated into a gentle rain of atomized metals. But the spiderweb structures were more durable, weathering the impact, tens of thousands of miles of material falling over three continents and as many oceans, folding and fracturing on their way down, the most massive portions able to kill sparrows and crack a few windows and roof tiles.

No planes were flying at the time, as a precaution. Few people were driving. Subsequent figures showed that human death rates had dropped for that critical hour, a worldly caution in effect; then they lifted afterward, parties and carelessness taking their inevitable toll.

The sail's central region detached itself at the end, then broke into still smaller portions. One portion crashed along the shore of Lake Superior. The Fox affiliate in Duluth sent a crew, beating the military by twenty minutes. The only witness to the historic event was a temperamental bull moose. Only when it was driven off did the crew realize that the sail wasn't an automated probe. A solitary crewmember lay within a fractured diamond shell, assorted life-support equipment heaped on all sides. Despite wounds and the fiery crash, it was alive—an organism built for gravity, air and liquid water. A trembling camera showed the world its first genuine alien sprawled out on the forest floor, a dozen jointed limbs reaching for its severed web, and some kind of mouth generating a clear, strong, and pitiful wail that was heard in a billion homes.

A horrible, piercing wail.

The scream of a soul in perfect agony.

Caleb was one of the guards supplied by the U.S. Marines.

Large in a buttery way, with close-cropped hair and tiny suspicious eyes, Caleb was the kind of fellow who would resemble a guard even without his uniform or bulky sidearm. His service record was flawless. Of average intellect and little creativity, nonetheless he possessed a double dose of what, for lack of a better word, could be called shrewdness.

Working the security perimeter, he helped control access to the alien. *The bug,* as he dubbed it, without a shred of originality. Twice in the

first two days he caught unauthorized civilians attempting to slip inside—one using a false ID, the other hiding inside bales of computer paper. Late on the third day he found a fellow guard trying to smuggle out a piece of the bug's shell. "It's a chunk of diamond," was the man's pitiful defense. "Think what it's worth, Caleb. And I'll give you half . . . what do you say. . . ?"

Nothing. He saw no reason to respond, handcuffing the man—a sometime acquaintance—then walking him back toward the abrupt little city that had sprung up on the lake shore. Double-walled tents were kept erect with pressurized air and webs of rope, each tent lit and heated, the rumble of generators and compressors making the scene appear busier than it was. Most people were asleep; it was three in the morning. A quarter moon hung overhead, the January stars like gemstones, brighter and more perfect than the battered diamond shard that rode against Caleb's hip. But the sky barely earned a glance, and despite the monumental events of the last weeks and days, the guard felt no great fortune for being where he was. His job was to deliver the criminal to his superiors, which he did, and he did it without distraction, acting with a rigorous professionalism.

The duty officer, overworked and in lousy spirits, didn't want the shard. "You take it back to the science people," he ordered. "I'll call ahead. They'll be watching for you."

Mistrust came with the job; Caleb expected nothing less from his boss.

The bug was at the center of the city, under a converted circus tent. Adjacent tents and trailers housed the scientists and their machinery. One facility was reserved for the press, but it was almost empty, what with the hour and the lack of fresh events. Overflow equipment was stored at the back of the tent, half-unpacked and waiting to be claimed by experts still coming from the ends of the world. Despite the constant drone of moving air, Caleb could hear the bug now and again. A wail, a whimper. Then another, deeper wail. Just for a moment, the sound caused him to turn his head, listening now, feeling something that he couldn't name, something without a clear source. An emotion, liquid and intense, made him pay close attention. But then the bug fell silent, or at least it was quieter than the manmade wind, and the guard was left feeling empty, a little cold, confused and secretly embarrassed.

He was supposed to meet a Doctor Lee in the press tent; those were his orders, but nobody was waiting for him.

Caleb stood under a swaying fluorescent light, removing the diamond shard from his pocket and examining it for the first time. Cosmic dusts and brutal radiations had worn at it; he'd seen prettier diamonds dangling from men's ears. What made it valuable? Why care half this much about the bug? The earth had never been in danger. The sail's lone passenger was dying. Everyone who visited it said it was just a matter of

time. To the limits of his vision, Caleb could see nothing that would significantly change people's lives. Scientists would build and destroy reputations. Maybe some fancy new machines would come from their work. Maybe. But the young man from central Missouri understood that life would go on as it always had, and so why get all worked up in the first place?

"You've got something for me?"

Caleb looked up, finding a middle-aged woman walking toward him. A very tired, red-eyed woman. She was one of the nation's top surgeons, although he didn't know or particularly care.

"I'll take that for you—"

"Sorry, ma'am." He had read her ID tag, adding, "I'm expecting Marvin Lee. Material studies."

"I know. But Marvin's busy, and I like the press tent's coffee. Since I was coming this way, I volunteered."

"But I can't give it to you. Ma'am." Caleb could see how the shard had been stolen in the first place.

Red eyes rolled, amused with his paranoia.

Not for the first time, he felt frustration. No sense of protocol here; no respect for sensible rules. The name on the ID was Hilton. Showing none of his feeling, Caleb said, "Perhaps you could take me to him, Dr. Hilton. If it's no trouble."

"I guess." She poured black coffee into a Styrofoam cup, a knowing little smile appearing. "Now I get it. You're after a trip to the big tent, aren't you?"

Hadn't he just said that?

A sly wink, and she said, "Come on then. I'll take you."

They left the press tent, the doctor without a coat and the guard not bothering to zip his up. A twenty-yard walk, then they entered the bug's enormous tent, three sets of sealed doors opening for them. The last pair of guards waved them on without a look. Caleb smelled liquor, for just a moment, and as he stepped through the door he was wondering who to warn about this serious breach of the rules—

—and there was a horrible, horrible wail.

Caleb stopped in mid-stride, his breath coming up short, a bolt of electricity making his spine straighten up and his face reflexively twist as if in agony.

Turning, showing the oddest half-grin, Dr. Hilton inquired, "Is something wrong?"

It took him a moment to say, "No, I'm fine."

"But it's your first time here, isn't it?"

What was her point?

"You've heard stories about it, haven't you?"

"Some."

"And you're curious. You want to see it for yourself."

"Not particularly," he answered, with conviction.

Yet she didn't believe him. She seemed to enjoy herself. "Marvin's on the other side. Stay with me."

Caleb obeyed. Walking between banks of instruments, he noticed that the technicians wore bulky, heavily padded headphones to blunt the screams. Now and again, at unpredictable moments, the bug would roar, and again Caleb would pause, feeling a little ill for that terrible moment when the air itself seemed to rip apart. Then just as suddenly there was silence, save for the clicking machines and hushed, respectful voices. In silence, Caleb found himself wondering if the guards drank because of the sounds. Not that he could condone it, but he could anticipate their excuse. Then he stepped off a floor of particle boards, onto rocky earth punctuated with tree stumps, and in the middle of that cleared patch of forest, stretched out on its apparent back, was the very famous bug. Not close enough to touch, but nearly so. Not quite dead, but not quite alive either.

There was some kind of face on a wounded appendage, a silent mouth left open, and what seemed to be eyes that were huge and strange and haunted. Dark liquid centers stared helplessly at the tent's high ceiling. It was no bug, Caleb realized. It didn't resemble an insect, or any mammal for that matter. Were those legs? Or arms? Did it eat with that flexible mouth? And how did it breathe? Practical questions kept offering themselves, but he didn't ask any of them. Instead he turned to the surgeon, dumbfounded. "Why bring me here?" he inquired.

She was puzzled. "I'm sorry, isn't that what you wanted? I assumed seeing Marvin was an excuse."

Not at all.

"You know," she informed him, "anyone else would give up a gland to be here. To stand with us."

True. He didn't quite see why, but he knew it was true.

Another pair of guards watched them from nearby. They knew the doctor. They had seen her come and go dozens of times, struggling to help her patient. In the course of three days, they had watched her face darken, her humor growing cynical, and her confidence languishing as every effort failed. They felt sorry for her. Maybe that was why they allowed Caleb to stand too close to government property. The soldier lacked clearance, but he was with Hilton, and he was safe looking, and how could this tiny indiscretion hurt? It made no sense to be hard-asses. Glancing at their watches, they measured the minutes before their shift ended . . . and once more that gruesome critter gave a big roar. . . !

"It's in pain," Caleb muttered afterward.

The doctor looked at him, then away. "Are you sure?"

What a strange response. Of course it was in pain. He searched for the

usual trappings of hospitals and illness. Where were the dangling bags of medicine and food? "Are you giving it morphine?" he asked, fully expecting to be told, "Of course."

But instead Hilton said, "Why? Why morphine?"

As if speaking to an idiot, Caleb said each word with care. "In order to stop the pain, naturally."

"Except morphine is an intricate, highly specific compound. It kills the hurt in Marines, but probably not in aliens." She waited a moment, then gestured. "You've got more in common—biochemically speaking—with these birch trees. Or a flu virus, for that matter."

He didn't understand, and he said so.

"This creature has DNA," she explained, "but its genetic codes are all different. It makes different kinds of amino acids, and very unusual proteins. Enzymes nothing like ours. And who knows what kinds of neurotransmitters."

The alien's mouth opened, and Caleb braced himself.

It closed, and he sighed.

"We've found organs," said Hilton, sipping her coffee. "Some we know, some we don't. Three hearts, but two are punctured. Dead. The scar tissue shows radiation tracks. Count them and we get an estimate of the tissue's age. A thousand years, maybe. Which means it was injured when it flew through a dust storm, probably on its way out of the last solar system."

The alien was about the size of a good riding horse. It seemed larger only because of its peculiar flattened shape. The wounds were surgically precise holes, wisps of dust having pierced diamond as well as flesh. Knowing what ballistic wounds meant, he asked, "How is it even alive?"

"Implanted machinery, in part. Most of the machinery isn't working, but what does is repairing some tissues, some organs." She took a big swallow of coffee. "But its wounds may not have been the worst news. Marvin and my other esteemed colleagues think that the cosmic buckshot crippled most of the sail's subsystems. The reactors, for instance. There were three of them, a city block square each, thick as a playing card. Without power, the creature had no choice but to turn *everything* off, including itself. A desperation cryogenic freeze, probably for most of the voyage. And it didn't wake until it was over our heads, almost. Its one maneuver might have been a doomed skydiver's attempt to strike a mound of soft hay."

Caleb turned and asked, "Will it live?"

Hilton was tiring of the game. "Eventually, no. There's talk about another freeze, but we can't even freeze humans yet."

"I said it was in pain, and you said, 'Are you sure?' "

"It's not us. We can't measure its moods, or how it feels. Empirical evidence is lacking—"

As if to debate the point, the alien screamed again. The eyes kept shaking afterward, the closing mouth making a low wet sound. Watching the eyes, Caleb asked, "Do you think it means, 'Hi, how are you?' "

Hilton didn't respond. She didn't have time.

Again the alien's mouth opened, black eyes rippling as the air was torn apart; and Caleb, hands to his ears and undistracted by nasty gray abstractions, knew exactly what that horrible noise meant.

Not a doubt in him, his decision already made.

For three days and several hours, a worldwide controversy had been brewing, sweeping aside almost every other human concern.

What should be done with the alien?

Everyone who would care knew about the wounds and screams. Almost everyone had seen those first horrid tapes of the creature, and they'd watched the twice-daily news conferences, including Dr. Hilton's extended briefings. No more network cameras were being allowed inside the central tent, on the dubious ground of cleanliness. (How did you infect such an odd creature with ordinary human pathogens?) But the suffering continued, without pause, and it was obvious that the people in charge were overmatched. At least according to those on the outside.

The United Nations should take over, or some trustworthy civilian agency. Said many.

But which organization would be best?

And assuming another caretaker, what kinds of goals would it try to accomplish?

Some observers wanted billions spent in a crash program, nothing more important now than the alien's total recovery. Others argued for a kind death, then a quick disposal of the body, all evidence of the tragedy erased in case a second sail-creature came searching for its friend. But the earth was littered with wreckage; people couldn't hope to salvage every incriminating fiber. That led others to argue that nothing should be done, allowing Nature and God their relentless course. And should death come, the body could be preserved in some honorable way, studied or not, and should more aliens arrive in some distant age—unlikely as that seemed—they could see that people were decent, had done their best, and no blame could possibly be fixed to them.

Anne Hilton despised all those options. She wanted to heal her patient, but crash programs were clumsy and expensive, and she was a pragmatic doctor who realized that human patients would suffer as a result, no money left for their mortal ills. Besides, she doubted if there was time. The fiery crash had plainly damaged the tissue-repairing systems. And worse, there was no easy way to give the creature its simplest needs. Its oxygen use was falling. Nitrogen levels were building in the slow, clear blood. Teams of biochemists had synthesized a few simple sugars, amino

acids, and other possible metabolites; yet the creature's success with each was uneven, the intravenous feedings canceled for now.

The truth told, Hilton's patient was collapsing at every level, and all that remained for the doctor were some of the oldest, most venerable skills.

Patience.

Prayer.

And whatever happened: "Do no harm."

For the next days, months and years, Dr. Anne Hilton would wrestle with her memories, trying to decide why she had acted as she did that morning. Why get coffee at that particular moment? Why offer to retrieve the diamond shard? And why invite Caleb on that impromptu tour?

The last question had many answers. She had assumed that he wanted a tour, that he was being stubborn about the shard for no other reason. And because he was a Marine, he represented authority, order and ignorance. She'd already had several collisions with his sort, politicians and other outsiders without enough mental activity to form a worthy thought. Maybe she'd hoped that shocking him would help her mood. She'd assumed that he was a big thoughtless lump of a man, the very worst kind. . . ! Imagine. Stationed here for three days, guarding something wondrous, and precious, yet he didn't have the feeblest grasp of what was happening. . . !

The last scream done, Caleb asked, "Where's its brain?"

She glanced at him, noticing a change in his eyes.

"Doctor?" he asked. "Do you know where it does its thinking?"

She was suddenly tired of dispensing free knowledge, yet something in his voice made her answer. A sip of coffee, an abbreviated gesture. Then she said, "Below the face. Inside what you'd call its chest," and with that she turned away.

She should have watched him.

She could have been more alert, like any good doctor, reading symptoms and predicting the worst.

But an associate was approaching, some nonvital problem needing her best guess. She didn't guess that anything was wrong until she saw her associate's face change. One moment he was smiling. Then he became suddenly confused. Then, horrified. And only after that did she bother to ask herself why that Marine would want to know where to find the brain.

Too late, she wheeled around.

Too late and too slow, she couldn't hope to stop him, or even slow him. Caleb had removed his sidearm from its holster, one hand holding the other's wrist, the first shot delivered to the chest's exact center, missing the brain by an inch. Security cameras on all sides recorded the event, in aching detail. The alien managed to lift one limb, two slender fingers

reaching for the gun. Perhaps it was defending itself. Or perhaps, as others have argued, it simply was trying to adjust its killer's aim. Either way, the gesture was useless. And Hilton was superfluous. Caleb emptied his clip in short order, achieving a perfectly spaced set of holes. Two bullets managed to do what bits of relativistic dust couldn't, devastating a mind older than civilization. And the eyes, never human yet obviously full of intelligence, stared up at the tent's high ceiling, in thanks, perhaps, seeing whatever it is that only the doomed can see.

There was a trial.

The charge, after all the outcry and legal tapdancing, was reduced to felony destruction of federal property. Caleb offered no coordinated defense. His attorneys tried to argue for some kind of alien mind control, probably wishing for the benefit of the doubt. But Caleb fired them for trying it, then went on the stand to testify on his own behalf. In a quiet, firm voice, he described his upbringing in the Ozarks and the beloved uncle who had helped raise him, taking him hunting and fishing, instructing him in the moral codes of the decent man.

" 'Aim to kill,' he taught me. 'Don't be cruel to any creature, no matter how low-born.' " Caleb stared at the camera, not a dab of doubt entering his steady voice. "When I see suffering, and when there's no hope, I put an end to it. Because that's what's right." He gave examples of his work: Small game. A lame horse. And dogs, including an arthritic Labrador that he'd raised from a pup. Yet that wasn't nearly enough reason, and he knew it. He paused for a long moment, wiping his forehead with his right palm. Then with a different voice, he said, "I was a senior, in high school, and my uncle got the cancer. In his lungs, his bones. Everywhere." He was quieter, if anything. Firmer. More in control, if that was possible. "It wasn't the cancer that killed him. His best shotgun did. His doctor and the sheriff talked it over, deciding that he must have held the twelve gauge up like this, then tripped the trigger like this." An imaginary gun lay in his outstretched arms, the geometry difficult even for a healthy oversized man. For the first time, the voice broke. But not badly and not for long. "People didn't ask questions," Caleb explained, arms dropping. "They knew what my uncle was feeling. What he wanted. They knew how we were, the two of us. And where I come from, decent people treat people just as good as they'd treat a sick farm cat. Dying stinks, but it might as well be done fast. And that's all I've got to say about that."

He was sentenced to five years of hard labor, serving every month without incident, without complaint, obeying the strict rules well enough that the prison guards voted him to be a model citizen of their intense little community.

Released, Caleb returned to Missouri, taking over the daily operations of the impoverished family farm.

Networks and news services pleaded for interviews; none were granted.

Some idiots tried sneaking onto his property. They were met by dogs and a silent ex-Marine—lean as a fence post now—and the famous shotgun always cradled in his wiry long arms.

He never spoke to trespassers.

His dogs made his views known.

Eventually people tired of running in the woods. Public opinions began to soften. The alien had been dying, it was decided. Nothing good could have been done for it. And if the Marine wasn't right in what he did, at least he'd acted according to his conscience.

Caleb won his privacy.

There were years when no one came uninvited.

Then it was a bright spring day twenty-some years after the killing, and a small convoy drove in past the warning signs, through the tall barbed wire gates, and right up to the simple farmhouse. As it happened, a Marine colonel had been selected to oversee the operation. Flanked by government people, he met with the middle-aged farmer, and with a crisp, no-nonsense voice said, "Pack your bags, soldier. But I'll warn you, you don't need to bring much."

"Where am I going?"

"I'll give you one guess."

Something had happened; that much was obvious. With a tight, irritated voice, Caleb told the colonel, "I want you all off my land. Now."

"Goddamn! You really don't know, do you?" The colonel gave a big laugh, saying, "Nothing else is on the news anymore."

"I don't have a television," said Caleb.

"Or a family anymore. And precious few friends." He spoke as if he'd just read the man's file. Then he pointed skyward, adding, "I just assumed you'd have seen it. After dusk is a good time—"

"I get to bed early," was Caleb's excuse. Then a sudden hard chill struck him. He leaned against his doorjamb, thinking that he understood, the fight suddenly starting to leave him. "There's another sail, isn't there? That's what this is all about."

"One sail? Oh, that's wonderful!" All the government men were giggling. "Make it three hundred and eighteen sails, and that's just *today's* count!"

"An armada of them," said someone.

"Gorgeous, gorgeous," said another, with feeling.

Caleb tried to gather himself. Then with a calm, almost inaudible voice, he asked, "But what do you want with me?"

"We don't want you," was the quick reply.

No?

"*They* do." The colonel kept smiling. "*They* asked specifically for you, soldier."

He knew why. Not a doubt in him.

Caleb muttered, "Just a minute," and dropped back into the house, as if to get ready.

The colonel waited for a couple seconds, then knew better. He burst through the door and tried to guess where Caleb would have gone. Upstairs? No, there was an ominous *click* from somewhere on his right. Caleb was in a utility room, his shotgun loaded and cocked, the double barrels struggling to reach his long forehead; and the colonel grabbed the gun's butt and trigger, shouting, "No! Wait!" Then half a dozen government men were helping him, dark suits left rumpled and torn. But they wrestled the shotgun away from their charge, and the colonel stood over him, asking, "What were you thinking? Why in hell would you—?"

"I killed one of theirs," Caleb said. "Now they want their revenge. Isn't that it?"

"Not close." The colonel was too breathless to put much into his laugh. "In fact, I don't think you could be more wrong, soldier. The last thing they want to *kill* is you. . . !"

Caleb was packed into a new shuttle and taken to orbit, an ungainly lunar tug carrying him the rest of the way. There was a new moon in a high, safe orbit. One of the sail creatures had captured a modest nickel-iron asteroid and brought it there. Healthy and whole, the creature scarcely resembled its dead brother. Its vast sail was self-repairing, and it possessed an astonishing grace, superseding the most delicate butterfly. Partially folded, riding the captive asteroid, it swallowed the tug, guiding it into a docking facility built recently from the native ores. Other tugs had brought up dignitaries, scientists, and a complete medical team. Everyone had gathered in the central room. As the one-time guard drifted into view, there was applause—polite but not quite enthusiastic—and from some of the faces, envy. Incandescent green envy.

Anne Hilton was among that number.

Old and long retired, she was present at the request of the sail creatures. Caleb didn't recognize her at first glance. She shook his hand, tried smiling, then introduced him to each member of her team. "We're just advisors," she informed him. "Most of the work will be done by our host."

Caleb flinched, just for a moment.

Their "host" didn't resemble the first alien, save for the artificial trappings. Sail creatures were an assemblage of sentient species. Perhaps dozens of them. Caleb had seen photographs of this particular species: Fish-like; human-sized; blackish gills flanking an unreadable carpish mouth. It had disgusted him at first glance, and the memory of it disgusted him now.

Dr. Hilton asked, "Would you like to meet her?"

He spoke honestly, saying, "Not particularly."

"But she wants to meet you." A cutting smile, then she promised, "I'll take you to her. Come on."

They had done this before, more than two decades ago. She had taken him to meet an alien, and for at least this moment she could feel superior in the same way. In charge.

There was a narrow tunnel with handholds, toeholds.

Suddenly they were alone, and with a soft, careful voice, Caleb confessed, "I don't understand. Why *me?"*

"Why not you?" Hilton growled.

"I'm not smart. Or clever. Not compared to everyone else up here, I'm not."

She lifted her eyebrows, watching him.

"These aliens should pick a scientist. Someone who cares about stars and planets. . . ."

"You're going to be young again." Hilton said the words as if delivering a curse. "It'll take her some time to learn our genetics, but she's promised me that she can reverse the aging process. A twenty-year-old-body again."

"I know."

"As for being smart," she said, "don't worry. She's going to tease your neurons into dividing, like inside a baby's head. By the time you leave us, you'll be in the top 99th percentile among humans. And as creative as can be."

He nodded, already aware of the general plan.

Then they were near the entrance to *her* chamber. Hilton stopped, one hand resting on Caleb's nearest arm, a firm and level voice telling him, "I would do anything—almost—for the chance to go where you're going. To live for eons, to see all those wondrous places!"

In a quiet, almost conspiratorial tone, he said, "I'll tell her to take you instead of me."

Hilton knew that he *meant* it, and she grew even angrier.

Then again, Caleb asked, "Why *me?*"

"They think they know you, I guess. They've been studying our telecommunications noise for years, and you certainly earned their attention." Her withered face puckered, tasting something sour. "You acted out of a kind of morality. You didn't hesitate, and you didn't make excuses. Then you accepted the hardships of prison, and the hardships that came afterward. Being able to live alone like you did . . . well, that's a rare talent for our species, and it's invaluable. . . ."

He gave a little nod, a sigh.

"These creatures don't treasure intelligence," she exclaimed. "That's something they can *grow,* in vats. The same with imagination. But there's some quality in *you* that makes you worth taking. . . ."

A dull ocher button would open the hatch.

Hilton reached for it, and her hand was intercepted, frail bones restrained by an unconscious strength.

Caleb put his face close to hers, and whispered.

"What I did for that alien," he confessed, "I would have done for a dog." She opened her mouth, but said nothing. After a moment, he continued: "Or a bug. Or *anything*."

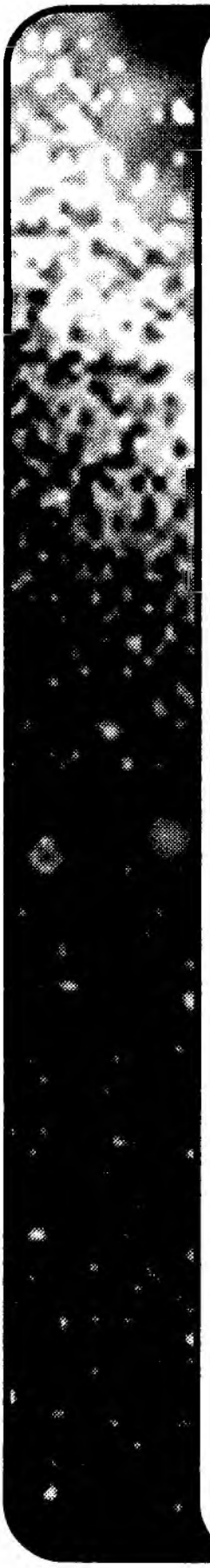
She stared at him, pulling at her hand until he abruptly let go.

