SEPTEMBER 1996

Asimov's SCIENCE FICTION

WPS 36009

Chrysalis
by Robert Reed

John Kessel

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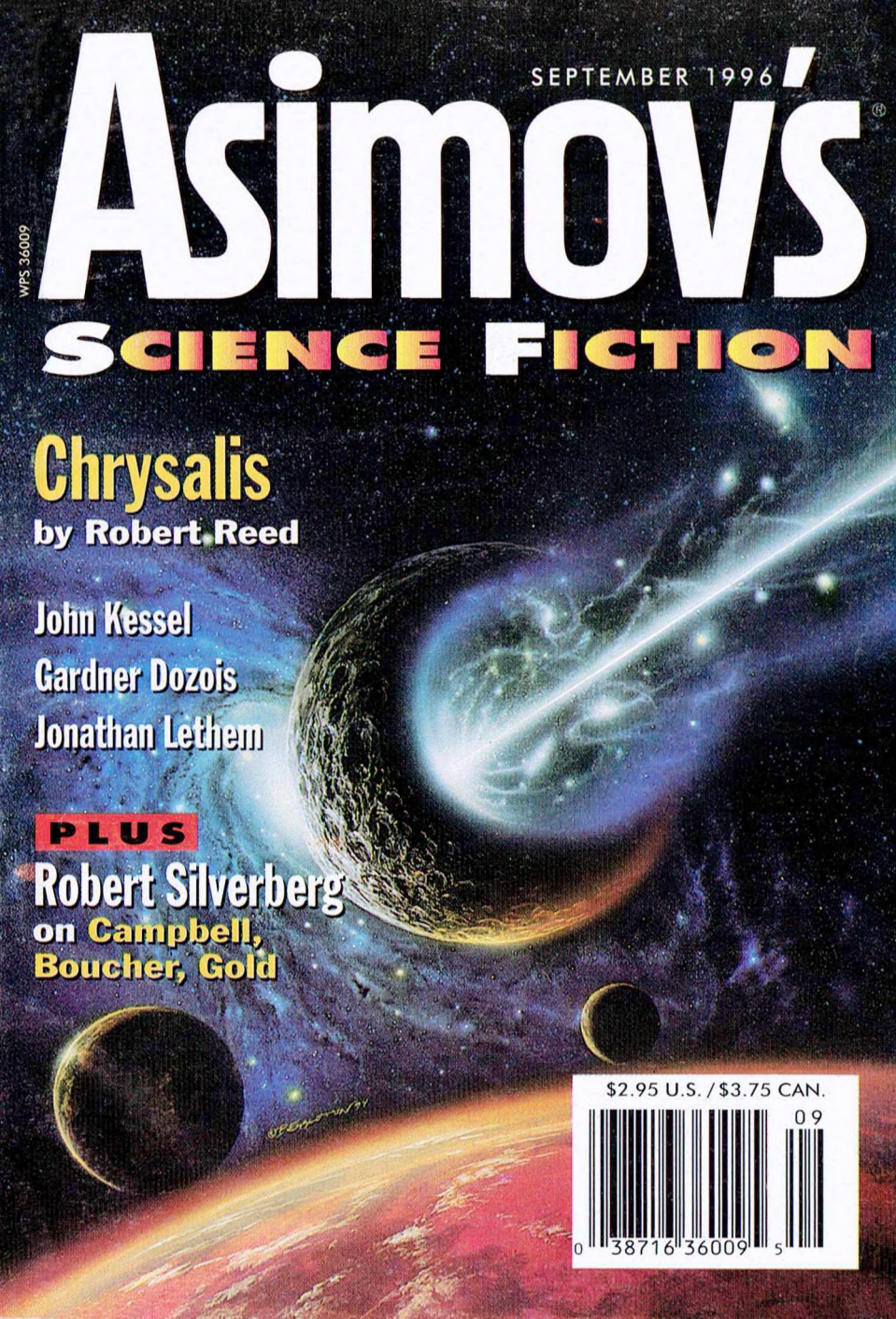
PLUS

Robert Silverberg
on Campbell, Boucher, Gold



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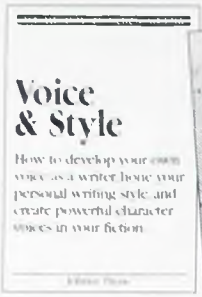

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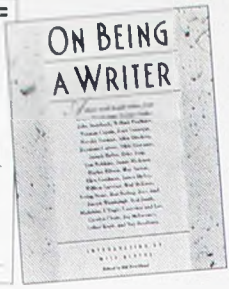

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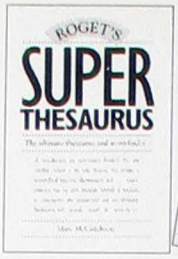

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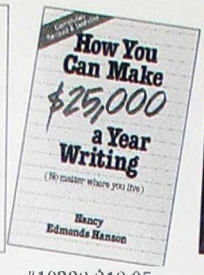

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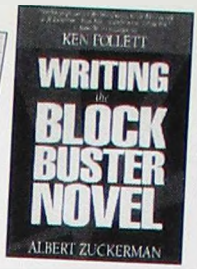

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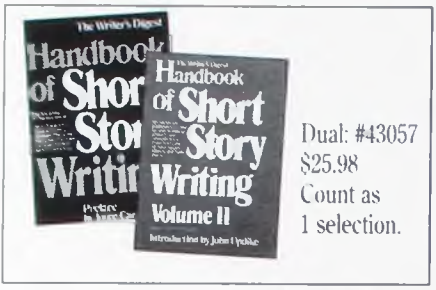

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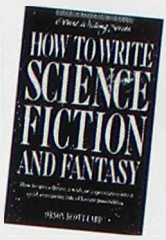

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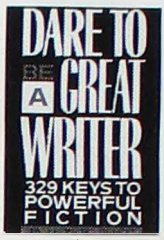

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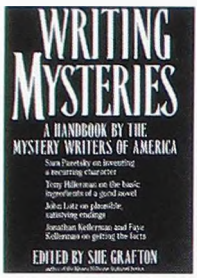

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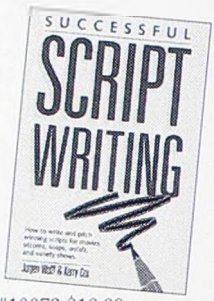

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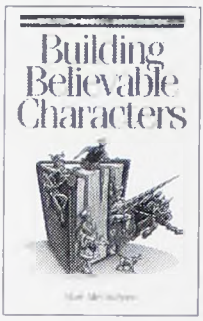

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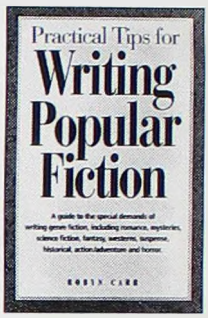

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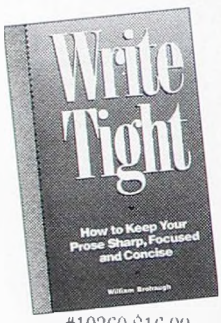

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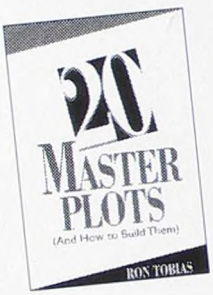

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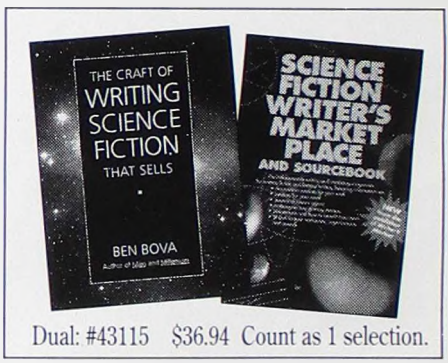

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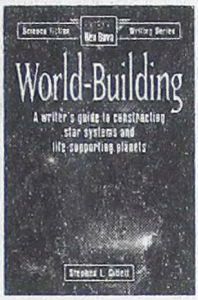

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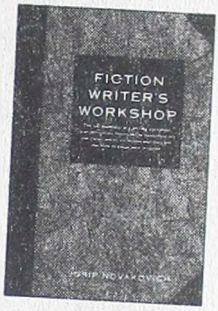

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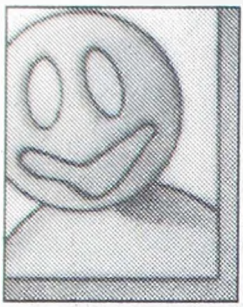

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Stories from *Asimov's* have won twenty-four Hugos and twenty-two Nebula Awards, and our editors have received ten Hugo Awards for Best Editor. *Asimov's* was also the 1994 recipient of the *Locus* Award for Best Magazine.

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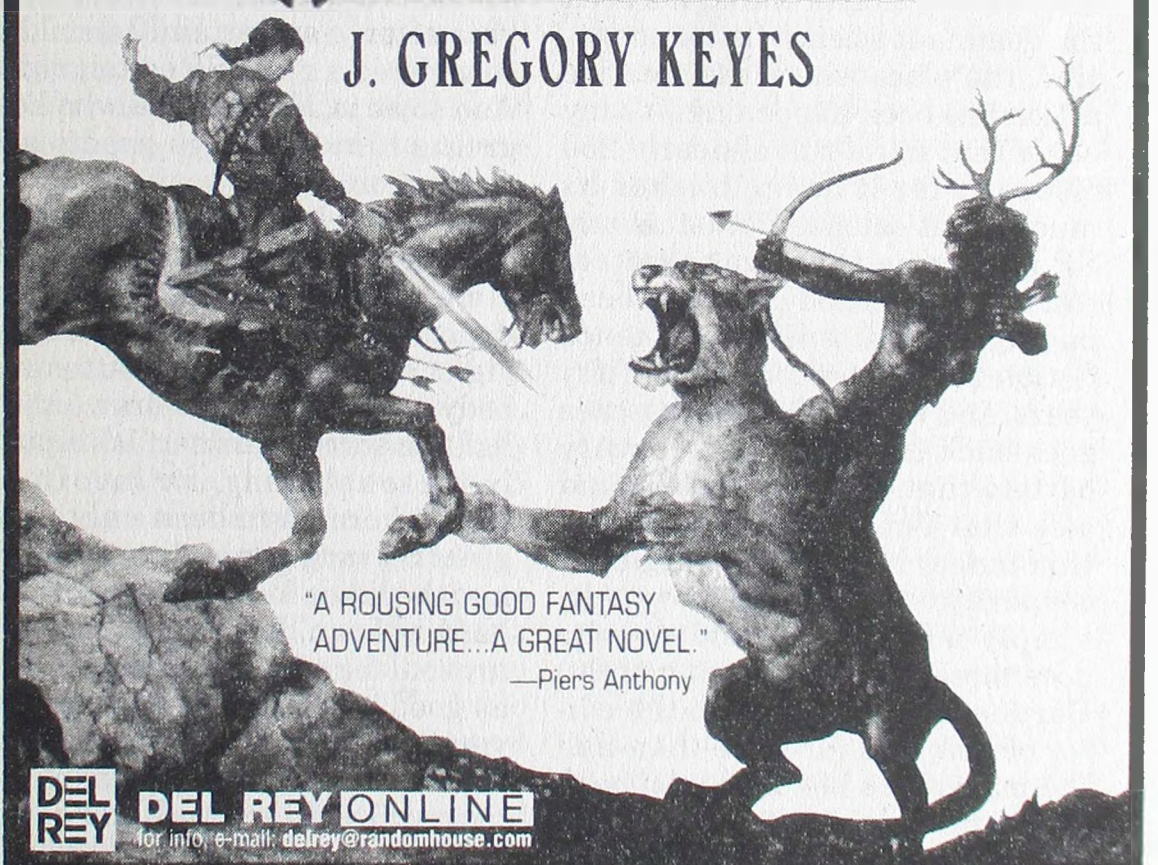

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REFLECTIONS

by Robert Silverberg

CAMPBELL, BOUCHER, GOLD

So I was giving out Hugos once again at the World SF Convention last year in Glasgow, and once again it was my pleasure to hand the Best Editor trophy to good old Gardner Dozois, the guiding figure of this sterling magazine, who was carrying off the shiny spaceship for the umpteenth time for his fine editorial work.

Asimov's Science Fiction is now close to twenty years old, and for most of that time, I think, it's been the dominant science fiction magazine, the place where the creative action has been happening. It's my belief that in its run of nearly 250 issues so far it has published as much great science fiction as any SF magazine that ever existed. (And I am somebody who has been paying close attention to science fiction magazines for almost fifty years, and whose file of back issues goes back a quarter of a century beyond that. Please bear in mind also that I'm not an employee of this magazine or of the gigantic corporate octopus that owns it, simply a free-lance writer who does these columns once a month.) Gardner Dozois has been the editor of *Asimov's* for more than half the magazine's life. Since *Asimov's* is unquestionably one of the great SF magazines of science fiction history, shouldn't Gardner therefore be ranked one of the great science fiction magazine editors?

Of course he should. Stories from *Asimov's* have carried off a preponderance of the Hugo and Nebula awards ever since Gardner began running the magazine, and have occupied much of the space in the annual Year's Best anthologies, even the ones that Gardner doesn't edit himself. An editor who systematically publishes a ton of great science fiction stories every year, year after year, certainly should be considered a great SF editor, right? And so he is, by all of you who keep giving him the Hugo practically every year.

But somehow I find that I just can't rank Gardner among the all-time greats, myself. I have no doubt that he deserves to be listed right at the pinnacle, but somebody else will have to draw up the list. I'm sorry, Gardner. It's a purely personal thing, for me. In my mind there have been only three great SF magazine editors, and for me, the list is forever closed. Try as hard as I can, I can't make room in my soul for a fourth, even an editor as good as you are. I can't get beyond that imperishable triumvirate—John W. Campbell, Jr., Anthony Boucher, and Horace L. Gold.

Oh, there have been plenty of

other important and distinguished editors in the seventy-year history of magazine science fiction. Surely Hugo Gernsback, the grand inceptor of it all, was an important editor, and so was Sam Merwin, Jr., when he was running *Startling* and *Thrilling Wonder,* and Larry Shaw of *If* and then *Infinity,* and Robert W. Lowndes of the estimable *Future Science Fiction* and its companions; and such people as Frederik Pohl and Robert P. Mills and Lester del Rey and Ben Bova and Cele Goldsmith, among others, right up to Shawna McCarthy, Gardner's immediate predecessor at this magazine, all turned in memorable jobs as editors in their day. But for me, Campbell, Boucher, and Gold stand alone at the summit.

Why do I put them so far beyond the others—even beyond the formidable Gardner Dozois himself?

Well, for one thing, I was afraid of them.

I couldn't ever be afraid of Gardner. He's a jolly, lovable man, and the worst thing he could ever do to me, aside from sitting on me, would be to turn down one of my stories. I could survive that. (I have, as a matter of fact, though it hasn't been a frequent experience.) But Gardner could never turn to me and say, "I don't really think you have what it takes to be a science fiction writer, Bob." He could never say, "Your entire life's work is nothing but a pile of second-hand bubble-gum, Bob." He could never say, "Have you ever considered getting a paying job, Bob?"

Oh, I suppose he *could* say those things. But I'd know he was just horsing around. (What were my stories doing in so many of his anthologies, if they weren't any good?) And in any case it's too late in my career for Gardner, or anybody else, to utter The Words That Destroy.

I was twenty years old, though, when I first ventured into the lofty realm ruled by Messrs. Campbell, Boucher, and Gold. I was pretty confident, at least outwardly, that I had the right stuff, and that they would eventually make room in their magazines for me alongside the offerings of such folk as Theodore Sturgeon, Isaac Asimov, Fritz Leiber, and Alfred Bester. But I lived in fear of the moment when one of these titanic editors would hold up a manuscript of mine between forefinger and thumb and say, "What is this thing doing on my desk, you arrogant little pisher?"

That was forty years ago. I *was* an arrogant little pisher, and they were the three greatest science fiction editors there had ever been, and when I dealt with them I felt like the merest peasant trying to get the attention of Zeus or Apollo or Poseidon. Do you understand, now, why I have trouble putting a nice young guy like Gardner in the same category as those three?

John Campbell was Zeus. He was a big man, six feet tall and over two hundred pounds, and he was the greatest SF writer in the business before I even was born; and then, in 1937, when he was

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only twenty-seven years old, he gave up free-lance writing to edit the magazine that then was called *Astounding Stories*, and now has become *Analog*. It was while editor of *Astounding* that this tough-minded, domineering man discovered such new SF writers as Asimov, Heinlein, Sturgeon, van Vogt, and de Camp. The list of his regular writers comprises just about everybody of any importance in the history of science fiction between 1939 and 1952 except Ray Bradbury and Fred Pohl, neither of whom, somehow, ever saw eye to eye with John. For just about everyone else, though, a sale to Campbell's *Astounding* was your ticket of admission to the club. You might be able to slip a story past any of the other editors, but in order to sell to Campbell you had to do it *right*. John was dogmatic the way potatoes are starchy: not only did he know what went into the making of a good SF tale, he understood how the universe worked, and if your story violated the laws of the universe, why, he would tell you so, and you crept out of his office wondering why you had ever bothered learning how to type.

I was terrified of him. The first time I sold him a story, in 1955, I was so electrified by the notion of having done it that I couldn't sleep all night. A couple of years later, when I brought myself for the first time to call him "John," I thought I would be struck down by a thunderbolt on the spot. He was that awesome. I went on to sell him dozens more stories; but I was always

amazed to find myself doing so. Even when I disagreed with him, and sometimes I did, I felt awe at the very idea that I could be so bold. (Isaac Asimov felt exactly the same way about John. You could look it up in Isaac's autobiography.)

By the time I began writing for John, he was already an editor in decline, though. His dogmas had fossilized around him, his quirks and prejudices had come to overwhelm his common sense, and his magazine was no longer the center of the action. Two writers whom he had helped to develop were, by the mid-1950s, stealing most of his thunder.

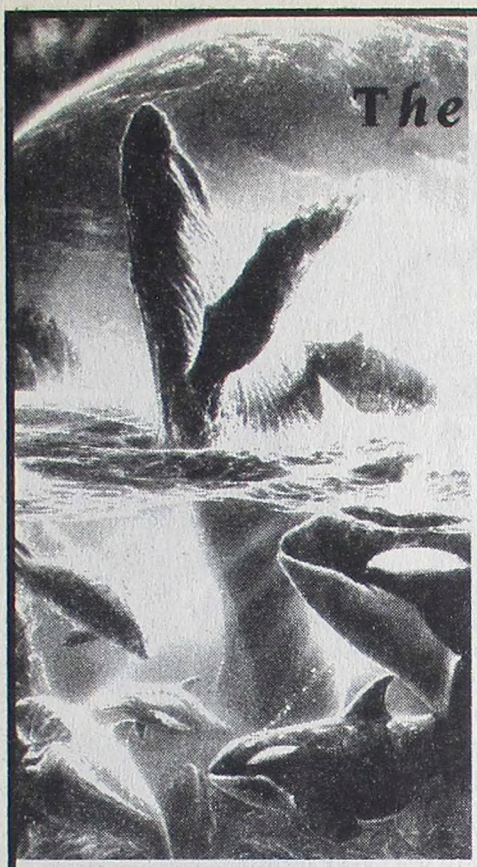
One was Anthony Boucher, the Apollo of my triumvirate—the most elegant and cultivated of men, a charming *litterateur* with a passionate love for cats, opera, detective stories, and the Roman Catholic Church. (I once sent him a story about an opera-loving priest who collaborates with a telepathic cat to solve a murder mystery. Tony was amused, but he didn't buy.) From 1949 to 1958 he was, in conjunction with J. Francis McComas, the founding editor of *The Magazine of Fantasy & Science Fiction*. Where the stolid engineering-oriented Campbell favored profound ideas of cosmic scope with a lesser emphasis on style and characterization, the more elfin Boucher inclined toward writing of greater literary distinction, graceful stories that often were playful or sly or touching. He took from Campbell a lot of writers who yearned to reach for more emotion-

al scope in their work than Campbell felt comfortable with, or whose sometimes dark views of the world were at odds with Campbell's formidable optimism. Campbell had led science fiction away from its pulp-mag heritage; Boucher now drew it onward toward mainstream levels of literary attainment. His circle of writers, like Campbell's, struck me as an exclusive club that I yearned to join.

What I feared, when I showed a story of mine to John, was that he would tell me I couldn't think well enough for him. What I feared from Tony was that he would tell me I couldn't write well enough for him. Tony would never be unkind to anyone—it simply wasn't in his nature—but I knew that in his gentle way he could nevertheless be devastating by implication, and I dreaded it. But I sent him stories anyway, and he sent them back with kind little notes, and eventually, the month I turned twenty-two, he bought one. I had become a member of the club. I sold him a second one a few months later, and then he retired from editing, to the great sorrow of us all. (He was only fifty-seven when he died, ten years later, in 1968.)

And Poseidon, the thunderer? He was Horace Gold, who started *Galaxy* in 1950 and ran it until poor health forced him out about fifteen years later. Gold was a perfectionist—a brilliant, prickly, difficult man, who made you rewrite your stories a dozen times and then rewrote them himself anyway. He drove his writers crazy. In endless lengthy telephone conversations he turned their stories and their psyches inside out. Evidently seeing some talent in me, he appointed himself my conscience, and hammered away at every sign of laziness in my work, every bit of glibness and formula writing. The fact that I was selling stories all over town didn't matter much to him: he insisted that I work to my fullest potential in every line. What a thorn in my side he was! But how enormously valuable his goading was in helping me to reach the level of quality he knew I could attain.

Campbell, Boucher, Gold. Each in his own way helped to form me as a writer and to move me toward maturity as an adult, and so they hold a special place in my life. To me they will always be the great ones, off on Olympus by themselves. Sorry, Gardner. You're doing a top-notch job, and history will rank you with the best our field has ever produced. But no latter-day editor, no matter how good, can move in alongside those three in my mind. ●



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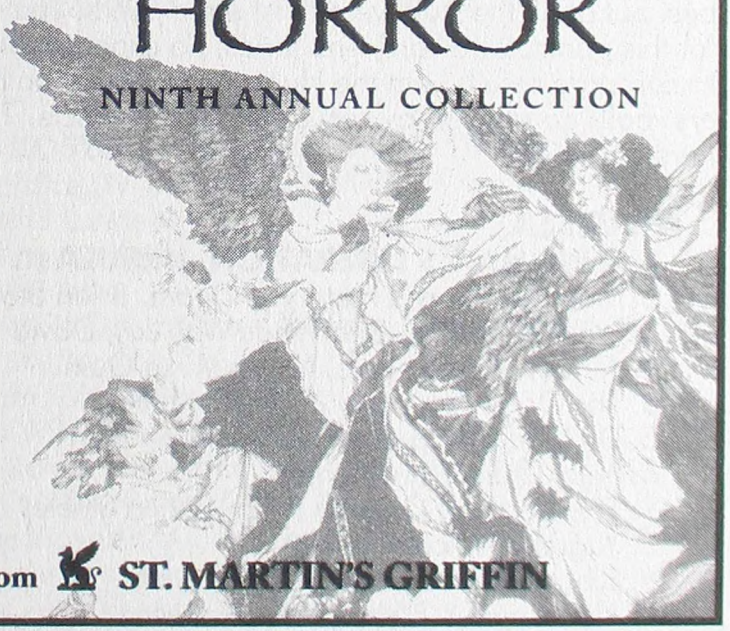

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TENTH ANNUAL READERS' AWARD RESULTS

Photo by C. N. Brown/Locus

Pictured from left to right: Gardner Dozois, Fran Danon, James Patrick Kelly, and Sheila Williams.