"Time to get this business started," Caleb announced.

With an elbow, he smacked the button. There was a hiss, a little wind blowing as the hatch pulled open, carrying with it the smell of warm water and things unnamed.

He turned and left her.

And she hugged herself as if cold, and she watched him, her mouth open and nothing to say, him growing small with the distance as her bewilderment grew vast and bitter and black. ●



STAR-RIGGER

Call me star-rigger
as they will, saying it
don't make it so. Saying it
just bitters the breath,
abrades the ear, when I've got
no more to do with stars
than a starfish on a reef.
I rig, all right, I probe,
hovering in my workpod,
with sensor beams and eyes
for damage, for crystallization
and pitting, for structural
fatigue and perforations, for
every damned kind of weakness
and find each one of them
in myself if not in the Ship.
I fill my head with the work,
the job I do for love and money,
love of my son, money to save him
from grounder's fate, back broken
on the reef of Port City, asteroid
encrusted with wrecks, debris
of scrapped ships and lives.
I fill and polish, replace
and refurbish, re-rig the Ship
for the next journey Out, and still
the stars that drew me here
grow more distant every day.
My parents were too poor, maybe
too full of love and fear,
to help me go. But my son,
my son will go Out, his brain
piloting the great Ship of his body
through the currents of space.
Perhaps then, with his emotions
damped, his body altered, perhaps
he will no longer care
for the father that got him there,
but he will still be my son,
my flesh gone on to lay claim
to the new frontier, to swim
naturally as a shark
in the all-fathering darkness.

—David Lunde

Eliot Fintushel

IZZY AT THE LUCKY THREE

Eliot Fintushel's tale of the extraordinary motel manager, Izzy, is the first of several stories about this charming character. The author's philosophical hosteler will be seen in future issues of *Asimov's*.

Illustration by Alan M. Clark

Izzy's back got so bad that he quit his job at Paragon Revolute and became night manager at the Lucky Three Motel, a hangout for lovers and suicides. Sarvadubka, the motel mogul, didn't care about Izzy's looks; he just wanted some meat behind the desk, without having to lay out for fringes. "He loves me for myself," Izzy crooned.

"You're not front office," was Fay's view.

"It's the fingertips, isn't it, the ones I lopped off at the Wurlitzer Plant in Tonawanda? I'll glove 'em, Fay baby."

"No, Iz, it's the brow." A palisade across his forehead. "One stroke of the razor, Izzy!" Fay implored him.

"Nothing doing. That's my lucky charm."

"Some luck," she sighed, but she kissed it, right at the spot where she wanted to drag a blade, bisecting the thing.

Fay was the angel of his middle age. She loved his paunch. He loved her crow's-feet and her stretch marks. He lived for the increase of her silver hairs and would not be dissuaded from celebrating each one, however she groused.

"I think it's a kind of *antenna.*"—That was Hamisch's take on the famous brow. She told Fay so over coffee at the Three.

Izzy had given Hamisch, his son's fiancée, a room on the sly, Number 6, to work on the Big Proof for her Ph.D. in math. "But none of your zen wall gazing," he told her, "neither you nor your Buddhist lover boy!"

"*Aunt Anna?*" Fay said.

"*Antenna.* Fay. An aerial. You know! That's how he hears spacemen and gets inside people's heads."

"I wish he *wouldn't,*" Fay lamented, ruefully shredding the delicate, cinnamon-powdered inner surface of a danish against her tongue. "But I love him, Audrey, the bum."

"I know you do, Fay. He's a prince, honestly. But what about it—anything strange lately?"

"Naw, just the usual. Bits of CB radio or whatever from interstellar freighters, stuff like that. A couple of wrong numbers on the transdimensional thing. Nothing heavy. I like it quiet. We just make love and do traction."

"Poor Izzy!"

They laughed. Why not? *Izzy* usually laughed. What are you going to do—fix a broken pencil? That was Izzy's back. It hurt all the time, and he wouldn't take a pill.

The tinnitus came with the man in the jogging suit. Izzy winced.

"What's wrong?" Fay was working the string off the corner of the pastries' box. Izzy put out for fresh danish from his own pocket, though the boss had a bin of shrink-wrapped Sara Lees.

"Not a thing, Fay baby. Too much java, maybe. Let me rent this guy a

key." He dealt one of his Lucky Three registration cards and pushed a ball-point pen in the stranger's direction, clicking the point out for him. "Give me your vitals," Izzy told him. His ears wouldn't stop ringing; it felt like someone reaming his brains with piano wire.

Suddenly, Izzy drew back the pen. "Sorry! My mistake. No vacancy."

"Izzy!" Fay started to say—she had never seen him lie—but he shushed her.

The man smiled, parting his lips slightly to reveal a perfect row of rectilinear teeth: matte steel. "Are you aware," he said, "of the Federal Civil Rights Act of 1964? Title II, I believe, is the applicable section."

"I'm aware of everything," Izzy said. "I can't give you a key if I haven't got a room."

Fay was methodically laying out the danish on a tray near the Mr. Coffee. She liked to arrange things when she was nervous. She made three rows of four danish each, with the raspberries at the top and the cheese at the bottom. Then she offered the thirteenth, a cheese, to Izzy.

"Not now, Fay."

The man said, "I will wait to speak to Mr. Sarvaduhka, perhaps."

"He's out yachting."

"I believe I saw the gentleman in the laundry room when I pulled in." The man sat down in a plastic chair by the front window, and Fay put her finger on what was so strange about his looks. He was always backlit. There was always an outline around him, like a pen-and-ink in a children's book. And his features were too regular, as if a draftsman had laid them out.

"Look," Izzy said, "we don't need any lobby lizards here. I could toss you for hanging around, couldn't I? That wouldn't violate any statutes."

"I have requested accommodations," he said. "Q.E.D."

"Where's your luggage?"

"Perhaps you would like payment in advance?"

"Tell me where your luggage is."

Hamisch strolled in and made straight for the raspberry jelly Danish. "Sergeant Ducky is here," she said. "He's nosing around the laundry room. I'm going to drive around till he's gone." Then she felt something pulling on her heart the way an unripe persimmon sucks the juice out of a tongue. She stopped and turned around. "What's going on?"

"You know where my luggage is," the man was telling Izzy. Hamisch had the feeling that if she interrupted their gaze, something would sizzle, ring, or slide open.

"So!" said Izzy. "We're laying down our tricks, are we?"

"You rent me a room, you! It's the *law*—not *my* law, *your* law! This is a public house."

"We can't take you in," Izzy said dryly. "There are municipal ordinances against animals."

The man stood up abruptly. His nostrils flared. His eyes were so wide they beat the flesh of his forehead back under his watch cap. His jaw made a wheezing sound when it opened and closed, like an automatic car window. He bit off the words: "I am not an animal."

"Reminds me of Nixon," Izzy said. He tossed the man a key at just the right angle to make it awkward to catch.

The man caught it, however, and then smiled. "I will sign in."

"Don't make me laugh."

"I will sign in." He held out his perfect, large hand, and Izzy had to put a pen in it. The man filled out the card—Manichee Smith—and laid two crisp twenties and a five on the desk beside it. "I know where the room is," he said.

He made two right angle turns and left the office.

"Don't scare the girl in the shower!" Izzy shouted after him.

Hamisch's eyes were wide as a lemur's. "What the hell was *that?*"

"Damn!" Izzy said. In her anxiety, Fay had eaten most of his cheese danish.

"There's plenty more, Izzy," she said.

"Tell me who's checked in," Sarvaduhka said.

Izzy scrunched up his shoulders to ease the back pain a little, and then he gave him the lowdown: "Fornicators in 15. Nice young couple. Very shy. Kind of scared, but not their first time. I suggested condoms and told them how to use the Magic Fingers. Listen, I ordered a dozen *Kama Sutras* to stick in strategic rooms. Your in-house videos eat the big one, frankly—literally, in fact; this is educational stuff, very highbrow, very explicit, and from the Sanskrit—I thought you'd like that. It's a business deduction on your Schedule C.

"I put a bunch of bicycle boys in the rooms on the west side by the highway, six of them in the three rooms with doors between them. They're on their way to a triathlon in Cleveland. I hope they won't bother the vegetable seed salesman in Number 4. That's not his wife, by the way. You should have heard the phone call that brought her here.

"Look out for the fellow in Number Five. Very sad. Very, very sad. I think I'm gonna give him some wake-up calls by mistake, if you know what I mean. Do you ever do that? No eye contact. Very sad. I worry about these folks. There was one the other night, a lady in her thirties. I made Fay go up and talk girltalk to her. Pregnant. Boyfriend's gone fishing. The usual.

"Hey! Isn't that your third danish?"

"They are stale anyway," Sarvaduhka said. He didn't care what Izzy did as long as the receipts added up. "Who's in Number 6?"

"Nobody."

"Someone left a typewriter in there. What's that about?"

"Don't know." Hamisch was getting careless.

"What about Number 11?"

"Don't ask."

"Did he pay in advance?"

"Cash on the barrel head."

"So what's the problem?" Sarvaduhka cleaned some big bills out of the cash register and bade Izzy good night. "I want you to push the videos," he said before leaving. "They are good videos. They are not bad videos. I use them myself. Good night. Also, give me a copy of this sutra book when they come in."

Just after Sarvaduhka left, Izzy went out to set up the NO VACANCY sign. He took a cup of Swiss Miss along and sipped it as he walked. He'd had it for the night. His back was killing him, and the jogger in Room 11 needed some thinking about.

Izzy had just slapped the big "NO" on the driveway signboard when the male fornicator from Number 15, an athletically built towhead in his late teens, wearing shirt tails and boxer shorts, danced up to him and stood under the halogen floodlights, smiling.

"Those Magic Fingers are something, aren't they?" Izzy said.

The boy said nothing. He scooped up a long, straight branch and balanced it on the tip of one finger.

"Don't do that," Izzy said. Something about it made him uncomfortable. The boy took Izzy's Swiss Miss before Izzy knew what was happening, and he placed the mug on top of his stick. He balanced it there. Just a little wave of chocolate sloshed over the side. The boy was good.

"Hey, quit it," said Izzy.

The light made the boy's skin look jaundiced, his lips black, surreal against the long, empty highway. "Look, Izzy!" the boy laughed. "Watch the coffee kupf!" That's what he said—coffee *kupf*. He made it wobble on top of the stick. A little chocolate sprayed Izzy in the face.

"I said, don't do that." When the cup dipped, Izzy's neck hurt. His back felt awful.

Then it fell. The lad caught it. Dark liquid dripped from his fingers. "Close call," he said, eyeing old Iz. Then he let it go. It shattered on a curbstone. "Too bad," the boy said. "Don't worry, though. I'll pay for it."

"I wish you could," said Izzy, pinching his shoulders and rolling his knuckles against the small of his back. "I really wish you could." He loped back to the office and leaned against the wall by Mr. Coffee. If he breathed too deeply, it hurt more.

Then the kid came in.

"That was quite a trick," Izzy said.

"What?" The boy blushed. "What trick do you mean?"

"Damn! *It wasn't you!*" Izzy grabbed Sarvaduhka's master key from its nook under the desk and headed toward Number 11, groaning with every

step. Fay poked her head out through the bead curtains behind the check-in desk—she had been watching "Wheel of Fortune." She brushed past the young lover . . .

". . . I just wanted to get some danish for Thelma. . . ."

. . . and poked her head out the office door after Izzy.

"What's the matter?" she called out.

"Later," he said, without looking back.

Fay ducked back in. "I hope you're using those things like Izzy told you," she told the boy as she dialed Hamisch's room.

"Um, yes. Thank you, Ma'am." He chose a raspberry and cut half of the remaining cheese with the side of a plastic spoon.

"I know," said Hamisch from over in 6, "I left the typewriter and Marmaduke saw it, right? Sorry. It won't happen again."

"It's not that, Audrey," Fay told her. "Something's wrong. Izzy just charged out of here with all his tags on. I think it's the jogger. Could you go and see?"

"Fay, I've got to stay and wait for Willy."

"Well, I've got to cover the office. For heaven's sake, Willy will find you."

"That jogger guy scares me, Fay."

"Never mind. I'm going over." Fay hung up.

The closer Izzy got to Number 11, the more his head buzzed. He felt so dizzy that the eleven, when he got there, looked just like a one, and every time he turned his head, the earth and sky turned with it. He was mad enough to ignore it, though.

He didn't need the key. The door was ajar. He pushed it open, and there was Smith, sitting at Number 11's round, oak-veneered table, playing cards with Willy.

"Pop!" Willy said, laying down his cards. "Do you know Mr. Smith? I just met him by the ice machine. We seem to have a lot in common."

Fay came up behind Izzy and carefully laid her hands on Izzy's shoulders. Then Hamisch was there too, a little out of breath. The jogger man just stared at his cards.

"Yeah," said Izzy. "He's quite a guy."

"He even knows something about Audrey's doctoral area, don't you, Mr. Smith?" Willy said.

The jogger man turned his head ninety degrees, absolutely without inclination on any plane whatsoever, and smiled at Izzy, Fay, and Hamisch—at their stomachs actually. Then he turned the ninety degrees back to his hand at gin rummy.

"About Excluded Middle?" Hamisch piped up. "Brouwer's bald spot?"

"*Tertium non datur,*" the jogger man said in Latin, and he laid down all his cards in stacks of three and four.

"*Nondotter,* my Aunt Fanny!" Izzy snarled. "Of course he knows all

about it. This is the guy who stole the 'excluded middle' in the god-damned first place! And now he's after *my ass*."

Audrey's Doctoral Area

Lucky old Sarvaduhka hadn't looked more closely at the word mill in Number 6! There was a half-filled sheet still hugging the platen, with two pieces of carbon paper (one facing the wrong way) and their couple of onion sheets. Beside the machine was a small stack of finished sheets with lots of erasures, cross-outs, arrows, sidebars, and coffee stains. Audrey was working on the *Tertium Exclusis*—and on torrid love letters to Willy to tide her over the hours of cerebral shutdown.

Her period was a few days late, and she was surprised to discover how happy that made her feel. She wrote the letters but didn't mail them, and she didn't tell Willy about her period either. She had bought a pregnancy test kit and hidden it under the bathroom sink in the motel room, in the curve of the trap; she couldn't bring herself to use it quite yet.

How come Izzy didn't know? Izzy with that WD-40 mind of his, a mind like penetrating oil that lubed-in on everything from the blinking Cepheids to Aunt Shirley's grocery list? Izzy was preoccupied. Izzy was in pain. And the guy in 11 was some kind of trouble. So Audrey's womb was still *juris privati,* even in Izzy's motel: good thing!

"I'm either pregnant or I'm not," Hamisch typed. Then she laughed at herself and typed x's over it; she typed o's on top of the x's just to make sure. But actually, it was right on the money—Hamisch was working on the Law of Excluded Middle, a foundational principle of mathematics, or at least some people thought so: something is either true, or it isn't, period—there is no third possibility, no *tertium*. "So if it's false that I'm not pregnant, then I am!" This time she didn't x it out. She opened the window and shouted "I am!" into the empty motel courtyard.

She was going to title her paper—which would clinch her Ph.D. and make her reputation by being published in the Annals of American Mathematics, *or not*—"Brouwer's Bald Spot." Jan Egbertus Brouwer was a Dutch mathematician back in the twenties who proved that, in layman's terms, however you groom it, every whorl of hair has a dead spot at the center—call it the cowlick conundrum. Brouwer called it a Fixed Point Theorem. ("Every map of the continuum onto itself contains at least one point which is its own image," was the way it came to Manichee Smith in his wet dreams.)

"Trouble is," Hamisch reminded Willy one day, "Brouwer had a sort of conversion experience. He decided that the Law of Excluded Middle was not to be trusted, but without it, you've got no Fixed Point Theorem, just a bald spot. Get it?"

"I get it," said Willy. He already had three letters after his name. He

was casually trying to peek past her to the stack of papers by her typewriter; it didn't look like mathematics.

"Oh, the *Exclusis* is all right for a universe of three or four things, or a million, or any finite number! Then you can just check each thing, one way or another, and if it's not *not* this, well then of course it *is!*"

"I get it," he said. She really loved him. He knew she did. That's what she was really talking about. It just came out like that.

"But for *infinite* collections, like numbers or points on a line . . ."

". . . or your red hair!" he said, kissing it.

"Don't mix me up. Excluded Middle might not apply. Maybe there's something besides yes and no, Willy. I feel like there used to be." He was unbuttoning her blouse. "I feel like there used to be *lots* of things besides. Colors, smells, feelings, all kinds of things! Do you know what I'm talking about?"

"No," he said. He took her lower lip between his teeth. "Let's meditate," he whispered. "Let's do some zazen, whaddaya say? Izzy'll never know."

She tried to ignore him . . . "Even wars and hatred and things like that are because of there being no *tertium* for people," she said. "Where did it go?" . . . but she liked what Willy was doing.

"Pop says somebody took it," Willy laughed, and that was the last thing either of them said that night.

All that had been when the moon was waning. Now it was new. Or was it? Tonight Willy was coming over, and she would tell him about the maybe-baby, that she was pregnant, or wasn't.

The phone rang. It was Fay. She was worried about Izzy and the guy in 11.

"Gin," said Smith.

"He lost? Willy *lost?*" Hamisch said.

"I never lose at cards," said Willy, but there were the threes, the queens, and the five hearts, from the four through the eight, all face up on the table in front of Smith. "Well, you caught me with a full diaper."

Willy laid down his cards and added up the points he was stuck with. He counted the pips one by one, touching them with the tip of his forefinger. He did it very slowly, like ice melting. Fay was moving slowly too. The shape of Izzy's shoulder remained in her hands, even after he had stepped away. Hamisch was saying something indecipherable because her voice was so low and scratchy, like rolling thunder or like a record trailing off when a fuse blows. Only Izzy and the jogger man were moving at their normal speed.

"Nice trick with the kid and the stick," Izzy remarked, "but you owe me a Swiss Miss."

"Put it on my tab."

"You're not gonna get me, you know. My funny bone's too strong. You guys are just a laugh factory, as far as I'm concerned."

"How is your back doing, Izzy?"

"You son of a bitch, what's your beef with me, anyway?"

"Some mutual acquaintances of ours got tired of land travel over the Isthmus of Izzy. They decided to blast a canal through."

"And you got the contract."

"Who better?"

"Yeah," Izzy growled, "who better than the guy who murdered the rainbow? Are you ever gonna give that thing back, by the way?"

"The *tertium?* Forget it. It is too interesting to watch you ciphers squabble."

"That's what I figured, you scum." Izzy had to sit down, but it didn't make his back feel any better. "Look," he said, "I can't help it if I'm some kind of cosmic relay station. I never asked for this noggin."

"Stop it," Smith said. "You're making me cry."

"Come on, Manny, can't we come to some kind of accommodation here? I mean, like the Panama Canal Treaty or something?"

"I am not authorized, Izzy."

"Right by the book, huh?"

"You know me."

"Yeah, I know you. Me and every mortician and hangman and IRS accountant. And Brouwer. He knew you."

"You should have seen his face, Izzy. Now, *that* was tasty. He just happened to be looking in the right direction—he was a little like you, actually—when I made off with the thing."

"I see it," said Izzy, reeling. "I see him that morning. He's trying to run after you, but he doesn't even understand what direction you're taking off in—it's not one of the regular three. He's shouting after you, 'Give it back! Give it back!' Something like that. It's Dutch. 'Give back our *woonerf!*' What's a *woonerf?*"

"Ha ha! Yes. That is what he called it, a *woonerf.* In Holland, they have little islands that slow down city traffic—parks, monuments, buildings even. Cars have to go around. *Woonerfs!* They think it makes life more charming. I think it just impedes traffic. Actually, *you* are a *woonerf,* Izzy."

"I'm gonna slow you down, Smith."

"No, you are not. Look at Brouwer. All he could do was write little monographs to his colleagues, trying to tell them their *Tertium Exclusis* was a lie. And he was a lot smarter than you, Izzy."

"What are you going to do?"

"The law of the place in which the guest is received by an innkeeper determines the nature of the obligation created by such a reception—Holland vs. Pack, Tennessee, 1823. There are analogous rulings all over the observable universe, Izzy."

"You have to follow local rules?"

"Yes, local—Milky Way, Solar System, Earth, et cetera, country, state, and municipality. That's how I am."

"Black and white. I know it."

"I'll have to think about what exactly to do. You'll have time to write a will."

Izzy stood. He walked backward, carefully, to replace his shoulders precisely in the curve of Fay's hands. "Your checkout time is ten A.M.," he said.

". . . fifty-nine, sixty-eight—it's sixty-eight points," said Willy, "plus the thirty for going out without discarding. You fleeced me, Mister."

"This is your wake-up call, Mr. Lemming," Izzy sang sweetly into the phone. "It's eight-thirty."

"Eight-thirty? Eight-thirty?" was the heavy response. "It's eight-thirty *at night.*"

"Oh," said Izzy. He waved Fay away. She was trying to make him take some aspirin with codeine. She even had a glass of water ready for him. "Oh, wasn't it *supposed* to be eight-thirty at night? I thought it was supposed to be eight-thirty at night. You must have meant eight-thirty *in the morning.*"

"Of course I did . . . wait a minute! I didn't ask for any wake-up call."

"Didn't you? Oh dear! I must have gotten you mixed up with Number 5."

"This *is* Number 5!"

"Oh. Please forgive me. I'm terribly sorry. I don't know *how* I made such a mistake."

"Well, see that it doesn't happen again!" Number Five slammed down the phone, starting Izzy's tinnitus again.

"That should do him for awhile," Izzy said. "Got a little rise out of him. The main cause of suicidal depression, my dear, is low levels of adrenaline."

"Izzat so?" said Fay. She took the pill herself.

"Hey, what gives?"

"I don't feel so good."

"It's that joker in 11," Izzy said. "We're gonna fix his wagon. Pull me his folio out of the bucket."

Fay found Smith's card in the big rolodex and pitched it to Iz. She slumped down in a Naugahyde chair by the map of tourist attractions on the easel by the door. She closed her eyes and thought about marsh gas.

Willy sauntered in and announced that he and Audrey were finished. He looked back and forth from Fay to Izzy, waiting for a response.

"Oh, shut up," Izzy said at last. "Things are bad all over. Why don't you come over here and make yourself useful?"

Izzy showed him the card he was studying. "Manichee Smith," it said.

What a riot! "Who was Manichee?" Izzy asked him. "Tell me, Mr. Ph. of D., was he somebody?"

"Look, Pop," Willy pleaded, "I feel awful. Audrey is being the most incredible bitch."

"It's not Audrey. It's the guy in 11, I'm telling you. He has this effect on people. Now answer my question."

"He was a Persian. Third century. Manichee, Mani—it's the same guy. A dualist."

"Interesting! What did he say?"

"This is not my field."

"What did he say, Willy?"

"There's Good. There's Evil. There's nothing between. Two worlds fighting it out. The Christians named a heresy after him: Manichean."

"What happened to him?"

"The Magi killed him. Zoroastrian priests. Same kind of guys who visited Baby Jesus. They put him in jail and killed him."

"So we had a breather of—eighteen twenties minus two hundred something—one thousand five hundred years, say, till Brouwer."

"What are you talking about, Pop?"

"I'm talking about the guy in Number 11."

"Oh Lord! More weirdness! This is all I need."

"You don't believe me?"

"Just leave me alone, okay?"

"The hell I will," Izzy said. "I need you, Willy." Izzy tightened up all over, making his muscles into a suit of armor to protect his ailing spine. It would cost him in the morning, but he had to be mobile to save his life. He folded up Smith's folio and stuffed it in his shirt pocket. Then he took Willy's arm and led him outside. As he tugged Willy after him out the door, he said to Fay, "You're a worthless hag who never made a decent cup of coffee in her life, and if you don't get off your duff and wash my drawers, I'll dump you."