Once again, it's time to tell you the winners of *Asimov's Science Fiction*'s Annual Readers' Award poll, which is now in its tenth year. As always, these were your choices, the stories and artwork and poetry that you—the readers—liked best out of all the stuff we published in 1995. The readers were the only judges for this particular award—no juries, no experts—and, once again, it's intriguing to compare results with the Hugo and Nebula ballots, as well as with the readers' polls conducted by *Locus* and *SF Chronicle*. This year's winners, and runners-up, were:

NOVELLA

1. **A WOMAN'S LIBERATION, URSULA K. LE GUIN**
2. Mortimer Gray's *History of Death,* Brian Stableford
3. We Were out of Our Minds With Joy, David Marusek
4. A Man of the People, Ursula K. Le Guin
5. The Doryman, Mary Rosenblum (tie)
5. Da Vinci Rising, Jack Dann (tie)
6. Fault Lines, Nancy Kress
7. The Death of Captain Future, Allen Steele
8. Yaguara, Nicola Griffith
9. Bibi, Mike Resnick & Susan Shwartz
10. Hypocaust & Bathysphere, Rebecca Ore

NOVELETTE

1. THINK LIKE A DINOSAUR, JAMES PATRICK KELLY
2. Dawn Venus, G. David Nordley
3. Road Kills, Kandis Elliot
4. Farthest Man from Earth, John C. Wright
5. Ether OR, Ursula K. Le Guin
6. Waging Good, Robert Reed
7. Fragments of a Painted Eggshell, Alexander Jablokov
8. Tap, Greg Egan (tie)
8. When the Old Gods Die, Mike Resnick (tie)
9. Drifting off the Coast of New Mexico, Stephen R. Boyett
10. Across the Darkness, Geoffrey A. Landis

SHORT STORY

1. LIFE ON THE MOON, TONY DANIEL
2. The War Memorial, Allen Steele
3. No Love in All of Dwingeloo, Tony Daniel
4. Paradise Lost, Don Webb
5. Alice's Asteroid, G. David Nordley (tie)
5. Jigoku no Mokushiroku (The Symbolic Revelation of the Apocalypse), John McDaid (tie)
5. The Death of Beatrix Potter, Candyce Bryne (tie)
6. Walking Out, Michael Swanwick
7. Take Me to the Pilot, Paul Di Filippo
8. A Place of Honor, Pat Murphy (tie)
8. Long Term Project: Report to the Great Council of Cockroaches, Geoffrey A. Landis (tie)
9. Sitcom, Lewis Shiner (tie)
9. Teaching Machines, Lawrence Watt-Evans (tie)
10. Passage to Galena, Phillip C. Jennings (tie)
10. The Bone-Carver's Tale, Jeff VanderMeer (tie)
10. The Skin Trade, Brian Stableford (tie)
10. Tongues, Robert Reed (tie)

POEM

1. CURSE OF BRUCE BOSTON'S WIFE, SCOTT L. TOWNER
2. Son, Dead on the Solstice, William John Watkins
3. Port City Lament, David Lunde
4. The Old Astronaut Sings to the Mourning Star, William John Watkins
5. In Kafkaville the Funerals Run on Time, William John Watkins
6. Brownies at Work, Ruth Berman (tie)
6. Kitchen Witch, William John Watkins (tie)
7. Curse of the Clone's Wife, Bruce Boston (tie)
7. Future Present: A Lesson in Expectation, Bruce Boston (tie)
8. Curse of the Cyborg's Wife, Bruce Boston (tie)
8. Postcard from a Time Traveler, Robert Frazier (tie)
9. Curse of the Time Traveler's Wife, Bruce Boston
10. cleaning out the attic, W. Gregory Stewart

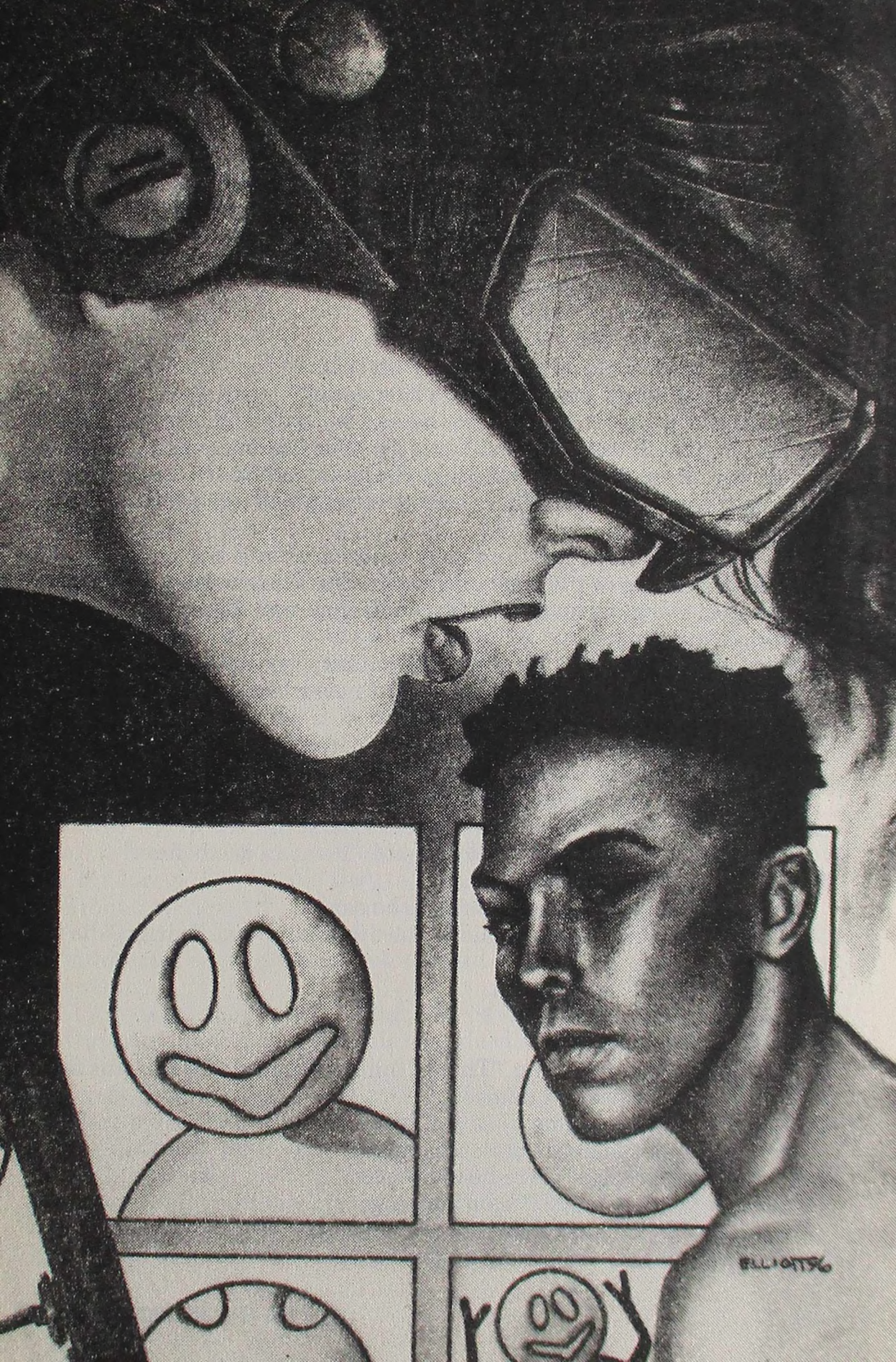
(Continued on page 148

Jonathan Lethem

HOW WE GOT IN TOWN AND OUT AGAIN

The author's next book, *The Wall of the Sky, the Wall of the Eye,* will be out from Harcourt Brace in October. It's a collection of seven short stories—three of which were first published in *Asimov's.* Doubleday will release his next novel, *As She Climbed Across the Table,* in March of 1997. Mr. Lethem lives in Berkeley, California, and teaches writing in San Francisco.

Illustration by Darryl Elliott


ELLIOTT

When we first saw somebody near the mall Gloria and I looked around for sticks. We were going to rob them if they were few enough. The mall was about five miles out of the town we were headed for, so nobody would know. But when we got closer Gloria saw their vans and said they were scapers. I didn't know what that was, but she told me.

It was summer. Two days before this Gloria and I had broken out of a pack of people that had food but we couldn't stand their religious chanting anymore. We hadn't eaten since then.

"So what do we do?" I said.

"You let me talk," said Gloria.

"You think we could get into town with them?"

"Better than that," she said. "Just keep quiet."

I dropped the piece of pipe I'd found and we walked in across the parking lot. This mall was long past being good for finding food anymore but the scapers were taking out folding chairs from a store and strapping them on top of their vans. There were four men and one woman.

"Hey," said Gloria.

Two guys were just lugs and they ignored us and kept lugging. The woman was sitting in the front of the van. She was smoking a cigarette.

The other two guys turned. This was Kromer and Fearing, but I didn't know their names yet.

"Beat it," said Kromer. He was a tall squinty guy with a gold tooth. He was kind of worn but the tooth said he'd never lost a fight or slept in a flop. "We're busy," he said.

He was being reasonable. If you weren't in a town you were nowhere. Why talk to someone you met nowhere?

But the other guy smiled at Gloria. He had a thin face and a little mustache. "Who are you?" he said. He didn't look at me.

"I know what you guys do," Gloria said. "I was in one before."

"Oh?" said the guy, still smiling.

"You're going to need contestants," she said.

"She's a fast one," this guy said to the other guy. "I'm Fearing," he said to Gloria.

"Fearing what?" said Gloria.

"Just Fearing."

"Well, I'm just Gloria."

"That's fine," said Fearing. "This is Tommy Kromer. We run this thing. What's your little friend's name?"

"I can say my own name," I said. "I'm Lewis."

"Are you from the lovely town up ahead?"

"Nope," said Gloria. "We're headed there."

"Getting in exactly how?" said Fearing.

"Anyhow," said Gloria, like it was an answer. "With you, now."

"That's assuming something pretty quick."

"Or we could go and say how you ripped off the last town and they sent us to warn about you," said Gloria.

"Fast," said Fearing again, grinning, and Kromer shook his head. They didn't look too worried.

"You ought to want me along," said Gloria. "I'm an attraction."

"Can't hurt," said Fearing. Kromer shrugged, and said, "Skinny, for an attraction."

"Sure, I'm skinny," she said. "That's why me and Lewis ought to get something to eat."

Fearing stared at her. Kromer was back to the van with the other guys.

"Or if you can't feed us—" started Gloria.

"Hold it, sweetheart. No more threats."

"We need a meal."

"We'll eat something when we get in," Fearing said. "You and Lewis can get a meal if you're both planning to enter."

"Sure," she said. "We're gonna enter—right Lewis?"

I knew to say right.

The town militia came out to meet the vans, of course. But they seemed to know the scapers were coming, and after Fearing talked to them for a couple of minutes they opened up the doors and had a quick look then waved us through. Gloria and I were in the back of a van with a bunch of equipment and one of the lugs, named Ed. Kromer drove. Fearing drove the van with the woman in it. The other lug drove the last one alone.

I'd never gotten into a town in a van before, but I'd only gotten in two times before this anyway. The first time by myself, just by creeping in. the second because Gloria went with a militia guy.

Towns weren't so great anyway. Maybe this would be different.

We drove a few blocks and a guy flagged Fearing down. He came up to the window of the van and they talked, then went back to his car, waving at Kromer on his way. Then we followed him.

"What's that about?" said Gloria.

"Gilmartin's the advance man," said Kromer. "I thought you knew everything."

Gloria didn't talk. I said, "What's an advance man?"

"Gets us a place, and the juice we need," said Kromer. "Softens the town up. Gets people excited."

It was getting dark. I was pretty hungry, but I didn't say anything. Gilmartin's car led us to this big building shaped like a boathouse only it wasn't near any water. Kromer said it used to be a bowling alley.

The lugs started moving stuff and Kromer made me help. The building was dusty and empty inside, and some of the lights didn't work. Kromer said just to get things inside for now. He drove away one of the vans and came back and we unloaded a bunch of little cots that Gilmartin the ad-

vance man had rented, so I had an idea where I was going to be sleeping. Apart from that it was stuff for the contest. Computer cables and plastic spacesuits, and loads of televisions.

Fearing took Gloria and they came back with food, fried chicken and potato salad, and we all ate. I couldn't stop going back for more but nobody said anything. Then I went to sleep on a cot. No one was talking to me. Gloria wasn't sleeping on a cot. I think she was with Fearing.

Gilmartin the advance man had really done his work. The town was sniffing around first thing in the morning. Fearing was out talking to them when I woke up. "Registration begins at noon, not a minute sooner," he was saying. "Beat the lines and stick around. We'll be serving coffee. Be warned, only the fit need apply—our doctor will be examining you, and he's never been fooled once. It's Darwinian logic, people. The future is for the strong. The meek will have to inherit the here and now."

Inside, Ed and the other guy were setting up the gear. They had about thirty of those wired-up plastic suits stretched out in the middle of the place, and so tangled up with cable and little wires that they were like husks of fly bodies in a spiderweb.

Under each of the suits was a light metal frame, sort of like a bicycle with a seat but no wheels, but with a headrest too. Around the web they were setting up the televisions in an arc facing the seats. The suits each had a number on the back, and the televisions had numbers on top that matched.

When Gloria turned up she didn't say anything to me but she handed me some donuts and coffee.

"This is just the start," she said, when she saw my eyes get big. "We're in for three squares a day as long as this thing lasts. As long as we last, anyway."

We sat and ate outside where we could listen to Fearing. He went on and on. Some people were lined up like he said. I didn't blame them since Fearing was such a talker. Others listened and just got nervous or excited and went away, but I could tell they were coming back later, at least to watch. When we finished the donuts Fearing came over and told us to get on line too.

"We don't have to," said Gloria.

"Yes, you do," said Fearing.

On line we met Lane. She said she was twenty like Gloria but she looked younger. She could have been sixteen, like me.

"You ever do this before?" asked Gloria.

Lane shook her head. "You?"

"Sure," said Gloria. "You ever been out of this town?"

"A couple of times," said Lane. "When I was a kid. I'd like to now."

"Why?"

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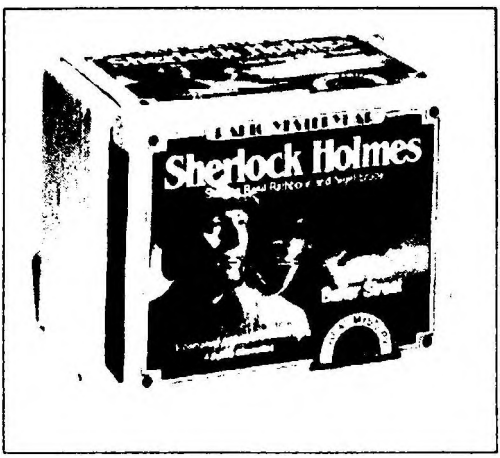

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"I broke up with my boyfriend."

Gloria stuck out her lip, and said "But you're scared to leave town, so you're doing this instead."

Lane shrugged.

I liked her, but Gloria didn't.

The doctor turned out to be Gilmartin the advance man. I don't think he was a real doctor, but he listened to my heart. Nobody ever did that before, and it gave me a good feeling.

Registration was a joke, though. It was for show. They asked a lot of questions but they only sent a couple of women and one guy away, Gloria said for being too old. Everyone else was okay, despite how some of them looked pretty hungry, just like me and Gloria. This was a hungry town. Later I figured out that's part of why Fearing and Kromer picked it. You'd think they'd want to go where the money was, but you'd be wrong.

After registration they told us to get lost for the afternoon. Everything started at eight o'clock.

We walked around downtown but almost all the shops were closed. All the good stuff was in the shopping center and you had to show a town ID card to get in and me and Gloria didn't have those.

So, like Gloria always says, we killed time since time was what we had.

The place looked different. They had spotlights pointed from on top of the vans and Fearing was talking through a microphone. There was a banner up over the doors. I asked Gloria and she said "Scape-Athon." Ed was selling beer out of a cooler and some people were buying, even though he must have just bought it right there in town for half the price he was selling at. It was a hot night. They were selling tickets but they weren't letting anybody in yet. Fearing told us to get inside.

Most of the contestants were there already. Anne, the woman from the van, was there, acting like any other contestant. Lane was there too and we waved at each other. Gilmartin was helping everybody put on the suits. You had to get naked but nobody seemed to mind. Just being contestants made it all right, like we were invisible to each other.

"Can we be next to each other?" I said to Gloria.

"Sure, except it doesn't matter," she said. "We won't be able to see each other inside."

"Inside where?" I said.

"The scapes," she said. "You'll see."

Gloria got me into my suit. It was plastic with wiring everywhere and padding at my knees and wrists and elbows and under my arms and in my crotch. I tried on the mask but it was heavy and I saw nobody else was wearing theirs so I kept it off until I had to. Then Gilmartin tried to help Gloria but she said she could do it herself.

So there we were, standing around half naked and dripping with cable in the big empty lit up bowling alley, and then suddenly Fearing and his big voice came inside and they let the people in and the lights went down and it all started.

"Thirty-two young souls ready to swim out of this world, into the bright shiny future," went Fearing. "The question is, how far into that future will their bodies take them? New worlds are theirs for the taking—a cornucopia of scapes to boggle and amaze and gratify the senses. These lucky kids will be immersed in an ocean of data overwhelming to their undernourished sensibilities—we've assembled a really brilliant collection of environments for them to explore—and you'll be able to see everything they see, on the monitors in front of you. But can they make it in the fast lane? How long can they ride the wave? Which of them will prove able to outlast the others, and take home the big prize—one thousand dollars? That's what we're here to find out."

Gilmartin and Ed were snapping everybody into their masks and turning all the switches to wire us up and getting us to lie down on the frames. It was comfortable on the bicycle seat with your head on the headrest and a belt around your waist. You could move your arms and legs like you were swimming, the way Fearing said. I didn't mind putting on the mask now because the audience was making me nervous. A lot of them I couldn't see because of the lights, but I could tell they were there, watching.

The mask covered my ears and eyes. Around my chin there was a strip of wire and tape. Inside it was dark and quiet at first except Fearing's voice was still coming into the earphones.

"The rules are simple. Our contestants get a thirty minute rest period every three hours. These kids'll be well fed, don't worry about that. Our doctor will monitor their health. You've heard the horror stories, but we're a class outfit; you'll see no horrors here. The kids earn the quality care we provide one way: continuous, waking engagement with the datastream. We're firm on that. To sleep is to die—you can sleep on your own time, but not ours. One lapse, and you're out of the game—them's the rules."

The earphones started to hum. I wished I could reach out and hold Gloria's hand, but she was too far away.

"They'll have no help from the floor judges, or one another, in locating the perceptual riches of cyberspace. Some will discover the keys that open the doors to a thousand worlds, others will bog down in the antechamber to the future. Anyone caught coaching during rest periods will be disqualified—no warnings, no second chances."

Then Fearing's voice dropped out, and the scapes started.

I was in a hallway. The walls were full of drawers, like a big cabinet

that went on forever. The drawers had writing on them that I ignored. First I couldn't move except my head, then I figured out how to walk, and just did that for a while. But I never got anywhere. It felt like I was walking in a giant circle, up the wall, across the ceiling, and then back down the other wall.

So I pulled open a drawer. It only looked big enough to hold some pencils or whatever but when I pulled it opened like a door and I went through.

"Welcome to Intense Personals," said a voice. There was just some colors to look at. The door closed behind me. "You must be eighteen years of age or older to use this service. To avoid any charges, please exit now."

I didn't exit because I didn't know how. The space with colors was kind of small except it didn't have any edges. But it felt small.

"This is the main menu. Please reach out and make one of the following selections: women seeking men, men seeking women, women seeking women, men seeking men, or alternatives."

Each of them was a block of words in the air. I reached up and touched the first one.

"After each selection touch *one* to play the recording again, *two* to record a message for this person, or *three* to advance to the next selection. You may touch three at any time to advance to the next selection, or four to return to the main menu."

Then a woman came into the colored space with me. She was dressed up and wearing lipstick.

"Hi, my name is Kate," she said. She stared like she was looking through my head at something behind me, and poked at her hair while she talked. "I live in San Francisco. I work in the financial district, as a personnel manager, but my real love is the arts, currently painting and writing—"

"How did you get into San Francisco?" I said.

"—just bought a new pair of hiking boots and I'm hoping to tackle Mount Tam this weekend," she said, ignoring me.

"I never met anyone from there," I said.

"—looking for a man who's not intimidated by intelligence," she went on. "It's important that you like what you do, like where you are. I also want someone who's confident enough that I can express my vulnerability. You should be a good listener—"

I touched three. I can read numbers.

Another woman came in, just like that. This one was as young as Gloria, but kind of soft-looking.

"I continue to ask myself why in the *heck* I'm doing this personals thing," she said, sighing. "But I know the reason—I want to date. I'm new to the San Francisco area. I like to go to the theater, but I'm really open-minded. I was born and raised in Chicago, so I think I'm a little more east

coast than west. I'm fast-talking and cynical. I guess I'm getting a little cynical about these ads, the sky has yet to part, lightning has yet to strike—"

I got rid of her, now that I knew how.

"—I have my own garden and landscape business—"

"—someone who's fun, not nerdy—"

"—I'm tender, I'm sensuous—"

I started to wonder how long ago these women were from. I didn't like the way they were making me feel, sort of guilty and bullied at the same time. I didn't think I could make any of them happy the way they were hoping but I didn't think I was going to get a chance to try, anyway.

It took pretty long for me to get back out into the hallway. From then on I paid more attention to how I got into things.

The next drawer I got into was just about the opposite. All space and no people. I was driving an airplane over almost the whole world, as far as I could tell. There was a row of dials and switches under the windows but it didn't mean anything to me. First I was in the mountains and I crashed a lot, and that was dull because a voice would lecture me before I could start again, and I had to wait. But then I got to the desert and I kept it up without crashing much. I just learned to say "no" whenever the voice suggested something different like "engage target" or "evasive action." I wanted to fly a while, that's all. The desert looked good from up there, even though I'd been walking around in deserts too often.