Willy was aghast. Izzy just pulled him along by the elbow, down past the laundry room toward the row of doors. Willy kept looking back to see if the office would explode. He saw Fay get up and pound the window. He heard her shouting something.

"Forget about Fay," Izzy said. "She'll be okay. I had to do that—Izzotherapy. Between you and me, Fay is the absolute best woman on Planet Earth. She compares to my mother like the sun compares to a lit fart, and my mother is a saint in heaven.

"Now let's get down to business. I don't suppose you've noticed how the place has been filling up in the last hour or so, since your game of rummy with Manichee?"

"Izzy, there are no more than half a dozen people here, counting Hamisch. The darn parking lot is empty."

"That's not the way I see it, Willy."

"Okay, Pop, so how do *you* see it?"

"You want me to show you? Good. Hop on."

"What?" said Willy.

"Look, wild oat, Peter Pan I'm not. I got no faerie dust. Just hop on, Willy."

"I don't think I know what you're talking about, Pop."

"That's perfect. Don't think about it. Just *do* it."

"Hop on?"

"Hop on!"

He did it. He didn't know *what* he did—body English without the body?—but Willy *did* it, dilating his mind like an eye in the dark, and there he was, on his father's wing. Just like the time he *almost* heard the sound of one hand clapping. Everything looked the way ether smells, full of eddying movement, as if spirits were evaporating from the skins of things, filling the air, singing and jabbering, dancing through matter, oblivious to the conventional borders of people and things. "Holy shit, Pop!" Willy said.

"Shit Pop! I like that," Izzy said. "Definite marketing potential."

"Be serious. You *live* with this?"

"Yeah," said Izzy, "live or die, with this and my aching back. Now let's check the guest list, shall we?"

Izzy guided his son from door to door. Skipping the cyclists, the suicide, the salesman, Smith, of course, and Hamisch, he pushed each door open and turned on the lights. Willy was stupefied.

In one room, he saw the Nile River; it was a woman in her middle thirties with a face that made you feel that you were asleep and dreaming. At the same time, the room was empty. They were *all* empty. The room with the elephants was empty. They were trumpeting and stampeding, so that Willy slammed the door shut before Izzy could show him what he wanted him to see. Then there was the room with the square root of two. It was an actual number, a fraction, complete, logic despite, and it howled like a banshee, scurrying into the mop board when they turned on the light. All that remained was a trail of dots, an infinite, converging sequence.

Fear was in Number 7. Room 14 was red, deep red, red so searing to the eye that Willy thought for a moment he was bleeding to death. "That's a heart attack," Izzy said. "All of the heart attacks. Even animals'. That's what it is. Let's get out of here."

The ceiling of 17 was a fiery sky. Leprous devils with skins like plains full of volcanoes were fettered to the clouds. Twelve Maidens of Light appeared, rainbow-like above a distant hillside, and far above them all, devils and Maidens, a crowd of heavenly beings ejaculated. Their seed fell to earth like a rain of Light, and a Sea Monster sprang up out of the Ocean, where the clock-radio used to be.

Willy was terrified. He started chanting:

"Roopung shunyatah shunyatah ayva roopum
roopaht na pirtuk shoonyatah . . ."

"What is that?" Izzy asked him. "What are you saying? It's making my ears stop ringing." But Willy couldn't hear him for the Sea Monster's roar.

They moved away from the rooms and sat down on a rock near the big neon "LUCKY THREE." Willy was shaking. Izzy put his arm around him. They could hear the young couple at it again in nearby 15. Izzy liked that sound.

"They're from all over," Izzy said. "Some are here just to watch, to make sure Smith does the job right. Others are here to help out."

"What job, Pop?"

"There's a contract out on me, Willy. Mr. Smith is trying to kill me. Thing is, he has to follow the rules. That's where we can trip him up." Izzy groaned then and grabbed his back. Willy started to massage him. "That's it. A little lower. Ahh!"

Hamisch was coming toward them. "Look. I'm sorry, Willy," she said. "I think I might be pregnant."

"Or not," said Izzy.

"Or not," she said.

Willy tilted his head to call her over. She sat down beside him, and together they worked on Izzy's sacroiliac. They kept on digging and rubbing while Willy laid his head on Audrey's shoulder and softly wept.

Izzy said, "Thank you. Thank you," but it wasn't helping at all.

Their fingers got tired. Izzy was staring at Smith's crumpled folio, with all the big blank lines: no car model or license number, no employer, no home address, just "Manichee Smith," and "Rooms: 1. Nights: 1. Number in Party: 1."

"Okay," Izzy said. "Okay. We gotta move. I'm going back to the office to look up a couple of things. I want you two to help me, all right?"

"Sure, Izzy, anything," Hamisch said for them both.

"Go back to 6. Watch the clock. Willy, at midnight exactly, I want you both to say that thing you were saying over in 17."

"The Prajnaparamita Hrydaya Sutra?" Willy said.

"Gezundheit!" said Izzy.

Hamisch asked, "Were you chanting that, Willy?" Willy nodded. "It's a very old Buddhist text," she told Izzy. "We chant it at the zen center. 'Form is emptiness. Emptiness is form . . .'"

Izzy cut her off: "Whatever. It makes my tinnitus stop. It must do something to Manny too, something awful, I hope."

"Two person, zero sum," said Hamisch. She couldn't help herself.

"What?" said Izzy.

"Everything that helps you hurts him, and vice versa."

"Hamisch, you're a doll," Izzy said. "Did I tell you that Willy has a girlfriend in 3?"

"What?!" Hamisch shouted.

Willy said, "Pop!"

"Take it easy. Just a little Izzotherapy there; gets the juices flowing. Now you go back and watch the clock. I gotta check out *Il duce*'s library." Izzy limped back to the office, past all the "empty" rooms.

As soon as he opened the door, Fay was all over him. "They're having an orgy in the connecting rooms on the west side," she said. "Where were you? They're riding their bicycles around inside. The seed packet guy is complaining, if you can believe it."

"What about 5?"

"I don't know about 5."

"Better go see, Fay. Wait a minute—Fay, I love you. You know that, don't you? I loved you since the minute I laid eyes on you. Do you still wanna shave my eyebrows apart? Go ahead. It's okay with me. Anything you want, baby. I really love you. Honest. I'll go get the razor."

"Iz, honey, what's wrong?" She put her arms around him.

He looked down. He was choking back tears, but he managed to say, "You better go check on 5, Fay. Bring him a cup of coffee. Tell him you thought he called for it. You know. Whatever."

"Sure, Izzy." She poured some stale coffee into a Styrofoam cup, snapped a lid on, and left the office with it. Just outside, she knocked on the window, and when Izzy looked up, she gave the pane a sloppy kiss that squeaked and left a big wet mark. Izzy smiled, and she walked away.

Izzy made himself a Swiss Miss and sat down in back at Sarvaduhka's rolltop desk. It smelled heavily of sandalwood incense. There was a little portable tape player, an old Sears Panasonic, in one corner of the desk under a row of little nooks with pennies, fasteners, and postage stamps stuffed in them. Izzy pushed the play button and heard a delicious, wavering soprano. She was singing something in Hindi, a love song. Sarvaduhka's desktop buzzed with the growl of the harmonium.

Izzy found the book he was looking for between two thin volumes with fancy nagari script and green monkeys on the covers. It was Joseph Henry Beale's *Law of Innkeepers and Hotels,* the 1906 edition. Stuffed between the pages were dozens of scraps, yellowed and dog-eared; Sarvaduhka tried to stay current on ways of maximizing income just inside the law. They were clippings from trade journals and newspapers, having to do with vice laws, civil suits against hotel owners, pending legislation, and so on.

Izzy sipped his chocolate and read. When the pain in his back got to be

too much, he stood up, or if he was standing, he sat down. Up or down, he kept reading till it was nearly midnight.

The salesman in 4 called. He wanted to know how to get the in-house video to work and if anyone had spoken to the rowdies on the west side. Izzy was conciliatory. He hung up and looked over Sarvaduhka's videotapes. Passing up the X's, he chose "Lyme Disease in Your Own Backyard: Identification and Precautions," dropped it into the machine and started the system. Then he bade the lovely soprano good night—she was still crooning as he stepped out the door—and he walked over to Number 11, balancing his skull as well as he could on top of his damaged spine. In his hand Izzy clutched Smith's crumpled folio.

"I do not want you to come in," Smith said, when Izzy reached the door.

"You got me there, pal," Izzy admitted. "*Newton Hotel vee Corbett*, Georgia Appellate Court, 1921. 'It is an unjustified intrusion upon the guest and a trespass against his rights incident to his occupancy and so on and so forth.' "

"You might look up *McKee vee Sheraton-Russell, Incorporated* as well, Mr. Molson," Smith said through the closed door. Izzy's head was pounding, and the tinnitus was like a high power line through his cranium.

"Come on, Manny," Izzy said, "can't we find some middle ground here? Maybe I can beat your bosses' offer. Let me in. Hey, come on! We can play rummy. I bet I could beat your pants off. You can kill me *later*. Willy's strictly small time; you know that, don't you? *I* taught him everything. *I'm* the man to beat at the Lucky Three, boy."

The door opened. Manichee Smith was wearing patterned silk pajamas. He was holding a deck of cards in one hand. The room behind him looked completely untouched except for the chairs pulled slightly away from the table where he and Willy had been sitting hours before. "I taught *Pythagoras* everything," he said.

Izzy stepped in. As he passed Manichee, he felt the skin pull away from his ribs, like hair standing up to follow a charged balloon.

"You hear it, don't you, Izzy?" Manichee said.

"Hear what?"

"The music of the spheres. You hear it, Izzy, just as Pythagoras did. That is why you can get past my door."

"So Pythagoras had tinnitus too! Listen, why don't we skip the small talk? You're out of here. I've got the goods on you, brother. Look at this." Izzy showed him the registration card.

"Come over here where the light is better," Manichee said. He laid his hand lightly on Izzy's back to escort him to a bedside lamp. The touch hurt Izzy, but he didn't let on.

"Your name isn't Smith," Izzy said. "You're in violation of the true-name registration statute, buddy."

"If I were to write my true name, Izzy, this entire continent and all the

sky above it and all the fluids below would burst into flame and be utterly consumed."

"Well, in that case," said Izzy, "you'd be guilty of a *number* of statute infractions, wouldn't you?"

"The penalty for the infraction you mention cannot be more than twenty-five dollars . . ."

"If you don't make tracks, I'm gonna call the boys in blue."

". . . and, in any case, there is no such statute in this jurisdiction, or in any jurisdiction, to my knowledge—which is complete—outside of Indiana, Massachusetts, and New Jersey. Is there something the matter with your head?"

Unconsciously, Izzy had begun to rub his temple with the heel of his hand. He stopped. "Everything is aces," he said. He glanced at his watch: five after midnight. What was Willy doing?

"It is approximately ten hours until checkout time, Izzy," Manichee said. He smiled, and Izzy fell to his knees.

Just then the ringing in Izzy's ears stopped. His back even felt a little better. Manichee looked alarmed. He squinted and looked around. "What treachery is this?" he said. Leaving Izzy on the floor by the bed, Manichee stomped about the room, as if he were looking for a mosquito. "It almost sounds like the old tongue," he muttered.

"It's Sanskrit," Izzy said brightly. "Is that like Persian?"

"You fools!" Manichee said to Willy and Hamisch, but not with his audible voice, "do you know who I am? I am Maitreya, the Buddha to Come. I am He! Mani and Maitreya are the same. I command your silence!"

In Room 6, Willy's recitation started to flag. Hamisch gripped his arm. "Keep going," she said. "If the Buddha stops you, kill the Buddha! Izzy needs us." Willy continued to chant.

> ". . . *pungcha skandhan tan cha svabhava shoonyatan* . . . none are born or die, nor are they stained or pure, nor do they wax or wane . . . no ignorance, no end of ignorance, no withering, no death, no end of death . . . there is no pain, or cause of pain, or cease in pain . . . *guttay guttay pahraguttay pahrasunguttay Bodhi svahah. . . !"*

"Say, what about the phone bill?" Izzy said, pulling himself to his feet again.

"What phone bill?" fumed Manichee.

"The *phone* bill. You must have called all your friends here somehow—you know, the gals and guys made of Tempest and Devouring Fire up and down the hallway. I'm not talking about the bicycle kids. By the way, those are no-smoking rooms, Manny. I hope you know that."

"There is no one in those rooms. By local standards of perception, there is no one there. No one!"

"Yeah, well, you must have *called* them, though. And the FCC says that the motel takes a cut of the action. I can evict you for nonpayment *de diem in diem,* for each charge as it accrues, bub. *Morningstar vee Lafayette Hotel, New York,* 1914."

"Make them stop that. What they are chanting is a lie. It is a lie. A thing either is or it is not. It cannot be both. It cannot be neither. Stop it! I can't think with all that noise."

"Nobody but us hears a thing, Manny. The way I figure it, with those calls of yours to the Andromeda Galaxy and intergalactic calls to your boys in the Magellanic Clouds or whatever, not to mention the interdimensional stuff, which can add up, you owe the Lucky Three about fifty-six hundred billion dollars, give or take."

"I will call Ashaqlon and Namrael to devour the aborted foetuses of the female devil's union in Hell! Heaven and Earth will collapse in a Great Conflagration lasting one thousand four hundred and sixty-eight years! According to the Federal Communications Commission, the motel may *not* charge a fee for non-intrastate calls."

"Who's talking non-intrastate, by which I assume you mean *interstate,* you scrawny Wisenheimer? The FCC allows fees of up to one hundred percent on calls *out of the country*, and if the Crab Nebula ain't out of the country, Jack, then the Pope has a flophouse in Dubuque serviced by Albigensian nuns and the Lubavitcher Rebbe eats Canadian bacon on Yom Kippur!"

"I'll *pay,*" Manichee screamed. "Make them abjure! Make them say it is or it is not!" Izzy couldn't see where he grabbed the checkbook from, or the pen, but suddenly Manichee had them; he scribbled out his check and pressed it into Izzy's hand. On it was a five and a six followed by eleven zeros, but Izzy couldn't make out the bank it was drawn on—its name was written in six dimensions in florid Manichaean script, with vowel signs that could only be seen in one's sleep.

"Now you will die," Manichee said. "I will not do it, not in any legally prosecutable sense in this benighted world of yours."

"Not so fast, Mr. Manicure. There's still the little matter of your address."

"Of my what?"

"Your *address.* Look here. You haven't filled it in." Izzy showed him the little card.

One might have called it a sniffle. Something was dripping from Manichee's nostrils. But it wasn't the usual effluence. It was a torrent of vaporous liquid, a roiled ocean teeming with tortured, drowning souls; yet at the same time, impossibly, it never passed the cleft in Manichee's perfect chin.

Izzy offered him his handkerchief.

"I came to Brouwer's Holland from Samarkand," the man in pajamas

said. "The Muslim holy men chased me out of Babylon, where the Father of Greatness abandoned me after Zoroastrian High Priests tricked me into their prison, keeping me there for twenty-six days until my body died, and with it the Eagle, the Demon, the Lion, the Fish, and the Dragon, two-legged, four-legged, swimming and crawling in perpetual lust and strife—no more!"

> . . . *ayvong sarvadharmah shoonyatah lakshanah anutpatrah anirudhah amalah vimalah asongpurnah* . . . everything therefore is nothing, without beginning, without end, without perfection, without fault . . .

"I'm a simple man," Izzy said. "Just give me your home address."

"It would mean nothing to you. It would not even seem to you a separate place from this one. It *interpenetrates* all these seemings. This too is my home and my place of power, right here where we stand." He turned his gaze on Izzy, and the force of it pushed Izzy back against the door. Izzy felt his vertebrae crumbling to fine dust. The room was spinning.

Something hard was pushing against him from behind. Just then the door opened, shoving Izzy aside, and Sarvaduhka came in, carrying the big "NO" sign under his arm. "Izzy, what is this?" he said. He was angry. "No vacancy? You put up the no vacancy sign, and most of the rooms are *empty?* There is *plenty* of vacancy! There is *everywhere* vacancy. There is vacancy in your head, Izzy!"

Manichee was beside himself.

"Tell him, boss," Izzy said. "Tell him about *Golstadt vee Sleepytime Inn,* 1957."

"What is going on here, Izzy?" Sarvaduhka asked. "There are people bicycling in the west side rooms. There are close-ups of ticks—of *ticks,* Izzy!—on the video. Where are the *tits,* Izzy? Where is the *ass?* Nobody is interested in things that live in the grass! And why is there a light on in Number 6? And what is Fay doing with a harmonica and a washboard in Number 5?"

"Come on, boss, tell him about the *Sleepytime* decision."

Sarvaduhka paused. He looked around the room. He couldn't see the severed roots of the five trees of Hell between Mr. Manichee's bared teeth. He couldn't smell the sulfurous fumes or hear the anguished screaming of the Sea Monsters being defeated by the Adamas of Light in the smoke alarm by the bathroom door. Everything looked Okay.

"The 1957?" Sarvaduhka said. "You want to know the 1957? What's the matter, isn't this gentleman coming from somewhere else?"

"No," said Izzy. "That's my point. No luggage. Nothing. He just said he lives *here.*"

"Yes, well, then, according to the court, as I recall, since the gentleman

is not a *bona fide* traveler, the relationship of innkeeper and guest, with its implied obligations and restrictions, is not, strictly speaking, established. Now what about the ticks, Izzy? What about the bicycles? What about the *harmonica?"*

"No!" gasped Manichee.

"You heard it," Izzy said. "I can boot you! Get *out.*"

"No!" said Manichee.

"Izzy," Sarvaduhka put in, "are you being uncivil to a paying guest?"

Izzy ignored him. "You're gone, Manichee. You're not here. Form is emptiness. Emptiness is form. I like the ring of that."

Manichee was fading, like a flock of pigeons turning on the wing, blinking out in thin profile against a blazing sky. Manichee was evaporating before their eyes.

"I'll be back, Izzy," he said. "I've left tokens in the caves of Turfan and the ruins in Tabessa and Fayyum, in Manichaean, Chinese, and Coptic. You will be as nothing . . . *nothing* . . ."

He was gone. The deck of cards he had been holding to the very end fell and scattered on the floor.

Sarvaduhka stood motionless for a long time, staring at the place where the pajama man had been. Then he closed his mouth.

"Don't worry, boss," Izzy said. "You're gonna be a very rich man. . . ." He handed Sarvaduhka the check. ". . . if you can find someone to cash this."

Izzy walked out of 11 and made his way to Number 5, where Fay and the suicide were playing "Has Anybody Seen My Gal?" jugband style. "Do you have to go?" the man asked Fay when Izzy rapped on the door.

"Keep the washboard," she said. "The mouth organ too. I can't really play it." She tossed it to him and left with Izzy.

"Iz," Fay said, as they walked next door to 6, arm in arm, "I've never seen you so tall."

They walked in on Willy and Hamisch without knocking. "It's over," Izzy told them.

Hamisch said, "I'm going to have a baby."

"I would have told you that before," said Izzy, "but I had a lot on my mind."

The UPS man left the package of books outside the office while Izzy slept. Izzy didn't get up till noon. At eight-thirty, the salesman pushed his key through the mail slot and drove away to his next drygoodser, leaving the lady in Number 4 to enjoy HBO till checkout. The bicycle athletes left a mess, including a message in shaving cream on one of the bathroom mirrors: "WHAT THE HELL IS SHOONYATAH?"

The suicide from 5 was in the office, putting a filter full of Maxwell House in the Mr. Coffee. The gurgling noise woke Izzy up. "Fay . . ." he said.

"I'm asleep!" she said.

Izzy got up and stretched. The pain was like heat lightning—subtle, remote; his back would hurt again, but not for a while. He strolled through the bead curtains and gave the coffee drinker a nod.

"No danish today!" the man observed.

"Forgive me," said Izzy. "I slept late."

"That's okay," the man said. "I'm just leaving. Thank that woman for the harmonica."

"Sure thing," said Izzy. Izzy followed him out the door and picked up the parcel of *Kama Sutras*. He took it inside and unwrapped it. He laid one copy neatly on Sarvaduhka's rolltop, in front of the green monkeys. He put another one next to the folio well; he removed the card for the fornicators in 15 and stuck it in the book to remind himself to give it to them when they came to check out; they would certainly sleep late.

Hamisch breezed in with Willy in tow. "You're alive," she said. "Have you still got this job?"

"I don't know," Izzy said. "Sergeant Ducky's probably still out trying to cash that check. But I think he likes me, Audrey."

"What's not to like?" Willy said.

"Say, by the way, I'm glad you came in here. I've got something for you," Izzy said.

He fished through the folio well for a minute, and then he handed Hamisch a little white card. Hamisch's full name and license plate number were at the top, and there was a dollar amount at the bottom.

"This is for your phone calls and that," Izzy said.

"What phone calls?" she said. Then she looked at the card. "Forty-five bucks?" she howled. "Izzy, what gives? I thought we had an understanding."

"Well now, Hamisch, we did at that. And no navel-gazing was a part of it too. You think I don't know why you were five minutes late on the chanting last night?"

"Izzy," she said, offended, "we were sitting in meditation *for you,* doing zazen *for you.*"

"Yeah, well, a deal is a deal, Audrey. We agreed: No Big Z. I just docked you for the time you were on that black cushion. One room, one night: forty-five smackers."

"*Sitzfleisch* don't run cheap," Fay put in, sleepwalking through the bead curtains.

Willy just reached for his checkbook. ●

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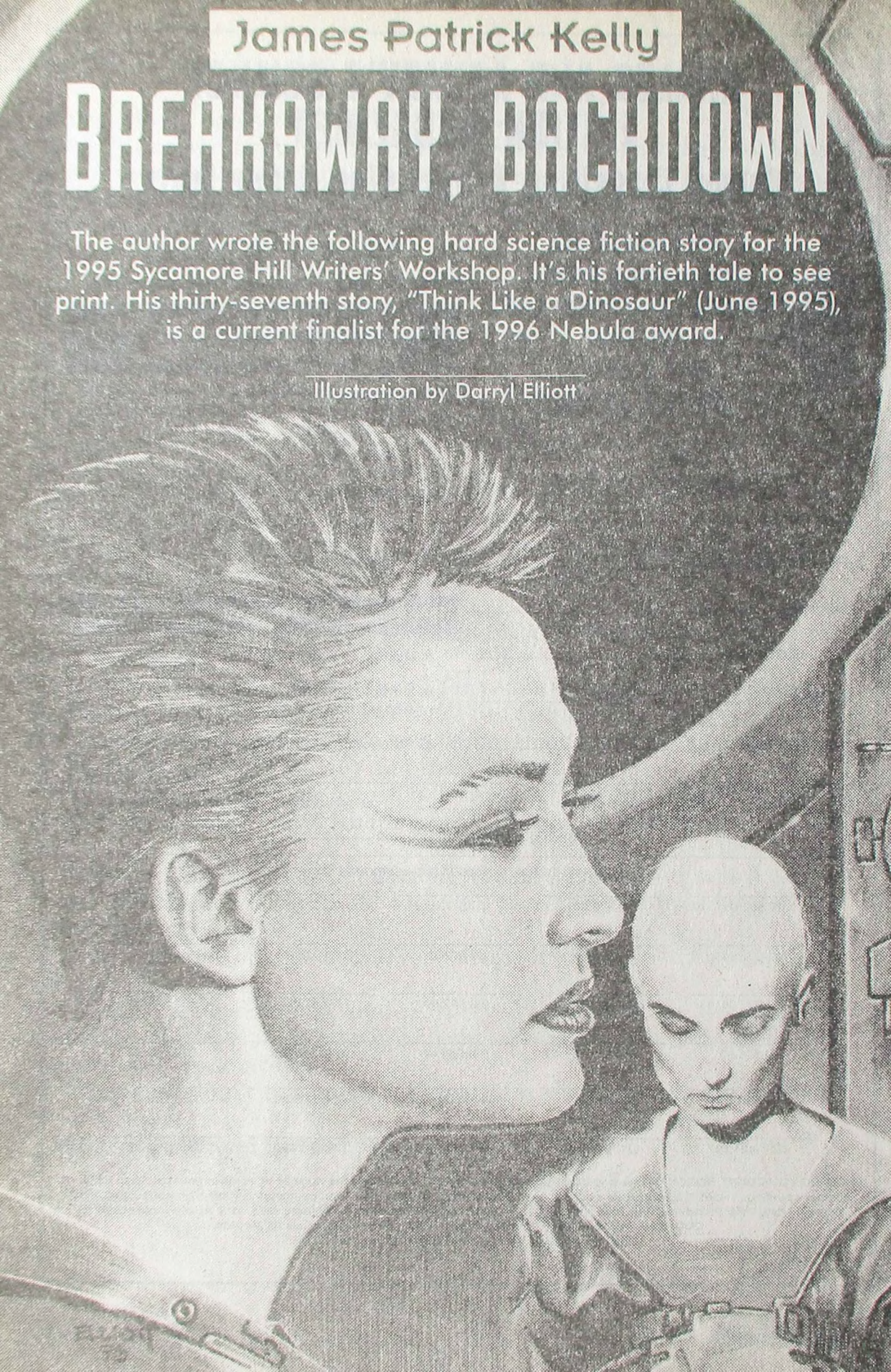
PLEASE MAKE CHECKS PAYABLE TO DELL MAGAZINES

James Patrick Kelly

BREAKAWAY, BACKDOWN

The author wrote the following hard science fiction story for the 1995 Sycamore Hill Writers' Workshop. It's his fortieth tale to see print. His thirty-seventh story, "Think Like a Dinosaur" (June 1995), is a current finalist for the 1996 Nebula award.

Illustration by Darryl Elliott



You know, in space nobody wears shoes.

Well, new temps wear slippers. They make the soles out of that adhesive polymer, griprite or griptite. Sounds like paper ripping when you lift your feet. Temps who've been up a while wear this glove thing that snugs around the toes. The breakaways, they go barefoot. You can't really walk much in space, so they've reinvented their feet so they can pick up screwdrivers and spoons and stuff. It's hard because you lose fine motor control in micro gee. I had . . . have this friend, Elena, who could make a krill and tomato sandwich with her feet, but she had that operation that changes your big toe into a thumb. I used to kid her that maybe breakaways were climbing down the evolutionary ladder, not jumping off it. Are we people or chimps? She'd scratch her armpits and hoot.

Sure, breakaways have a sense of humor. They're people after all; it's just that they're like no people you know. The thing was, Elena was so limber that she could bite her toenails. So can you fix my shoe?

How long is that going to take? Why not just glue the heel back on?

I know they're Donya Durands, but I've got a party in half an hour, okay?

What, you think I'm going to walk around town barefoot? I'll wait—except what's with all these lights? It's two in the morning and you've got this place bright as noon in Khartoum. How about a little respect for the night?

Thanks. What did you say your name was? I'm Cleo.

You are, are you? Jane honey, lots of people *think* about going to space but you'd be surprised at how few actually apply—much less break away. So how old are you?

Oh, no, they like them young, just as long as you're over nineteen. No kids in space. So the stats don't scare you?

Not shoe repair, that's for sure. But if you can convince them you're serious, they'll find something for you to do. They trained me and I was nobody, a business major. I temped for almost fifteen months on *Victor Foxtrot* and I never could decide whether I loved or hated it. Still can't, so how could I even think about becoming a breakaway? Everything is loose up there, okay? It makes you come unstuck. The first thing that happens is you get spacesick. For a week your insides are so scrambled that you're trying to digest lunch with your cerebellum and write memos with your large intestine. Meanwhile your face puffs up so that you can't find your-

self in the mirror anymore and your sinuses fill with cotton candy and you're fighting a daily hair mutiny. I might've backed down right off if it hadn't been for Elena—you know, the one with the clever toes? Then when you're totally miserable and empty and disoriented, your brain sorts things out again and you realize it's all magic. Some astrofairy has enchanted you. Your body is as light as a whisper, free as air. I'll tell you the most amazing thing about weightlessness. It doesn't go away. You keep falling: down, up, sideways, whatever. You might bump into something once in a while but you never, ever slam into the ground. Extremely sexy, but it does take some getting used to. I kept having dreams about gravity. Down here you have a whole planet hugging you. But in space, it's not only you that's enchanted, it's all your stuff too. For instance, if *you* put that brush down, it stays. It doesn't decide to drift across the room and out the window and go visit Elena over on B deck. I had this pin that had been my mother's—a silver dove with a diamond eye—and somehow it escaped from a locked jewelry box. Turned up two months later in a dish of butterscotch pudding, almost broke Jack Pitzer's tooth. You get a lot of pudding in space. Oatmeal. Stews. Sticky food is easier to eat and you can't taste much of anything but salt and sweet anyway.

Why, do you think I'm babbling? God, I *am* babbling. It must be the Zentadone. The woman at the persona store said it was just supposed to be an icebreaker with a flirty edge to it, like Panital only more sincere. You wouldn't have any reset, would you?

Hey, spare me the lecture, honey. I know they don't allow personas in space. Anyway, imprinting is just a bunch of pro-brain propaganda. Personas are temporary—*period*. When you stop taking the pills, the personas go away and you're your plain old vanilla self again; there's bushels of studies that say so. I'm just taking a little vacation from Cleo. Maybe I'll go away for a weekend, or a week or a month but eventually I'll come home. Always have, always will.

I don't care *what* your Jesus puppet says; you can't trust godware, okay? Look, I'm not going to convince you and you're not going to convince me. Truce?

The shoes? Four, five years. Let's see, I bought them in '36. Five years. I had to store them while I was up.

You get used to walking in spike heels, actually. I mean, I'm not going to run a marathon or climb the Matterhorn. Elena has all these theories of why men think spikes are sexy. Okay, they're kind of a short term body mod. They stress the leg muscles, which makes you look tense, which

leads most men to assume you could use a serious screwing. And they push your fanny out like you're making the world an offer. But most important is that, when you're teetering around in heels, it tells a man that if he chases you, you're not going to get very far. Not only do spike heels say you're vulnerable, they say you've *chosen* to be vulnerable. Of course, it's not quite the same in micro gee. She was my mentor, Elena. Assigned to teach me how to live in space.

I was an ag tech. Worked as a germ wrangler in the edens.

Microorganisms. Okay, you probably think that if you stick a seed in some dirt, add some water and sunlight and wait a couple of months, mother nature hands you a head of lettuce. Doesn't work that way, especially not in space. The edens are synergistic, symbiotic ecologies. Your carbo crops, your protein crops, your vitamin crops—they're all fussy about the neighborhood germs. If you don't keep your *clostridia* and *rhizobium* in balance, your eden will rot to compost. Stinky, slimy compost. It's important work—and duller than accounting. It wouldn't have been so bad if we could've talked on the job, but CO_2 in the edens runs 6 percent, which is great for plants but will kill you if you're not wearing a breather. Elena painted an enormous smile on mine, with about eight hundred teeth in it. She had lips on hers, puckered so that they looked like she was ready to be kissed. Alpha Ralpha the chicken man had this plastic beak. Only sometimes we switched—confused the hell out of the nature lovers. I'll tell you, the job would've been a lot easier if we could've kept the rest of the crew out, but the edens are designed for recreation as much as food production. On *Victor Foxtrot* we had to have sign-ups between 8:00 and 16:00. See, the edens have lots of open space and we keep them 8 degrees over crew deck nominal and they're lit twenty hours a day by grolights and solar mirrors and they have big windows. Crew floats around sucking up the view, soaking up photons, communing with the life force, shredding foliage and in general getting in our way. Breakaways are the worst; they actually adopt plants like they were pets. Is that crazy or what? I mean, a tomato has a life span of three, maybe four months before it gets too leggy and stops bearing. I've seen grown men cry because Elena pulled up their favorite marigold.

No, all my plants now are silk. When I backed down, I realized that I didn't want anything to do with the day. My family was a bunch of poor nobodies; we moved to the night when I was seven. So nightshifting was like coming home. The fact is, I got too much sun while I was up. The sun is not my friend. Haven't seen real daylight in over a year; I make a point of it. I have a day-night timeshare at Lincoln Street Under. While the sun is shining I'm asleep or safely cocooned. At dusk my roomie comes home

and I go out to work and play. Hey, being a mommy to legumes is *not* what I miss about space. How about you? What turned you into an owl?

Well, well, maybe you *are* serious about breaking away. Sure, they prefer recruits who've nightshifted. Shows them you've got circadian discipline.

Elena said something like that once. She said that it's hard to scare someone to death in broad daylight. It isn't just that the daytime is too crowded, it's too tame. The night is edgier, scarier. Sexier. You say and do things that wouldn't occur to you at lunchtime. It's because we don't really belong in the night. In order to survive here we have to fight all the old instincts warning us not to wander around in the dark because we might fall off a cliff or get eaten by a saber-toothed tiger. Living in the night gives you a kind of extra . . . I don't know. . . .

Right. And it's the same with space; it's even scarier and sexier. Well, maybe sexy isn't exactly the right word, but you know what I mean. Actually, I think that's what I miss most about it. I was more alive then than I ever was before. Maybe too alive. People live fast up there. They know the stats: they *have* to. You know, you sort of remind me of Elena. Must be the eyes—it sure as hell isn't the body. If you ever get up, give her a shout. You'd like her, even though she doesn't wear shoes anymore.

Almost a year. I wish we could talk more, but it's hard. She transferred to the *Marathon*; they're out surveying Saturn's moons. There's like a three hour lag; it's impossible to have real-time conversation. She sent a few vids, but it hurt too much to watch them. They were all happy chat, you know? Nothing important in them. I didn't plan on missing her so much. So, you have any college credits?

No real difference between Harvard and a net school, unless you're some kind of snob about bricks.

Now that's a hell of a thing to be asking a perfect stranger. What do I look like, some three star slut? Don't make assumptions just because I'm wearing spike heels. For all you know, honey, I could be dating a basketball player. Maybe I'm tired of staring at his navel when we dance. If you're going to judge people by appearances, hey, *you're* the one with the machine stigmata. What's that supposed to be, rust or dried blood?

Well, you ought to be. Though actually, that's what everyone wants to know. That, and how do you go to the bathroom. Truth is, Jane, sex is complicated, like everything about space. First of all, forget all that stuff you've heard about doing it while you're floating free. It's dangerous, hard

work and no fun. You want to have sex in space, one or both of you have to be tied down. Most hetero temps use some kind of a joystrap. It's this wide circular elastic that fits around you and your partner. Helps you stay coupled, okay? But even with all the gear, sex can be kind of subtle. As in disappointing. You don't realize how erotic weight is until there isn't any. You want to make love to a balloon? Some people do nothing but oral—keeps the vectors down. Of course the breakaways, they've reinvented love, just like everything else. They have this kind of sex where they don't move. If there's penetration they just float in place, staring into one another's eyes or some such until they tell one another that it's time to have an orgasm and then they do. Lesbians just touch each other. Elena tried to show me how, once. I don't know why, but it didn't happen for me. Maybe I was too embarrassed because I was the only one naked. She said I'd learn eventually, that it was part of breaking away.

No, I thought I was going to break away, I really did. I stuck it out until the very last possible day. It's hard to explain. I mean, when nobodies on earth look up at night—no offense, Jane, I was one too—what calls them is the romance of it all. The high frontier, okay? Sheena Steele and Captain Kirk, cowboys and asteroids. Kid stuff, except they don't let kids in space because of the cancer. Then you go up and once you're done puking, you realize that it was all propaganda. Space is boring and it's indescribably magic at the same time—how can that be? Sometimes I'd be working in an eden and I'd look out the windows and I'd see earth, blue as a dream, and I'd think of all the people down there, twelve billion ants, looking up into the night and wondering what it was like to be me. I swear I could feel their envy, as sure as I can feel your floor beneath me now. It's part of what holds you up when you're in space. You know you're not an ant; there are fewer than twenty thousand breakaways. You're brave and you're doomed and you're different from everyone else who has ever lived. Only then your shift ends and it's time to go to the gym and spend three hours pumping the ergorack in a squeeze suit to fight muscle loss in case you decide to back down. I'll tell you, being a temp is hell. The rack is hard work; if you're not exhausted afterward, you haven't done it right. And you sweat, *God*. See, the sweat doesn't run off. It pools in the small of your back and the crook of your arm and under your chin and clings there, shivering like an amoeba. And while you're slaving on the rack, Elena is getting work done or reading or sleeping or talking about you with her breakaway pals. They have three more hours in their day, see, and they don't ever have to worry about backing down. Then every nine weeks you have to leave what you're doing and visit one of the wheel habitats and readjust to your weight for a week so that when you come back to *Victor Foxtrot*, you get spacesick all over again. But you tell yourself it's all worth it because it's not only space that you're exploring; it's yourself. How many people can say that? You

have to find out who you are so that you decide what to hold onto and what to let go of . . . excuse me, I can't talk about this anymore right now.

No, I'll be all right. Only . . . okay, so you don't have any reset. You must have some kind of flash?

That'll have to do. Tell you what, I'll buy the whole liter from you.

Ahh, ethanol with a pedigree. But a real backdown kind of drug, Jane—weighs way too much to bring out of the gravity well. And besides, the flash is about the same as hitting yourself over the head with the bottle. Want a slug?

Come on, it's two-thirty. Time to start the party. You're making me late, you know.

Do me a favor, would you? Pass me those shoes on the shelf there . . . no, no the blue ones. Yes. Beautiful. Real leather, right? I love leather shoes. They're like faces. I mean, you can polish them but once they get wrinkles, you're stuck with them. Look at my face, okay? See these wrinkles here, right at the corner of my eyes? Got them working in the edens. Too much sun. How old do you think I am?

Twenty-nine, but that's okay. I was up fifteen months and it only aged me four years. Still, my permanent bone loss is less than 8 percent and I've built my muscles back up and I only picked up eighteen rads and I'm not half as crazy as I used to be. Hey, I'm a walking advertisement for backing down. So have I talked you out of it yet? I don't mean to, okay? I'd probably go up again, if they'd have me.

Don't plan on it; the wheel habitats are strictly for tourists. They cost ten times as much to build as a micro gee can and once you're in one you're pretty much stuck to the rim. And you're still getting zapped by cosmic rays and solar X-rays and energetic neutrons. If you're going to risk living in space, you might as well enjoy it. Besides, all the important work gets done by breakaways.

See, that's where you're wrong. It's like Elena used to say. We didn't conquer space, it conquered us. Break away and you're giving up forty, maybe fifty years of life, okay? The stats don't lie. Fifty-six is the *average*. That means some breakaways die even younger.

You don't? Well, good for you. Hey, it looks great—better than new. How much?

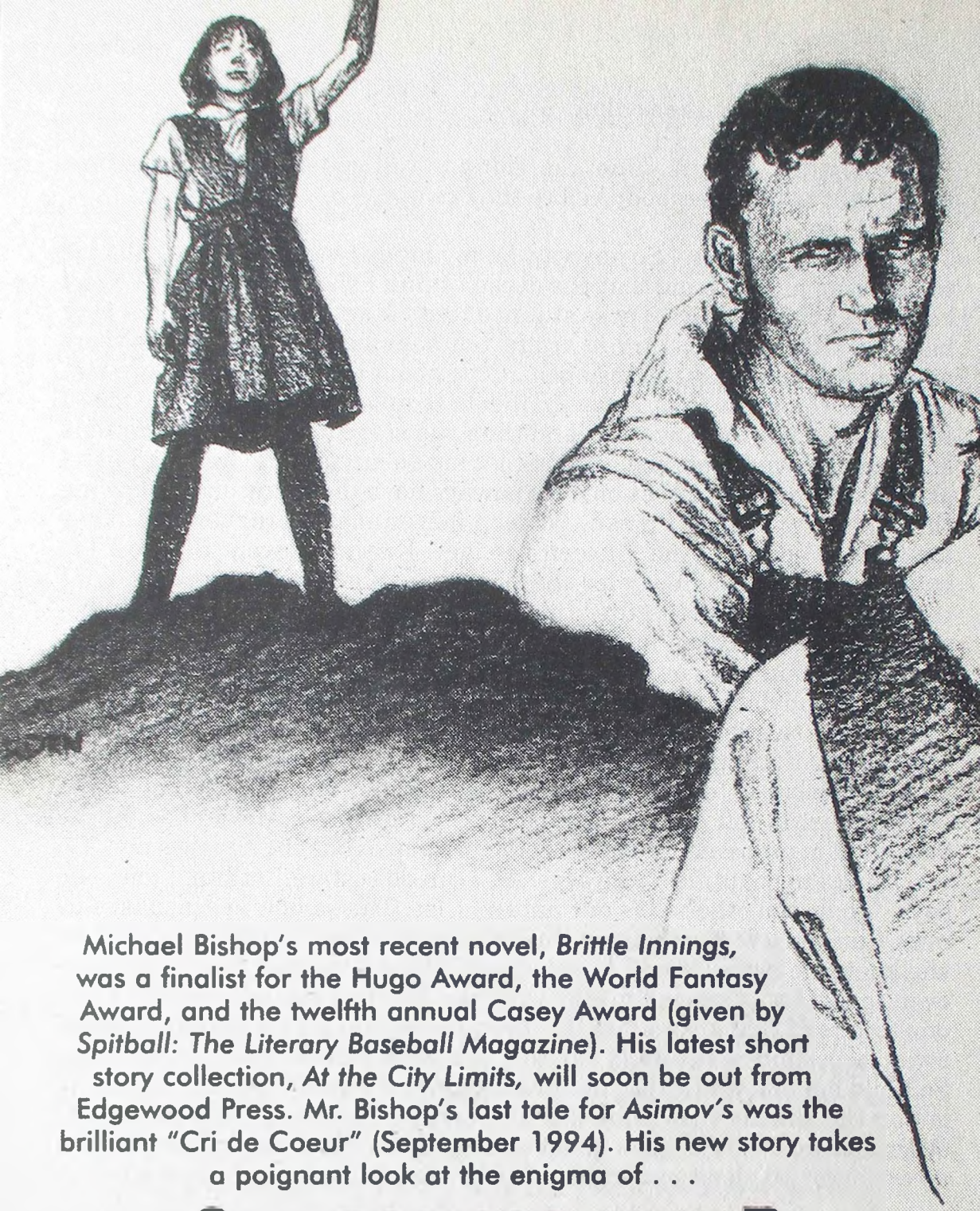
Does that include the vodka?

Well thanks. Listen, Jane, I'm going to tell you something, a secret they ought to tell everybody before they go up.

No, I'm not. Promise. So anyway, on my breakaway day Elena calls me to her room and tells me that she doesn't think I should do it, that I won't be happy living in space. I'm so stunned that I start crying, which is a very backdown thing to do. I try to argue, but she's been mentoring for years and knows what she's talking about. Only about a third break away—but, of course, you know that. Anyway, it gets strange then. She says to me, "I have something to show you," and then she starts to strip. See, the time she'd made love to me, she wouldn't let me do anything to her. And like I said, she'd kept her clothes on; breakaways have this thing about showing themselves to temps. I mean, I'd seen her hands before, her feet. They looked like spiders. And I'd seen her face. Kissed it, even. But now I'm looking at her naked body for the first time. She's fifty-one years old. I think she must've been taller than me once, but it's hard to be sure because she has the deep micro gee slouch. Her muscles have atrophied so her papery skin looks as if it's been sprayed onto her bones. She's had both breasts prophylactically removed. "I've got 40 percent bonerot," she says, "and I mass thirty-eight kilos." She shows the scars from the operations to remove her thyroid and ovaries, the tap on her hip where they take the monthly biopsy to test for leukemia. "Look at me," she says. "What do you see?" I start to tell her that I've read the literature and watched all the vids and I'm prepared for what's going to happen but she shushes me. "Do you think I'm beautiful?" she says. All I can do is stare. "*I* think I am," she says. "So do the others. It's our nature, Cleo. This is how space makes us over. Can you tell me you *want* this to happen to you?" And I couldn't. See, she knew me better than I knew myself. What I wanted was to float forever, to feel I was special, to stay with her. Maybe I was in love with her. I don't know if that's possible. But loving someone isn't a reason to break away, especially if the stats say that someone will be dead in five years. So I told her she was right and thanked her for everything she'd done and got on the shuttle that same day and backed down and became just another nobody. And she gave up mentoring and went to Saturn and as soon as we forget all about each other we can start living happily ever after.

No, here's the secret, honey. The heart is a muscle, okay? That means it shrinks in space. All breakaways know it, now you do too. Anyway, it's been nice talking to you.

Sure. Good night. ●



Michael Bishop's most recent novel, *Brittle Innings,* was a finalist for the Hugo Award, the World Fantasy Award, and the twelfth annual Casey Award (given by *Spitball: The Literary Baseball Magazine*). His latest short story collection, *At the City Limits,* will soon be out from Edgewood Press. Mr. Bishop's last tale for *Asimov's* was the brilliant "Cri de Coeur" (September 1994). His new story takes a poignant look at the enigma of . . .

ALLEGRA'S HAND

Michael Bishop

Illustration by Laurie Harden

Allegra Jamison came to Vista Grove Elementary in early November of my second year as a counselor. At once, she drew bemused or outraged notice for flaunting on her left hand an elbow-length glove of soft, well-worn, cream-colored linen. In no other way did she initially seem remarkable. She struck Beth Peaden, her teacher, as one more pale carp in our mostly Anglo, quasi-rural fishpond.

Except for that glove.

Me, I met Allegra on a hectic Tuesday. Each class has two "ambassadors," heads-up kids who accompany new arrivals around and introduce them to key staff: the principal, Mr. Buchanan; the librarian, Ms. Faris; the music teacher, Ms. Springer; the lunchroom manager, Mrs. Judah; the custodian, Mr. Vicic. As school counselor, I qualify as key. In fact, I brought the ambassador program to Vista Grove three years ago as a gung-ho middle-aged intern. Anyway, Ambassadors Kip Hunt and Hannah Treece escorted Allegra to my office before lunch and stood in the hall as I signed the counselor coupon in her get-acquainted book and gave her a cartoon sticker for her three-ring binder. Allegra murmured, "Thanks," and turned to go, hugely affectless for a newcomer.

"Where did you move here from?" I said hurriedly.

"Nother state." Piping soprano; rising inflection.

"Of course. Which one?"

"Sorrow n transience. Dad sez."

That floored me. Fifth graders don't talk like that, even if they have self-protective instincts keen enough to attribute such off-the-wall poetry to a parent.

"Ah," I said, hoping to recover with a joke: "Alabama?"

"Yessum. Tescumbia."

What could I say? I knew zilch about Tescumbia. "That's a handsome . . . a pretty glove."

"Yessum."

"And quite a fashion statement, wearing only one."

Hannah Treece stuck her head in the door. "One glove, Mrs. Hewitt. We think she thinks she's a rock star."

"I am, without even singing, my dad sez. If I *really* was, though, I'd sew sequins on it."

"Did you lose the other one?" I shooed Hannah back out.

"Nome. It's on purpose, the one alone. Necessary too."

Necessary. Why? Did she have a skin disorder, fungus on her fingernails, a second-degree burn, a tattoo that a family cultist had needled into her as a baby? Oh the questions I wanted to ask. But why-what-who-where-and-when constructions breed defensiveness, suspicion, guilt. A counselor, as much as possible, should couch all grubby, buttinsky inquiries in the form of friendly imperatives. For example: *Tell me about your family, kid.*

With my professional scruples on alert and Hannah and Kip fidgeting outside, I couldn't ask what I wanted to ask, namely, *Why?* Why is your glove necessary?

Allegra, meanwhile, slipped into the hall.

Gone and soon forgotten. As that comic-strip kid Calvin says, The Days Are Just Packed. I had no time to eat in the lunchroom. Some peanut-butter crackers, peach yogurt, and a stale Caramello would fuel me. After that, an afternoon jammed to the rafters with guidance lessons, small groups, and teacher referrals, several of EXTREME urgency. A new fifth-grade filly with one silly glove just didn't weigh that heavily. I had to teach peacemaking skills to the toughs in a schoolbus shoving match, counsel the niece of a shotgun-murder victim, deal with a Munchausen-by-proxy mother who'd fabricated a case of bang-up asthma for her seven-year-old daughter (as a way to manipulate both her kid and the school system), and write up three cases of abuse and/or neglect for the Department of Family & Children Services, known to everybody hereabouts as DFACS.