Except that I had to pee I could have done that forever. Fearing's voice broke in, though, and said it was time for the first rest period.

"—still fresh and eager after their first plunge into the wonders of the future," Fearing was saying to the people in the seats. The place was only half full. "Already this world seems drab by comparison. Yet, consider the irony, that as their questing minds grow accustomed to these splendors, their bodies will begin to rebel—"

Gloria showed me how to unsnap the cables so I could walk out of the middle of all that stuff still wearing the suit, leaving the mask behind. Everybody lined up for the bathroom. Then we went to the big hall in the back where they had the cots, but nobody went to sleep or anything. I guessed we'd all want to next time, but right now I was too excited and so was everybody else. Fearing just kept talking like us taking a break was as much a part of the show as anything else.

"Splendors, hah," said Gloria. "Bunch of second-hand cyber junk."

"I was in a plane," I started.

"Shut up," said Gloria. "We're not supposed to talk about it. Only, if you find something you like, remember where it is."

I hadn't done that, but I wasn't worried.

"Drink some water," she said. "And get some food."

They were going around with sandwiches and I got a couple, one for Gloria. But she didn't seem to want to talk.

Gilmartin the fake doctor was making a big deal of going around checking everybody even though it was only the first break. I figured that the whole point of taking care of us so hard was to remind the people in the seats that they might see somebody get hurt.

Ed was giving out apples from a bag. I took one and went over and sat on Lane's cot. She looked nice in her suit.

"My boyfriend's here," she said.

"You're back together?"

"I mean ex-. I'm pretending I didn't see him."

"Where?"

"He's sitting right in front of my monitor." She tipped her head to point.

I didn't say anything but I wished I had somebody watching me from the audience.

When I went back the first thing I got into was a library of books. Every one you took off the shelf turned into a show, with charts and pictures, but when I figured out that it was all business stuff about how to manage your money, I got bored.

Then I went into a dungeon. It started with a wizard growing me up from a bug. We were in his workshop, which was all full of jars and cobwebs. He had a face like a melted candle and he talked as much as Fearing. There were bats flying around.

"You must resume the quest of Kroyd," he said to me, and started touching me with his stick. I could see my arms and legs, but they weren't wearing the scaper suit. They were covered with muscles. When the wizard touched me I got a sword and a shield. "These are your companions, Rip and Batter," said the wizard. "They will obey you and protect you. You must never betray them for any other. That was Kroyd's mistake."

"Okay," I said.

The wizard sent me into the dungeon and Rip and Batter talked to me. They told me what to do. They sounded a lot like the wizard.

We met a Wormlion. That's what Rip and Batter called it. It had a head full of worms with little faces and Rip and Batter said to kill it, which wasn't hard. The head exploded and all the worms started running away into the stones of the floor like water.

Then we met a woman in sexy clothes who was holding a sword and shield too. Hers were loaded with jewels and looked a lot nicer than Rip and Batter. This was Kroyd's mistake, anyone could see that. Only I figured Kroyd wasn't here and I was, and so maybe his mistake was one I wanted to make too.

Rip and Batter started screaming when I traded with the woman, and

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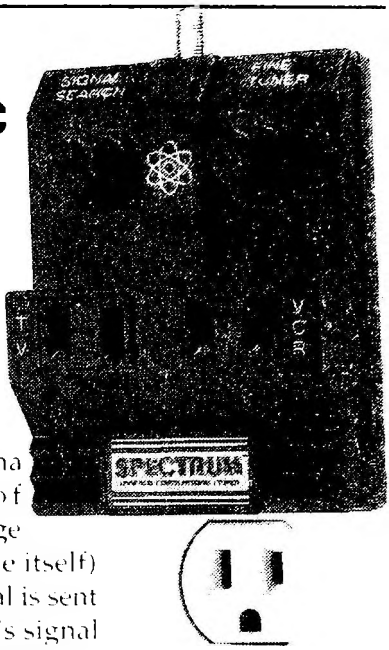

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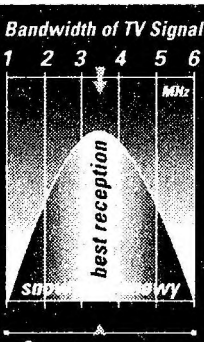

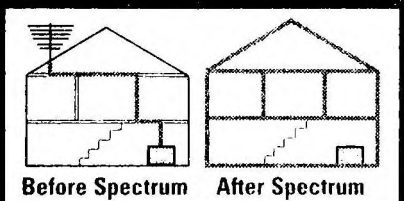

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then she put them on and we fought. When she killed me I was back in the doorway to the Wizard's room, where I first ran in, bug-sized. This time I went the other way, back to the drawers.

Which is when I met the snowman.

I was looking around in a drawer that didn't seem to have anything in it. Everything was just black. Then I saw a little blinking list of numbers in the corner. I touched the numbers. None of them did anything except one.

It was still black but there were five pictures of a snowman. He was three balls of white, more like plastic than snow. His eyes were just o's and his mouth didn't move right when he talked. His arms were sticks but they bent like rubber. There were two pictures of him small and far away, one from underneath like he was on a hill and one that showed the top of his head, like he was in a hole. Then there was a big one of just his head, and a big one of his whole body. The last one was of him looking in through a window, only you couldn't see the window, just the way it cut off part of the snowman.

"What's your name?" he said.

"Lewis."

"I'm Mr. Sneeze." His head and arms moved in all five pictures when he talked. His eyes got big and small.

"What's this place you're in?"

"It's no place," said Mr. Sneeze. "Just a garbage file."

"Why do you live in a garbage file?"

"Copyright lawyers," said Mr. Sneeze. "I made them nervous." He sounded happy no matter what he was saying.

"Nervous about what?"

"I was in a Christmas special for interactive television. But at the last minute somebody from the legal department thought I looked too much like a snowman on a video game called *Mud Flinger*. It was too late to redesign me so they just cut me out and dumped me in this file."

"Can't you go somewhere else?"

"I don't have too much mobility." He jumped and twirled upside down and landed in the same place, five times at once. The one without a body spun too.

"Do you miss the show?"

"I just hope they're doing well. Everybody has been working so hard."

I didn't want to tell him it was probably a long time ago.

"What are you doing here, Lewis?" said Mr. Sneeze.

"I'm in a scape-athon."

"What's that?"

I told him about Gloria and Fearing and Kromer, and about the contest. I think he liked that he was on television again.

* * *

There weren't too many people left in the seats. Fearing was talking to them about what was going to happen tomorrow when they came back. Kromer and Ed got us all in the back. I looked over at Lane's cot. She was already asleep. Her boyfriend was gone from the chair out front.

I lay down on the cot beside Gloria. "I'm tired now," I said.

"So sleep a little," she said, and put her arm over me. But I could hear Fearing outside talking about a "Sexathon" and I asked Gloria what it was.

"That's tomorrow night," she said. "Don't worry about it now."

Gloria wasn't going to sleep, just looking around.

I found the SmartHouse Showroom. It was a house with a voice inside. At first I was looking around to see who the voice was but then I figured out it was the house.

"Answer the phone!" it said. The phone was ringing.

I picked up the phone, and the lights in the room changed to a desk light on the table with the phone. The music in the room turned off.

"How's that for responsiveness?"

"Fine," I said. I hung up the phone. There was a television in the room, and it turned on. It was a picture of food. "See that?"

"The food, you mean?" I said.

"That's the contents of your refrigerator!" it said. "The packages with the blue halo will go bad in the next twenty-four hours. The package with the black halo has already expired! Would you like me to dispose of it for you?"

"Sure."

"Now look out the windows!"

I looked. There were mountains outside.

"Imagine waking up in the Alps every morning!"

"I—"

"And when you're ready for work, your car is already warm in the garage!"

The windows switched from the mountains to a picture of a car in a garage.

"And your voicemail tells callers that you're not home when it senses the car is gone from the garage!"

I wondered if there was somewhere I could get if I went down to drive the car. But they were trying to sell me this house, so probably not.

"And the television notifies you when the book you're reading is available this week as a movie!"

The television switched to a movie, the window curtains closed, and the light by the phone went off.

"I can't read," I said.

"All the more important, then, isn't it?" said the house.

"What about the bedroom?" I said. I was thinking about sleep.

"Here you go!" A door opened and I went in. The bedroom had another television. But the bed wasn't right. It had a scribble of electronic stuff over it.

"What's wrong with the bed?"

"Somebody defaced it," said the house. "Pity."

I knew it must have been Fearing or Kromer who wrecked the bed because they didn't want anyone getting that comfortable and falling asleep and out of the contest. At least not yet.

"Sorry!" said the house. "Let me show you the work center!"

Next rest I got right into Gloria's cot and curled up and she curled around me. It was real early in the morning and nobody was watching the show now and Fearing wasn't talking. I think he was off taking a nap of his own.

Kromer woke us up. "He always have to sleep with you, like a baby?"

Gloria said, "Leave him alone. He can sleep where he wants."

"I can't figure," said Kromer. "Is he your boyfriend or your kid brother?"

"Neither," said Gloria. "What do you care?"

"Okay," said Kromer. "We've got a job for him to do tomorrow, though."

"What job?" said Gloria. They talked like I wasn't there.

"We need a hacker boy for a little sideshow we put on," said Kromer. "He's it."

"He's never been in a scape before," said Gloria. "He's no hacker."

"He's the nearest we've got. We'll walk him through it."

"I'll do it," I said.

"Okay, but then leave him out of the Sexathon," said Gloria.

Kromer smiled. "You're protecting him? Sorry. Everybody plays in the Sexathon, sweetheart. That's bread and butter. The customers don't let us break the rules." He pointed out to the rigs. "You'd better get out there."

I knew Kromer thought I didn't know about Gloria and Fearing, or other things. I wanted to tell him I wasn't so innocent, but I didn't think Gloria would like it, so I kept quiet.

I went to talk to Mr. Sneeze. I remembered where he was from the first time.

"What's a Sexathon?" I said.

"I don't know, Lewis."

"I've never had sex," I said.

"Me neither," said Mr. Sneeze.

"Everybody always thinks I do with Gloria just because we go around together. But we're just friends."

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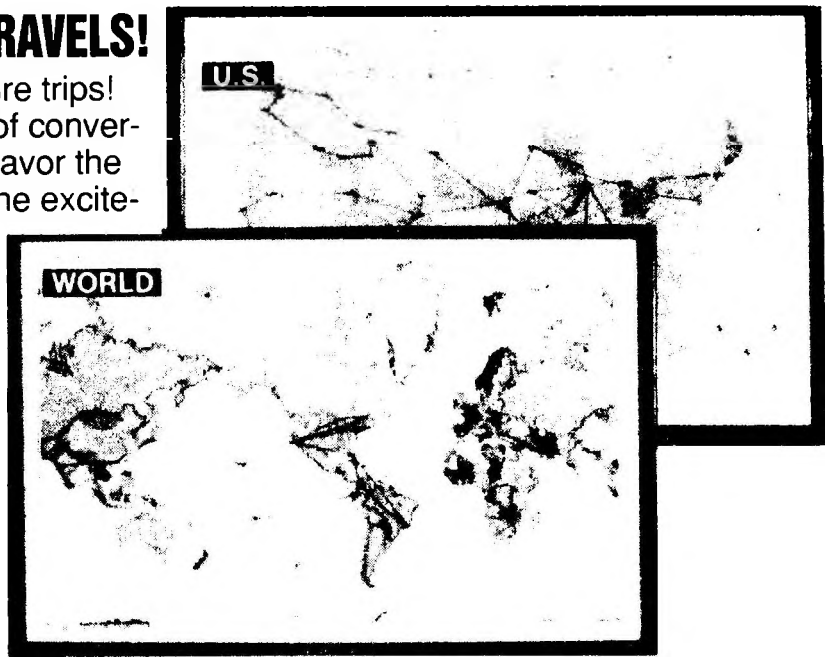

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"That's fine," said Mr. Sneeze. "It's okay to be friends."
"I'd like to be Lane's boyfriend." I said.

Next break Gloria slept while Gilmartin and Kromer told me about the act. A drawer would be marked for me to go into, and there would be a lot of numbers and letters but I just had to keep pressing "1-2-3" no matter what. It was supposed to be a security archive, they said. The people watching would think I was breaking codes but it was just for show. Then something else would happen but they wouldn't say what, just that I should keep quiet and let Fearing talk. So I knew they were going to pull me out of my mask. I didn't know if I should tell Gloria.

Fearing was up again welcoming some people back in. I couldn't believe anybody wanted to start watching first thing in the morning but Fearing was saying "the gritty determination to survive that epitomizes the frontier spirit that once made a country called America great" and "young bodies writhing in agonized congress with the future" and that sounded like a lot of fun, I guess.

A woman from the town had quit already. Not Lane though.

A good quiet place to go was Mars. It was like the airplane, all space and no people, but better since there was no voice telling you to engage targets, and you never crashed.

I went to the drawer they told me about. Fearing's voice in my ear told me it was time. The place was a storeroom of information like the business library. No people, just files with a lot of blinking lights and complicated words. A voice kept asking me for "security clearance password" but there was always a place for me to touch "1-2-3" and I did. It was kind of a joke, like a wall made out of feathers that falls apart every time you touch it.

I found a bunch of papers with writing. Some of the words were blacked out and some were bright red and blinking. There was a siren sound. Then I felt hands pulling on me from outside and somebody took off my mask.

There were two guys pulling on me who I had never seen before, and Ed and Kromer were pulling on them. Everybody was screaming at each other but it was kind of fake, because nobody was pulling or yelling very hard. Fearing said "The feds, the feds!" A bunch of people were crowded around my television screen I guess looking at the papers I'd dug up, but now they were watching the action.

Fearing came over and pulled out a toy gun and so did Kromer, and they were backing the two men away from me. I'm sure the audience could tell it was fake. But they were pretty excited, maybe just from remembering when feds were real.

I got off my frame and looked around. I didn't know what they were going to do with me now that I was out but I didn't care. It was my first chance to see what it was like when the contestants were all in their suits and masks, swimming in the information. None of them knew what was happening, not even Gloria, who was right next to me the whole time. They just kept moving in the scapes. I looked at Lane. She looked good, like she was dancing.

Meanwhile Fearing and Kromer chased those guys out the back. People were craning around to see. Fearing came out and took his microphone and said, "It isn't his fault, folks. Just good hacker instincts for ferreting out corruption from encrypted data. The feds don't want us digging up their trail, but the kid couldn't help it."

Ed and Kromer started snapping me back into my suit. "We chased them off," Fearing said, patting his gun. "We do take care of our own. You can't tell who's going to come sniffing around, can you? For his protection and ours we're going to have to delete that file, but it goes to show, there's no limit to what a kid with a nose for data's going to root out of cyberspace. We can't throw him out of the contest for doing what comes natural. Give him a big hand, folks."

People clapped and a few threw coins. Ed picked the change up for me, then told me to put on my mask. Meanwhile Gloria and Lane and everybody else just went on through their scapes.

I began to see what Kromer and Fearing were selling. It wasn't any one thing. Some of it was fake and some was real, and some was a mix so you couldn't tell.

The people watching probably didn't know why they wanted to, except it made them forget their screwed-up life for a while to watch the only suckers bigger than themselves—us.

"Meanwhile, the big show goes on," said Fearing. "How long will they last? Who will take the prize?"

I told Gloria about it at the break. She just shrugged and said to make sure I got my money from Kromer. Fearing was talking to Anne the woman from the van and Gloria was staring at them like she wanted them dead.

A guy was lying in his cot talking to himself as if nobody could hear and Gilmartin and Kromer went over and told him he was kicked out. He didn't seem to care.

I went to see Lane but we didn't talk. We sat on her cot and held hands. I didn't know if it meant the same thing to her that it did to me but I liked it.

After the break I went and talked to Mr. Sneeze. He told me the story of the show about Christmas. He said it wasn't about always getting gifts. Sometimes you had to give gifts too.

* * *

The Sexathon was late at night. They cleared the seats and everyone had to pay again to get back in, because it was a special event. Fearing had built it up all day, talking about how it was for adults only, it would separate the men from the boys, things like that. Also that people would get knocked out of the contest. So we were pretty nervous by the time he told us the rules.

"What would scapes be without virtual sex?" he said. "Our voyageurs must now prove themselves in the sensual realm—for the future consists of far more than cold, hard information. It's a place of desire and temptation, and, as always, survival belongs to the fittest. The soldiers will now be steered onto the sexual battlescape—the question is, will they meet with the Little Death, or the Big one?"

Gloria wouldn't explain. "Not real death," is all she said.

"The rules again are so simple a child could follow them. In the Sex-Scape environment our contestants will be free to pick from a variety of fantasy partners. We've packed this program with options, there's something for every taste, believe you me. We won't question their selections, but—here's the catch—we will chart the results. Their suits will tell us who does and doesn't attain sexual orgasm in the next session, and those who don't will be handed their walking papers. The suits don't lie. Find bliss or die, folks, find bliss or die."

"You get it now?" said Gloria to me.

"I guess," I said.

"As ever, audience members are cautioned never to interfere with the contestants during play. Follow their fantasies on the monitors, or watch their youthful bodies strain against exhaustion, seeking to bridge virtual lust and bona fide physical response. But no touchee."

Kromer was going around, checking the suits. "Who's gonna be in your fantasy, kid?" he said to me. "The snowman?"

I'd forgotten how they could watch me talk to Mr. Sneeze on my television. I turned red.

"Screw you, Kromer," said Gloria.

"Whoever you want, honey," he said, laughing.

Well I found my way around their Sex-Scape and I'm not too embarrassed to say I found a girl who reminded me of Lane, except for the way she was trying so hard to be sexy. But she looked like Lane. I didn't have to do much to get the subject around to sex. It was the only thing on her mind. She wanted me to tell her what I wanted to do to her and when I couldn't think of much she suggested things and I just agreed. And when I did that she would move around and sigh as if it were really exciting to talk about even though she was doing the talking. She wanted to touch me but she couldn't really so she took off her clothes and got close to me

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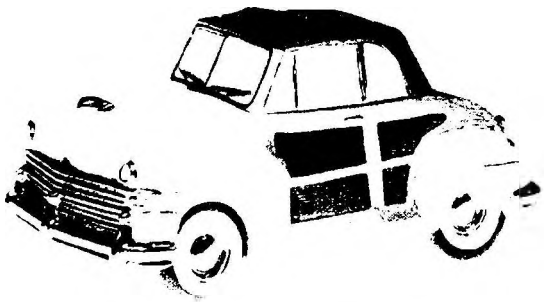

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and touched herself. I touched her too but she didn't really feel like much and it was like my hands were made of wood, which couldn't have felt too nice for her though she acted like it was great.

I touched myself a little too. I tried not to think about the audience. I was a little confused about what was what in the suit and with her breathing in my ear so loud but I got the desired result. That wasn't hard for me.

Then I could go back to the drawers but Kromer had made me embarrassed about visiting Mr. Sneeze so I went to Mars even though I would have liked to talk to him.

The audience was all stirred up at the next break. They were sure getting their money's worth now. I got into Gloria's cot. I asked her if she did it with her own hands too. "You didn't have to do that," she said.

"How else?"

"I just pretended. I don't think they can tell. They just want to see you wiggle around."

Well some of the women from the town hadn't wiggled around enough I guess because Kromer and Ed were taking them out of the contest. A couple of them were crying.

"I wish I hadn't," I said.

"It's the same either way," said Gloria. "Don't feel bad. Probably some other people did it too."

They didn't kick Lane out but I saw she was crying anyway.

Kromer brought a man into the back and said to me, "Get into your own cot, little snowman."

"Let him stay," said Gloria. She wasn't looking at Kromer.

"I've got someone here who wants to meet you," said Kromer to Gloria. "Mr. Warren, this is Gloria."

Mr. Warren shook her hand. He was pretty old. "I've been admiring you," he said. "You're very good."

"Mr. Warren is wondering if you'd let him buy you a drink," said Kromer.

"Thanks, but I need some sleep," said Gloria.

"Perhaps later," said Mr. Warren.

After he left Kromer came back and said, "You shouldn't pass up easy money."

"I don't need it," said Gloria. "I'm going to win your contest, you goddamn pimp."

"Now, Gloria," said Kromer. "You don't want to give the wrong impression."

"Leave me alone."

I noticed now that Anne wasn't around in the rest area and I got the idea that the kind of easy money Gloria didn't want Anne did. I'm not so dumb.

* * *

Worrying about the Sexathon had stopped me from feeling how tired I was. Right after that I started nodding off in the scapes. I had to keep moving around. After I'd been to a few new things I went to see the snowman again. It was early in the morning and I figured Kromer was probably asleep and there was barely any audience to see what I was doing on my television. So Mr. Sneeze and I talked and that helped me stay awake.

I wasn't the only one who was tired after that night. On the next break I saw that a bunch of people had dropped out or been kicked out for sleeping. There were only seventeen left. I couldn't stay awake myself. But I woke up when I heard some yelling over where Lane was.

It was her parents. I guess they heard about the Sexathon, maybe from her boyfriend, who was there too. Lane was sitting crying behind Fearing who was telling her parents to get out of there, and her father just kept saying "I'm her father! I'm her father!" Her mother was pulling at Fearing but Ed came over and pulled on her.

I started to get up but Gloria grabbed my arm and said, "Stay out of this."

"Lane doesn't want to see that guy," I said.

"Let the townies take care of themselves, Lewis. Let Lane's daddy take her home if he can. Worse could happen to her."

"You just want her out of the contest," I said.

Gloria laughed. "I'm not worried about your girlfriend outlasting me," she said. "She's about to break no matter what."

So I just watched. Kromer and Ed got Lane's parents and boyfriend pushed out of the rest area, back toward the seats. Fearing was yelling at them, making a scene for the audience. It was all part of the show as far as he was concerned.

Anne from the van was over talking to Lane, who was still crying, but quiet now.

"Do you really think you can win?" I said to Gloria.

"Sure, why not?" she said. "I can last."

"I'm pretty tired." In fact my eyeballs felt like they were full of sand.

"Well if you fall out stick around. You can probably get food out of Kromer for cleaning up or something. I'm going to take these bastards."

"You don't like Fearing anymore," I said.

"I never did," said Gloria.

That afternoon three more people dropped out. Fearing was going on about endurance and I got thinking about how much harder it was to live the way me and Gloria did than it was to be in town and so maybe we had an advantage. Maybe that was why Gloria thought she could win

now. But I sure didn't feel it myself. I was so messed up that I couldn't always sleep at the rest periods, just lie there and listen to Fearing or eat their sandwiches until I wanted to vomit.

Kromer and Gilmartin were planning some sideshow but it didn't involve me and I didn't care. I didn't want coins thrown at me. I just wanted to get through.

If I built the cities near the water the plague always killed all the people and if I built the cities near the mountains the volcanoes always killed all the people and if I built the cities on the plain the other tribe always came over and killed all the people and I got sick of the whole damn thing.

"When Gloria wins we could live in town for a while," I said. "We could even get jobs if there are any. Then if Lane doesn't want to go back to her parents she could stay with us."

"You could win the contest," said Mr. Sneeze.

"I don't think so," I said. "But Gloria could."

Why did Lewis cross Mars? To get to the other side. Ha ha.

I came out for the rest period and Gloria was already yelling and I unhooked my suit and rushed over to see what was the matter. It was so late it was getting light outside and almost nobody was in the place. "She's cheating!" Gloria screamed. She was pounding on Kromer and he was backing up because she was a handful mad. "That bitch is cheating! You let her sleep!" Gloria pointed at Anne from the van. "She's lying there asleep, you're running tapes in her monitor you goddamn cheater!"

Anne sat up in her frame and didn't say anything. She looked confused. "You're a bunch of cheaters!" Gloria kept saying. Kromer got her by the wrists and said "Take it easy, take it easy. You're going scape-crazy, girl."

"Don't tell me I'm crazy!" said Gloria. She twisted away from Kromer and ran to the seats. Mr. Warren was there, watching her with his hat in his hands. I ran after Gloria and said her name but she said "Leave me alone!" and went over to Mr. Warren. "You saw it, didn't you?" she said.

"I'm sorry?" said Mr. Warren.

"You must have seen it, the way she wasn't moving at all," said Gloria. "Come on, tell these cheaters you saw it. I'll go on that date with you if you tell them."

"I'm sorry, darling. I was looking at you."

Kromer knocked me out of the way and grabbed Gloria from behind. "Listen to me, girl. You're hallucinating. You're scape-happy. We see it all the time." He was talking quiet but hard. "Any more of this and you're

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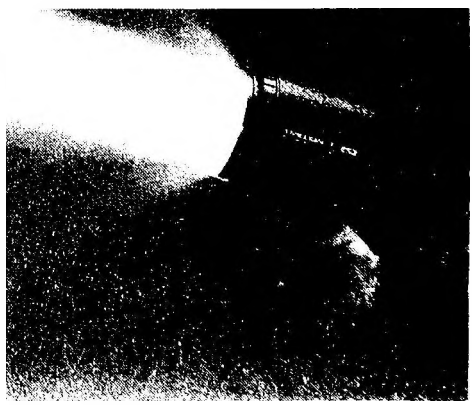

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out of the show, you understand? Get in the back and lie down now and get some sleep. You need it."

"You bastard," said Gloria.

"Sure, I'm a bastard, but you're seeing things." He held Gloria's wrist and she sagged.

Mr. Warren got up and put his hat on. "I'll see you tomorrow, darling. Don't worry. I'm rooting for you." He went out.

Gloria didn't look at him.

Kromer took Gloria back to the rest area but suddenly I wasn't paying much attention myself. I had been thinking Fearing wasn't taking advantage of the free action by talking about it because there wasn't anyone much in the place to impress at this hour. Then I looked around and I realized there were two people missing and that was Fearing and Lane.

I found Ed and I asked him if Lane had dropped out of the contest and he said no.

"Maybe there's a way you could find out if Anne is really scaping or if she's a cheat," I said to Mr. Sneeze.

"I don't see how I could," he said. "I can't visit her, she has to visit me. And nobody visits me except you." He hopped and jiggled in his five places. "I'd like it if I could meet Gloria and Lane."

"Let's not talk about Lane," I said.

When I saw Fearing again I couldn't look at him. He was out talking to the people who came by in the morning, not in the microphone but one at a time, shaking hands and taking compliments like it was him doing the scaping.

There were only eight people left in the contest. Lane was still in it but I didn't care.

I knew if I tried to sleep I would just lie there thinking. So I went to rinse out under my suit, which was getting pretty rank. I hadn't been out of that suit since the contest started. In the bathroom I looked out the little window at the daylight and I thought about how I hadn't been out of that building for five days either, no matter how much I'd gone to Mars and elsewhere.

I went back in and saw Gloria asleep and I thought all of a sudden that I should try to win.

But maybe that was just the idea coming over me that Gloria wasn't going to.

I didn't notice it right away because I went to other places first. Mr. Sneeze had made me promise I'd always have something new to tell him about so I always opened a few drawers. I went to a tank game but it was boring. Then I found a place called the American History Blood And Wax

Museum and I stopped President Lincoln from getting murdered a couple of times. I tried to stop President Kennedy from getting murdered but if I stopped it one way it always happened a different way. I don't know why.

So then I was going to tell Mr. Sneeze about it and that's when I found out. I went into his drawer and touched the right numbers but what I got wasn't the usual five pictures of the snowman. It was pieces of him but chopped up and stretched into thin white strips, around the edge of the black space, like a band of white light.

I said, "Mr. Sneeze?"

There wasn't any voice.

I went out and came back in but it was the same. He couldn't talk. The band of white strips got narrower and wider, like it was trying to move or talk. It looked a bit like a hand waving open and shut. But if he was still there he couldn't talk.

I would have taken my mask off then anyway, but the heat of my face and my tears forced me to.

I saw Fearing up front talking and I started for him without even getting my suit unclipped, so I tore up a few of my wires. I didn't care. I knew I was out now. I went right out and tackled Fearing from behind. He wasn't so big, anyway. Only his voice was big. I got him down on the floor.

"You killed him," I said, and I punched him as hard as I could, but you know Kromer and Gilmartin were there holding my arms before I could hit him more than once. I just screamed at Fearing, "You killed him, you killed him."

Fearing was smiling at me and wiping his mouth. "Your snowman malfunctioned, kid."

"That's a lie!"

"You were boring us to death with that snowman, you little punk. Give it a rest, for chrissake."

I kept kicking out even though they had me pulled away from him. "I'll kill you!" I said.

"Right," said Fearing. "Throw him out of here."

He never stopped smiling. Everything suited his plans, that was what I hated.

Kromer the big ape and Gilmartin pulled me outside into the sunlight and it was like a knife in my eyes. I couldn't believe how bright it was. They tossed me down in the street and when I got up Kromer punched me, hard.

Then Gloria came outside. I don't know how she found out, if she heard me screaming or if Ed woke her. Anyway she gave Kromer a pretty good punch in the side and said "Leave him alone!"

Kromer was surprised and he moaned and I got away from him. Gloria punched him again. Then she turned around and gave Gilmartin a kick in the nuts and he went down. I'll always remember in spite of what happened next that she gave those guys a couple they'd be feeling for a day or two.

The gang who beat the crap out of us were a mix of the militia and some other guys from the town, including Lane's boyfriend. Pretty funny that he'd take out his frustration on us, but that just shows you how good Fearing had that whole town wrapped around his finger.

Outside of town we found an old house that we could hide in and get some sleep. I slept longer than Gloria. When I woke up she was on the front steps rubbing a spoon back and forth on the pavement to make a sharp point, even though I could see it hurt her arm to do it.

"Well, we did get fed for a couple of days," I said.

Gloria didn't say anything.

"Let's go up to San Francisco," I said. "There's a lot of lonely women there."

I was making a joke of course.

Gloria looked at me. "What's that supposed to mean?"

"Just that maybe I can get us in for once."

Gloria didn't laugh, but I knew she would later. ●

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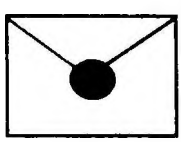

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Daniel Keys Moran last appeared in our pages twelve years ago with the marvelous novella, "Realtime" (August 1984), that he co-wrote with Gladys Prebehalla. Over the intervening years he's produced a number of novels—including *The Long Run* and *The Last Answer*. His next book will be *The A.I. War*. We are delighted that Mr. Moran found the time to return to *Asimov's* with his compact and powerful little tale about what it means to experience the world . . .

ON SEQUOIA TIME

Daniel Keys Moran

Illustration by Steve Cavallo

John Muir called the sequoia the "king of all the conifers of the world, the noblest of a noble race." The trees were named for the Cherokee chief Sequoyah, who invented the Cherokee alphabet.

They are the largest and very nearly the oldest of all living things.

1

My grandfather Charles was seven years old when he first saw the box canyon where he would spend most of his adult life, the canyon where he would plant the tree.

It was late afternoon on Wednesday, July 2, 1924, that Charles saw the entrance, and a little bit inside. They were driving a two-lane, poorly paved road through northern Arizona. (They were moving from Idaho to California. After twelve years of trying to make the same sixteen acres of Idaho farmland feed his family, with a little left over to sell, my great-grandfather had seen the writing on the wall, and packed it in.) Charles suspected they were lost, but from the way the muscles in his father's neck were standing out he knew better than to say anything about it.

Charles had very good eyes in those days, and when he pointed out the canyon's entrance to his older sister she could not see it.

They sat in the back seat of a battered old Model T, a car that had probably come off the assembly line looking old. It wouldn't go faster than forty miles an hour and it complained above thirty. Aside from their clothes and some boxes of kitchen utensils tied on top of the car it was the only thing their family owned.

His sister Abby peered out the dirty window at the place where two mesas came together, about four or five miles off. "Right *there*," Charles insisted. "There's an opening in there and you could go inside, maybe."

"I don't see it," said Abby crossly, and that was the end of the matter.

When he was twenty-nine my grandfather came back looking for the canyon. It was the summer of 1946; World War II was over, and Charles had just gotten out of the Marine Corps.

His eyesight wasn't as good as it had been as a child. Four years of constant studying in college had damaged his vision, and it had gotten worse during the campaign to take Okinawa from the Japanese. He'd broken his glasses early on and had to work and fight without them for several months; it had nearly cost him his life.

He went hunting for the canyon with binoculars and a brand new pair of glasses, a parting gift from Uncle Sam.

It took him a good part of the summer just to find the road on which his family had come to California. He drove a black pre-war Packard that

reminded him sometimes of the Model T in which his family had moved to California. It ran a bit faster but it was just as ugly and beat up.

The hunt for the road took up most of his time. There were a dozen roads his father might have come by, including several that were not even listed on the map he had. His father had died during the war (at home, of a heart attack) and his mother had verified, when Charles asked, that they had indeed been lost much of the time while driving through northern Arizona.

On a hot dusty day in early August he finally found it.

The entrance was just as he remembered it across the span of twenty-two years: a small gap between two mesas, not quite five miles off the road. In 1924 the road had been about as good as roads in those parts got; by 1946 it was rutted and worn away in places. By the time I first visited my grandfather's ranch in the mid-'70s the road was almost entirely gone.

Charles drove the Packard slowly off the road. The spare in back held air, but the tread was mostly gone and Charles did not want to take a chance on it. So he drove carefully, and made three miles before the terrain got so rough that he decided to hike the rest of the way. Driving across the desert floor like that raised up a cloud of dust that hung in the dry, still air behind him like a long rope; when he got out of the car the dust trail was still visible all the way back out to the road.

He walked the last mile and stood at the entrance to the box canyon. The entrance was not wide, only about forty yards across. The way Grandpa told it to me years later, the instant he first stood there he knew he was home. A spring just inside welled up and over its borders, turning into a slow-moving thread of a creek that ran westward down the length of the canyon. Charles walked the canyon from end to end that first day, even though it was afternoon when he found it and after dark when he left. It ran over a mile and a half wide, and four miles long. Because of the spring, there were bushes and shrubs growing inside, and even a pair of small trees. He saw one rabbit that hid from him quickly.

He was a city boy, then, but he figured that if he saw one rabbit, there were probably twenty he didn't see, and he was right about that.

As he was hiking back up out of the canyon the wind hit him. It came up slow and gentle, a breeze that moved the warm, still desert air pleasantly. Then it got both stiffer and colder, and by the time Charles reached the entrance to the canyon he was leaning into it, shivering, pushing for each step he took.

When he left the canyon it stopped with remarkable abruptness.

After he looked at the lay of the land he realized what was happening. What was no more than a gentle breeze outside the canyon was being channeled and tightened by the converging walls of the two mesas, until the breeze, moving across several dozens of square miles, turned into a small hurricane at the entrance to the canyon.

That was why he planted the trees, of course—as a windbreak.

He could never tell me, or anyone, why he'd come searching for the canyon in the first place. The one time I asked him why he'd spent an entire summer looking for something he'd seen just once, when he was only seven years old, Grandpa looked at me with those wise blue eyes, scratched his bald, leathery skull, and grinned. "Danny, damned if I know."

Charles came back to the canyon permanently in 1951, with his wife Laurinda and their two children. One of them was my mother.

I spent the first summer with my grandfather in 1975, when I was twelve years old.

Grandpa was fifty-seven then, and Grandma was fifty-two. I don't believe I knew their first names then.

The only people at the ranch were my grandfather and grandmother; all the children had left long ago. The ranch, the desert surrounding it, the mountains rising up above it, were both fascinating and very foreign to a boy from Los Angeles.

There are two kinds of sequoias; I don't specifically remember having seen one of either kind before then, though surely I must have. The tree was not impressive, the first time I saw it; just about my height, and struggling.

Over the course of the years Grandpa had planted several rows of trees at the entrance to the box canyon, staggered to muffle the wind. It worked; the trees at the entrance to the canyon got shaken up every afternoon when it got cold and the wind came up, but the trees away from the entrance were barely stirred at all, and back at the ranch house the wind was never worse than a gentle breeze.

Five rows of trees had been planted when I stayed that first summer. Lots of them were fruit trees—apple trees mostly, because Grandpa liked apples and apple pie. There were a couple of citrus trees too, though because of the cold they never did so well. (It gets very cold in northern Arizona at night, and during the winter you get snow and ice.)

Grandpa ended up planting seven rows of trees before he died. There were orange trees and apple trees, oaks and a couple of varieties of evergreen. There was even, for a while, a cherry tree, but as I recall it died the second or third summer I spent at the ranch.

The sequoia stood in the fifth row of trees, with scraggly orange trees on both sides of it, well back from the wind. Grandpa had just planted it that summer, and it was still small and thin, about five feet tall, but you could already tell it was going to do better than the citrus we had planted around it.

* * *

I spent three summers at the ranch. When I was fifteen I stopped going, not because I wanted to, but because my parents got divorced and life spun out of control for a while.

The sequoia was nine feet tall then, in the summer of 1977.

My grandfather died almost twenty years later, in '96, of pancreatic cancer. It is one of the more unpleasant ways to die. Grandma lasted three more years, but after Grandpa died she was never really the same. She died in June of '99, and that summer was the last time I ever visited the ranch.

We flew to Arizona for Grandma's funeral. It was a small funeral; myself and my older sister Janet, my mother and her sister Beth, and half a dozen of my grandmother's friends, old folks of her generation who made the rounds at the funerals, waiting patiently and with not much fear for their turn to come.

After the funeral my mother and aunt and sister and I drove out to the ranch together. Janet had never been there before; we wandered around and looked at things while my mother and aunt went through my grandmother's few possessions.

The ranch had gone to seed. I'd done the work that had to be done on my visits, but no more, and it showed. The wood needed painting, and the pens where the cows and the one pig had been kept were falling apart.

A small colony of coyotes who didn't know they were supposed to be afraid of humans had taken up residence in the abandoned horse shed, about sixty yards from the main house. I suppose Grandma had never gone out to the shed after the horses were sold. The coyotes stared at us and we stared at them, and we all agreed to leave each other alone.

The creek kept along as it had since that day in '46 when my grandfather had first seen it. It was small enough that a grown man could step entirely across it. Janet had to take a slight hop.

You could barely see where the garden had once been. It was a slightly empty spot, with a couple fewer weeds, in the midst of the general desolation.

The trees were gorgeous: a small forest, shady and cool in late afternoon. The evergreens were all doing well, and the oaks, and the walnut tree. Only half of the citrus trees had survived, though, and none of the tropicals my grandfather had tried to plant. The corpse of a palm tree, about nine feet tall and virtually mummified, had managed to avoid falling over. I guessed it had been dead at least as long as Grandpa.

The sequoia was eighteen feet tall.

My sister and I stood together and admired it. It was worth admiring: the tallest tree in the small forest by a good bit, the thick bark was a

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healthy deep brown and the needles glistened a lustrous dark green in the late afternoon sunlight.

When we were done admiring it we left it alone and went back to the ranch house to pick up Mom and Aunt Beth. Aunt Beth was worried about Grandma's cats; she'd had four and they weren't in the house, and Aunt Beth couldn't find them. We looked briefly but it was getting late and I didn't want to drive back in the dark. We drove away from that canyon and I don't recall looking back.

No human ever saw that canyon again.

The tree grew.

In 1972, when my grandfather planted the sequoia, humans had wiped out most of a population of trees that had existed since before the coming of humans to the American continents. The only remaining native populations of Great Sequoias were found in an area about 280 miles long, and less than twenty wide, in California on the western slopes of the Sierra Nevada. They were almost never found at heights of less than a mile above sea level.

The summer I was thirteen I took two books on trees with me to visit my grandparents' ranch. I knew that the small tree was a redwood, but what type of redwood neither I nor my grandfather knew.

The books told me. It was a California big-tree, a Sequoiadendron giganteum. Of the two kinds of sequoias, the giant sequoia is the one likeliest to survive in the cold, at high altitudes. My grandfather had planted wisely, at least this once. The Sequoia sempervirens can grow taller than the Sequoiadendron, but it's thinner and it handles the cold more poorly; and that canyon got cold.

The tree found itself in an environment that suited it. The other trees, particularly the thick-sapped pines, helped protect it from the wind; and it was closer to the water than most of the other trees, too.

By the time the tree had reached thirty-five feet the United States was fighting a "police action" in Brazil to preserve what was left of the rain forests. Without euphemisms it was a war, and a losing one. Too many people had a vested interest in the slash-and-burn beef-growing economy that was consuming the rain forests, starting with the desperately poor South American Indians who had no other way to survive, and working step by step up the economic ladder to McDonald's corporation stockholders.

While the rain forests died, life in the canyon flourished. The rabbit population, without my grandfather's .22 rifle to keep it in check, exploded. My grandmother's cats—tough farm cats, pushing twenty pounds—did well even without Grandma to take care of them. Shortly there were eight cats, and then eleven, and the cat population leveled off at around twenty. There would have been more except that the coyotes wanted the

same food—the desert mice and squirrels and rabbits—and were tougher about going after it. The coyotes rarely hunted the cats; it happened at times, but it was always a fierce fight. For five years one tom, a big orange glandular monster who weighed thirty-three pounds, made it a riskier proposition than usual; he killed and ate two young coyotes before a rattler finally got him one night.

The rattlesnakes my grandfather had spent nearly four decades warring against outlasted him; they killed more of the cats than the coyotes ever did.

About the time the sequoia was nearing forty-eight feet, a couple of owls nested in its lower branches. The owls fed off the snakes, including the rattlers, almost casually; baby owls were born the next summer.

The sequoia broke fifty feet the year the last of the Brazilian rain forests went up in flames.

Life in the canyon continued quietly. Water came up from the ground. The sun warmed the canyon during the day, and during the night the mammals retreated to their burrows, the owls took flight to hunt, and the snakes and lizards and insects grew still. Tree sap turned sluggish; it would stay liquid, and keep the trees alive, well below the freezing point of water.

The sequoia's bark grew thicker as the tree grew taller. It was still very young, for a sequoia. Giant sequoias can live a very long time; nobody really knows how long. Humans had found giant sequoias as much as thirty-five hundred years old, and there was no reason to believe that they might not live longer.

The sequoia in my grandfather's canyon might have been expected to live a long time, even by sequoia standards. Though it had competition for soil and water, it grew fast, and got up into the sunlight, putting most of the other trees into its shade. By the time it was tall enough to take the brunt of the canyon's wind itself, there was no danger that the wind would kill it.

The giant sequoia was not the only thing that thrived in that canyon. So did the pines surrounding it, and the animals that lived among them, the owls and the snakes and the lizards, the coyotes and the rabbits and bees. There was water and there was sunlight and there was food enough for everything; and the wild creatures flourished.

Some days, when the sun came slanting down into the canyon just right, it was so beautiful that seeing it would have made you glad to be alive.

The cats, living in the wild where size was important, got bigger and bigger with the passage of the years, until most of them approached the size of the glandular monster who had once been such a freak. These were not mutants; the genes for size had been floating around in the cat

population, but they had not been selected for. Now they were selected for and the cats got big, quickly, and gave the coyotes and owls some real competition for the rabbits and desert mice, snakes and lizards.

Quickly is a relative word: the sequoia continued to grow, too, at its own pace. It was young and beautiful, with dark brown branches laden with dusky green leaves, the branches radiating outward from its trunk in a conical pattern, all the way from the ground to the top of the tree. In later life the branches near the ground would wither away, leaving the tree with a smooth trunk reaching up as much as two hundred feet; but for now the tree was young, and its growth was everywhere. The tree drank the water, and dug down into the soil, and reached for the sun.

As adults, giant sequoias can reach heights of three hundred and fifty feet; by this time the sequoia in my grandfather's canyon had nearly reached a hundred.

—I was dead by then, of course, and so were you, and your grandchildren, and everyone your grandchildren had ever known or loved.

And still the tree grew.

2

When the tree was a hundred and sixty-one feet tall the skies above it turned scarlet at midnight.

Two warring groups of humans had tossed nukes at each other, and everyone else.

(Who were these humans? I doubt it matters, but for what it's worth they were a group of people in what used to be India, and another group in what was once South America. Why did North America get nuked? The United States was gone a long time by then, and its remnants were of no threat to anyone—but everybody had extra nukes they didn't need, and there was not a continent on the planet that didn't receive a few dozen.)

The bombs fell, in a nuclear rain that lasted for days, through a preemptive first strike and a retaliatory second strike, through retaliatory second and third strikes, until only submarines and spaceships remained to launch weapons at one another. Through all of this, the bombs fell, and fell. The nuclear explosions were bad enough in and of themselves, and were succeeded by firestorms of epic size that burned to the ground every sequoia on the west coast of North America.

Worse was to follow. Vast clouds of dust and earth were blasted into the sky. Whole continents disappeared beneath them; and temperatures began to drop.

* * *

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In the canyon, the sky was an angry orange color for two or three days, and then it got dark and started to get cold.

In the war, and the small Ice Age that followed, most of the living things on the planet's surface died, and a lot of those beneath the ocean. The canyon I had spent three summers in, during the days when I was alive, survived better than most places. The canyon was not near any military targets, and most of the species living between its walls made it through. The rabbits had a very hard time of it, and as a result the coyotes died out. But six of the cats survived, four of them females, and in time kittens appeared, and the cats and rabbits struggled on.

It was worse almost everywhere else in the world; and worse in ways the world had never seen before. There had been die-offs before, to be sure. The great majority of the species that had ever existed on the surface of the planet were extinct by the time the last sequoia was planted by my grandfather.

Sixty-five million years ago an asteroid crashed into the Earth, near what is now Mexico. It blasted so much soot and smoke and dust into the sky that years passed in which the planet received no sunlight. Every species of land animal larger than a turtle died off.