"All I want is DFACS, ma'am," agency social worker Epifanio Sudar likes to joke. "Jes gimme DFACS."

So when Allegra Jamison ambled off with Kip and Hannah, she ambled off into the sanity-saving realm of Out of Sight, Out of Mind.

Maybe I saw Allegra in the halls later that week. Maybe I didn't. She returned stage-center shortly after, though, when Beth Peaden referred her with this message:

"Allegra Jamison has a big vocabulary, but few social skills or friends. The glove she wears—she won't talk about it—has prompted mild teasing. Allegra responds with hot looks that only prompt more verbal abuse. Despite daily wear, her glove always looks clean. Either she has extras or she washes it every night. Please talk with her about making friends so she can avoiding teasing."

I went down to Mr. Buchanan's office and caught him making a face over a cup of microwaved coffee. "Don't we have a dress code?" I asked.

"Is that a rhetorical question?" Mr. Buchanan resembles a tubercular Sumo wrestler. When he makes a face, his bottom lip unrolls like a mugging chimpanzee's.

"Not exactly."

"Then don't worry. You look fine."

I said that our dress code (the only rules we usually have to enforce center on cleanliness and proper fit) *might* help us solve our problem with Allegra Jamison. It prohibited gloves, didn't it? Mr. Buchanan picked up and paged through the manual that we send home with every kid at the start of every school year.

"No mention of gloves," he said. "Guess they're okay."

"How can a child write or draw or use a pair of scissors if she's wearing gloves?"

"Allegra just wears one, a left one, and because she's a righty, well . . ." He plopped the manual down. "What's the issue here?"

"Beth—Mrs. Peaden—says it gets her teased."

"Teasing, as objectionable as it sometimes seems, can correct beaucoups of odd behavior or dress."

"I don't think it will in Allegra's case."

"Why? Have you talked to the girl?"

"Not yet. But Mrs. Peaden's referral and my own first-day impression—I don't know, it's just that she wears that glove kind of defiantly."

"So she's got balls." Mr. Buchanan ducked his head, peeked up mock-apologetically. *"Mea culpa. Mea maxima culpa."*

"Couldn't you say the dress code prohibits it as a safety measure? A glove like hers—I'd only wear one that long with an evening gown—could catch in a file drawer or under a window sash. It could—"

"So could a sleeve. Should we all go sleeveless? Or, to please the super-safety-conscious among us, nude?" No grin this time; an amused twinkle, only.

"Okay, okay."

"Do your job. You're looking for a mechanical solution. Do your job."

Mr. Buchanan had nailed it: I wanted a decree from on high to sweep Allegra from my IN tray. Why? Because my IN tray was already brimfull. Because Allegra and her kooky glove nagged from a distance at my already dubious peace of mind.

So I cleared the decks—sort of—and summoned the little fashion rebel in. Two, maybe three, days after Beth Peaden's referral, she entered wearing a threadbare rusty-black smock over a rumpled inky-black dress, thin-soled Kmart tennis shoes, and her ever-present glove. She sat, and I left my desk to undercut the authority-figure intimidation factor. Drumming the fingers of her right hand on her desk's writing palette, Allegra looked sidelong into the *How Do You Feel?* mirror on my rear wall.

"Tell me about your week."

She shrugged.

"I hear it hasn't been all that good. Your classmates give you grief."

"They're geeks. Troublemaking geeks."

"Maybe they don't mean to be."

"Yeah. Like they're remote-controlled or somethin." Such rapid-fire sarcasm!

"I don't think they're remote-controlled, Allegra. They're reacting to *something* outside themselves. Any idea what?"

"Me. I drive em Bonkersville."

"Tell me how you drive them Bonkersville."

Allegra raised her gloved hand, her forearm parallel to the floor at shoulder height. (Progress.) I sat down in a plastic chair that immediately equalized our gazes.

"The day we met you said your glove was *necessary*. I don't understand. Would you please explain?"

A sneery shrug. "What's to explain? It covers."

"Of course. Your hand. Your forearm."

"Yessum."

"Tell me about the need to cover those parts of yourself."

"Adam n Eve wore figs."

"Fig leaves, actually."

" 'Actually'? It's *none* of it actual. It's all just book stuff. Lies, even."

"Whether fact or lies, Adam and Eve were concealing very private parts of themselves. Your hand, your forearm—they're different, Allegra. More . . . public."

"Mine aren't. They're private. They're *mine*."

"Of course. I don't mean to imply otherwise. It's just that hands seldom provoke us to shame. Many people take pride in their hands."

"N some do in their privates. Me, *I'm* not ashamed of no part, specially not this hand."

Whoa. I felt like a member of the affirmative team debating the proposition *Resolved: Counselors Make Helpful Friends*. And losing spectacularly. I groped for balance:

"So you wear a glove to insure the privacy of your hand."

Sullenly: "Yessum."

"And that's the only reason."

"No. If I took it off, Mrs. Peaden's army of geeks'd leap on me hardern a jay on a junebug."

" 'Army of geeks'? Allegra, do you think name-calling helps or hinders the friend-making process?"

"Who wants geeks for friends?"

"Geek is a label, Allegra."

"So?"

"A label says nothing meaningful about who your classmates really are." Uh-oh. I'd shifted against my will and training into blah-blah lecture mode.

" 'Cep how I feel about em."

My jaw began to descend; I stopped it. Touché, I thought. Leaning back, I regarded Allegra as her classmates sometimes must, as a being dropped among them from the planet Monstra.

"Cun I go?" she asked. "Mrs. Peaden's startin math."

Some children have no verbal skills. To draw them out, you have them draw: stick-figure portraits of their families, boxy diagrams of their

homes. Allegra had terrific verbal skills, which she used to hedge herself about or to bludgeon would-be intruders. But our first formal interview had come to an end. I didn't know where else to take it, or how to redeem any part from the morass into which I'd let it sink, or what to make of her piecemeal revelations so far.

"Skedaddle then," I told her. "Nobody in this office is a prisoner." (Not even me.)

After school, I drove to a "local" bar—forty miles away—and had two ice-cold bottles of Mexican beer. Hubie, who died during my practicum at St. Elmo's, would have glowed (I think) with flabbergasted approval.

A week later, at lunch, Beth Peaden came by and found me abstractedly downing spoonfuls of blueberry yogurt and poring over a fresh stack of referrals.

"Oh, hi," I said. "Caught me." I wiped my mouth.

"Hoped I would." Beth has trim good looks, a mind like a top-notch tax accountant's, and more empathy for her kids than is strictly healthy.

"Sorry I couldn't help with the Jamison girl."

"Juanita, you helped a lot. As soon as she got back from your office, the difference was . . . huge. She didn't throw eye-daggers at the worst teases, or cut them up verbally, or even try to tattle. Hallelujah."

"You're kidding."

"No. I came to thank you. Thanks."

"Wow."

"Some teasing persists, from Rob Pino and Eddie Staley, but she handles it better. She's even got a girlfriend or two. If anything, I'd like you to talk with Rob and Eddie."

"Sure. That's what I'm here for." As Beth turned to go, I said, "She still wearing that glove?"

"Does Tarzan wear a loin cloth?"

But keeping a secret and flaunting that resolve tend to eat away at beehive institutions like schools. Everyone wanted to know what Allegra's glove concealed. Disease? Injury? Poison ivy pustules? Demagogic Magic Marker slogans? Body art of an erotic or a primitive stamp? And I was as curious as the next obnoxious Vista Grovite.

Unless, maybe, that person's name was Eddie Staley.

Right before our Thanksgiving break, with two teachers and nearly twenty students out with the flu, Mr. Buchanan assigned me to recess playground duty. I checked out soccer balls and bolo paddles, pushed swings, refereed impromptu races, soothed hurt feelings, and ruminated bitterly on the time I could have spent in my office, doing my real job.

I emerged from one such reverie to see Eddie Staley, over by the teeter-totters, his face in Allegra Jamison's, jawing like a pint-sized TV pitch-

man and side-stepping repeatedly to keep her from escaping. She almost broke free anyway, but Eddie grabbed her collar, yanked her back, and twisted as hard as he could at her gauntlet's linen cuff. Allegra kneed Eddie in the groin—a Jamie Lee Curtis movie maneuver—then clubbed him in the gut with her gloved forearm.

"*Oooof!*" went Eddie. "*Oooooooow!*" He sank to his knees, one hand on his breadbasket, one at the crotch of his so-fly stonewashed button-flies.

I interceded, catching Allegra by the arm—the right one—and laying a hand on the gasp-racked Eddie's shoulder. "Hands to yourself, Eddie. I saw it all. I don't condone Allegra's retaliation, but you . . . you pretty much got what you asked for."

"Lidl snivel bastid," Allegra said.

I hushed her. Sent her to a more or less neutral corner. Pulled Eddie to his feet and made him face me. He struggled to stop gasping, to compose himself.

Red-eyed, he said, "I uz jes tryin to make her . . . you know, take off . . . thet dorky glove."

"Suppose I tried to make you take off your dorky jeans?"

Wide-eyed outrage. Or terror. "Unh-unh. No way."

"Exactly. And you've no business trying to disrobe Allegra or anybody else. Got it?"

"Yessum."

"Walk over there and tell her you're sorry."

"She *hit* me."

"I saw."

"Lookit my stummick." He pulled out his shirt, exposed his rounded belly. A diagonally slashing welt had already begun to show crimson above his navel. "Felt like she had a bar in thet glove. A tire iron."

Only he said *tar arn*, and his mouth did a sniveling orbital wobble.

"I doubt that. You'll be okay. Just tuck your shirt back in. The bell's about to ring."

He obeyed me. He didn't apologize to Allegra, though, and I didn't force him to.

Once recess had ended and I sat at my familiar, work-laden desk again, I thought about the welt on Eddie's stomach. Had a kid come to school with such an injury, and had questioning revealed its origins in a domestic dispute, regulations would have compelled me to notify DFACS.

Nicole Staley, Eddie's mother, strode in and stood rigidly at my desk—with no invitation, greeting, smile, or hint of self-consciousness. I stood, said my name, and tried to shake her hand.

"I awready know you. We met at Open House."

"Please sit down." I lowered my hand.

"No thanks. I'll speak to the point and ast you to do the same."

"The point being?"

"Thet glove girl in Mrs. Peaden's class. She hit Eddie."

"An unhappy response to some deplorable goading."

"He says you said you'd take off his pants for it."

The evening before, despite my workload and weariness, I'd made notes on the incident. I read them to Nicole Staley, who listened with persimmon-sucking distaste.

"It's still thet Jamison biddy's fawt."

"How so?"

"Thet glove. It's got to come off. It's a distraction, like fanny holes in kids' jeans or mini-dresses on our priddy baby girls." (*Gulls,* she said.)

"It's just Allegra, Mrs. Staley. It's . . . I don't know, it's just who she is."

"Anybody ever seen her thout it?"

"Not that I'm aware of."

"I think it's a health hazard. A disguise. I think it's hiding"—imaginary trumpet fanfare—"*leprosy*. You know, thet ol Bible disease."

"I disagree. It's even possible that she wears the glove as a religious statement, Mrs. Staley. I don't have the power, or the right, to make her remove it just because it overexcites other people's imaginations."

Mrs. Staley took a photograph from her purse. A Polaroid. She handed it to me. In it, Eddie stood stripped to the waist before a paneled wall, the welt on his stomach throbbingly red, an uncertain half-smirk on his lips.

"After Thanksgiving, we've got a school-board meetin'. I might show em this pichur. I might say you thettened to pull down Eddie's jeans."

I returned the Polaroid. "You're within your rights to do just that." An admission that stymied further bluster.

Mrs. Staley put Eddie back into her purse and retreated—excuse my un-P.C. hyperbole—to whatever cockroachy dustbin had hatched her.

That night I telephoned the number that Allegra had given the school as an emergency contact. I asked for Creel Jamison, her father. "Hold on," an elderly male voice said. "He's my neighbor. Lemme see if he's tohome."

The receiver clunked down hard. I was on countertop hold, listening to tinny sitcom dialogue, a house dog's intermittent yapping, and, about five minutes into my wait, the dinging of a stove timer. Five minutes stretched to ten. The dinging went on and on.

"Hello," I said. "*Hello?*"

The receiver suddenly clunked again, more painfully than before. "Creel here. Talk to me."

(In the background, the elderly male voice: "*Dammitawl, I nearlybout burnt 'em.*" The stove timer stopped dinging.)

I introduced myself to Mr. Jamison. I reviewed for him my meetings with Allegra, noting my concern about her interactions with her class-

mates and detailing the Eddie Staley playground episode. I informed him that Mrs. Staley had made noises about going to the school board with it.

"Allegra knows better than to hit, ma'am." Mr. Jamison had a youthful voice and a soft Southern accent more businesslike—in a feedstore or lumberyard context—than hillbillyish.

"Believe me," I said, "she was provoked."

"Don't excuse her, ma'am. She still knows better. I hope you gave her serious what-for."

"Primarily, I scolded the boy. He'd been bullying her ever since her arrival."

"Sounds like lopsided discipline to me. Prejudiced, even. You got the Staleys' number? I think Allegra should call em to apologize."

Prejudiced? Out of Creel Jamison's sight, I bristled. But held my tongue and gave him the Staleys' telephone number. An apology might in fact defuse the situation and slide me off the scapegoat's altar.

"Mr. Jamison, I have a sensitive question to ask."

"Ask away." I hesitated. During my hesitation, he said, "Yessum, it's true. In hot weather, I sleep buck nekkid."

A declaration that literally dumbfounded me.

"That's a joke, Mrs. Hewitt. You know, a *funny?* To break the tension, like?"

"Oh."

"Go ahead. Ask yore sensitive question." Disappointment in my obvious lack of humor tinged his voice, but didn't negate his openness.

"Does Allegra *have* to wear that long ugly glove to school everyday?"

"No, ma'am."

"Then why does she?"

"I guess she likes it. Blonged to her mama."

Ten feet into the meadow and I'd stepped into a cow pie the size of Troup County. I took a swig of my Corona, then banged the bottle—gently—against my forehead.

"What happened to Mrs. Jamison?"

"Vamoosed with a canoeing buddy of mine when Allegra was two. Today they live in west Texas, where the canoeing ain't thet much to brag on."

"I'm sorry." For what? Mrs. Jamison's absconding? Or her diminished (outdoor) recreational opportunities?

"Don't sweat it, ma'am. I don't."

"What about Allegra? Without that glove, things would go a lot easier for her."

"We don't *want* things easy. Else I'd quit Nathan Crowder's truck brokerage and suck tit off Uncle Sugar."

"It's admirable you don't."

"It's taking responsibility. The year thet started bein 'admirable' is the year this country slid into the slops."

If Nashville needed another back-to-basics lyricist, Creel Jamison certainly qualified. I pointed our conversation back to Allegra, though, observing that she believed she had to wear the glove as a cover, the way Adam and Eve had concealed their nakedness from God.

"That's a strange take for a little girl, Mr. Jamison. And she insists it isn't shame that motivates her, but . . . well, *necessity*. What does she mean?"

"Moren likely, jes what she says."

"Then what, besides the obvious, does her glove conceal?"

"Difference," Creel Jamison said. "Specialness. Which can get you applauded or crucified, dependin."

"But the glove itself signals a provocative difference."

"Not like her uncovered hand would."

"Is she sick? Is her hand a prosthetic device?"

Creel Jamison laughed. "It's real. Too real. And this gabfest's over. Talk to Allegra. She rides her own mounts and curries em when she's done."

"Very folksy. But I—"

"Talk to her. My blessing. But if she ungloves for you, don't Judas-kiss her. Hear?"

Before I could reply, Creel Jamison hung up. Progress, I thought: It's okay he hung up because I know a lot more about Allegra, and I have permission to dig deeper.

After Thanksgiving, a peculiar sort of homage to Allegra manifested itself in Mrs. Peaden's class. Hannah Treece and Lindsay Des Rochers showed up boasting elbow-length ballroom gloves on their left arms. Hannah's, of silky acetate, shone ruby-red. Lindsay's, of deep-brown velvet, scintillated with glitter and raised petal-shaped patterns. Allegra, the fashion rebel, had become a fashion plate.

Sort of.

By Wednesday, Hannah and Lindsay had abandoned their gloves for the ever-popular bare look, and no one else at Vista Grove appeared ready to renew the experiment. Evening-wear gloves wear a body out. They reduce dexterity, raise the temperature from elbow to fingernail, and snag on local excrescences. Only Allegra had the requisite grit, commitment, and stamina to keep flaunting that demanding style.

On the other hand (metaphorically speaking), incidents of ridicule, grab-cuff, and eye-rolling fell off dramatically. I now lacked a solid professional reason to dig deeper into the mystery behind Allegra's glove. I might as well've asked Jody Schuett why he always wore argyle socks.

The last day before Christmas break, I got another referral from Beth:

"Allegra Jamison isn't staying focused. Her grades have dropped. She's missed turning in four homework assignments since Thanksgiving. She seems depressed and frequently visits Never-Never Land. Please talk to her."

Degree of urgency?

Beth had circled MODERATE.

Having my excuse, I hurried to call Allegra in before Vista Grove shut down for the holidays.

She came in clad in her favorite black outfit, with floppy leg warmers over sagging tights, shuffle-along bag-lady shoes, and a cream-colored scarf with a crow printed in the center of its main shoulder-lapping flap. And, of course, her glove; her mother's glove, cream-colored like the scarf.

"Hello, Allegra. You look striking."

She went to my *How Do You Feel?* mirror and pulled from it the taped-up construction-paper portrait of a freckle-faced girl with a diamondlike tear on her cheek. She handed this to me, then sidled with a careless hip bang into my interviewee's desk. "Crap," she said.

"No: you *do* look striking."

Allegra hit me with an I-don't-believe-you-said-that moue. "Thet was like an all-purpose crap, Mrs. Hewitt. Everything's crappy."

"Tell me about it."

She laid her cheek on her gloved forearm, her face toward the cinderblock rear wall. I knelt beside her and massaged the knot of tension in her neck.

"If you had to rank the crappiness, where would you start? At home? At school?"

"It all glops together."

"Your dad?"

"He's . . . he's okay. I love him."

"Mrs. Peaden? Your classmates?"

"What do they have to do with anything? They're jes, you know, around, like rocks or strangers' tombstones."

"Okay. Tell me who *does* have something to do with what's crappy in your life."

"My mama. My brother. Me."

This catalogue brought me up short. Allegra's mama had run out on her and Creel eight years ago.

And her brother? *What* brother?

I left Allegra to check my file. Surprise: It listed a brother, Desmond, seventeen. "Dez," however, wasn't supposed to be a current member of the Jamison household, having left Dad and Sis two years ago to take a job in Amarillo, Texas, installing state-of-the-art sound equipment in automobiles, trucks, and all-terrain vehicles. Who needed a high-school diploma when you could patch a CD-player into a Jeep Cherokee?

"Allegra, do you recall the last time you saw your mother?"

"No."

"What about . . . Dez?"

"This morning. Last night. Yesterday morning. The night before. The dawn before that." A sing-song litany.

"This"—I tapped my file folder—"sez Dez is in Texas."

Allegra looked up. "Files lie." She softened. "Or mebbe git outdated."

"Tell me about Dez."

"Would you like to see my arm?" She put her right thumb and forefinger around the cuff of her glove, then held the arm up to me for inspection. I accepted her offer, and indulged my curiosity, by walking over to study the skin between her elbow and the glove's tourniqueted cuff.

A band of tender purple marbled with spoiled-looking green encircled her arm. I wanted to see more. "Is it like that all the way down to your hand?"

"Nome."

"Did Dez do that?"

She pulled her arm away and set it carefully in her lap. "I had this dream bout Dez. It scared me. It woke me up. I slept again, but it came back."

"All right. Tell me your dream."

"Dez was swimming, deep underwater like. He didn't have a suit. Red slits opened n shut on both sides of his neck, and this clear lacy fin ran down his back. He sort of wormed along through the water. His ding-dong—" Allegra pursed her lips, eyed me skeptically.

"His penis?"

"Yessum."

"It's all right. Go ahead."

"His *penis* floated under him—shyly—till he got to this clump of shells or like jammed-up fish bones on the sea floor. Then it . . ." She grimaced.

"It erected?"

"Yeah. It *pointed*. Like a big thick finger. At a hole in the seashell mound under his face. He hovered over it with his fin ripplin and his you-know pointing."

"Is that when you woke up?"

"Nome. Not yet."

"Tell me what else happened."

"Dez was doing fish stuff with his mouth." Allegra blew a series of invisible smoke rings. "Like thet. Then his cheeks puffed up big n he . . . vomited. Green Jell-O came out n fell in sticky little crystals into the hole in the seashell mound. They got harder, dropping. They looked like stones—jewels—by the time they'd all got down."

"And?"

"I woke up. Scared. Sick, even. After a while, I went back to sleep n dreamt it again."

"Just the same?"

"Jes the same. Cep I knew I was dreamin."

"Allegra, how can I help you?"

"Lemme stay in here. Lemme do some work for you."

I gave her a stack of construction paper to cut in two for seasonal messages home. The discoloration on her arm and the lurid specifics of her nightmare cried abuse to me—emotional, physical, and possibly sexual. The perpetrator? Dez Jamison, who Allegra said had come all the way from Texas to visit them over Thanksgiving and Christmas. I had more questions to ask. Had Dez ever inappropriately touched her? Had she told Creel her dream or showed him her bruise?

Then, writing in my file, I heard several sharp cracking noises in a row. When I looked up, I saw Allegra repeatedly slamming the paper-cutter's blade down on her gloved forearm. I shouted her name, stumbled over, knocked the paper cutter out of her grasp, and tried to seize her left arm so that I could see how badly she had injured herself. It shames me to say that I also envisioned my firing, a police investigation, and a ruinous lawsuit against both me and the school board.

Allegra twisted her arm away and stepped back. "I'm okay!" she said. "It don't hurt! It cain't hurt! Jes don't worry bout it!"

"Child, you *have* to let me see it. We may need to get you to an emergency room."

"Here, then! Look!" She thrust the arm out at me, but all I could reliably tell was that my paper cutter had slashed a half-dozen transverse tatters into her mother's glove. In its gill-like gaps, I may or may not have seen the emerald sheen of a clandestine stoniness. . . .

Epifanio Sudar is a twenty-seven-year-old social worker with DFACS. On Saturday I called him at home and asked if he would go with me out to Allegra Jamison's place—an unannounced visit—to do a thorough check on her home life.

"It's vacation, Juanita. Don't you ever rest? I've got a Christmas-shopping date in forty minutes."

We talked a while, and he agreed to go with me on Monday, meanwhile cautioning me not to visit the Jamisons alone. "Two fools," he told me, "are always braver than one."

Not that I expected hostility from Creel Jamison, who had sounded both cooperative and bright on the phone, or an ambush at the hands of Dez, whom I knew only from a few file-folder notes and a surrealistic dream recitation from the lips of his depressed younger sister.

Epifanio knows the county, including every confusing back road and byway around Vista Grove. We drove to the Jamisons' in his white VW bug and found their trailer off a dirt lane behind an azalea-ringed clapboard house with a rusty tin roof. The house, I understood, belonged to Creel's elderly neighbor, the man with the telephone.

The trailer—*mobile home* would be a euphemism—rested cattywampus among some scrawny pines, some overturned oil drums, two broken swing sets, two portable storage units, a mound of beer cans, and a mix of lawnmower parts, discarded toys, and ribby-looking bicycle frames. As we pulled in, a feral housecat glanced our way and bolted.

"I'm disappointed," Epifanio said.

"Of course. No one should have to live like this."

"Hey, bleeding-heart lady, I'm only disappointed there's no engineless jalopy up on blocks. With a clunker up on blocks, it'd be *perfect*."

"Up yours, Epifanio."

We went to the door. Early afternoon. Because no car, clunker or otherwise, sat out front, I feared we might have to come back later. But if Allegra admitted us in the middle of a work day—Creel's work day—we had a better hope of inspecting and evaluating the place than if he greeted us.

Allegra cracked the hollow-core front door and peered out warily. "Mrs. Hewitt!" she said.

"And Mr. Sudar," I said. "May we come in?"

"*He* cain't. I don't know him."

"He's a colleague, Allegra. A county social worker."

"He's a stranger. And a man. Dad sez—"

"That's fine," Epifanio said. "Your dad tells you right." To me he said, "I'll wait in the car."

I entered. Allegra wore a magenta-and-brown horsehair robe whose sleeves swallowed her arms and hands. She put her hands in her arm pits.

"I was sewing. Back there." Nodding over one shoulder.

"Your dad's at work, right?"

"Yessum."

"Where's your brother?"

"Dez? The nekkid fish? He left Sattidy. Swum on back to Texas. Dad sorta kicked his butt out."

"Did Dez put that bruise on your left arm? You never did tell me, Allegra, and I need to know."

"Nome, he didn't. He jes upset me by bein hissef, which he cain't help any moren I can."

I looked around. A living room. A breakfast counter and a galleylike kitchen. A beat-up recliner dominated the living room. Next to the recliner sat a small bookcase, the shelves of which held a library of maybe fifty paperbacks.

I ambled over and saw Plato's *Republic*; a poetry anthology called *The Voice That Is Great Within Us*; Frances Fitzgerald's *Fire in the Lake*; novels by Somerset Maugham, Herman Wouk, John Steinbeck, Anais Nin; biographies of Gandhi, Babe Ruth, Adolf Hitler, Albert Einstein, John

Lennon; five or six back issues of the *National Geographic*; well-paged fairy-tale compilations by Hans Christian Andersen, the Brothers Grimm, Oscar Wilde; and plenty more. Seeing these books, I had a powerful urge to select one at random, plop down in Creel Jamison's chair, and read, and read, and read, as if I had no other duty or concern in the world.

Allegra brushed past me to the bookcase, knelt, and, with her right hand, pulled out a dilapidated paperback, which she thrust upon me.

"What's this?"

"My favorite, *The Arabian Nights*. My favorite story in it is 'The Young King of the Black Isles.' "

"Why, Allegra?"

Still kneeling, and with her eyes lowered, she raised her left arm, letting her robe's sleeve fall back to her shoulder. Her hand, wrist, and forearm—all the way up to the bruise that she'd showed me at school—consisted of a shiny green crystal, or a sculpted assemblage of crystals, that I at first took for a costume glove, a Halloween gauntlet, that she'd put on to get a gasp out of me. But because it ended in a shapely hand, the mirror image of her right one, and graded imperceptibly into the discolored skin below her elbow, I quickly understood that instead of a flesh-and-blood human hand Allegra had this eerily gorgeous member of organic stone.

If she ungloves for you, Creel Jamison had told me over the telephone, *don't Judas-kiss her. Hear?*

"I'm not ashamed of it," Allegra said, still not looking at me. "Nor of any other part, neither."

I knelt in front of her. "You shouldn't be."

"It's beautiful. Dad sez. He's awways told me thet."

"I agree with him, Allegra."

"I only cover it to keep from gettin marked out a freak, a *real* freak. Dad sez they'd come for me."

"Who?"

"Medical doctors. TV folk. The Ringling Brothers Circus. Greasy lidl carnies. Everbody."

"Your daddy's right again." Except, I silently thought, for his medical-doctor phobia.

"He sez we could prolly make money from it, lots of money, but I'd never have no peace again. So it wouldn't be worth the nonstop harassment n fret."

"Your daddy cares for you. Your daddy's wise."

"It's jes thet now it's goin stony-green *right on up my arm*. It'd stopped for a while, but now it's moving again, and I'm . . . I'm *skeered*, Mrs. Hewitt."

I murmured consolation—who knows what?—but also started wonder-

ing what it would mean to "Judas-kiss" her in the eyes of her unfashionably principled father. Had I traduced the ethics of my calling by coming to see Allegra during Creel's absence and without his permission? No, not strictly speaking, for I'd suspected abuse and hadn't yet identified a culprit. But now, with Allegra's viridescent hand before me as a faceted rebuke, I felt that I'd pushed the situation's protocols into a swampy moral hinterland. Besides, Allegra—unless I'd totally lost my grip on reality—needed medical attention. The emerald glacier inching up her left arm had more in common with a metastasizing cancer than with a cheery crystallization experiment, and for Creel to make her forgo treatment to keep the larger world from ravaging her innocence struck me as unconscionable, and bleakly ironic.

With some effort, I persuaded Allegra to go to Mr. Emmons' house next door, call her dad, and ask him to come home. It was "very important"—she should tell him—that he talk to her school counselor, Mrs. Hewitt, face-to-face.

Allegra dressed casually (jeans, a flannel shirt, *and* her mother's glove, the cuts in which she'd mended with some beige thread), then sauntered across the junky yard to Mr. Emmons' place. I returned to the car and explained to Epifanio all I could without divulging the secret of Allegra's hand. I also apologized for the sit-and-wait role to which circumstances had relegated him.

"No problem," he said. "What's the book?"

I showed him.

"Ah, Scheherazade. I hope we get reprieved too. That this hillbilly hothead doesn't shoot us."

"He's not a hillbilly. Or a hothead."

Allegra trudged back from Emmons' place. "Got him!" she cried. "He's comin!" Banged her way inside; peeked back out. "But he don't like it much!"

"Great," murmured Epifanio.

I thumbed through *The Arabian Nights* to "The History of the Young King of the Black Isles"; then back a page to one of the final paragraphs of its lead-in story, "The Further Adventures of the Fisherman." Silently, I read:

> *Instead of answering these questions the young man began to weep bitterly. "How inconstant is fortune!" cried he; "she takes pleasure to pull down those she has raised." At these words, lifting up his robe, he showed the sultan that he was a man only from the head to the girdle, and that the other half of his body was black marble.*

The sultan witnessing this sight admits that it fills him with horror, adding, "I am impatient to hear your history." In that same state—ex-

pectant impatience—I awaited the coming of Allegra's father, Creel Jamison.

About forty minutes later, he arrived, swinging into the trailer's yard in a rattletrap truck on whose flatbed a tool chest, a hot-water heater, and possibly the interior components of a heat pump jumped like bugs on a hotplate. The way he slammed to a standstill, hopped down, and flung his truck door shut betrayed his seething anger.

"Uh-oh," said Epifanio.

Creel came on bullishly. He shone stocky, muscular, and handsome, a serrated forelock hanging down across his brow like a grackle's wing. At thirty-six, he looked roughneck young: a nervy, two-fisted teenager.

"What're you doin out here, Mrs. Hewitt?" he demanded.

"We came to see—"

"It chaps my butt to leave Nate mannin all six phone lines for a parley that prolly coulda waited till after-hours, doncha think?"

He stopped, tucking his thumbs into his belt and cocking a solid Levi'd hip. He apparently didn't plan to drag us out of Epifanio's car and pistol-whip us. (Thank God.)

"It chaps my butt!" he repeated.

I got out. Introduced Epifanio. Said that Creel and I needed to confer in private, along with Allegra, and that the matter's urgency had led me to ask her to summon him home, an inconvenience that paled beside the physical and mental health issues requiring our attention.

"Well," said Creel. "The kitten ungloved, eh?" He sounded resigned, not jealously put out.

We talked some more at the car. Creel's easier-going tone, along with my assurance that I'd suffer no harm here, persuaded Epifanio that he could responsibly leave. At first, I'd wanted him to stay, not to protect me, but as an ally in my counseling effort. Creel said no, Allegra's privacy counted more than our convenience. Besides, once we'd conferred, Creel would gladly drive me back to Vista Grove. So Epifanio, looking only mildly doubtful of this ad-lib arrangement, said *adio* and putt-putted out of the parts-littered yard.

Inside, Allegra sat in Creel's recliner, her gleaming green arm propped on its armrest, her mama's glove in a helical sort of heap on the floor. When we entered, she lifted an emerald forefinger to acknowledge us. And I saw that her ostensibly petrified appendage—down to its separate digits—could move, that it *lived*. As, of course, cancer cells conquer healthy tissue through an insidiously lively process of subdivision and displacement.

Creel and I sat down on bar stools at the breakfast counter and revolved toward Allegra.

"I guess you kinda like this lady," he said.

"She's okay."

"She's duty-bound and friendly-acting. Whether she's okay or not, darlin, remains to be seen."

"Allegra's frightened," I said. "And you haven't taken her to a doctor."

"A minerologist'd be more like it, doncha think? Sides, I *have* taken her to a doctor. A big-time specialist in Memphis—a do-right Christian—who swore he'd keep her dilemmer strickly confidential. Which he has. So far. For nigh-on ten years. Can we trust you to do the same, Mrs. Hewitt?"

"What did your man in Memphis say? And if this 'do-right Christian' hasn't found a solution, maybe another doctor could help you more."

"Listen. He's presented Allegra's case to all his big-wig colleagues nationwide. *World*wide. As a game. A hypothetical, for-fun-like problem. Sending along all his test results and whatnot over modems and fax machines and e-mail and so on. For feedback."

"I'm famous," Allegra said. "Sort of. 'The Girl with the Crystal Arm.' "

I said, "Diagnosis? Prognosis? Treatment? Speculations? Surely, these networking geniuses have told your doctor friend in Memphis *something*, Mr. Jamison."

"Well, some refused to play. No time. No interest. But others said stuff like 'impossible' or 'too weird for rational discourse,' then tried to work on it, anyway. None of em can figure what it was jump-started the microscopic block-laying or crystallization process, though. There's no decent treatments either. I'd sooner chant over chicken blood under a full moon than try again the chemo and radiation routes that made Allegra sicker than her slow stonifying ever did."

"When did it start?"

"I was a toddler," Allegra said, bumping the recliner's footrest down and reciting a family story she knew by heart: "Mama took me to a GP in Holly Springs, Mississippi, where we was living. A nurse there accused her of abusing me, pinchin the tips of my fingers. Cuz my trouble—"

"Yore specialness," Creel said. "Yore uniqueness."

"—my *trouble* started at my fingertips n worked down my hand to my wrist n from there on up tord my elbow, jes like you see it here." She showed me.

"But what caused the 'trouble' to begin with?" I looked from Allegra to her father.

Creel shrugged. "What starts any cancer?"

"You must have a theory."

"The doctors don't, but *I* should?"

"Do you?"

"Sort of," Creel admitted.

"What is it?"

"Me, I think the trouble came from Angela, her mama. About a year before Allegra was born, Angela became one of them loopy crystal worship-

pers. Mebbe still is. Thought crystals focused spiritual power n boosted sexual energy. She'd sleep with a piece of glauconite—really, just some greensand breccia—under her pillow. She even raked me down the back with it once while we were—" Creel stopped, embarrassed.

"Did you tell your doctor friend this theory?"

"Uh course."

"And he said—?"

"Thet it was nuttier than Angela's crystal fetish. Mebbe so, but it was moren he or his fella geniuses come up with."

To Allegra, I said, "What about the bruise? At school, you made me think your brother Dez did that to you."

"Her skin bruises that way before the crystallizing revs up again," Creel said. "It's sort of what sent her mama off with A. W. Richard. 'Here, you've got her,' she sez. 'I cain't take the slurs I git ever time I drive her to a checkup. Or seeing it happen to her, either.' So she ran."

"But it's okay for *Dez* to live out there nex to her and her doofusy new hubby," Allegra said.

"We tried having Dez visit for the holidays," Creel said. "It didn't work out."

"Why not?"

"I hate his rotten guts is why," Allegra said. "He's jes like Mama, a deserter."

"He'd changed," Creel said. "Talked tough n dirty. Liked to strut around in briefs. Bragged bout all the money he had n how 'def' his mama Mrs. Richard thought he was. Teased Allegra bout her hand, when wunst he was her self-appointed big-brother champion. I chucked him out."

I left my stool, to kneel in front of Allegra with my hands on her knees.

"I can see why you're so frustrated and angry. And I can see"—I nodded at her hand—"why you're scared. How must it feel to have your body turn into something not-you. Into cold and alien stone?"

Before she could answer, Creel said, "It's taken it nine years to git that far. So it's her. And it's not cold. Touch it n see."

Allegra nodded, giving permission. I touched the back of her hand, running my finger along her wrist and the top of her forearm. These smooth faceted surfaces had warmth, a glassy counterfeit of body warmth, and held within their murkier green depths a net of veins. The History, I mused heartbrokenly, of the Princess of Vista Grove. I left off stroking Allegra's arm and began to stroke her cheek.

"It's *her*," Creel said. "It grows with her. She can even move it. It makes her, you know, *unique*."

"Mr. Jamison, she'd be unique without it. And if only this made her unique, you and I would have to pray for blown-glass eyeballs or genuine tortoise-shell skulls to confirm for us *our* uniqueness."

Head cocked, Creel Jamison just stared at me.

"What do you plan to do when this emerald invasion reaches her shoulder? When it spreads up to her neck and down through her torso?"

Allegra began to cry.

"Oh child, I'm sorry." To Creel, I said, "I don't think you're a bad man, and certainly not a deliberate abuser, but I have to report this."

He spun about, propped his elbows on the counter, dropped his chin into his hands.

"Don't you dare," he whispered tightly.

"Why not? *How* can I not?"

I'd begun to regret allowing Epifanio to return to town. I half expected Creel to threaten me, with physical violence or a destructive lawsuit, but instead he said, "Because it won't do no good, ma'am."

"You don't know that."

"I *do* know." Still not looking at me, he slammed one fist down on the counter. "Not only am I not a 'bad man,' I'm not a neglectful one, Mrs. Hewitt. There's nuthin you can do for my baby by reporting this I haven't already given a shot, or mebbe two, mysef. Bout all you can do is make sure the press comes baying in, sniffin n snappin n leg-hikin like a pack of mangy snoopsome hounds."

"There has to be *some* treatment." I patted Allegra's back; she sniffled into my sweater.

"Only one that Dr. Desautels n his high-powered researcher friends ever agreed on."

"Okay. What's that?"

Allegra pulled back and said: "Cut if off."

"Yeah," Creel said. "Amputation."

Creel and Allegra drove me home, Allegra huddled between us in the truck as if sending her mind—her entire self—into some other realm, where the curse of her hand became an asset, where the denizens had resilient bodies of shatterproof glass, bodies that winked in the sunlight like bright transducers.

Or maybe she just felt numb, sledgehammered by all that had happened that afternoon.

What *had* happened?

Most important, I'd caved. I'd let Creel convince me not to report to DFACS, Child Protective Services, or our regional medical center Allegra's extraordinary complaint. Creel had already done all he could. Her condition, although admittedly weird, didn't represent an immediate threat to her life. Nor was it painful. Her glove was the only prophylactic—against ridicule if not further spread of the crystals—that she needed now. If I disclosed a secret that they'd screened for years from our pillaging world, I'd kill their last hope of a joyful Christmas. For, as Creel

saw it, the nastiness of Dez's early exile back to Amarillo had already smutched the season.

"Remember," I told him as they dropped me off. "You've got to stay in touch over the holidays."

"Course," he said.

"And I'm taking Allegra shopping on Friday."

"Thet's fine too."

They drove off, Allegra slumped against the passenger door, her arm tucked out of view, her abstraction from the moment so keen that she reminded me of a kid in a Walker Evans photograph from the Great Depression.

On Wednesday, I got a letter from Creel. He'd scrawled it in longhand, with a No. 2 pencil; it took me at least a minute to decipher any sentence of six words or more. I reproduce the letter (legibly) here:

Dear Mrs. Hewit,

Thanks for agreing to our agreement. Thanks for caring about Allegra. She loves you right back. I want you to believe *I would never hurt or in any way shape or form put in jprdy her health/happiness. I am her father, she is my blood, I see her as a living breathing Gift of God. I also believe all things*—all things—*work together for good even if we can't always see His finger pointing like an arrow past all the evil crap at Glory.*

Many people wld lable Allegra's condition unnatural. Even Dr. Desautels used that word once to me, in front of her—good Christan though he is—& I wanted to bust him for it. Well it may be strange or unpresidented or whatever but I don't think it's unnatural. A truely great book I found maybe 15 yrs ago—The Seven Mysteries of Life—*helped me to see that what's hapening to Allegra doesn't make her a freak or a spawn of Satin. Look—*

"Putting it in terms of evolution"—I am not a Cretionist, I believe in God-sparked Evolution—"when a bunch of milling molecules makes its initial change toward what is generally considered life. . . . they begin to line up, to sort themselves, to form rows, layers, lattices. In short, they crystallize. . . . & this is why the crystal is the basic structure of life, of order, & why ordered solids from rock to wood to muscle to bone to gene are describable as crystal." You can look this up if you get the book, it's on pg 445.

Tests show the microscopic crystals in Allegra's hand—wrist, forearm, & maybe even right on up if it doesn't stop—are triclinic, *layered in little boxes w/ unequal axes & oblique cnnctng angles. That's not* unnatural, *it's just the way some crystals grow, & some of them—crystls, I mean—grow like rengzd life forms. Under a microscope, for*

exmpl. bauxite looks like clumps of garden pees, asbestos like hair, limonite like aspearagus sprouts. So why shd we get all hot & bothrd if cells in a God-made human creture start going to crystl in her & lining up in beutiful tilted boxes. No reson but fear.

I don't fear, Mrs. Hewit. God's in charge, even in this. Crystls conduct electrcty, & piezoelctrcty shows up everywhere in living tissue. So the charge *that God has He puts in animal & vgtbl cells to make it power their senses—hearing, feeling, taste, & so on. It irks me people can't see that, knowing how they see. Anyway, Allegra's special, a one of a kind wonder, but she's* not *unnatural, & I love her like I lov myself.*

Yrs sncrly, Creel J.

An extraordinary letter: puzzling, troubling, full of cagy truck-driver or garage-mechanic eloquence. Non-Southerners, I understood, would probably conclude from it that Creel was a religious fanatic. Me, I regarded him only as a believer with a single self-decided agenda, namely, Allegra. And maybe that agenda *did* qualify him as a fanatic.

For me, the troubling part of Creel's letter didn't lie in its references to God, but in its attempt to persuade me—and, more important, himself—that the crystal takeover Allegra was enduring, again, signaled a benign manifestation of His divine ordering.

A wistful hope. Pure self-delusion.

Allegra—if not tomorrow, next year, or even a decade down the line—would die of her affliction. It would . . . well, *petrify* her. From fingertips to foot soles. From nails to pate. Vista Grove's city councilors, if she petrified here in the county, might one day put her on the Post Office lawn, as an Oz-ish memorial to herself. And if, in her final vitreous state, she could still move a little, hooray. City employees wouldn't have to reposition her every week to keep our Bermuda grass from browning and blowing off.

That night I dreamt of Allegra; in fact, of all my charges at Vista Grove.

Class by class and grade by grade, our kids filed into the cafeteria buck-naked: lumpy gnomes and trolls in amongst the agile sylphs and leprechauns. Not only were they naked, they were transparent (but more like plastic anatomical figures than like ghosts). Their nakedness—this detail underscored the fact that I was dreaming—made no difference to any of them. They all behaved like veteran nudists, completely at ease with bare fannies and air-stroked genitalia. When they sat down to eat, the cameraman in my subconscious dollied in for a closeup on Allegra.

Her lunch tray held dozens of cubes of shimmering lime Jell-O; nothing else. She spooned them down. They filled her from her clear-plastic

toes to her knees, from her knees to her hips, from her hips to her armpits, and from her armpits to the jut of her willful chin.

As her classmates ate—pizza, green beans, canned corn, rice pudding, the standard cafeteria fare—they acquired clothes.

Only Allegra turned emerald-green from toe to crown. On her last few bites she packed Jell-O into her sinuses, and up into her cranium, with a severe gusto.

Finally, all the other kids, fully dressed, turned toward her to gawk.

Allegra sat amidst them like a transmogrified princess, as petite as an elf, as green as bomb-hot chrysoberyl. The sight of her, once she'd finished popping Jell-O cubes, stirred long but self-conscious laughter.

On Friday, without coming in, Creel dropped Allegra off at my house. I took her shopping. As Christmas gifts, I bought her a long-sleeved blouse, some elbow-length blue-silk gloves, some mittens, and a pair of leather dress gloves.

"I only need one of each of em," she said.

"It's cold enough now to wear both gloves. Don't discard the extras. They're not really extras."

At Vaughn's Hardware, with money she'd put aside from her allowance, Allegra bought her dad a gabardine work shirt and a rubber-headed mallet. The mallet was to pound shelving into place without scarring the boards, a mistake to which Creel's impatience frequently recommitted him.

"Anyone else to buy for?" I asked.

"Who? Not Dez. Absodamnlutely not Mama. You mebbe, but if so, I wouldn't buy in front of you."

"Like I've done you?"

"Thet's different. We had . . . fun."

Vaughn's doesn't gift-wrap so we returned to my house to wrap Allegra's presents for Creel. Allegra insisted on doing the job herself. She slipped off her mended glove and set to work, her left hand moving as easily as her right. I watched it, alert and grateful, thinking that for these few moments she had entrusted to me her most cherished secret—with Creel unavailable to give his imprimatur to the disclosure.

"What do you want to happen?" I said.

She raised her hand. *The* hand. "Bout this?" I nodded. She resumed gift-wrapping, shook her head. "If I had three wishes, I'd wish for it to turn back norml. If thet didn't work, I'd wish for it to fall off hurtlessly while I sleep, like a lizard's tail. Then I'd git me a silver hook-hand n run Eddie Staley straight into Pinson Quarry Lake."

"What if *that* didn't work?"

"My third wish? Jes to gemmify all over, I guess."

" 'Gemmify'? Is that your word, Allegra?"

"I don't know. Mebbe it's Creel's. Mebbe I got it out of thet book he likes to crib from. Anyway, it's what I think *is* happenin, Mrs. Hewitt. Ever day."

She had a tiny purse, from which she removed a creased paper scrap. "Read this." Someone had typed its message—maybe even Allegra, whom I imagined tapping away earnestly at a battered Remington:

> *. . . . crystallization is essentially a cooling, settling-down and going-to-sleep process in which structure is formed by atoms expending energy and radiating heat as they compose themselves like a bear getting ready to hibernate. The crystal's energy leaks away most easily from its edges and easiest of all from its outer corners and protruding points (pg 451)*

"While it grows, the green stays warm. But what I think's happenin is, I'm coolin down. Gemmifyin. I'll prolly end up like Sleeping Beauty fore her prince showed up to plant thet magic kiss on her."

I put my finger on a bow Allegra was tying.

She said, "They's one good thing to remember, though. Jes one, but a really priddy neat one."

"What's that?"

"When I gemmify all over—cool down to total deadness— well, my body—my *corpse?*—I don't think it'll rot, it'll jes lay out somewhere n . . . you know, *erode.*"

I spent three days of my Christmas break in Savannah, at a Ramada Inn near the Civic Center, where I attended a road-show mounting of *The Phantom of the Opera.* I needed a respite from Vista Grove Elementary and my fatiguing caseload.

Over the first four days of the holidays, in addition to my attentions to Allegra, I'd helped Epifanio admit a fifth-grade boy to Manumission, a local clinic specializing in therapy for youthful sex offenders; accompanied a sobbing third-grader to the funeral of her mother, a victim of breast cancer; and tried to comfort a distraught second-grader who'd dialed 911 when his parents—a carousing mother and a perpetually soused stepdad—abandoned him for two days in a shotgun rental property with no food, hot water, or lights.

Allegra's case preoccupied me, though. After sitting high in the balcony at *Phantom*, and catching maybe half the words in its libretto, I returned to my motel room fuming and unable to sleep. So I rummaged up a sheet of stationery and wrote Creel Jamison a letter:

> *I'm keeping my end of the bargain* [I believe I wrote], *but I worry about Allegra more and more. She told me after our mini-shopping*

spree that she thinks she'll eventually succumb to the vitality-freezing process advancing from her left hand. The Latin word applicable here is sinister, *meaning "on the left" or "unlucky," and in today's English "threatening evil" or "presaging trouble." How can we ignore a sign so conspicuous, Mr. Jamison, and so dire?*

I suggest that you reconsider and possibly even follow through with the amputation option. You must have thought long and hard about it already—I don't assume you've summarily dismissed it—but should it afford a surgical stop to the threat to Allegra's life, with no unforeseen physical side-effects or any chance that the crystallization process might begin again, then surely your daughter deserves to benefit from it.

Please let me hear from you. I will return to Vista Grove two or three days before New Year's. My warmest holiday greetings.

Once home, I swung by the Post Office to see what mail had come. Amid the mostly unwelcome deluge, I had a yellow card summoning me inside for a package pickup. This package was a 4" X 6" box wrapped in tan paper, with Allegra Jamison's return address. From its grease-pencil printing, I knew that she had mailed it herself.