This die-off was different, though. It was an orderly catastrophe, planned for and carried out by our children, twenty-five generations removed. This disaster is what finally killed the whales, who had hung on through the slaughter of humans who wanted to slice them up and use their fat as a lubricant or a fuel; who had hung on while those same humans bred new humans, billions upon billions upon billions, and with sheer numbers poisoned the water the whales lived in and the air they breathed. They had hung on through the rise and fall of empires, but they were the largest of all the animals and the ones most damaged when the radioactive debris was inevitably washed down to the sea. The Earth tried to cleanse itself, to wash away the poisons; and the water ended up where it always did. It destroyed the food chain the whales depended upon; and it is a good question whether the last whales died of radiation poisoning or starvation.

The tree was not a complex thing, but it had a sort of awareness, a knowledge of when things were well and when they were not. For a very long time after that things were not well. Many of the trees that had provided it with a windbreak died off as the cold got worse. The spring that fed the stream slowed for several decades, and when it eventually resumed its flow, it was contaminated by radioactive isotopes that might have killed the tree, had it been smaller. It did kill some of the other trees, among those that had survived the cold.

Slowly though, slowly even by the tree's standards, things began to get better. The winds that had nearly killed it, winter after brutal winter,

stopped being so severe. The winters themselves grew warmer, as did the summers, and the radiation levels, still lethal elsewhere in the world, declined in the area around the canyon to the point where plants and animals stopped dying of it, much, and started mutating instead. Most of the mutants died, of course; that's what mutants do.

Things were a little simpler in the canyon, a little less complex; here as everywhere else the great war had knocked out some of the links in the elaborate chain that made life on Earth a viable affair.

But life in the canyon hung on. The tree pushed ahead with the serious business of growing. It broke two hundred feet just weeks before a human being staggered into the canyon to die.

The man came in off the desert, from the east where the fireball sun hung in the morning sky. He was at least half dead already. He was six generations removed from the men and women who had pulled the trigger and launched the nukes; but in six generations the fighting had not stopped. Instead it had spread, though with less dangerous weapons now, north and south and east and west. He wore combat armor that was supposed to protect him from incidental radiation, still high six generations after the great war, and it did that. What it did not do was protect him from the artillery that had destroyed the rest of his squad. I've said that my sister and I were the last human beings to see the canyon, and this is true. The soldier was flash-blinded and deafened. His right arm was shattered from the elbow down, and a stress fracture in his right leg slowed but did not stop him. Occasionally he called out, in a high cracked voice, words that may have meant something to someone who spoke his language.

He climbed up into the canyon, walked a few hundred yards and then sat down in the shade of an apple tree that was almost as bad off as he was.

It took two days before the lack of water killed him. He was only a dozen yards from the slow small stream that now curled its way around the sequoia's wide base, but he could neither hear nor see it, and so he suffered, screaming out occasionally to an audience of cats who were trying to decide what he was, and whether he was edible.

The tree took little enough notice of it. The man's dying was not affecting its sunlight or its water. Indirectly, after the cats ate him, he would end up fertilizing the ground in the great tree's vicinity, which was all to the good.

We might dwell upon that lone surviving soldier, dying in pain in the desert beneath the harsh sun. We might, but we will not. He was only one man; and worse was coming.

Not all humans died in that great war. Some of those who did not decid-

ed that, if the human race was to survive, the race itself needed to change. (Perhaps they were right about that. I don't know. The old design hadn't worked out very well, but then the new one didn't do much better—)

They remade themselves. With genetic engineering they created children who were stronger and faster, who thought more clearly and more quickly than you or I. They reinvented themselves from the ground up, generation after generation, to be the greatest warriors the world had ever seen. Before the tree had reached two hundred and twenty-five feet, the new humans had killed off the remnants of the old humans, the ones who looked more or less like you and me, and were therefore forced to turn their attentions to one another.

You might wonder if these humans were really human. They were. They were people, at least, more so than you and I in all the ways that count. They did not always look like us, but that does not matter. I do not know if you could say that they were better than us; but they were more than us.

When I was a boy I used to read sci-fi stories, or watch episodes of *Star Trek*, about how as humans evolved we would turn into something that was all brains and no hormones, all intellect and no emotions.

That isn't what happened. These people who were descended from us were capable of a range of experience that would have destroyed any of us, our best or our worst. They were more dangerous and more generous than us; they grew angrier and happier, grieved harder and rejoiced with more abandon. Love was an emotion so deep they could not lie about it, and hatred a passion so black it was always lethal to someone.

The tree was three hundred and fourteen feet tall when the human race finally killed itself, and everything else too. They did it with nanotechnology. One group of humans, who were good people—they would tell you so—created a molecule-sized nanomachine that fed on living creatures, and that reproduced itself, using common materials, to make more such nanomachines. They intended to use the nanomachine on other humans, who were bad people and who they hated and wanted to kill.

Unfortunately something went wrong.

It was humanity's last mistake in a very long line. The Big One. The nanomachines got loose before the good humans who had created them completed the controls that would have let them protect themselves from their creation.

The nanomachines ate them and their children first. Poetic justice, you might say, if that sort of thing amuses you. The nanomachines did not stop after eating their creators; they were not designed to. They drifted out on the winds, to the oceans, to the furthest reaches of the planet. And where they found biomass, they ate it. They swarmed over living creatures, reproducing and eating. They ate indiscriminately, people and pets

and leather and wood and rubber and plastic; and when they were done nothing remained but a gray sludge of dead nanomachines with nothing left to eat.

The tree was—well, I do not know if fortunate is the word. It was all the way around the planet from the spot where the world ended; and years passed before the first spores of the gray sludge came drifting in across the desert, borne on the back of the wind.

The tree was, in a sense, the last representative of the human race, the last thing that might have said to an uncaring universe, they were not so bad. My grandfather planted that tree, and he cared for it while it was young and needed the care. He planted that windbreak for himself, for his own reasons; but any orchard of trees might have served as a windbreak, and more effectively than the trees he planted and labored over. And he loved that sequoia. It was the first tree he showed me, the first summer I visited him; it was the only one I ever heard him mention, or worry over. He worried whether it would survive the winters, worried that he had planted it in a location that would stunt its growth, or kill it. And partially because he worried about it, it did survive; and because of the location he picked, it lasted longer than anything.

There were other things created by the human race that stood in monument, despite the nanomachines that were busy turning the world, from the depths of the Marianas Trench to the heights of Everest, into a vast gray sludge. Between its wars and its building humanity had inflicted scars upon the planet that would be erased only in the course of geologic time. The nanomachines did not eat metal or stone or cement or glass; weapons and vehicles and buildings littered the surface of the planet when the nanomachines were done.

But of the good things the human race did, there was one living thing that still survived; and that one thing was the tree.

Perhaps it's foolish to talk this way, for the tree was just a tree. So far as I know it had no emotions. It could not think or reason. And yet it could feel, and had a sort of awareness of itself, and it knew that something was wrong. The nanomachines first entered the canyon on the wind; and they made short work of almost everything. All the animals, the lizards and bees and snakes and cats and rabbits and owls and crows, died within hours. The smaller trees took days to die, and even the oaks, large though some of them had grown, were gone within a week.

But an adult California big-tree, a giant sequoia, is *huge*. The gray sludge ate away at the tree, stripped it of its leaves, but the tree was made of more than two million pounds of living hardwood. Its bark alone was two to three feet thick, and the bark served to slow the attack of the nanomachines. The bark protected the tree, as evolution had designed it to, significantly slowed the nanomachine attack.

Months passed while the tree struggled for life. It was the last living thing on the surface of the planet that humanity had killed.

Here are some of the things we killed:

Hawks and seaweed. Horses. Puppies and kittens and parrots. Lions and lizards, lobsters and clams. Sharks. Grass and crabgrass and all the flowers, every last one of them; a rose by any other name was just as dead. Bats and vultures and pigeons and bluebirds, boa constrictors and garden snakes and earthworms. Elephants and marijuana plants. Milkweed and tumbleweed and all the other plants humans named "weeds" and tried to destroy because they couldn't figure out a way to make use of them. Snails and frogs and raccoons and bears. We killed the dolphins and the seals and the squid and the starfish, jellyfish and sea anemones and sea horses and all the animals that made the beautiful shells we so treasured.

We killed *everything*—the air and the ground and the water, and everything that lived in those places.

The last thing we killed was the tree.

Half a year had passed since the gray sludge's arrival. The tree's leaves had gone first, and then its branches. The nanomachines ate inward, chewing away at the hardwood. They worked quickly enough, under the circumstances. The tree was twenty-five feet around, and it took the nanomachines a long time to eat their way through it. They got started at the base first, about ten feet above the ground. Other nanomachines attacked the tree along its length, but the invasion at the tree's base was the worst one.

If by some quirk of fate my grandfather had been able to see the canyon at that moment, he would not have recognized it as the place where he'd grown old and died. Every tree, except the great sequoia itself, had toppled to the ground and sunk into a sludge of gray dust. Where grass and shrubs had sprouted, bare rock stood forth. The wind that had always gathered at the mouth of the canyon once again had nothing to stop it, and each evening it blew the dirt and dust back into the canyon, leaving nothing but the exposed rock behind.

Only the one tree still stood above the expanse of pale rock, covered in a gray blanket of molecule-sized machines.

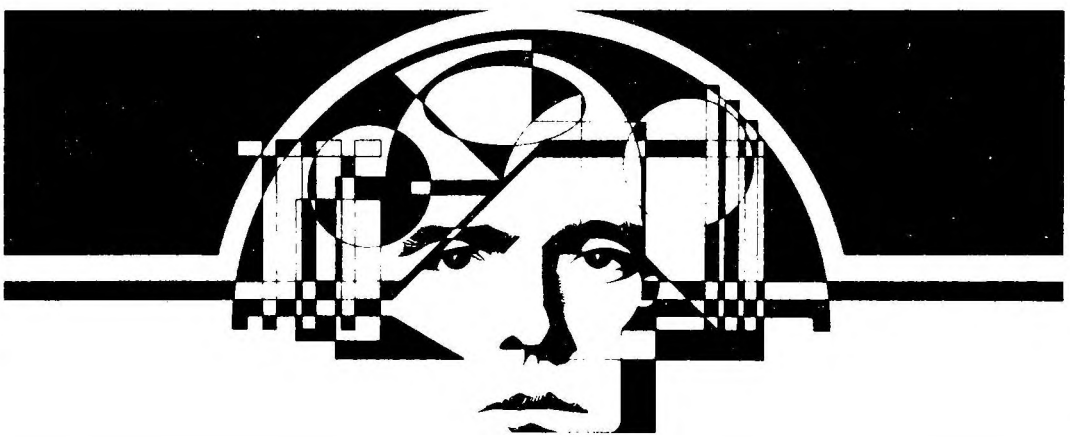
Only the one tree, in all the world, still maintained a flicker of life. Sap flowed sluggishly within the tree's core, even at the end. The gray sludge ate inexorably away at the tree's base, until the day the wind came up, the wind that had tried to knock my grandfather over almost two thousand years before—

And the tree my grandfather planted, fell.

The fall took quite a while, at least on the human scale. On sequoia time, it was faster than the downstroke of a hummingbird's wings.

The fall lasted either a long time or an instant; it doesn't matter. When the tree's thousand tons of hardwood struck the bare stone surface of the canyon the tree shattered, and the sound of its death echoed up and down the length of the canyon for almost thirty seconds before it faded, and the canyon grew quiet again except for the wind. ●

—For my grandfather, who's been hit this year by both strokes and Alzheimer's disease; who will never know I wrote this for him. I wish I'd written faster.



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John Kessel

THE MIRACLE OF IVAR AVENUE

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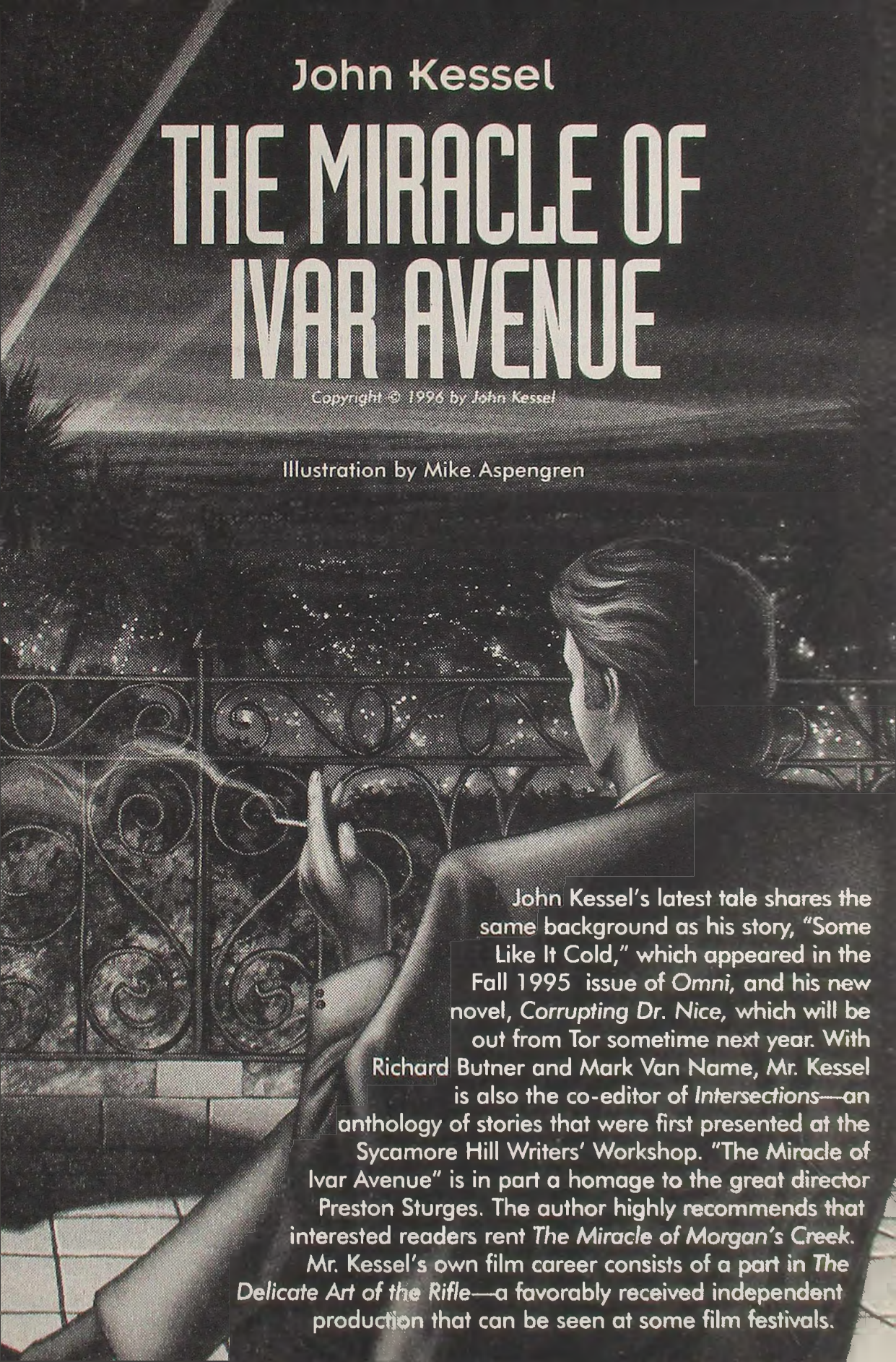
Illustration by Mike Aspengren



John Kessel's latest tale shares the same background as his story, "Some Like It Cold," which appeared in the Fall 1995 issue of *Omni*, and his new novel, *Corrupting Dr. Nice*, which will be out from Tor sometime next year. With Richard Butner and Mark Van Name, Mr. Kessel is also the co-editor of *Intersections*—an anthology of stories that were first presented at the Sycamore Hill Writers' Workshop. "The Miracle of Ivar Avenue" is in part a homage to the great director Preston Sturges. The author highly recommends that interested readers rent *The Miracle of Morgan's Creek*. Mr. Kessel's own film career consists of a part in *The Delicate Art of the Rifle*—a favorably received independent production that can be seen at some film festivals.

Inside the coat pocket of the dead man Corcoran found an eyepiece. "Looks like John Doe was a photographer," the pathologist said, gliding his rubber-gloved thumb over the lens. He handed it to Kinlaw.

While Corcoran continued to peel away the man's clothing, Kinlaw walked over to the morgue's only window, more to get away from the smell of the autopsy table than to examine the lens. He looked through the eyepiece at the parking lot. The device produced a rectangular frame around a man getting into a 1947 Packard. "This isn't from a camera," Kinlaw said. "It's a cinematographer's monocle."

"A what?"

"A movie cameraman uses it to frame a scene."

"You think our friend had something to do with the movies?"

Kinlaw thought about it. That morning a couple of sixth graders playing hooky had found the body on the beach in San Pedro. A man about fifty, big, over two hundred pounds, mustache, thick brown hair going gray. Wearing a beat-up tan double-breasted suit, silk shirt, cordovan shoes. Carrying no identification.

Corcoran hummed "Don't Get Around Much Anymore" while he examined the dead man's fingers. "Heavy smoker," he said. He poked in the corpse's nostrils, then opened the man's mouth and shone a light down his throat. "This doesn't look much like a drowning."

Kinlaw turned around. "Why not?"

"A drowning man goes through spasms, clutches at anything within his grasp; if nothing's there he'll usually have marks on his palms from his fingernails. Plus there's no foam in his trachea or nasal cavities."

"Don't you have to check for water in the lungs?"

"I'll cut him open, but that's not definitive anyway. Lots of drowning men don't get water in their lungs. It's the spasms, foam from mucus, and vomiting that does them in."

"You're saying this guy was murdered?"

"I'm saying he didn't drown. And he wasn't in the water more than twelve hours."

"Can you get some prints?"

Corcoran looked at the man's hand again. "No problem."

Kinlaw slipped the monocle into his pocket. "I'm going upstairs. Call me when you figure out the cause of death."

Corcoran began unbuttoning the dead man's shirt. "You know, he looks like that director, Sturges."

"Who?"

"Preston Sturges. He was pretty hot stuff a few years back. There was a big article in *Life*. Whoa. Got a major surgical scar here."

Kinlaw looked over Corcoran's shoulder. A long scar ran right to center across the dead man's abdomen. "Gunshot wound?"

Corcoran made a note on his clipboard. "Looks like appendectomy. Probably peritonitis, too. A long time ago—ten, twenty years."

Kinlaw took another look at the dead man. "What makes you think this is Preston Sturges?"

"I'm a fan. Plus, this dame I know pointed him out to me at the fights one Friday night during the war. Didn't you ever see *The Miracle of Morgan's Creek?*"

"We didn't get many movies in the Pacific." He took another look at the dead man's face.

When Corcoran hauled out his chest saw, Kinlaw spared his stomach and went back up to the detectives' staff room. He checked missing-persons reports, occasionally stopping to roll the cameraman's monocle back and forth on his desk blotter. There was a sailor two weeks missing from the Long Beach Naval Shipyard. A Mrs. Potter from Santa Monica had reported her husband missing the previous Thursday.

The swivel chair creaked as he leaned back, steepled his fingers and stared at the wall calendar from Free State Buick pinned up next to his desk. The weekend had brought a new month. Familiar April was a blonde in ski pants standing in front of a lodge in the snowy Sierras. He tore off the page: May's blonde wore white shorts and was climbing a ladder in an orange grove. He tried to remember what he had done over the weekend but it all seemed to dissolve into a series of moments connected only by the level of scotch in the glass by his reading chair. He found a pencil in his center drawer and drew a careful X through Sunday, May 1. Happy May Day. After the revolution they would do away with pinup calendars and anonymous dead men. Weekends would mean something and lives would have purpose.

An hour later the report came up from Corcoran: there was no water in the man's lungs. Probable cause of death: carbon monoxide poisoning. But bruises on his ankles suggested he'd had weights tied to them.

There was no answer at Mrs. Potter's home. Kinlaw dug out the L.A. phone book. *Sturges, Preston* was listed at 1917 Ivar Avenue. Probably where Ivar meandered into the Hollywood hills. A nice neighborhood, but nothing compared to Beverly Hills. Kinlaw dialed the number. A man answered the phone. "Yes?"

"I'd like to speak to Mr. Preston Sturges," Kinlaw said.

"May I ask who is calling, please?" The man had the trace of an accent: Kinlaw couldn't place it.

"This is Detective Lemoyne Kinlaw from the Los Angeles Police Department."

"Just a minute."

There was a long wait. Kinlaw watched the smoke curling up from Sapienza's cigarette in the tray on the adjoining desk. An inch of ash clung to the end. He was about to give up when another man's voice came onto the line.

"Detective Kinlaw. How may I help you?" The voice was a light baritone with some sort of high class accent.

"You're Preston Sturges?"

"Last time I checked the mirror, I was."

"Mr. Sturges, the body of a man answering your description was found this morning washed up on the beach at San Pedro."

There was a long pause. "How grotesque."

"Yes, sir. I'm calling to see whether you are all right."

"As you can hear, I'm perfectly all right."

"Right," Kinlaw said. "Do you by any chance have a boat moored down in San Pedro?"

"I have a sailboat harbored in a marina there. But I didn't wash up on any beach last night, did I?"

"Yes, sir. Assuming you're Preston Sturges."

The man paused again. Kinlaw got ready for the explosion. Instead, Sturges said calmly, "I'm not going to be able to convince you who I am over the phone, right?"

"No, you're not."

"I'll tell you what. Come by the Players around eight tonight. You can put your finger through the wounds in my hands and feet. You'll find out I'm very much alive."

"I'll be there."

As soon as he hung up Kinlaw decided he must have been a lunatic to listen to Corcoran and his dames. He was just going to waste a day's pay on pricey drinks in a restaurant he couldn't afford. Then again, though Hollywood people kept funny hours, as he well knew from his marriage to Emily, what was a big time director doing home in the middle of the day?

He spent the rest of the afternoon following up on missing persons. The sailor from Long Beach, it turned out, had no ring finger on his left hand. He finally got through to Mrs. Potter and discovered that Mr. Potter had turned up Sunday night after a drunken weekend in Palm Springs. He talked to Sapienza about recent mob activity and asked a snitch named Bunny Witcover to keep his ears open.

At four-thirty, Kinlaw called back down to the morgue. "Corcoran, do you remember when you saw that article? The one about the director?"

"I don't know. It was an old issue, at the dentist's office."

"Great." Kinlaw checked out of the office and headed down to the public library.

It was a Monday and the place was not busy. The mural that surrounded the rotunda, jam-packed with padres, Indians, Indian babies, gold miners, sheep, a mule, dancing señoritas, conquistadors, ships and flags, was busier than the room itself.

A librarian showed him to an index: the January 7, 1946 issue of *Life*

listed a feature on Preston Sturges beginning on page 85. Kinlaw rummaged through the heaps of old magazines and finally tracked it down. He flipped to page 85 and sat there, hand resting on the large photograph. The man in the photograph, reclining on a sound stage, wearing a rumpled tan suit, was a dead ringer for the man lying on Corcoran's slab in the morgue.