Inside the tan wrapping, which I tore off while parked in front of the Post Office, I found gold-foil Christmas paper, a smushed yellow drugstore bow, and a note, whose printed message went: "SORRY THIS IS LATE. I TELL CREEL I DONT WANT TO HAVE MY HAND, ACTULLY MY ARM CUT OFF. NOT NOW. LIKE HE SAY, ITS ME AND I AM IT."

I flipped the note over: "IF I DO GET IT CUT, I LIKE YOU TO HAVE IT. ITS VALUBLE, CREEL SAS. I AM SICK OF IT BUT YOU CULD PUT IT SOMEWERE IN YOU HOUSE TO REMEBER ME AND I WOOD BE HAPY. MERRY CRISTMAS, ALLEGRA."

I laid her note on the dash, pulled the Christmas paper off my gift: her favorite old paperback of *The Arabian Nights*.

Early in January, the kids came back. Allegra smiled at me every time we passed in the halls. She had stopped wearing her mother's glove over her secret hand, choosing to flaunt instead either the blue silk glove or the fawn-colored leather one that I'd bought her before Christmas at Pinson's.

In a way, I suppose, I now considered her (with a scrum of midnight mental qualifications) a resolved case. Or, at least a *semi*resolved case. I turned the bulk of my time to classroom cutups, underachievers, and troublemakers; the chronic butts of others' lampoons, the self-esteem-shorn, and dumb-as-dirt space cadets; abuse victims, scowling quasi-psychos, and maladjusted newcomers. My list goes on.

Late in the month—freezing cold, no snow—Beth Peaden ran past my office. Ran back. Peeked in.

"Quick, Juanita! There's a commotion on the playground! A veritable riot, looks like!"

I ran coatless down the hall, out the side door, and along Vista Grove's cyclone fence to playground zero. An icy wind, or winds, stabbed through me like a convocation of darning needles. Boys from two of our fifth-grade classes had Allegra Jamison penned into a gravely corner of the yard. Rob Pino clung like a spider to the fence, wedging himself a foot or so over her head with the fingers of one hand and the soft toes of his sneakers. From his free hand, a blue silk glove streamed, whipping frenziedly about as he led his buddies in a chorus of chimplike hoots. Eddie Staley hooted louder than Rob, feinted menacing runs at Allegra, and laughed when Rob lost his grip, nearly barrel-rolling down on her.

"Geek, freak!" the boys chanted: *"We grabbed a peek at her hand! / Geek, freak! / Lookit her wickity hand!"*

As Beth, Mr. Buchanan, and I converged on the spot, some of the boys parted truculently to let us through. Allegra became visible—clearly visible—for the first time. She stood facing her tormentors, her left arm raised. Every time one of them, including Eddie, feinted toward her, she pivoted to catch the anticipated blow on her coruscating green arm. The sight of Beth Peaden, Mr. Buchanan, Mr. Vicic, and me all bearing down on her seemed to enrage her further. She smacked Rob with the back of her hand, clubbed Eddie between the eyes, knocked a kid I couldn't identify out of her way, and broke across the yard on a desperate run toward the pecan grove bordering our school to the north.

Luckily (I guess), it was Friday, the one day Mr. Buchanan lets us dress casually. I had on jeans, an embroidered cambric shirt, and low-cut beige sneakers. I took out after Allegra. She could fly, though, and wriggled through a gap in the gate that I would not've fit through even if I'd drunk an Alice-in-Wonderland shrinking potion. *"Allegra!"* I cried as she pelted like sixty through the stately naked grey columns of the grove, the pecan trees' winter branches blooming atop them like huge, luminous ganglia. She ignored me. And kept running. And had almost disappeared by the time—fingers raw, teeth clacking—I pulled the collapsing gate far enough inward to let me squeeze through it after her.

"Catch her!" Mr. Buchanan yelled. "Bring her back!"

Permission to pursue. I trotted through the grove looking for footprints, knee-clipped shrubs, sneaker-trod brown grass. I found nothing but open chapels among the symmetrically spaced pecans and cold wind funneling through their connected halls. Allegra had gone to ground as surely as a fox.

I estimated the temperature at 35 degrees F., with a wind-chill factor dropping it to 20 degrees or less. Suddenly, though, the sun came out, a

white fish-eye behind and above me. Swathes of skim-milk blue washed out around it, in bands that rippled into the skyey greyness ahead. The fish-eye didn't warm me any, but the wafting blue lifted my spirits. I crossed a narrow asphalt access road separating the pecan grove from what looked like an illegal dump site. By this time, though, I'd given up my trot for a winded stroll, one hand at my waist and the sweat on my shoulder blades cooling like . . . well, a crystal whose energy has started to leak away "from its outer corners and protruding points."

I found Allegra in the unlicensed dump.

On a refuse mound overlooking a plain of toppled freezers, discarded golf clubs, and gutted TV sets, she stood with her sinister arm raised in blessing or renunciation. A blessing for the scarred earth, I thought, or a hopeful renunciation of the stone cancer in her hand. The fish-eye sun rayed through it, revealing its changed bones and mutated veins. It threw wheeling green lattices down across the debris and blazed with the redemptive authority of a lightning rod.

"*Allegra!*"

Perhaps thirty yards separated us. In spite of the wind, Allegra heard me and turned. Tears dirtied her face. Her eyes showed no sign of recognition. However, her hand stayed up so that when she drew it once from right to left across her body, I realized that she meant this slow wave for both greeting and farewell. A salute and a valediction.

Come back with me! I started to cry. But didn't because she plunged sure-footedly down the mound, keeping her balance even as pop-top rings, rotten cardboard, pickle jars, quicksand coffee grounds, etc., etc., squirted out from under her. At the bottom, she ran on, weaving among appliance husks, bleached animal corpses, and other wreckage until out of sight. Hugging myself, I turned and walked back to school.

Allegra had seriously injured Rob Pino, Eddie Staley, and a boy named Chris Ritter in her single-handed efforts to hold her tormentors at bay. Good for her, I thought. But the wound to Rob's arm, the cut on Eddie's face, and the queer gouge in the Ritter boy's chest had nasty edges and a sickening depth. Lots of stitches. Lots of outrage. Both of Eddie's parents came to school to berate Mr. Buchanan. The threat of multiple lawsuits hung in the air like a blur of August no-see-ums. It wouldn't have surprised me if the families of our half-pint provocateurs had put together a lynch party and a torchlight parade to the Jamisons' trailer.

The upshot of the recess attack on Allegra was that Creel Jamison quit Nathan Crowder's truck brokerage and pulled her out of school. In fact, the two of them must have hightailed it out of Vista Grove, and maybe the state, as soon as Allegra managed to pick her way home and explain to her daddy what had happened. I've never seen Creel or Allegra again, and I don't think that anyone else in town has either.

* * *

Over a long weekend in February, when Beth Peaden's husband Matt flew to Jacksonville on business, Beth stayed with me. We had a pajama party, behaved like over-the-hill teenagers, and talked a lot about the Jamison case. I felt released from the stricture of confidentiality because (1) dozens of us had seen Allegra's hand; (2) the Jamisons had fled like guilty assault suspects; and (3) Beth had followed Allegra's case all year, insofar as she could, as her teacher.

"I figured a disease," Beth said. "Never . . . *that*."

"How could anyone figure the displacement of human tissue by minute triclinic crystals? No way."

"The condition dooms her. So, so bleak." Beth shuddered. In fact, she began to lose her composure. "A *horror*."

"Maybe not."

"Oh, no? She's like the guy in the Poe story 'A Cask of Amontillado,' who gets bricked up behind a wall. That fella only had to wait days to die. Allegra has to live with her doom—a more horrible kind of bricking up—for . . . well, who knows for how long?"

"A more *beautiful* kind of bricking up."

"Don't romanticize it, or her family life, or her fate."

"Beth, I go bump against more hopeless, intractable cases than Allegra's almost every week. None more *unusual*, I grant you, but many sadder and a few even harder to envision turning out acceptably."

The second-grader whose mother's sleazoid lover burned him all over the torso with a cigar. Six- and seven-year-old rape victims of both sexes. A conscienceless sixth-grader, possibly a case of fetal-alcohol syndrome, who hanged a stray dog in our gymnasium. Foster children swapped from home to home for the entire duration of their schooling. Chronic liars. I couldn't think of any one of these kids who didn't seem as profoundly afflicted as Allegra, even if their cases would never provide fodder for a weekly "investigative" tabloid or a TV show about Astonishing Conundrums.

"Allegra's mama ran off when she was two," Beth said. "Her older brother probably molested her."

"But her daddy loves her, and she's lived continuously in his household since infancy."

"He's a God nut. He picks her up and moves her every time there's trouble."

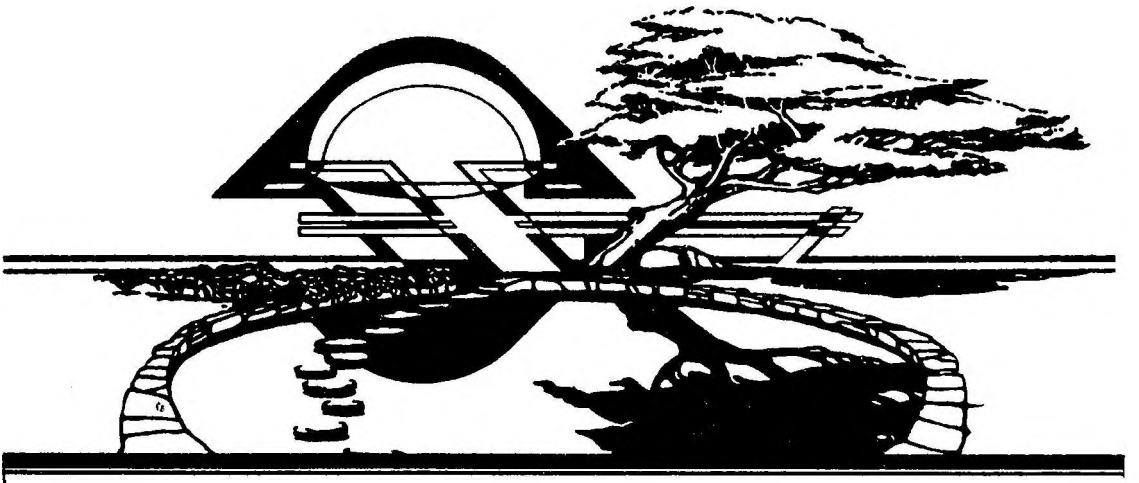
"He picks her up and moves her," I echoed. "And he seeks meaning even in the bleakest anomalies."

Mexican standoff. We popped popcorn, watched *The Seventh Voyage of Sinbad* on TBS, and went to bed. Beth fell asleep. I writhed about in my blankets, thinking of Allegra, of how much and genuinely I missed her. She was dead to me—like a child felled by leukemia or a prodigal van-

ished into a plague-ridden land. Sleepless, I turned on a lamp and picked up my copy of *The Arabian Nights*. Going through "The Young King of the Black Isles," I came upon this passage:

> *The enchantress went immediately out of the Palace of Tears to fulfill [the sultan's] commands, and by the exercise of her spells soon restored to the young king his natural shape, bidding him, however, on pain of death, to begone from her presence instantly. The young king, yielding to necessity, retired to a remote place. . . .*

My hand, holding the book, fell asleep, but I could not and sat waiting for slumber in my overwarm room. ●



We appreciate comments about the magazine, and would like to hear from more of our readers. Editorial correspondence should include the writer's name and mailing address, even if you use e-mail. Letters can be e-mailed to 71154.662@compuserve.com or posted to Letters to the Editor, *Asimov's*, 1540 Broadway, New York, N.Y. 10036. Letters may be shortened and edited for publication. The e-mail address is for editorial correspondence *only*—questions about subscriptions should be directed to Box 5130, Harlan, IA 51593-5130.

ON BOOKS

Paul Di Filippo

Two Critics, a Reprint, and Several Chapbooks

Only once in my life was I ever moved to steal a library book. The volume was Damon Knight's *In Search of Wonder* (1956). The circumstances: I was thirteen, my allowance would never stretch to cover a hardcover book, and where would I ever find such an item from such an obscure publisher anyhow? Moreover, I was under a spell. The heretofore unimaginable notion that my beloved SF literature could be *theorized* about—intelligently, heartfully evaluated and discussed—combined with Knight's supple, sardonic prose, had bound me in chains of avarice. Besides, the book hadn't been checked out for a couple of months previous, proving that no one needed it or appreciated it as much as I.

Under similar circumstances, I would certainly have to steal John Clute's new *Look at the Evidence* (Serconia Press, hardcover, $30.00, 448 pages). This collection of Clute's criticism (much of it from the woefully under-read *Interzone*, and hence unfamiliar to American readers) spanning the five years from 1987 to 1992 (with many interpolated comments from 1995) evokes the same feelings as the Knight classic. Written under the deadline-heavy constraints of periodical reviewing, the assembled columns are both timebound and timeless, mixing quotidian soundings of the SF scene with eternal verities. Yoked in the same harness, they all pull together toward an ideal, eternally retreating goal: "unmasking the being of [any given] book; re-creating that being; freeing the book from the author of the book."

Much like Knight, Clute is a critic's critic: erudite, stylish, humorous, candid, passionate, dedicated to literature. If he had contributed nothing other than the insight that all futuristic SF has a "real year" of attitudes lurking beneath it (Clute's Law?), he would deserve honor. But he's done much, much more—more almost perhaps than SF deserves sometimes. When he loves a book, he communicates that enthusiasm contagiously. When he thinks an author—even one of his favorites—has been particularly boneheaded, he lets loose with atomic cannons: his demolition of the Panshins' *The World Beyond the Hill* (1989) and Stephen Donaldson's first *Gap* book (1990) are prime examples.

Occasionally, Clute's Johnsonian vocabulary cloys: if I never see the words "remit," "meniscus," or "congeries" again, my gratitude will be boundless. Also, several metaphors

here and there resemble two-headed calves: "something ominous throbbing like a toe-stub of tomtoms in the deep waters of the circumambient world" conjures up only a submerged sandaled beatnik with bongo. But on the whole, his distinctive prose is a dappled serpent that enwraps and hypnotizes.

John Clute is a unique resource, our own postmodern Edmund Wilson. His touch on a book does indeed liberate.

Clute mentions that among his generational peers, he feels an affinity with both Norman Spinrad and Thomas Disch. It's a neat synchronicity then that brings us Disch's *The Castle of Indolence* (Picador USA, hardcover, $21.00, 229 pages) in the same season.

To state that the essays collected here deal solely with poetry is both accurate and misleading. The surface subject matter, the springboards, are indeed poetry and poets, both classic (Emerson, Hardy) and modern (various). But along the way, Disch discourses on SF, the novelist's life, market forces, academic fads, political correctness, minimalism, and countless other topics. For Disch, who moves effortlessly among many literary spheres himself, everything is interconnected (one of poetry's dictums, of course) and illuminations radiate from diverse sources.

For those readers like myself, whose poetry reading stopped at the floodtide of High Modernism (and Disch faces squarely the dilemma that "poetry has lost most of its audience and much of its cachet"; in fact, it's a regular leitmotif), *Castle of Indolence* proves nonetheless to be a stimulating, entrancing read—an education, in fact. Without making Disch sound professorial—he's the opposite—he has the admirable reviewer's knack of bringing an untutored reader right up to speed on the subject matter at hand. Unfamiliarity with the poets under discussion is no bar from immensely enjoying this book.

As a critic, Disch employs a more pellucid, conversational style than does Clute. But both men place a premium on intelligence, passion, devotion, and hard work (Disch's title, in fact, refers to the slothy abode of easy, bad poetry). Disch's often acerbic comments bear endless quoting. Let me attempt to tantalize you with a few: "At such moments, Emerson's grandiloquence verges on that of Sousa or Streisand." On Rod McKuen: "In a steamy mirror all men are twins." "[Charles Olson's girlfriend] kept the horse but dumped the poet. Later women were not so wise."

Finally, as a kind of companion volume, let me recommend Disch's own poetry, most recently collected in *Burn This* (Wiseacre Books, 114 Oak Street, Patchogue, NY 11772, trade, $12.00. 126 pages). Rescued from a host of publications over a span of years (1968-1994), these poems range from the witty formalism of "The Thirty-Nine Articles" (which instructs the reader in how to write a sestina while becoming one itself) to the sprawling embrace of "The Long Poem."

Whether Disch's keen eye focuses on death ("The Art of Dying"), nature ("The Return to Nature"), language ("On the Use of the Masculine-Preferred"), or less celestial topics ("The Exigent Poet"), he devotes his whole armory to the subject, rendering even his slighter, humorous poems into gems. Here in its entirety is an example:

WHAT TASTE FORBIDS
appetite
excuses

The omnibus volume *Alastor* (Tor Books, hardcover, $25.95, 479 pages) ushers back into print three of Jack Vance's finest books: *Trullion: Alastor 2262* (1973); *Marune: Alastor 933* (1975); *Wyst: Alastor 1716* (1978). In a single volume, these three novels are almost an embarrassment of riches, showcasing Vance's enormous talents in a way that the singleton appearance of the interlinked books could not. Despite the oldest being nearly twenty-five years old, these books are as fresh as if newly minted. *Wyst* has even improved with age, its satire of a politically correct, dole-doped society gaining sharpness in the light of America's own long downhill slide. Packed with cunning villains, deadly seductresses, conflicted heroes, unfathomable aliens, exotic locales, these novels are archetypical subcreations, worlds that make our real one seem wan and etiolated. If all SF was this good, it would all deserve to survive for decades.

For over a decade Chris Drumm (Chris Drumm Books, PO Box 445, Polk City, Iowa 50226) has been producing neat little chapbooks redolent of love, talent and a keen eye for niche marketing. Born mostly as an attempt to resurrect R. A. Lafferty's career (such as it is), Drumm's line soon expanded to include a host of other projects. Here's a recent exhibition of his wares.

Two bibliographies, *A Cordwainer Smith Checklist* by Mike Bennett and *Chronography: A Chronological Bibliography of Books by Charles Harness* by T. Koppel. Each of these contains tantalizing information. For Smith, the fact that he once thought of titling *Norstrilia* (1975) as *Everyone's Fond of Money*. For Harness, the revelation of five unsold novels. Two volumes of poetry, *Sorceries and Sorrows* by Jessica Amanda Salmonson and *Blood Routines* by Joel Ward, the former containing Poe-esque nightmares, the latter surreal meditations. Three short story collections, *Night Eyes* by Bruce Boston; *The Bestseller and Other Tales* by Don Webb; and *The Unpublished Gunn: Part One* by James Gunn. Boston's and Webb's adroit postmodern fabulations are complemented by Gunn's circa-1940 pulp exercises that show the growth of a writer from amateur to pro. Lastly, Steve Rasnic Tem's *Celestial Inventory* is a novelette detailing with excruciating precision the obsessions and terrors inherent in mute creation.

Send for Drumm's catalog, and treat yourself to some good things in small packages.

Eating Crow

Alert readers nearly a decade ago might have been impressed by a story in *Interzone* by one Scott Bradfield. Titled "The *Flash!* Kid," the story told of a boy's contact with an alien artifact and the strange changes it wrought on him. The style was zippy and assured, sly and caustic. Plainly, this was a writer to watch.

Primed by this story, our hypothetical reader might have noticed the appearance of Bradfield's first novel, *The History of Luminous Motion* (1989), even though the book surfaced in the waters of the mainstream. With affinities to both Günter Grass's *The Tin Drum* (1959) and Ian McEwen's *The Cement Garden* (1978), foreshadowing the movie *Kids* (1995), *Motion* was the first-person narrative of eight-year-old Philip Davis, an amoral monster all too familiar from actual headlines. Abandoning the realistic speech and observational powers of a preteen for the vocabulary and insights of a punk Rimbaud, Bradfield propelled the reader on a phantasmagoric voyage through the minefields of contemporary West Coast culture. Superbly evoking the detritus of our lives, Bradfield exhibited a fascination with the secret lives of families and houses, the psychosis of adopting an SF attitude to real life, and the affectless sheen of rootless killers.

These themes continued to appear in his short-story collection, *Dream of the Wolf* (1990), which incorporated "The *Flash!* Kid," and new threads appeared: the radicalizing power of strange dreams, the moral superiority of animals. In his second novel, *What's Wrong with America* (1994), Bradfield took the naïvely deadly murderess Dolores Starr of his story "The Darling" and transformed her into sixty-nine-year-old Emma O'Hallahan, who offs her husband and a nosy neighbor one fine suburban day when she just can't take their inanity anymore. Told in diary form, Emma's spiralling descent into hallucinatory nightmare manages to be both hilarious (in the grand tradition of little-old-lady murderer) and savagely damning of Western anomie.

All this prequel leads up to Bradfield's new book, *Animal Planet* (Picador USA, hardcover, $22.00, 231 pages). While a quick comic read, it disappoints in both depth and surface, lacking the hypnagogic allure and off-kilter insights of his earlier work. Still, the book offers its own modest attractions.

Animal Planet falls into the category of sentient animal fiction, a broad territory that encompasses writers from Aesop to Richard Adams, Beatrix Potter to Brian Jacques (and one in which Bradfield had previously dabbled: see the story "Dazzle" in his collection).

One day a revolt breaks out at the London Zoo. Inspired in part by the mocking rhetoric of Charlie the Crow, the caged animals escape and establish a short-lived encampment against human hegemony. Once the revolt is broken,

the troublemaking animals are quickly dispersed around the globe, with Charlie himself escaping to Antarctica, where he teams up with a penguin named Buster (who reminded me of no one so much as *Bloom County*'s Opus). The rest of the book details Charlie's rise and fall, a worldwide animal revolution, and the way in which the human mediasphere reacts to and shapes events, "the world of culture mobil[izing] itself around them like an army of misinformation."

Bradfield's animals undergo shifting depictions, almost like the animal totems in Native American myths. At times they are represented as being small, feathered, beaked and furred; at other times, they are clothes-wearing, human-sized creatures, able to manipulate the tools of the handed ones. This kind of deliberate inconsistency militates against any clear readerly identification with the animals. (For a counterexample, read John Crowley's *Beasts* [1976].) And since all the human characters are cardboard, the reader's attention must focus on the satirical elements, which are just too weak to support the book.

Bradfield's targets are Hollywood, the publishing industry, superpowers, and upper-middle-class complacency. Hardly the most radical strawmen for abuse, nor does Bradfield have much new to say, other than "greed rules." His broad strokes paint a clumsy, unfresh picture—surprisingly so, given his earlier toothy acuity.

A final problem is how we are meant to read the allegorical status of the animals. At times, as when Roy the Gorilla is explicitly likened to a plantation slave or Charlie is nicknamed Nig, Bradfield seems to want to tell a parable about the fate of African-Americans. At other times, as when whites can't distinguish an Eskimo woman (named, yuck, Muk Luk) from the animals, he appears to be telling a story about European colonialism. While a one-for-one correspondence is not necessary in such a fabulation, Bradfield seems both to want such a coherence and confusingly to undermine it.

What remains to enjoy in the book is the depiction of Charlie, who stays refreshingly individuated. Trampled by the forces he rather selfishly releases, he undergoes betrayal, martyrdom, and a final redemption, providing the book with a closing invigoration.

Can You Do Anything When I Feel This?

Circlet Press (PO Box 15143, Boston, MA 02215) is the intriguing enterprise run by Cecilia Tan. Specializing in "erotic science fiction," Circlet Press offers collections and anthologies that deliver more heavily on the erotica than the SF. That speculative components would tend to get minimized in the face of human (and alien!) passions is only predictable, a testament to the difficulty of marrying any two genres (such as SF and mystery fiction) and indeed the im-

balance is no detriment to the enjoyment of these sexy tales.

Selling Venus (trade, $9.95, 143 pages) bills itself as "futuristic tales of the age-old tradition of exchanging sex for money." Certain themes and tropes predominate. Androids and direct neural stimulation fascinate these writers, and provide fodder for epistemological quandaries. Cyberpunk venues seem remarkably adaptable to tales of prostitution—a telling reflection.

S/M Futures (trade, $12.95, 170 pages) caters to more esoteric tastes. (Yet not unprecedented in SF: consider Laurence Janifer's *Bloodworld* [1965] for one.) Perhaps not surprisingly, this collection contains more stories that engender real SF estrangements, such as Lauren Burka's "The Specialist" and Thomas Roche's "Dark Fiber." Both volumes feature intelligent and principled introductions by Tan. A final feature to note is the appearance of so many female writers in this enterprise. Porn as a male-dominated industry seems an outmoded paradigm.

Dreaming Tomorrow Into Being

If Jack Kerouac had written Samuel Delany's *The Einstein Intersection* (1967), the result might resemble Jonathan Lethem's picaresque, robustly melancholy second novel, *Amnesia Moon* (Harcourt Brace, hardcover, $20.00, 247 pages). But then again, I might just be dreaming this.

The book's warped version of the standard upfront disclaimer provides a hint of what's to come: "The incidents and situations depicted in the lives of the readers of *Amnesia Moon*, as well as in the life of its author, exist solely in the imaginations of the novel's characters, and are not to be construed as real."

In the near future, things have come apart. Alien invasion, psychotropic warfare, environmental disaster—the cause is any, all, or none of these. But the effects are indisputable. The world—America, specifically—is now divided into zones of altered reality, subject to the shaping influences of the occasional lucid dreamer, whose flights of fancy become other people's reality (as in, of course, so much of Philip K. Dick's work, and Le Guin's *The Lathe of Heaven* [1971]).

Living in a shattered Wyoming community that evokes the ambiance of a dozen classic apocalyptic venues all run through a blender, our protagonist, Chaos, appears to be such a powerful figure, yet one wounded by amnesia and kept in subjugation by fellow dreamer, the Palmer-Eldritch-like Kellogg. One day Chaos's disgust and unease reach the boiling point: he assaults Kellogg and hits the road, determined to discover his past. Along for the ride comes Melinda Self, furry thirteen-year-old foil, a ruefully humorous, tough-minded daughter figure.

His hegira takes Chaos through a handful of twisted communities, eventually depositing him in a relatively functional San Francisco.

Along the way, tidbits of information come to him. He learns that he is really Everett Moon, self-exiled from a former life, complete with duties and allegiances, enemies and lovers. How Everett untangles his past and resolves it forms the narrative thrust of the book.

But what really makes the fine, autumnal novel so intriguing and captivating are two things. First, the florid, yet controlled surrealism that never lapses into obscurity or slips Lethem's leash of taut prose. In what is obviously a conscious tactic, Lethem has toned down his style from his first book, *Gun, With Occasional Music* (1994), so as to always keep a transparent window between reader and events.

An even more deeply attractive aspect to this book, however, is the way in which Lethem manages to objectify genuine emotional states without falsifying them. A man who lives his life in an elevator, one who wakes each morning captive to imposed feelings of negativity, a woman rendered midget-sized except in the presence of a controlling lover, the sensations attendant on being transformed into a sentient clock—all these situations and many more are exquisitely portrayed by Lethem, evoking strange or common emotions shared by many of us each day. In this regard, the book also reminds me of John Crowley's *Engine Summer* (1979).

To read *Amnesia Moon* is to fall gleefully down a rabbit-hole that leads to a land whose traps and snares, pleasures and horrors are congruent with the hidden deep structures of our hearts.

Let's Get Small

Nanodreams (Baen Books, mass market, $5.99, 285 pages), edited by Elton Elliott, is a well-conceived and neatly executed anthology whose time has come. Or perhaps we should make that "whose time *may* come." As its title portends, *Nanodreams* focuses on the future of molecular-scale engineering, its potential for both good and evil. Mixing original pieces (both fiction and fact) with reprints, the anthology covers a lot of territory, while not foreclosing future ventures of a similar sort. The book suceeds in its goal of provoking a storm of thought about nanotech that extends far beyond its pages. This is a *big* topic, whose implications are enormous.

The opener is the short version of Greg Bear's "Blood Music," which retains its prophetic qualities and shows the nanotech revolution at its (possibly uncontrolled) inception. Closing the volume is Marc Stiegler's "The Gentle Seduction," which carries nanotech almost to its conceivable limits in time and space. Between these two, the stories choose to focus mostly on closeups of nanotechnology impacting on representative individuals. The tone ranges from despairing (Richard Geis's "Monster Hunt") through cautionary (Kevin Anderson's "Dogged Persistence") to accepting

(Charles Sheffield's "Deep Safari"). Each author contributes insightful commentary on his own piece as well.

This volume is a unique example of how SF can conduct a helpful dialogue with real science, and actually function like a tugboat guiding the liner of Progress.

Knocking at Tech-Heaven's Gates

One writer who has obviously spent much fruitful speculative thought on nanotechnology is the impressively talented newcomer Linda Nagata. Her first two novels popped up at either end of 1995 as paperback originals, and are so well done that they deserve not to sink into the morass of strippable verbiage.

First to surface was *The Bohr Maker* (Bantam, mass market, $4.99, 325 pages). Shifting amidst a variety of sweat-redolent, lived-in, high-tech venues, this book reminded me most obviously of Michael Swanwick's *Vacuum Flowers* (1987), boasting believable characters who were truly citizens of the future, in both attitudes and capabilities.

Playing fluidly with concepts of identity and reality (simulated versions of personality and surroundings compete with baseline originals), Nagata wove a thrilling tale of the deadly hunt for the device of the title, a unique colony of nanomachines capable of turning its human host nearly godlike. Employing characters from the lower classes (the street urchins Phousita and Arif) as well as the upper (space-dwelling Nikko and his nemesis and lover, Kirstin), Nagata was able to sketch an entire world in her fluent, hard-edged prose, a tool as sharp as that possessed by many a longtime writer.

This exciting debut showed an author who had fully digested the work of writers from Bear to Egan, McAuley to Calder, Varley to Ryman, and fashioned her own bright chimeric beast on which to ride and join the parade.

With her second book, *Tech-Heaven* (Bantam, mass market, $4.99, 357 pages), Nagata does many things differently, while retaining the virtues of the first book—always a promising strategy. And to my eyes, she adds two more writers to her list of influences: Norman Spinrad and James Tiptree.

Unlike *Bohr*, *Tech-Heaven* opens in a world not too far removed from ours. Biotech research is slightly further along, as are several societal trends of a Luddite, Balkanizing nature. Otherwise, a gritty familiarity obtains. The character whose shoulders we ride exclusively (with one small exception) is the young woman named Katie Kishida, wife to Tom, mother to two daughters. This tighter focus, compared to the POV shifts in *Bohr*, allows a rich depth of character development. Over the jam-packed course of this novel, we will see Katie believably age into her early sixties, accumulating scars and

layers of memory that evoke the painfully earned wisdom exhibited by many of Tiptree's older female characters.

When her husband has what seems to be an inescapably fatal accident, Katie faces the task of seeing him placed into risky cryonic suspension. (The details of cryonic shutdown and, later, revival are the most realistic I've ever encountered, and are typical of Nagata's scrupulous attention to the nuts-and-bolts of her future.) This act diverts Katie's whole life onto an unexpected course. Taken up by the media and by competing pro-cryo and anti-cryo factions, Katie becomes first a spokesperson for the movement, then an actual high-stakes player in the whole biotech industry.

It's in the details of the political infighting and media manipulation that Nagata shows a flair reminiscent of Spinrad's. Much of the book is devoted to Machiavellian maneuvers that, gradually, lead us to the very future of *The Bohr Maker*. Along the way, mankind's immersion in the technosphere, the quest for the utopian "tech-heaven" is forcefully debated, with not all of the points accruing to Katie's side either. (Short intermittent chapters focus on the Bardo-like hallucinations of the frozen Tom Kishida, whose brain retains a certain level of functioning, providing a spiritual angle to the materialistic debate.)

Nagata's next book, set in far future or near, is on my must-read list.

A Couple of Likely Lads

Between them, Brian Aldiss and Michael Moorcock possess roughly eighty years of writing experience. In terms of stature, we might call them the Heinlein and Asimov of Great Britain (although there was never a less viable stylistic comparison coined under any sun). At this stage in their careers (which, praise be, show no signs of slowdown or stoppage or senescence), each man more or less ectoplasmically extrudes books from the entire totipotent mass of his body/mind/soul gestalt. To pick up one of their books, thus placing yourself in their capable hands, is like trustfully submitting yourself to the world's best neurosurgeon for a lifesaving operation.

Aldiss's latest offering is *The Secret of This Book* (HarperCollins UK, hardcover, £15.99, 334 pages), a collection of his stories culled from the period 1992-95 (with one inconsequential exception from 1987). The fact that all these stories were published (and probably written) over such a relatively short period lends them a powerful thematic unity that is fostered by Aldiss's original linking material, a blend of anecdote, parable and musings.

"Common Clay" is the opening peal, its notes being art, anima, and the tug-of-war between the individual and society. The second story, "The Mistakes, Miseries and Misfortunes of Mankind," brings in war, and the stage is set. In one masterful story after another,

ranging from the here-and-now all the way to the afterlife, Aldiss dissects the follies and foibles of mankind, pinning the ugly insect of war under a microscope, offering the consolations of art, love, sex, and self-knowledge to the trampled victims of the brutish hatreds so rampant in our age. The solace might not always completely salve the hurt, as Aldiss fully admits, but it's all we've got.

Much as Samuel Delany's *Flight from Nevèrÿon* (1985) can lay claim to being one of the very first novels to deal with AIDS, so can *The Secret of This Book* stand as a harbinger of fiction that is forced to deal with the confusing post-Cold-War world epitomized by the Yugoslavian conflict. Permeating the book like an ineffable sadness—sometimes explicitly, more often allegorically—is the war that festers in Europe's heart, making Aldiss our indispensable moral barometer.

Michael Moorcock also chooses to link an assemblage of disparate stories with new bridges in his *Fabulous Harbours* (Millennium, hardcover, £15.99, 192 pages), but they're bridges of a different sort. (And one or two are a trifle suspect: the inclusion of an admittedly entertaining Jerry Cornelius story, for instance, is justified by stating that one of this book's characters was its author!)

Following closely on the heels of *Blood* (1995), *Harbours* faithfully opens with an appearance by that earlier volume's colorful lovers, Jack Karaquazian and Colinda Dovero. But it turns out that the pair has traded both their original universe and the charms of the Second Ether (where the *Zeitjuego*, or Game of Time, is played) for residence, however temporary, in yet a third universe.

This timeline is inhabited and to some extent shaped mainly by the von Beks, that delicious, dilatory, decadent, deceitful clan whom Moorcock now chronicles. One tentacle of the family is ensconced in London's mythic Sporting House Square, where a gathering ostensibly spins the tales that form this book.

These stories (many of which evoke the ambiance of *The Boys' Own Paper* as if written by J. K. Huysmans) range across time and space, from a pirate-infested America to a Thatcherite England. Through many of them strides a red-eyed albino with a soul-sucking sword, whether called Elric ("The Black Blade's Summoning") or Ulrich ("The Affair of the Seven Virgins"; "Crimson Eyes") or Al Rik'h ("No Ordinary Christian"). Karaquazian and Dovero gradually fade from view (although their ally/antagonist, Captain Quelch, remains in various disguises), and the reader finds himself repaid for their absence by the doings of the comical, alluringly abominable von Beks.

At the literal and figurative center of the book is "Lunching With the Antichrist." This tale explicates and embodies the core of Moorcock's esthetic. Portraying a fragile, isolated period when many factors conspire to permit a utopian moment to exist, this subtle, el-

egaic tale achieves the impossible: it causes the reader to feel nostalgia for a time and place that never actually was.

In his introduction, Moorcock opines: "I believe our visions reveal our motives and identities. I also believe that one day our visions of a perfect society will be subtle enough to work. Here, for the time being, is a vision of an imperfect world that is somewhat better than our own. . . ."

Anarchic demiurge, Moorcock simultaneously entertains and remolds our shared life nearer to his heart's desire.

Packs a Wallop!

These days, small and midsized presses function rather like baseball's farm teams, grooming new talent to feed the majors. Taking all the risks and usually reaping little of the glory and loot, these minnow publishers perform a vital, often thankless task, spurred on more by love than gold.

A case in point is the saga of William Browning Spencer and Permanent Press (Noyac Road, Sag Harbor, NY 11963).

Permanent brought Spencer's first three books into being in handsome hardcover editions (all still available), presumably growing the audience for his fourth, which is now being published by St. Martin's. So the world goes, and we must perforce approve, albeit with some wistfulness, since Spencer is a wonderful writer who deserves as wide an audience as possible. (And in fact, such a bittersweet progression would fit perfectly into Spencer's own rueful worldview.)

Spencer's first book, *Maybe I'll Call Anna* (1990) is a non-SF work reminiscent of the film *Betty Blue* (1986). Following the obsession of young David Livingston with the beautiful, clinically schizophrenic Anna Shockley, the book slips smoothly through a labyrinth of life-threatening twists and turns. Alternately humorous and gruesome, *Anna* reveals Spencer's already sure hand with character and incident (although choppy POV-switching at the end is awkward). We'll need to reference this volume later.

The Return of Count Electric (1993) is a collection of previously unpublished short stories that exhibit a multihued palette, spanning thriller, horror, fantasy, and oddball comedy. Certain fascinations of Spencer's start to accrue, falling in and out of kaliedoscopic patterns: psychotic murderous women; weddings; old photographs; the commingled innocence, vulnerability, and amoral hungers of children. Spencer's style—elliptical, wry, and full of American vernacular talltale chutzpah—begins to summon associations: Elmore Leonard, Neal Barrett, Jr., James Blaylock, Thorne Smith. His take on humanity might be a variant of Arthur Clarke's famous observation: "Not only is your neighbor stranger than you imagine, he or she is stranger than you *can* imagine!"

The second novel, *Résumé With*

Monsters (1995) remains unread by me as of this writing—a flaw I intend to remedy when White Wolf reprints it soon. Suffice it to say that it injects a dose of Lovecraft into a modern office setting.

All of which brings us to *Zod Wallop* (hardcover, $21.95, 278 pages), my favorite of Spencer's books so far, and his most accomplished.

The protagonist of *Zod Wallop* is Harry Gainesborough, writer and illustrator of fiction for children and young adults, a role played earlier in *Anna* by David Livingston. (Of note is the fact that Spencer himself is also a visual artist.) Harry has been traumatized by the death of his daughter in an ocean drowning. A breakdown and divorce leads to hospitalization in the Harwood Psychiatric clinic and a partial recovery. Still, Harry is blocked from writing, and is rapidly sinking into alcoholism.

At this point, the *real* complications ensue. Harry's last kids' book, the bestseller *Zod Wallop*, begins to usurp reality. Not the actual bestseller, of course, but its shadowy magical doppelgänger, an early, darker version of the manuscript, thought to be destroyed. It appears that Harry and some of his fellow patients were all involuntarily subject to an experimental drug that melded their psyches into a gestalt mind capable of altering reality. One member of the gestalt is Harry's biggest fan, the Mad-Hatter-like Raymond Story, and he's fixated on the grief-contaminated version of *Zod Wallop* as a template.

Raymond and his fellow patients are as charming and quirky an assemblage of the mentally unfit as you've seen since the film *The King of Hearts* (1966). (I keep returning to films as an apt analogy to Spencer's cinematic style of writing, which plainly correlates to his background in the visual arts. Terry Gilliam's *The Fisher King* [1991] also resonates here.)

As Spencer's *Zod Wallop* progresses, Harry and his friends battle to defeat the villains of the Gainesborough *Zod Wallop* (from which we are granted tasty excerpts that, a rare feat, do not disappoint as being inferior to an actual magical text). That one of the bad guys is named Roald Peake hints at two more flavors in Spencer's stew: Roald Dahl and Mervyn Peake.

Through one beguiling, horrifying, absurdist David-Lynchian episode after another, we follow Spencer's cast as they strive to prevent one man's intense self-pity and suffering from rendering our world a stony frozen desert. Speaking deep truths about the uses and abuses of escapism and fantasy, *Zod Wallop* provides a wild ride through a land where sanity and insanity blur.

But as one character says, "There should be no stigma attached to being crazy. Indeed, some would say that it is the only realistic response to the times." ●

NEXT ISSUE

JULY COVER STORY

Hugo- and Nebula-Award-winner **George R.R. Martin** returns to these pages next month for the first time in more than a decade, delivering a big, powerful new novella that takes us to a strange, cruel, exotic, and gorgeously painted world for a powerful saga of family loyalties and bitter betrayal, of the rise and fall of kings, of love, ambition, deadly politics, and murder, as warring dynasties struggle for the control of nations, and we get a vivid and unforgettable taste of the "Blood of the Dragon."

TOP-FLIGHT PROFESSIONALS

Hugo-Award-winner **Charles Sheffield** takes us to the most remote and dangerous reaches of interstellar space, in company with a shipload of treacherous, quarrelsome, and unsavory treasure hunters who gradually realize that Something vast and relentless and deadly just might be hunting them instead, in a headlong adventure that penetrates the secret heart of "Cloud Cuckoo"; **Daniel Marcus** explores the meaning of trust in a very strange far-future society, a port city where vast ships whisper away to the furthest stars, in the evocative "Those Are Pearls That Were His Eyes"; **Jessica Amanda Salmonson** gives us a sharp and incisive look at Native American society just a bit before everything Went To Hell, in the blackly ironic story of "Ghoul John and the Corpse"; and new writer **R. Neube** makes a brilliant *Asimov's* debut with the compelling "Son of the Road," sweeping us along the backroads and country lanes of a troubled future America in company with a twenty-first century hustler who will help us understand what ordinary folk may well have to do to make ends meet in the next century.

EXCITING FEATURES

Robert Silverberg's "Reflections" column speculates about the future of "International Language"; **Norman Spinrad's** "On Books" column shows us how it's "Déjà Vu All Over Again"; plus an array of cartoons, poems, letters, and other features. Look for our July issue on sale on your newsstand on May 28, 1996, or subscribe today and be sure to miss none of our upcoming issues!

COMING SOON

Ursula K. Le Guin, Gene Wolfe, Bruce Sterling, Michael Bishop, Mary Rosenblum, Michael Swanwick, Tony Daniel, Jonathan Lethem, Tanith Lee, Michael Cassutt, Stephen Baxter, L. Timmel Duchamp, Brian Stableford, Lisa Goldstein, Rebecca Ore, Robert Reed, John Kessel, Brian W. Aldiss, Charles L. Harness, Ben Bova, Ian Watson, Avram Davidson, Eliot Fintushel, and many more.

CLASSIFIED MARKETPLACE

ASIMOV'S/ANALOG combination CLASSIFIED AD rate is $4.80 per word—payable in advance ($72.00 minimum). Capitalized words 60¢ per word additional. To be included in the next issue please send order and remittance to Judy Dorman, DELL MAGAZINES, 1540 Broadway, New York, N.Y. 10036.

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PUZZLES

Offbeat word puzzles. Terrible puns. Complementary issue: Puzzlewits, 1090G Smallwood Drive. Suite 109, Waldorf, MD 20603-4574.

SF CONVENTIONAL CALENDAR

May 18. "It's Convention Night in Canada": 4 con(vention)s. Plan now for social weekends with your favorite SF authors, editors, artists & fellow fans. For a longer, later list, an explanation of cons, a sample of SF folksongs, and info on clubs and fanzines, send me an SASE (self-addressed, stamped #10 [business] envelope) at 101 S. Whiting #700A, Alexandria VA 22304. The hot line is (703) 461-8645. If a machine answers (with a list of the week's cons), leave a message and I'll call back on my nickel. When writing cons, send an SASE. For free listings, tell me of your con 6 months out. Look for me at cons as Filthy Pierre, with a musical keyboard. — Erwin S. Strauss

APRIL 1996

26-28—**DeepSouthCon.** For info, write: **Box 1271, Brunswick GA 31521.** Or phone: **(912) 638-1486** (10 AM to 10 PM. not collect). Con will be held in: Jekyll Island GA (if city omitted, same as in address) at the Best Western. Guests will include: Turtledove, Ranson, McDevitt, Siclari, Stern, Jack Haldeman. The South's big annual con.

26-28—**Fleet Academy North. (416) 588-3817.** Holiday Inn Yorkdale, Toronto ON. Fontana, Trimbles. Star Trek.

26-28—**AmigoCon. (800) 585-8574 or (915) 542-0443.** El Paso TX. Relax-a-con, to plan for WesterCon in July.

MAY 1996

2-5—**UK National Star Trek Con.** International Arena, Cardiff UK. Nana Visitor, Walter Koenig, Mark Lenard.

3-5—**MarCon. (614) 475-8181.** Hyatt Regency, Columbus OH. Katherine Kurtz, Industrial Light & Magic (SFX).

3-5—**DemiCon. (515) 224-7654.** Howard Johnson's, Merle Hay Rd., Des Moines IA. Algis Budrys, Keith Berdak.

3-5—**AngliCon. (206) 789-2748.** Seattle WA vicinity. In May (exact dates are TBA). For fans of British media.

3-5—**LepreCon. (602) 945-6809.** Phoenix AZ. Emphasis on SF/fantasy art. About 600 expected here each year.

3-5—**MonadnoCon. (603) 899-4200, x2989.** Franklin Pierce College, Rindge NH. Star Trek and astronaut guests.

3-5—**InterPressCon. (812) 174-9677 (in Russia).** St. Petersburg, Russia. Publishing emphasis. Big Russian con.

10-12—**World Horror Con, Box 40842, Eugene OR 97404. (503) 345-6197.** Clive Barker, Chas. de Lint, M. Whelan.

10-12—**Roc of Ages, 105 Honeywood Ct., Kissimmee FL 34743. (407) 344-3010.** Sheraton Airport, Charlotte NC.

10-12—**Federation Con, c/o Schoemann, Schoepplerstr. 24, Augsburg D-86154, Germany.** Maritim, Bonn, Germany.

11-12—**For the Kids, Box 123, Qunique VA 22965. (800) 263-6404.** Sheraton Inn, Charlottesville VA. Trek stars.

17-19—**WolfCon, c/o Wendy Duff, 3617 Margarets Bay Rd. Halifax, NS B3B 1B7 (902) 835-6131.** Old Orchard Inn.

17-19—**CanCon, Box 5752, Merivale Depot, Nepean ON K2C 3M1. (613) 596-4105.** Talisman, Ottawa ON. C. de Lint.

17-19—**KeyCon, Box 3178, Winnipeg MB R3C 4E6.** Larry Niven, Tanya Huff, Sunshine Katz, Dave Hayward.

17-19—**VCon, 1855 W. 2nd Ave. #110, Vancouver BC V6J 1J1.** Delta Pacific Centre. Kim S. Robinson, W. Gibson.

17-19—**Conduit, Box 11745, Salt Lake City UT 84147. (801) 532-6821.** Quality City Center. Saberhagen, Parker.

17-19—**RocKon, Box 24285, Little Rock AR 72221. (501) 224-8771.** University Av. Hilton. D. Gallagher, M. Burke.

24-26—**Kubla Khan, 647 Devon Dr., Nashville TN 37220. (615) 832-8402.** Ramada Inn South. C. Fontenay, Offutt.

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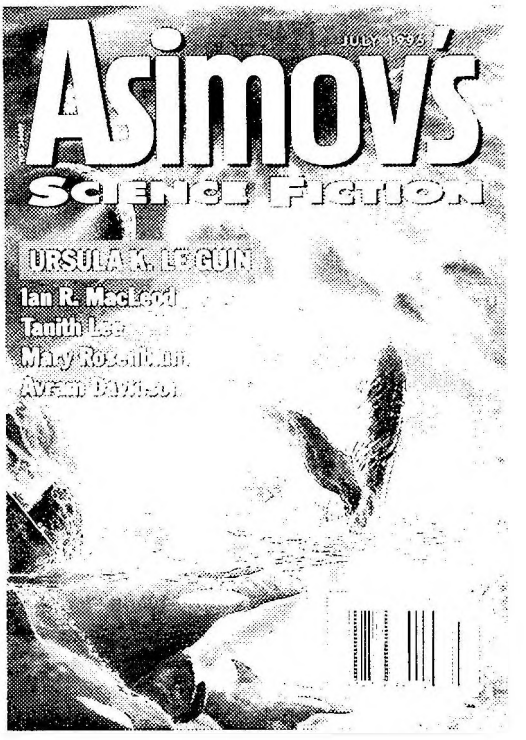

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