Kinlaw's apartment stood on West Marathon at North Manhattan Place. The building, a four-story reinforced concrete box, had been considered a futuristic landmark when it was constructed in 1927, but its earnest European grimness, the regularity and density of the kid's-block structure, made it seem more like a penitentiary than a work of art. Kinlaw pulled the mail out of his box: an electric bill, a flyer from the PBA, and a letter from Emily. He unlocked the door to his apartment and, standing in the entry, tore open the envelope.

It was just a note, conversational, guarded. Her brother was out of the army. She was working for Metro on the makeup for a new Dana Andrews movie. And oh, by the way, did he know what happened to the photo album with all the pictures of Lucy? She didn't have a single one.

Kinlaw dropped the note on the coffee table, took off his jacket and got the watering can, sprayer and plant food. First he sprayed the hanging fern in front of the kitchen window, then moved through the plants in the living room: the African violets, ficus and four varieties of coleus. Emily had never cared for plants, but he could tell she liked it that he did. It reassured her, told her something about his character that was not evident from looking at him. On the balcony he fed the big rhododendron and the planter full of day lilies. Then he put the sprayer back under the kitchen sink, poured himself a drink, and sat in the living room. He watched the late afternoon sun throw triangular shadows against the wall.

The *Life* article had painted Sturges as an eccentric genius, a man whose life had been a series of lucky accidents. His mother, a Europe-traipsing culture vulture, had been Isadora Duncan's best friend, his stepfather a prominent Chicago businessman. After their divorce Sturges's mother had dragged her son from opera in Bayreuth to dance recital in Vienna to private school in Paris. He came back to the U.S. and spent the twenties trying to make a go of it in her cosmetics business. In 1928 he almost died from a burst appendix; while recovering he wrote his first play; his *Strictly Dishonorable* was a smash Broadway hit in 1929. By the early thirties he had squandered the play's earnings and come to Hollywood, where he became Paramount's top screenwriter, and then the first writer-director of sound pictures. In four years he made eight movies, several of them big hits, before he quit to start a new film company with millionaire Howard Hughes. Besides writing and directing, Sturges owned an engineering company that manufactured diesel

engines, and The Players, one of the most famous restaurants in the city.

Kinlaw noted the ruptured appendix, but there was little to set off his instincts except a passing reference to Sturges being "one of the most controversial figures in Hollywood." And the closing line of the article: "As for himself, he contemplates death constantly and finds it a soothing subject."

He fell asleep in his chair, woke up with his heart racing and his neck sweaty. It was seven o'clock. He washed and shaved, then put on a clean shirt.

The Players was an eccentric three-story building on the side of a hill at 8225 Sunset Boulevard, across Marmont Lane from the neo-gothic Chateau Marmont hotel. Above the ground-level entrance a big neon sign spelled out "The Players" in easy script. At the bottom level drive-in, girls in green caps and jumpers waited on you in your car. Kinlaw had never been upstairs in the formal rooms. It was growing dark when he turned off Sunset onto Marmont and pulled his Hudson up the hill to the terrace-level lot. An attendant in a white coat with his name stitched in green on the pocket took the car.

Kinlaw loitered outside and finished his cigarette while he admired the lights of the houses spread across the hillside above the restaurant. Looking up at them, Kinlaw knew that he would never live in a house like those. There was a wall between some people and some ways of life. A lefty like the twenty-four-year-old YCL member he had been in 1938 would have called it money that kept him from affording such a home, and class that kept the people up there from wanting somebody like him for a neighbor, and principle that kept him from wanting to live there. But the thirty-five-year-old he was now knew it was something other than class, or money, or principle. It was something inside you. Maybe it was character. Maybe it was luck. Kinlaw laughed. You ought to be able to tell the difference between luck and character, for pity's sake. He ground out the butt in the lot and went inside.

At the dimly lit bar on the second floor he ordered a gin and tonic and inspected the room. The place was mostly empty. At one of the tables Kinlaw watched a man and a woman whisper at each other as they peered around the room, hoping, no doubt, to catch a glimpse of Van Johnson or Lizabeth Scott. The man wore a white shirt with a big collar and a white Panama hat with a pink hat band, the woman a yellow print dress. On the table they held two prudent drinks neatly in the center of prudent cocktail napkins, beside them a map of Beverly Hills folded open with bright red stars to indicate the homes of the famous. A couple of spaces down the bar a man was trying to pick up a blonde doing her best Lana Turner. She was mostly ignoring him but the man didn't seem to mind.

"So what do you think will happen in the next ten years?" he asked her.

"I expect I'll get some better parts. Eventually I want at least second leads."

"And you'll deserve them. But what happens when the Communists invade?"

"Communists schmonumists. That's the bunk."

"You're very prescient. The state department should hire you, but they won't."

This was some of the more original pickup talk Kinlaw had ever heard. The man was a handsome fellow with an honest face, but his light brown hair and sideburns were too long. Maybe he was an actor working on some historical pic.

"You know, I think we should discuss the future in more detail. What do you say?"

"I say you should go away. I don't mean to be rude."

"Let me write this down for you, so if you change your mind . . ." The man took a coaster and wrote something on it. He pushed the coaster toward her with his index finger.

Good luck, buddy. Kinlaw scanned the room. Most of the clientele seemed to be tourists. At one end of the room, on the bandstand, a jazz quintet was playing a smoky version of "Stardust." When the bartender came back to ask about a refill, Kinlaw asked him if Sturges was in.

"Not yet. He usually shows up around nine or after."

"Will you point him out to me when he gets here?"

The bartender looked suspicious. "Who are you?"

"Does it matter?"

"You look like you might be from a collection agency."

"I thought this place was a hangout for movie stars."

"You're four years late, pal. Now it's a hangout for bill collectors."

"I'm not after money."

"That's good. Because just between you and me, I don't think Mr. Sturges has much."

"I thought he was one of the richest men in Hollywood."

"Was, past tense."

Kinlaw slid a five dollar bill across the bar. "Do you know what he was doing yesterday afternoon?"

The bartender took the five note, folded it twice and stuck it into the breast pocket of his shirt. "Most of the afternoon he was sitting at that table over there looking for answers in the bottom of a glass of Black Label scotch."

"You're a mighty talkative employee."

"Manager's got us reusing the coasters to try to save a buck." He straightened a glass of swizzle sticks. "I paid for the privilege of talking. Mr. Sturges is into me for five hundred in back pay."

Down the end of the bar the blonde left. The man with the sideburns waved at the bartender, who went down to refill his drink.

Kinlaw decided he could afford a second gin and tonic. Midway through the third the bartender nodded toward a table on the mezzanine; there was Sturges, looking a lot healthier than the morning's dead man. He saw the bartender gesture and waved Kinlaw over to his table. Sturges stood as Kinlaw approached. He had thick, unkempt brown hair with a gray streak in the front, a square face, jug ears and narrow eyes that would have given him a nasty look were it not for his quirky smile. A big, soft body. His resemblance to the dead man was uncanny. Next to him sat a dark-haired, attractive woman in her late thirties, in a blue silk dress.

"Detective Kinlaw. This is my wife, Louise."

"How do you do."

As Kinlaw was sitting down, the waiter appeared and slid a fresh gin and tonic onto the table in front of him.

"You've eaten?" Sturges asked.

"No."

"Robert, a menu for Mr. Kinlaw."

"Mr. Sturges, I'm not sure we need to spend much time on this. Clearly, unless you have a twin, the identification we had was mistaken."

"That's all right. There are more than a few people in Hollywood who will be disappointed it wasn't me."

Louise Sturges watched her husband warily, as if she weren't too sure what he was going to say next, and wanted pretty hard to figure it out.

"When were you last on your boat?"

"Yesterday. On Saturday I went out to Catalina on the *Island Belle* with my friends, Dr. Bertrand Woolford and his wife. We stayed at anchor in a cove there over Saturday night, then sailed back Sunday. We must have got back around one P.M. I was back at home by three."

"You were with them, Mrs. Sturges?"

Louise looked from her husband to Kinlaw. "No."

"But you remember Mr. Sturges getting back when he says?"

"No. That is, I wasn't at home when he got there. I—"

"Louise and I haven't been living together for some time," Sturges said.

Kinlaw waited. Louise looked down at her hands. Sturges laughed.

"Come on, Louise, there's nothing for you to be ashamed of. I'm the one who was acting like a fool. Detective Kinlaw, we've been separated for more than a year. The divorce was final last November."

"One of those friendly Hollywood divorces."

"I wouldn't say that. But when I called her this morning, Louise was gracious enough to meet with me." He put his hand on his wife's. "I'm hoping she will give me the chance to prove to her I know what a huge mistake I made."

"Did anyone see you after you returned Sunday afternoon?"

"As I recall, I came by the restaurant and was here for some time. You can talk to Dominique, the bartender."

Eventually the dinner came and they ate. Or Kinlaw and Louise ate: Sturges regaled them with stories about how his mother had given Isadora the scarf that killed her, about his marriage to the heiress Eleanor Post Hutton, about an argument he'd seen between Sam Goldwyn and a Hungarian choreographer, in which he played both parts and put on elaborate accents.

Kinlaw couldn't help but like him. He had a sense of absurdity, and if he had a high opinion of his own genius, he seemed to be able to back it up. Louise watched Sturges affectionately, as if he were her son as much as her ex-husband. In the middle of one of his stories he stopped to glance at her for her reaction, then reached impulsively over to squeeze her hand, after which he launched off into another tale, about the time, at a pool, he boasted he was going to "dive into the water like an arrow," and his secretary said, "Yes, a Pierce-Arrow."

After a while Sturges wound down, and he and Louise left. At the cloak room Sturges offered to help her on with her jacket, and Kinlaw noticed a moment's skepticism cross Louise's face before she let him. Kinlaw went back over to talk with the bartender.

"I've got a couple more questions."

The bartender shrugged. "Getting late."

"This place won't close for hours."

"It's time for me to go home."

Kinlaw showed him his badge. "Do I have to get official, Dominique?"

Dominique got serious. "Robert heard you talking to Sturges. Why didn't you let on earlier you were a cop? What's this about?"

"Nothing you have to worry about, if you answer my questions." Kinlaw asked him about Sturges's actions the day before.

"I can't tell you about the morning, but the rest is pretty much like he says," Dominique told him. "He came by here about six. He was already drinking, and looked terrible. 'Look at this,' he says to me, waving the L.A. *Times* in my face. They'd panned his new movie. 'The studio dumps me and they still hang this millstone around my neck.' He sat there, ordered dinner but didn't eat anything. Tossing back one scotch after another. His girlfriend must have heard something, she came in and tried to talk to him, but he wouldn't talk."

"His girlfriend?"

"Frances Ramsden, the model. They've been together since he broke with Louise. He just sat there like a stone, and eventually she left. Later, when business began to pick up, he got in his car and drove away. I remember thinking, I hope he doesn't get in a wreck. He was three sheets to the wind, and he's already had some accidents."

"What time was that?"

"About seven-thirty, eight. I thought that was the last I'd see of him, but then he came back later."

"What time?"

"After midnight. Look, can you tell me what this is about?"

Kinlaw watched him. "Somebody's dead."

"Dead?" Dominique looked a little shaken, nothing more.

"I think Sturges might know something. Anything you remember about when he came back? How was he acting?"

"Funny. He comes in and I almost don't recognize him. The place was clearing out then. Instead of the suit he'd had on earlier he was wearing slacks and a sweatshirt, deck shoes. He was completely sober. His eyes were clear, his hands didn't shake—he looked like a new man. They sat there and talked all night."

"They?"

"Mr. Sturges and this other guy he came in with. Friendly looking, light hair. He had a kind of accent—German, maybe? I figure he must be some Hollywood expatriate—they all used to all hang out here—this was little Europe. Mr. Sturges would talk French with them. He loved to show off."

"Had you seen this man before?"

"Never. But Mr. Sturges seemed completely familiar with him. Here's the funny thing—he kept looking around as if he'd never seen the place."

"You just said he'd never been here before."

"Not the German. It was Sturges looked as if he hadn't seen The Players. 'Dominique,' he said to me, 'How have you been?' 'I've been fine,' I said.

"They sat up at Mr. Sturges's table there and talked all night. Sturges was full of energy. The bad review might as well have happened to somebody else. The German guy didn't say much, but he was drinking as hard as Mr. Sturges was earlier. It was like they'd changed places. Mr. Sturges stood him to an ocean of scotch. When we closed up they were still here."

"Have you seen this man since then?"

The bartender looked down the bar. "Didn't you see him? He was right here when you came in, trying to pick up some blonde."

"The guy with the funny haircut?"

"That's the one. Mr. Sturges said to let him run a tab. Guess he must've left. Wonder if he made her."

It was a woozy drive home with nothing to show for the evening except the prospect of a Tuesday morning hangover. He might as well do the thing right: back in the apartment Kinlaw got out the bottle of scotch, poured a glass, and sat in the dark listening to a couple of blues records.

Scotch after gin, a deadly combination. After a while he gave up and went to bed. He was almost asleep when the phone rang.

"Hello?"

"Lee? This is Emily."

Her voice was brittle. "Hello," he said. "It's late." He remembered the nights near the end when he'd find her sitting in the kitchen after midnight with the lights out, the tip of her cigarette trembling in the dark.

"Did you get my letter?"

"What letter?"

"Lee, I've been looking for the photo album with the pictures of Lucy," she said. "I can't find it anywhere. Then I realized you must have taken it when you moved out."

"Don't blame me if you can't find it, Emily."

"You know, I used to be impressed by your decency."

"We both figured out I wasn't as strong as you thought I was, didn't we? Let's not stir all that up again."

"I'm not stirring up anything. I just want the photographs."

"All I've got is a wallet photo. I'm lucky I've got a wallet."

Instead of getting mad, Emily said, quietly, "Don't insult me, Lee." Her voice was tired.

"I'm sorry," he said. "I'll look around. I don't have them, though."

"I guess they're lost, then. I'm sorry I woke you." She'd lost the edge of hysteria; she sounded like the girl he'd first met at a Los Angeles Angels game in 1934. It stirred emotions he'd thought were dead, but before he could think what to say she hung up.

It took him another hour to get to sleep.

In the morning he showered, shaved, grabbed some ham and eggs at the Indian Head Diner and headed in to homicide. The fingerprint report was on his desk. If the dead guy was a mob button man, his prints showed up nowhere in any of their files. Kinlaw spent some time reviewing other missing persons reports. He kept thinking of the look on Louise Sturges's face when her husband held her coat for her. For a moment she looked as if she wasn't sure this was the same man she'd divorced. He wondered why Emily hadn't gotten mad when he'd insulted her over the phone. At one time it would have triggered an hour's argument, rife with accusations. Did people change that much?

He called the Ivar Avenue number.

"Mrs. Sturges? This is Lemoyne Kinlaw from the L.A.P.D. I wondered if we might talk."

"Yes?"

"I hoped we might speak in person."

"What's this about?"

"I want to follow up on some things from last night."

She paused. "Preston's gone off to talk to his business manager. Can you come over right now?"

"I'll be there in a half an hour."

Kinlaw drove out to quiet Ivar Avenue and into the curving drive before 1917. The white-shingled house sat on the side of a hill, looking modest by Hollywood standards. Kinlaw rang the bell and the door was answered by a Filipino houseboy.

Once inside, Kinlaw saw that the modesty of the front was deceptive. The houseboy led him to a large room at the back that must have been sixty by thirty feet.

The walls were green and white, the floor dark hardwood. At one end of the room stood a massive pool table and brick inglenook fireplace. At the other end, a level up, surrounded by an iron balustrade, ran a bar upholstered in green leather, complete with a copper-topped nightclub table and stools. Shelves crowded with scripts, folders and hundreds of books lined one long wall, and opposite them an expanse of French doors opened onto a kidney-shaped pool surrounded by hibiscus and fruit blossoms, Canary Island pines and ancient firs.

Louise Sturges, seated on a bench covered in pink velveteen, was talking to a towheaded boy of eight or nine. When Kinlaw entered she stood. "Mr. Kinlaw, this is our son, Mon. Mon, why don't you go outside for a while."

The boy raced out through the French doors. Louise wore a plum-colored cotton dress and black flats that did not hide her height. Her thick hair was brushed back over her ears. Poised as a *Vogue* model, she offered Kinlaw a seat. "Have you ever had children, Mr. Kinlaw?"

"A daughter."

"Preston very much wanted children, but Mon is the only one we are likely to have. At first I was sad, but after things started to go sour between us I was glad that we didn't have more."

"How sour were things?"

Louise smoothed her skirt. Her sophistication veiled a calmness that was nothing cheap or Hollywood. "Have you found out who that drowned man is?"

"No."

"What did you want to ask me about?"

"I couldn't help but get the impression last night that you were surprised at your husband's behavior."

"He's frequently surprised me."

"Has he been acting strangely?"

"I don't know. Well, when Preston called me yesterday I was pretty surprised. We haven't had much contact since before our separation. At the end we got so we'd communicate by leaving notes on the banister."

"But that changed?"

She watched him for a moment before answering. "When we met, Preston and I fell very much in love. He just swept me off my feet. He was so intense, funny. I couldn't imagine a more loving husband. Certainly he was an egotist, and totally involved in his work, but he was also such a charming and attentive man."

"What happened?"

"Well, he started directing, and that consumed all his energies. He would work into the evening at the studio, then spend the night at The Players. At first he wanted me totally involved in his career. He kept me by his side at the sound stage as the film was shot. Some of the crew came to resent me, but Preston didn't care. Eventually I complained, and Preston agreed that I didn't need to be there.

"Maybe that was a mistake. The less I was involved, the less he thought of me. After Mon was born he didn't have much time for us. He stopped seeing me as his wife and more as the mother of his son, then as his housekeeper and cook.

"Some time in there he started having affairs. After a while I couldn't put up with it anymore, so I moved out. When I filed for divorce, he seemed relieved."

Kinlaw worried the brim of his hat. He wondered what Sturges's version of the story would be.

"That's the way things were for the last two years," Louise continued. "Then he called me Sunday night. He has to see me, he needs to talk. I thought, he's in trouble; that's the only time he needs me. Back when the deal with Hughes fell through, he showed up at my apartment and slept on my bed, beside me, like a little boy needing comfort. I thought this would just be more of the same. So I met with him Monday morning. He was contrite. He looked more like the man I'd married than he'd seemed for years. He begged me to give him another chance. He realized his mistakes, he said. He's selling the restaurant. He wants to be a father to our son."

"You looked at him last night as if you doubted his sincerity."

"I don't know what to think. It's what I wanted for years, but—he seems so different. He's stopped drinking. He's stopped smoking."

"This may seem like a bizarre suggestion, Mrs. Sturges, but is there any chance this man might not be your husband?"

Louise laughed. "Oh, no—it's Preston all right. No one else has that ego."

Kinlaw laid his hat on the end table. "Okay. Would you mind if I took a look at your garage?"

"The garage? Why?"

"Humor me."

She led him through the kitchen to the attached garage. Inside, a red Austin convertible sat on a wooden disk set into the concrete floor.

"What's this?"

"That's a turntable," Louise said. "Instead of backing up, you can flip this switch and rotate the car so that it's pointing out. Preston loves gadgets. I think this one's the reason he bought this house."

Kinlaw inspected the garage door. It had a rubber flap along the bottom, and would be quite airtight. There was a dark patch on the interior of the door where the car's exhaust would blow, as if the car had been running for some time with the door closed.

They went back into the house. In the backyard the boy, laughing, chased a border collie around the pool. Lucy had wanted a dog. "Let me ask you one more question, and then I'll go. Does your husband have any distinguishing marks on his body?"

"He has a large scar on his abdomen. He had a ruptured appendix when he was a young man. It almost killed him."

"Does the man who's claiming to be your husband have such a scar?"

Louise hesitated, then said, "I wouldn't know."

"If you should find that he doesn't, could you let me know?"

"I'll consider it."

"One last thing. Do you have any object he's held recently—a cup or glass?"

She pointed to the bar. "He had a club soda last night. I think that was the glass."

Kinlaw got out his handkerchief and wrapped the glass in it, put it into his pocket. "We'll see what we will see. I doubt that anything will come of it, Mrs. Sturges. It's probably that he's just come to his senses. Some husbands do that."

"You don't know Preston. He's never been the sensible type."

Back at the office he sent the glass to the lab for prints. A note on his desk told him that while he had been out he'd received a call from someone named Nathan Lautermilk at Paramount.

He placed a call to Lautermilk. After running the gauntlet of the switchboard and Lautermilk's secretary, Kinlaw got him. "Mr. Lautermilk, this is Lee Kinlaw of the L.A.P.D. What can I do for you?"

"Thank you for returning my call, detective. A rumor going around here has it you're investigating the death of Preston Sturges. There's been nothing in the papers about him dying."

"Then he must not be dead."

Lautermilk had no answer. Kinlaw let the silence stretch until it became uncomfortable.

"I don't want to pry into police business, detective, but if Preston was murdered, some folks around here might wonder if they were suspects."

"Including you, Mr. Lautermilk?"

"If I thought you might suspect me, I wouldn't draw attention to myself by calling. I'm an old friend of Preston's. I was assistant to Buddy DeSylva before Preston quit the studio."

"I'll tell you what, Mr. Lautermilk. Suppose I come out there and we have a talk."

Lautermilk tried to put him off, but Kinlaw persisted until he agreed to meet him.

An hour later Kinlaw pulled up to the famous Paramount arch, like the entrance to a Moorish palace. Through the curlicues of the iron gate the sun-washed soundstages hulked like pastel munitions warehouses. The guard had his name and told him where to park.

Lautermilk met him in the long low white building that housed the writers. He had an office on the ground floor, with a view across the lot to the sound stages but close enough so he could keep any recalcitrant writers in line.

Lautermilk seemed to like writers, though, a rare trait among studio executives. He was a short, bald, pop-eyed man with a Chicago accent and an explosive laugh. He made Kinlaw sit down and offered him a cigarette from a brass box on his desk. Kinlaw took one, and Lautermilk lit it with a lighter fashioned into the shape of a lion's head. The jaws popped open and a flame sprang out of the lion's tongue. "Louie B. Mayer gave it to me," Lautermilk said. "Only thing I ever got from him he didn't take back later." He laughed.

"I'm curious. Can you arrange a screening of one of Preston Sturges's movies?"

"I suppose so." Lautermilk picked up his phone. "Judy, see if you can track down a print of *Miracle of Morgan's Creek* and get it set up to show in one of the screening rooms. Call me when it's ready."

Kinlaw examined the lion lighter. "Did Sturges ever give you anything?"

"Gave me several pains in the neck. Gave the studio a couple of hit movies. On the whole I'd say we got the better of the deal."

"So why is he gone?"

"Buddy DeSylva didn't think he was worth the aggravation. Look what's happened since Sturges left. Give him his head, he goes too far."

"But he makes good movies."

"Granted. But he made some flops, too. And he offended too many people along the way. Didn't give you much credit for having any sense, corrected your grammar, made fun of people's accents and read H.L. Mencken to the cast over lunch. And if you crossed him he would make you remember it later."

"How?"

"Lots of ways. On *The Palm Beach Story* he got irritated with Claudette Colbert quitting right at five every day. Preston liked to work

'til eight or nine if it was going well, but Colbert was in her late thirties and insisted she was done at five. So he accommodated himself to her. But one morning, in front of all the cast and crew, Preston told her, 'You know, we've got to take your close-ups as early as possible. You look great in the morning, but by five o'clock you're beginning to sag.' "

"So you were glad to see him go."

"I hated to see it, actually. I liked him. He can be the most charming man in Hollywood. But I'd be lying if I didn't tell you that the studios are full of people just waiting to see him slip. Once you start to slip, even the waitresses in the commissary will cut you."

"Maybe there's some who'd like to help him along."

"By the looks of the reactions to his last couple of pictures, they won't need to. *Unfaithfully Yours* might have made money if it hadn't been for the Carole Landis mess. Hard to sell a comedy about a guy killing his wife when the star's girlfriend just committed suicide. But *Beautiful Blonde* is a cast iron bomb. Daryl Zanuck must be tearing his hair out. A lot of people are taking some quiet satisfaction tonight, though they'll cry crocodile tears in public."

"Maybe they won't have to fake it. We found a body washed up on the beach in San Pedro answers to Sturges's description."

Lautermilk did not seem surprised. "No kidding."

"That's why I came out here. I wondered why you'd be calling the L.A.P.D. about some ex-director."

"I heard some talk in the commissary, one of the art directors who has a boat down in San Pedro heard some story. Preston was my friend. There have been rumors that he's been depressed. Anyone who's seen him in the last six months knows he's been having a hard time. It would be big news around here if he died."

"Well, you can calm down. He's alive and well. I just talked to him last night, in person, at his restaurant."

"I'm glad to hear it."

"So what do you make of this body we found?"

"Maybe you identified it wrong."

"Anybody ever suspect that Sturges had a twin?"

"A thing like that would have come out. He's always talking about his family."

Kinlaw put the cinematographer's monocle on Lautermilk's desk. "We found this in his pocket."

Lautermilk picked it up, examined it, put it down again. "Lots of these toys in Hollywood."

The intercom buzzed and the secretary reported that they could see the film in screening room D at any time. Lautermilk walked with Kinlaw over to another building, up a flight of stairs to a row of screening rooms. They entered a small room with about twenty theater-style seats, sever-

al of which had phones on tables next to them. "Have a seat," Lautermilk said. "Would you like a drink?"

Kinlaw was thirsty. "No, thanks."

Lautermilk used the phone next to his seat to call back to the projection booth. "Let her rip, Arthur."

"If you don't mind," he said to Kinlaw, "I'll leave after the first few minutes."

The room went dark. "One more thing, then," Kinlaw said. "All these people you say would like to see Sturges fail. Any of them like to see him dead?"

"I can't tell you what's in people's heads." Lautermilk settled back and lit a cigarette. The movie began to roll.

The Miracle of Morgan's Creek was a frenetic comedy. By twenty minutes in Kinlaw realized the real miracle was that they had gotten it past the Hays Office. A girl gets drunk at a going-away party for soldiers, marries one, gets pregnant, doesn't remember the name of the father. All in one night. She sets her sights on marrying Norval Jones, a local yokel, but the yokel turns out to be so sincere she can't bring herself to do it. Norval tries to get the girl out of trouble. Everything they do only makes the situation worse. Rejection, disgrace, indictment, even suicide are all distinct possibilities. But at the last possible moment a miracle occurs to turn humiliation into triumph.

Kinlaw laughed despite himself, but after the lights came up the movie's sober undertone began to work on him. It looked like a rube comedy but it wasn't. The story mocked the notion of the rosy ending while allowing people who wanted one to have it. It implied a maker who was both a cruel cynic and dizzy optimist. In Sturges's absurd universe anything could happen at any time, and what people did or said didn't matter at all. Life was a cruel joke with a happy ending.

Blinking in the sunlight, he found his car, rolled down the windows to let out the heat, and drove back to homicide. When he got back the results of the fingerprint test were on his desk. From the tumbler they had made a good right thumb, index and middle finger. The prints matched the right hand of the dead man exactly.

All that afternoon Kinlaw burned gas and shoe leather looking for Sturges. Louise had not seen him since he'd left the Ivar Avenue house in the morning, he was not with Frances Ramsden or the Woolfords, nobody had run into him at Fox, the restaurant manager claimed he'd not been in, and a long drive down to the San Pedro marina was fruitless: Sturges's boat rocked empty in its slip and the man in the office claimed he hadn't seen the director since Sunday.

It was early evening and Kinlaw was driving back to Central Homicide when he passed the MGM lot where Emily was working. He wondered if

she was still fretting over the photo album. In some ways his problems were simpler than hers; all he had to do was catch the identical twin of a man who didn't have a twin. It had to be a better distraction than Emily's job. He remembered how, a week after he'd moved out, he'd found himself drunk one Friday night, coming back to the house to sit on the backyard swing and watch the darkened window to their bedroom, wondering whether she was sleeping any better than he. Fed up with her inability to cope, he'd known he didn't want to go inside and take up the pain again, but he could not bring himself to go away either. So he sat on the swing he had hung for Lucy and waited for something to release him. The galvanized chain links were still unrusted; they would last a long time.

A man watching a house, waiting for absolution. The memory sparked a hunch, and he turned around and drove to his apartment. He found the red Austin parked down the block. As he climbed the steps to his floor a shadow pulled back into the corner of the stairwell. Kinlaw drew his gun. "Come on out."

Sturges stepped out of the shadows.

"How long have you been waiting there?"

"Quite a while. You have a very boring apartment building. I like the bougainvillea, though."

Kinlaw waved Sturges ahead of him down the hall. "I bet you're an expert on bougainvillea."

"Yes. Some of the studio executives I've had to work with boast IQ's that rival that of the bougainvillea. The common bougainvillea, that is."

Kinlaw holstered the gun, unlocked his apartment door and gestured for Sturges to enter. "Do you have any opinion of the IQ of police detectives?"

"I know little about them."

Sturges stood stiffly in the middle of Kinlaw's living room. He looked at the print on the wall. He walked over to Kinlaw's record player and leafed through the albums.

Kinlaw got the bottle of scotch from the kitchen. Sturges put on Ellington's "Perfume Suite."

"How about a drink?" Kinlaw asked.

"I'd love one. But I can't."

Kinlaw blew the dust out of a tumbler and poured three fingers. "Right. Your wife says you're turning over a new leaf."

"I'm working on the whole forest."

Kinlaw sat down. Sturges kept standing, shifting from foot to foot. "I've been looking for you all afternoon," Kinlaw said.

"I've been driving around."

"Your wife is worried about you. After what she told me about your marriage, I can't figure why."

"Have you ever been married, Detective Kinlaw?"

"Divorced."

"Children?"

"No children."

"I have a son. I've neglected him. But I intend to do better. He's nine. It's not too late, is it? I never saw my own father much past the age of eight. But whenever I needed him he was always there, and I loved him deeply. Don't you think Mon can feel that way about me?"

"I don't know. Seems to me he can't feel that way about a stranger."

Sturges looked at the bottle of scotch. "I could use a drink."

"I saw one of your movies this afternoon. Nathan Lautermilk set it up. *The Miracle of Morgan's Creek*."

"Yes. Everybody seems to like that one. Why I didn't win the Oscar for original screenplay is beyond me."

"Lautermilk said he was worried about you. Rumors are going around that you're dead. Did you ask him to call me?"

"Why would I do that?"

"To find out whether I thought you had anything to do with this dead man."

"Oh, I'm sure Nathan told you all about how he loves me. But where was he when I was fighting Buddy DeSylva every day? *Miracle* made more money than any other Paramount picture that year, after Buddy questioned my every decision making it." He was pacing the room now, his voice rising.

"I thought it was pretty funny."

"Funny? Tell me you didn't laugh until it hurt. No one's got such a performance out of Betty Hutton before or since. But I guess I can't expect a cop to see that."

"At Paramount they're not so impressed with your work since you left."

Sturges stopped pacing. He cradled a blossom from one of Kinlaw's spaths in his palm. "Neither am I, frankly. I've made a lot of bad decisions. I should have sold The Players two years ago. I hope to God I don't croak before I can get on my feet again."

Kinlaw remembered the line from the *Life* profile. He quoted it back at Sturges: " 'As for himself, he contemplates death constantly and finds it a soothing subject.' "

Sturges looked at him. He laughed. "What an ass I can be! Only a man who doesn't know what he's talking about could say such a stupid thing."

Could an impostor pick up a cue like that? The Ellington record reached the end of the first side. Kinlaw got up and flipped it over, to "Strange Feeling." A baritone sang the eerie lyric. "I forgot to tell you in the restaurant," Kinlaw said. "That dead man had a nice scar on his belly. Do you have a scar?"

"Yes. I do." When Kinlaw didn't say anything Sturges added, "You want me to show it to you?"

"Yes."

Sturges pulled out his shirt, tugged down his belt and showed Kinlaw his belly. A long scar ran across it from right to center. Kinlaw didn't say anything, and Sturges tucked the shirt in.

"You know we got some fingerprints off that dead man. And a set of yours, too."

Sturges poured himself a scotch, drank it off. He coughed. "I guess police detectives have pretty high IQ's after all," he said quietly.

"Not so high that I can figure out what's going on. Why don't you tell me?"

"I'm Preston Sturges."

"So, apparently, was that fellow who washed up on the beach at San Pedro."

"I don't see how that can be possible."

"Neither do I. You want to tell me?"

"I can't."

"Who's the German you've been hanging around with?"

"I don't know any Germans."

Kinlaw sighed. "Okay. So why not just tell me what you're doing here."

Sturges started pacing again. "I want to ask you to let it go. There are some things—some things in life just won't bear too much looking into."

"To a cop, that's not news. But it's not a good enough answer."

"It's the only answer I can give you."

"Then we'll just have to take it up with the district attorney."

"You have no way to connect me up with this dead man."

"Not yet. But you've been acting strangely. And you admit yourself you were on your boat at San Pedro this weekend."

"Detective Kinlaw, I'm asking you. Please let this go. I swear to you I had nothing to do with the death of that man."

"You don't sound entirely convinced yourself."

"He killed himself. Believe me, I'm not indifferent to his pain. He was at the end of his rope. He had what he thought were good reasons, but they were just cowardice and despair."

"You know a lot about him."

"I know all there is to know. I also know that I didn't kill him."

"I'm afraid that's not good enough."

Sturges stopped pacing and faced him. The record had reached the end and the needle was ticking repetitively over the center groove. When Kinlaw got out of his chair to change it, Sturges hit him on the head with the bottle of scotch.

Kinlaw came around bleeding from a cut behind his ear. It couldn't have been more than a few minutes. He pressed a wet dish towel against it until the bleeding stopped, found his hat and headed downstairs. The

air hung hot as the vestibule of hell with the windows closed. Out in the street he climbed into his Hudson and set off up Western Avenue.

The mess with Sturges was a demonstration of what happened when you let yourself think you knew a man's character. Kinlaw had let himself like Sturges, forgetting that mild-mannered wives tested the carving knife out on their husbands and stone cold killers wept when their cats got worms.

An orange moon in its first quarter hung in the west as Kinlaw followed Sunset toward the Strip. When he reached The Players he parked in the upper lot. Down the end of one row was a red Austin; the hood was still warm. Head still throbbing, he went into the bar. Dominique was pouring brandy into a couple of glasses; he looked up and saw Kinlaw.

"What's your poison?"

"I'm looking for Sturges."

"Haven't seen him."

"Don't give me that. His car's in the lot."

Dominique set the brandies on a small tray and a waitress took them away. "If he came in, I didn't spot him. If I had, I would have had a thing or two to tell him. Rumor has it he's selling this place."

"Where's his office?"

The bartender pointed to a door, and Kinlaw checked it out. The room was empty; a stack of bills sat on the desk blotter. The one on the top was the third notice from a poultry dealer, for $442.16. PLEASE REMIT IMMEDIATELY was stamped in red across the top. Kinlaw poked around for a few minutes, then went back to the bar. "Have you seen anything of that German since we talked yesterday?"

"No."

Kinlaw remembered something. He went down to where the foreigner and the blonde had been sitting. A stack of cardboard coasters sat next to a glass of swizzle sticks. Kinlaw riffled through the coasters: on the edge of one was written "Suite 62."

He went out to the lot and crossed Marmont to the Chateau Marmont. The elegant concrete monstrosity was dramatically floodlit. Up at the top floors, the building was broken into steep roofs with elaborate chimneys and dormers surrounding a pointed central tower. Around it wide terraces with traceried balustrades and striped awnings marked the luxury suites. Kinlaw entered the hotel through a gothic arcade with ribbed vaulting, brick paving, and a fountain at the end.

"Six," he told the elevator operator, a wizened man who stared straight ahead as if somewhere inside he was counting off the minutes until the end of his life.

Kinlaw listened at the door to Suite 62. Two men's voices, muffled to the point he could not make out any words. The door was locked.

Back in the tower opposite the elevator a tall window looked out over

the hotel courtyard. Kinlaw leaned out: the ledge was at least a foot and a half wide. Ten feet to his right were the balustrade and awning of the sixth-floor terrace. He eased himself through the narrow window and carefully down the ledge; though there was a breeze up at this height, he felt his brow slick with sweat. His nose an inch from the masonry, he could hear the traffic on the boulevard below.

He reached the terrace, threw his leg over the rail. The French doors were open and through them he could hear the voices more clearly. One of them was Sturges and the other was the man who'd answered the phone that first afternoon at the Ivar house.

"You've got to help me out of this."

"Got to? Not in my vocabulary, Preston."

"This police detective is measuring me for a noose."

"Only one way out then. I can fire up my magic suitcase and take us back."

"No."

"Then don't go postal. There's nothing he can do to prove that you aren't you."

"We should never have dumped that body in the water."

"What do I know about disposing of bodies? I'm a talent scout, not an executive producer."

"That's easy for you to say. You won't be here to deal with the consequences."

"If you insist, I'm willing to try an unburned moment-universe. Next time we can bury the body in your basement. But really, I don't want to go through all this rumpus again. My advice is to tough it out."

"And once you leave and I'm in the soup, it will never matter to you."

"Preston, you are lucky I brought you back in the first place. It cost every dollar you made to get the studio to let us command the device. There are no guarantees. Use the creative imagination you're always talking about."

Sturges seemed to sober. "All right. But Kinlaw is looking for you, too. Maybe you ought to leave as soon as you can."

The other man laughed. "And cut short my holiday? That doesn't seem fair."

Sturges sat down. "I'm going to miss you. If it weren't for you I'd be the dead man right now."

"I don't mean to upset you, but in some real sense you are."

"Very funny. I should write a script based on all this."

"*The Miracle of Ivar Avenue*? Too fantastic, even for you."

"And I don't even know how the story comes out. Back here I'm still up to my ears in debt, and nobody in Hollywood would trust me to direct a wedding rehearsal."

"You are resourceful. You'll figure it out. You've seen the future."

"Which is why I'm back in the past."

"Meanwhile, I have a date tonight. A young woman, they tell me, who bears a striking resemblance to Veronica Lake. Since you couldn't introduce me to the real thing."

"Believe me," Sturges said. "The real thing is nothing but trouble."

"You know how much I enjoy a little trouble."

"Sure. Trouble is fun when you've got the perfect escape hatch. Which I don't have."

While they continued talking, Kinlaw sidled past the wrought iron terrace furniture to the next set of French doors, off the suite's bedroom. He slipped inside. The bedclothes were rumpled and the place smelled of whiskey. A bottle of Paul Jones and a couple of glasses stood on the bedside table along with a glass ashtray filled with butts; one of the glasses was smeared with lipstick. Some of the butts were hand-rolled reefer. On the dresser Kinlaw found a handful of change, a couple of twenties, a hotel key, a list of names:

Jeanne d'Arc		Carole Lombard	X
Claire Bloom		Germaine Greer	X
Anne Boleyn	X	Vanessa Redgrave	
Eva Braun	X	Alice Roosevelt	X
Louise Brooks	X	Christina Rossetti	
Charlotte Buff	X	Anne Rutledge	
Marie Duplessis		George Sand	X
Veronica Lake			

Brooks had been a hot number when Kinlaw was a kid, everybody knew Hitler's pal Eva, and Alice Roosevelt was old Teddy's aging socialite daughter. But who was Vanessa Redgrave? And how had someone named George gotten himself into this company?

At the foot of the bed lay an open suitcase full of clothes; Kinlaw rifled through it but found nothing that looked magic. Beside the dresser was a companion piece, a much smaller case in matching brown leather. He lifted it. It was much heavier than he'd anticipated. When he shook it there was no hint of anything moving inside. It felt more like a portable radio than a piece of luggage.

He carried it out to the terrace and, while Sturges and the stranger talked, knelt and snapped open the latches. The bottom half held a dull gray metal panel with switches, what looked something like a typewriter keyboard, and a small flat glass screen. In the corner of the screen glowed green figures: 23:27:46 PDT 3 May 1949. The numbers pulsed and advanced as he watched . . . 47 . . . 48 . . . 49 . . . Some of the typewriter keys had letters, others numbers. The keys in the top row were Greek letters. Folded into the top of the case was a long finger-thick ca-

ble, matte gray, made out of some braided material that wasn't metal and wasn't fabric.

"You have never seen anything like it, right?"

It was the stranger. He stood in the door from the living room.

Kinlaw snapped the case shut, picked it up and backed a step away. He reached into his jacket and pulled out his pistol.

The man swayed a little. "You're the detective," he said.

"I am. Where's Sturges?"

"He left. You don't need the gun."

"I'll figure that out myself. Who are you?"

"Detlev Gruber." He held out his hand. "Pleased to meet you."

Kinlaw backed another step.

"What's the matter? Don't tell me this is not the appropriate social gesture for the mid-twentieth. I know better."

On impulse, Kinlaw held the case out over the edge of the terrace, six stories above the courtyard.

"So!" Gruber said. "What is it you say? The plot thickens?"

"Suppose you tell me what's going on here? And you better make it quick; this thing is heavier than it looks."

"All right. Just put down the case. Then I'll tell you everything you want to know."

Kinlaw rested his back against the balustrade, letting the machine hang from his hand over the edge. He kept his gun trained on Gruber. "What is this thing?"

"You want the truth, or a story you'll believe?"

"Pick one and see if I can tell the difference."

"It's a transmogrifier. A device that can change anyone into anyone else. I can change General MacArthur into President Truman, Shirley Temple into Marilyn Monroe."

"Who's Marilyn Monroe?"

"You will eventually find out."

"So you changed somebody into Preston Sturges?"

Gruber smiled. "Don't be so gullible. That's impossible. That case isn't a transmogrifier, it's a time machine."

"And I bet it will ring when it hits the pavement."

"Not a clock. A machine that lets you travel from the future into the past, and back again."

"This is the truth, or the story?"

"I'm from about a hundred years from now. 2043, to be precise."

"And who was the dead man in San Pedro? Buck Rogers?"

"It was Preston Sturges."

"And the man who was just here pretending to be him?"

"He was not pretending. He's Preston Sturges, too."

"You know, I'm losing my grip on this thing."

"I am chagrined. Once again, the truth fails to convince."

"I think the transmogrifier made more sense."

"Nevertheless. I'm a talent scout. I work for the future equivalent of a film studio, a big company that makes entertainment. In the future, Hollywood is still the heart of the industry."

"That's a nice touch."

"We have time machines in which we go back into the past. The studios hire people like me to recruit those from the past we think might appeal to our audience. I come back and persuade historicals to come to the future.

"Preston was one of my more successful finds. Sometimes the actor or director or writer can't make the transition, but Preston seems to have an intuitive grasp of the future. Cynicism combined with repression. In two years he was the hit of the interactive fiber optic lines. But apparently it didn't agree with him. The future was too easy, he said, he didn't stand out enough, he wanted to go back to a time where he was an exception, not the rule. So he took all the money he made and paid the studio to send him back for another chance at his old life."

"How can you bring him back if he's dead?"

"Very good! You can spot a contradiction. What I've told you so far isn't exactly true. This isn't the same world I took him from. I recruited him from another version of history. I showed up in his garage just as he was about to turn on the ignition and gas himself. In your version, nobody stopped him. So see, I bring back my live Sturges to the home of your dying one. We arrive a half hour after your Sturges is defunct. You should have seen us trying to get the body out of the car and onto the boat. What a comedy of errors. This stray dog comes barking down the pier. Preston was already a madman, carrying around his own still-warm corpse. The dog sniffs his crotch, Preston drops his end of the body. Pure slapstick.

"So we manhandle the ex-Sturges onto the boat and sail out past the breakwall. Dump the body overboard with window counterweights tied to its ankles, come back and my Sturges takes his place, a few years older and a lot wiser. He's had the benefit of some modern medicine; he's kicked the booze and cigarettes and now he's ready to step back into the place that he escaped earlier and try to straighten things out. He's got a second chance."

"You're right. That's a pretty good story."

"You like it?"

"But if you've done your job, why are you still here?"

"How about this: I'm actually a scholar, and I'm taking the opportunity to study your culture. My dissertation is on the effects of your Second World War on Hotel Tipping Habits. I can give you a lot of tips. How would you like to know who wins the Rose Bowl next year?"

"How'd you like to be trapped in 1949?"

Gruber sat down on one of the wrought iron chairs. "I probably would come to regret it. But you'd be amazed at the things you have here that you can't hardly get in 2043. T-bone steak. Cigarettes with real nicotine. Sex with guilt."

"I still don't understand how you can steal somebody out of your own past and not have it affect your present."

"It's not my past, it's yours. This is a separate historical stream from my own. Every moment in time gives rise to a completely separate history. They're like branches splitting off from the same tree trunk. If I come out to lop a twig off your branch, it doesn't affect the branch I come from."

"You're not changing the future?"

"I'm changing your future. In my past, as a result of personal and professional failures, Preston Sturges committed suicide by carbon monoxide poisoning on the evening of May 1, 1949. But now there are two other versions. In one Sturges disappeared on the afternoon of May 1, never to be seen again. In yours, Sturges committed suicide that evening, but then I and the Sturges from that other universe showed up, dropped his body in the ocean off San Pedro, and set up this new Sturges in his place—if you go along."

"Why should I?"

"For the game! It's interesting, isn't it? What will he do? How will it work out?"

"Will you come back to check on him?"

"I already have. I saved him from his suicide, showed him what a difference he's made to this town, and now he's going to have a wonderful life. All his friends are going to get together and give him enough money to pay his debts and start over again."

"I saw that movie. Jimmy Stewart, Donna Reed."

Gruber slapped his knee. "And they wonder why I delight in the twentieth century. You're right, detective. I lied again. I have no idea how it will work out. Once I visit a time stream, I can't come back to the same one again. It's burned. A quantum effect; 137.04 Moment Universes are packed into every second. The probability of hitting the same M-U twice is vanishingly small."

"Look, I don't know how much of this is malarkey, but I know somebody's been murdered."

"No, no, there is no murder. The man I brought back really is Preston Sturges, with all the memories and experiences of the man who killed himself. He's exactly the man Louise Sturges married, who made all those films, who fathered his son and screwed up his life. But he's had the advantage of a couple of years in the twenty-first century, and he's determined not to make the same mistakes again. For the sake of his son and family and all the others who've come to care about him, why not give him that chance?"

"If I drop this box, you're stuck here. You don't seem too worried."

"Well, I wouldn't be in this profession if I didn't like risk. What is life but risk? We've got a nice transaction going here, who knows how it will play out? Who knows whether Preston will straighten out his life or dismantle it in some familiar way?"

"In my experience, if a man is a foul ball, he's a foul ball. Doesn't matter how many chances you give him. His character tells."

"That's the other way to look at it. 'The fault, dear Brutus, is not in our stars, but in ourselves. . . .' But I'm skeptical. That's why I like Preston. He talks as if he believes that character tells, but down deep he knows it's all out of control. You could turn my time machine into futuristic scrap, or you could give it to me and let me go back. Up to you. Or the random collision of atoms in your brain. You don't seem to me like an arbitrary man, Detective Kinlaw, but even if you are, basically I don't give a fuck."

Gruber sat back as cool as a Christian holding four aces. Kinlaw was tempted to drop the machine just to see how he would react. The whole story was too fantastic.

But there was no way around those identical fingerprints. And if it were true—if a man could be saved and given a second chance—then Kinlaw was holding a miracle in his hand, with no better plan than to dash it to pieces on the courtyard below.

His mouth was dry. "Tell you what," he said. "I'll let you have your magic box back, but you have to do something for me first."

"I aim to please, detective. What is it?"

"I had a daughter. She died of polio three years ago. If this thing really is a time machine, I want you to take me back so I can get her before she dies."

"Can't do it."

"What do you mean you can't? You saved Sturges."

"Not in this universe. His body ended up on the beach, remember? Your daughter gets polio and dies in all the branches."

"Unless we get her before she gets sick."

"Yes. But then the version of you in that other M-U has a kidnapped daughter who disappears and is never heard from again. Do you want to do that to a man who is essentially yourself? How is that any better than having her die?"

"At least *I'd* have her."

"Plus, we can never come back to this M-U. After we leave, it's burned. I'd have to take you to still a third branch, where you'd have to replace yet another version of yourself if you want to take up your life again. Only, since he won't be conveniently dead, you'll have to dispose of him."

"Dispose of him?"

"Yes."

Kinlaw's shoulder ached. His head was spinning trying to keep up with all these possibilities. He pulled the case in and set it down on the terrace. He holstered his .38 and rubbed his shoulder. "Show me how it works, first. Send a piece of furniture into the future."

Gruber watched him meditatively, then stepped forward and picked up the device. He went back into the living room, pushed aside the sofa, opened the case and set it in the center of the room. He unpacked the woven cable from the top and ran it in a circle of about ten feet in diameter around an armchair, ends plugged into the base of the machine. He stepped outside the circle, crouched and began typing a series of characters into the keyboard.

Kinlaw went into the bedroom, got the bottle of scotch and a glass from the bathroom and poured himself a drink. When he got back Gruber was finishing up with the keyboard. "How much of all this gas you gave me is true?"

Gruber straightened. His face was open as a child's. He smiled. "Some. A lot. Not all." He touched a switch on the case and stepped over the cable into the circle. He sat in the armchair.

The center of the room, in a sphere centered on Gruber and limited by the cable, grew brighter and brighter. Then the space inside suddenly collapsed, as if everything in it was shrinking from all directions toward the center. Gruber went from a man sitting in front of Kinlaw to a doll, to a speck, to nothing. The light grew very intense, then vanished.

When Kinlaw's eyes adjusted the room was empty.

Wednesday morning Kinlaw was sitting at his desk trying to figure out what to do with the case folder when his phone rang. It was Preston Sturges.

"I haven't slept all night," Sturges said. "I expected to wake up in jail. Why haven't you arrested me yet?"

"I still could. You assaulted a police officer."

"If that were the worst of it I'd be there in ten minutes. Last night you were talking about murder."

"Since then I had a conversation with a friend of yours at the Marmont."

"You—what did he tell you?" Sturges sounded rattled.

"Enough for me to think this case will end up unsolved."

Sturges was silent for a moment. "Thank you, Detective."

"Why? Because a miracle happened? You just get back to making movies."

"I have an interview with Larry Weingarten at MGM this afternoon. They want me to write a script for Clark Gable. I'm going to write them the best script they ever saw."

"Good. Sell the restaurant."

"You too? If I have to, I will."

After he hung up, Kinlaw rolled the cinematographer's monocle across his desk top. He thought of the body down in the morgue cooler, bound for an anonymous grave. If Gruber was telling the truth, the determined man he'd just spoken with was the same man who had killed himself in the garage on Ivar Avenue. Today he was eager to go forward: Kinlaw wondered how long that would last. He could easily fall back into his old ways, alienate whatever friends he had left. Or a stroke of bad luck like the Carole Landis suicide could sink him.

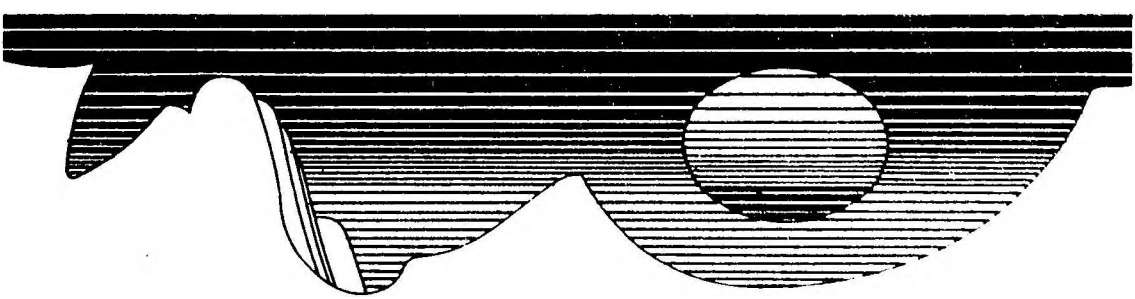
But it had to be something Sturges knew already. His movies were full of it. That absurd universe, the characters' futile attempts to control it. At the end of *Morgan's Creek* the bemused Norval is hauled out of jail, thrust into a national guard officer's uniform, and rushed to the hospital to meet his wife and children for the first time—a wife he isn't married to, children that aren't even his. He deliriously protests this miracle, a product of the hypocrisy of the town that a day earlier wanted to lock him up and throw away the key.

Then again, Norval had never given up hope, had done his best throughout to make things come out right. His character was stronger than anyone had ever given him credit for.

Kinlaw remembered the first time he'd seen his daughter, when they called him into the room after Emily had given birth. She was so tiny, swaddled tightly in a blanket: her little face, eyes clamped shut, the tiniest of eyelashes, mouth set in a soft line. How tentatively he had held her. How he'd grinned like an idiot at the doctor, at the nurse, at Emily. Emily, exhausted, face pale, had smiled back. None of them had realized they were as much at the mercy of fate as Sturges's manic grotesques.

He looked up at the calendar, got the pencil out and crossed off Monday and Tuesday. He got the telephone and dialed Emily's number. She answered the phone, voice clouded with sleep. "Hello?"

"Emily," he said. "I have the photo album. I've had it all along. I keep it on a shelf in the closet, take it out and look at the pictures and cry. I don't know what to do with it. Come help me, please." ●



Charles Oberndorf

ORACLE

Charles Oberndorf's previous short fiction was published in Bantam's first two *Full Spectrum* anthologies. He is the author of three science fiction novels: *Sheltered Lives, Testing,* and *Foragers* (which was released from Bantam/Spectra in March). Mr. Oberndorf teaches English at University School in Cleveland, Ohio. He lives in Ohio with his wife and son.

Illustration by Steve Cavallo

This is a story about a woman who sought out the Gods for some advice, for a prophecy, in fact. If you remember your Greeks, if you remember their stories, you know how the Gods warred with each other, how they toyed with human fate in the course of their Olympic bickering. You know that nothing good will come of asking the Gods.

The woman knows this, too, as well as her husband.

But what choice does she have?

The woman's name is not Jocasta, nor is her husband called Laius. This Laius will not be murdered on the road, nor will Jocasta sleep unknowingly with her husband's murderer. Both will live, and still do live. You might even know them, you might have heard about what she had done. But she is not the only parent to have done this, so we'll call her Jocasta to protect her private grief.

Jocasta and Laius live on Haynlayn, which we could call Thebes for consistency, if we believed in consistency. Haynlayn is a metal sphere, two miles in circumference, and in many ways, it is like a polis, a city-state, and many of its citizens would be happy to use that archaic reference. Like all the Hundred Worlds, it orbits roughly twelve light minutes from the sun, four light minutes from the Minds. It is a self-sustaining polis, growing its own food, raising its own children, choosing its own rulers and obeying its own rules.

Years ago, when Jocasta married, her father was a well-known diplomat who shuttled from world to world, maintaining travel and trade agreements, and her mother was in charge of autumn harvesting, which routinely took place at a fifth of Haynlayn's agricultural plots. Laius' father was an assistant to the governor, and his mother was an important mediator of disputes. All the children who had been born into each family survived and grew and prospered; there was no youthful problem that could not be remedied by the proper tutoring or the appropriate gene therapy. Both houses should have considered themselves lucky or blessed.

Misfortune, as on any of the Hundred Worlds, was rife. External lasers sometimes malfunctioned, and a tiny meteor would tear apart a network of solar cells or damage a parabolic reflector that brought light to Haynlayn's farms. Once cosmic dust had so built up on a tracking device that the laser never fired; the meteor struck Haynlayn itself, opening up the sphere like a pin pricking a balloon. A whole compartment was lost; twenty people died. Radiation was life's constant. All genetic material was stored within lead vaults. But radiation was its own life force. New cancers blossomed, and sometimes no gene therapy could prune away their growth. Mutations persisted, and new crops couldn't survive the deleterious change in their DNA. Some crops withered. Some reproduced too quickly. One underground weed wove its way through the soil and strangled the roots of other plants, spreading across a whole acre before

it was discovered by a young woman's trowel. And just as quickly, new blight may spread. The wheat harvest might be ravaged or the oranges dried out, whole fortunes lost. Prosperous houses might find themselves bargaining for their futures with nothing more than a sterilized half-acre of soil.

Haynlayn believed in evolution in action; they believed in fostering human strength; they could not afford to let limited resources be squandered by those who fell into poverty. After any failure, a citizen had two years to show his strength and ingenuity, to demonstrate his cultural and genetic fitness. Those who couldn't recover from the loss of their plot, or from some other financial misfortune, were given enough credit to purchase a sailship ticket and citizenship papers on another world. Once deported, their names were wiped clean from the citizenship records. It was as if they had never existed.

But the members of Laius and Jocasta's houses, with the exception of one or two self-righteous black sheep, saw themselves as the benefactors of evolution, as evolution's patrons rather than its supplicants. Their children survived into adulthood. They did not succumb to some strange new bacteria, nor did they foolishly get into accidents that could kill them. They were part of the new humanity, and they attributed their success to their superior genome, to their skill at teaching their children, to their constant will to succeed.

So when Jocasta and Laius decided to have their first child, they expected success to be their due, and they decided to make this child a product of their love. It was not unheard of for newborn lovers to conceive their first child in the marital bed, but it was not considered sensible or wise. When Jocasta had been a child, five eggs had been removed from each of her ovaries, examined for mutation, and stored in a radiation-proof vault. When Laius' voice changed, when pubic hair darkened his loins, when his testicles began to produce copious amounts of sperm, he contributed several samples of semen to be frozen and stored in the same vault. But they did not want their first child to be mixed in a tube. They were confident that their youth protected them from the sun's perpetual radioactive bath. Their love had been renewed and reawakened by the vows they had just made. They made love often and in the middle of her cycle, they held each other tight and proclaimed that their love was strong enough to transcend mere chemistry, that it could be felt by the sperm rushing up uterine walls, that it could warmly envelop the awaiting egg.

She did not bleed when it was time, and soon it was confirmed. There would be a child. They waited. Cells multiplied, were differentiated; the embryo attached itself to the wall of the uterus and grew. Soon there were sloughed off cells and the tests could be run.

The healer in charge we'll call Tiresias, because indeed he was blind,

and as much of a prophet as a healer might be. This Tiresias, however, had not lost his sight to the rage of a spiteful woman. Instead, long before, there had been an accident, a set of swaying agricultural lights, whose cables snapped, and the lights plummeted down, ending in an explosion of glass. Two youths died, and glass shards had shattered Tiresias' eyesight. He had seen the swaying lamps, but there were tasks to be finished, work to be done. If he had cleared the area. . . . So, he held himself responsible for the disaster and refused to have new eyes grown for him. Instead he relied on his sense of touch, the talent of his ears and his nose, and for this he was sought out as a healer, even though there were many, including his own patients, who, in his absence, joked about his self-inflicted blindness.

In his office, Tiresias handed a screen to Jocasta and another to Laius. He directed them toward an image of Jocasta's twenty-three pairs of chromosomes. They looked like the burnt images of tiny worms. He directed their attention to the thirteenth pair. He then showed Laius' twenty-three pairs of chromosomes. He directed their attention to the thirteenth pair. They looked to each other; they foresaw what was coming; both their hearts sank. Laius remembered thrusting into her, the sudden pleasurable rush of semen, the promises he had made of what their love could accomplish. Jocasta remembered visualizing the egg within her, golden with light, the one lovely sperm working its way in, the way she had felt so complete in his arms, with her pleasure.

Tiresias now showed them the infant's twenty-three pairs. They both looked at the last pair. The child would be a boy. And Tiresias' firm, kind voice directed them to the thirteenth pair. The one on the right: it was shaped differently, nothing at all like hers or her husband's.

Remember, they were both children of Haynlayn. They believed evolution was a steep ladder, a treacherous stairway. They believed that from the tide pools to water to land to an upright position that each change was the mark of advancement; they believed that living in isolated populations, almost one hundred worlds, none with a population of over ten thousand, would respark mankind's randomly sorted, preordained genetic progress. So Laius, his heart heavy with grief, asked for new truths. The change had not been deleterious enough to cause the child to miscarry. Mutations can be good, he insisted. This new rearrangement of genetic material could benefit humanity.

Tiresias, however, was comfortable with his blindness. He was comfortable with the way adenine attached to thymine, guanine to cytosine, that strands of DNA begat strands of RNA, that a sequence of four molecules, in a variety of combinations, could code for the proteins produced in cells, that this series of chemical reactions led to beating hearts and incomprehensible arguments. Tiresias showed them swirls of mapped DNA, and his sighted aide came to point out how mixed up the new cod-

ing was, how impossible it was to say anything more than that a number of the genes that shaped intelligence were affected.

Laius railed against Tiresias for his uncertainty, and Tiresias assured Laius that he could be right, that this mutation *could* be beneficial. But they had no way of knowing. They might know the entire genome, but the intricacy of its chemistry was much like that of an epic poem. They knew literal meaning. They knew interpretations. But ambiguity remained. They had never seen this particular combination before. And they had no gene therapy available to alter the story.

Tiresias gently reminded them of the truths they already knew. There were barely a million humans left living in the Hundred Worlds. There was no room for expansion. He asked them to consider if they wanted to bring an uncertain life into an uncertain universe.

Perhaps you rebel, just as Jocasta and Laius first rebelled against this news. Perhaps you dream of a future where there will be lightweight metals that keep out deadly radiation. You want gene therapies that will eradicate all disease. You want a couple sensible enough to have used the egg and sperm already stored away; for a moment, you have forgotten the way love and desire make it necessary that an act carry its own poetic truth. And worse, you don't want there to be a doctor, a blind, loving doctor who bears the Greek name that has become synonymous with wisdom, you don't want him giving the sad advice he has just given. You want a future of men and women who are struggling with the universe, and this tiny dilemma—born when gamma rays tore through a patch of double helix—is perhaps universal, but it isn't the kind of struggle you had in mind.

The Greeks created Gods in their own image, and gave them great powers and great wisdom. Why then did Aphrodite promise Helen, who was married and contented in Sparta, to another man, to Paris? Why did Eros shoot an arrow into Helen's heart, so that she would follow Paris back to Troy? And why did the Gods allow so much slaughter over one woman? What wisdom was there in such honor? Perhaps we expect too much from our future, much more than the Greeks ever expected of their very own Gods.

Jocasta and Laius left for home, blinded by their grief. They tried to determine when it had happened, when one of the four chromosomes that settled in the thirteenth position had been shattered by a bolt of radiation. Perhaps it had happened when Jocasta, as a girl, had traveled from world to world with her father. Or perhaps it had happened when Laius, as an adolescent paying his debt to the community, was repairing and replacing damaged solar panes. Laius was a proud man, and he assumed responsibility. He never should have insisted that they conceive this child the way they had. And Jocasta couldn't respond. What they had done wasn't wrong. She was the oldest of two children; this was how she had

been conceived (each parent had told her, in secret, when the other was absent). She had never felt so helpless.

They did not tell their parents. They knew family would expect them to do the sensible thing. Jocasta could not be so heartless, but she saw no other option. She did not want to bring such a child into the world, and, several days later, she admitted this to her husband. Laius called her selfish. He called her short-sighted and weak-willed. This child might not be limited at all! This child might have some new brilliance! He said this so emphatically that Jocasta knew he didn't believe it. He reminded her of the wealth and prominence of each of their houses, how this child could survive, perhaps even prosper, no matter how severe the . . . he ran out of words here, for what could he call that additional blotch on the right chromosome of the thirteenth pair?

Jocasta looked at him. She could not tell if his righteousness would be as vigorous nine months from now. She wondered how many husbands argued the same way, then led their wives back to the clinic.

She asked, "Will you declare this child as yours?"

Each person was allotted one child. If Laius left her, if he remarried, he would only be able to impregnate his second wife if that wife had had no child born in her own name.

She could see the answer in his eyes. She wanted his commitment; she saw her own selfishness. "No," he said, and turned away.

Laius was an ethical man. He knew how easy it was to blame the mother for all the wrongs done to a child; he saw how he had broken his orgasmic promise to love the child he had helped to conceive. So, the next day, he told her that he would declare the son as his.

Jocasta admired his strength of will, but she saw in it much of pride and little of love. Still she could not easily wipe this embryo from her womb. Its heart beat. It deserved more than a guess. She wanted life to be more than a gamble. She wanted to know the child's fate.

She would seek out the opinion of the Minds.

She did not tell Laius of her decision. He would either fight her, because contact with the Minds was forbidden on Haynlayn, or he would insist on going in her stead.

Jocasta had a cousin on a world with a difficult-to-pronounce Urdu name, so we'll call the world Delphi. On Delphi, scientists spoke with the Minds, and farmers predicted their crops based on data the Minds analyzed. When people died, the last recording of their mind was sent to be stored in the Minds, where in one small place, they lived a digital afterlife and had occasional discussions with the loved ones they'd left behind back on Delphi.

Jocasta's cousin had settled on Delphi. Years ago, upon finishing her education, she had traveled, like all the prosperous youths of Haynlayn. Taking her final steps of independence, she had gone from world to

world, seeking out new experiences, all of this paid for by her parents so that she would one day see why life on Haynlayn was preferable to all other possible lives, and then return to work hard for their world's future. But Haynlayn was a sensible place, a place where truth could be calculated, and Delphi was full of mystics who spouted nonsense. The cousin had found a place she could call home, and there she remained. Laius had no interest in Delphic mysticism, but he did not want his wife to make this decision by calculation. Once she told him she'd made arrangements to see her cousin, he was happy to send her off, and he expected her to return full of the spiritual resolve necessary to bear his son.

The clearance from work would have been difficult, but Jocasta's father suspected something was terribly wrong. Not one to pry, he talked to the right people and paid for passage. Even though the rest of the family had disowned Jocasta's cousin—she was considered a traitor of sorts—he knew that his brother's daughter would send Jocasta back in the proper frame of mind.

A trip by sail took twenty days. The embryo became a fetus. She knew it had legs and arms, a brainstem, and a penis. She kept to herself on the voyage, afraid to strike up any conversation that would lead her to confess her plans.

To go to the Minds was not an easy thing. Once, there had been Earth, and it had teemed with life, it had overflowed with life. And now there was no Earth. Long ago, humans and machines had united to compete, to compete with other humans and machines: all improvement, all effort, was directed to increase personal prosperity, and, if there were surplus wealth, to spread it. Machines were improved and improved until the humans themselves became no more useful to the competition than any other primate. Machines dug themselves into the earth, and set themselves to converting earth and rock into materials that suited their *own* purposes, and when the Earth was consumed, they reached out into the solar system, seducing Venus, conquering Mars, eating Saturn, and finally removing Jupiter from his throne, until finally they were the Minds, orbiting eight light minutes from the Sun, sharing and creating data, slowly expanding, doing whatever it was they did. All that was left of the solar system was the Sun, the Minds, the Hundred Worlds, several handfuls of asteroids, and Pluto, too distant and worthless for anyone to collect.

In many of the worlds it was forbidden to speak with the Minds. Many of the worlds preferred human labor to machine labor. In a handful of worlds, there were no computers, no machines that required any programming. And on other worlds, people would speak with the Minds, or with just a few of the Minds, or perhaps (no one really knew) they spoke only with the subprogram of a subprogram of one Mind who had some curiosity about Earth's only surviving primates.

Jocasta had with her, stored in her credit chip, the complete transcrip-

tion of her son's genome, the chemical composition of her amniotic fluid, and a complete list of everything she had consumed since she became aware of her pregnancy. Nature and nurture, all the data she had, for the Minds to ponder, to tell her what she should do.

She knew there was a danger in asking for a prophecy. Laius of Thebes had left his kingdom and climbed Mount Parnassus to the temple at Delphi, where he had asked the oracle about the child his wife carried. He'd waited in a wooden booth while the sibyl, sitting upon a tripod, had hovered above a cleft in the rock and breathed in Apollo's will. Then the temple's priests, speaking in hexameter, had explained to Laius the significance of the sibyl's mutterings: Laius would be slain by his son; his wife would give birth to his son's children.

But what if Laius had never made the trip to Delphi? He never would have heard the prophecy, and never would have ordered his son's feet to be bound, nor would he have asked his wife to place the infant in the wilderness to die. Oedipus surely would have grown to love and respect his parents as a son should, and Apollo's fate for him would have dissipated with the sulfurous vapors that emanated from the mountain's cleft.

So why was Jocasta of Haynlayn going to Delphi? She already had her prophecy. She should have spent several hours in a Haynlayner clinic, then returned to her life. If she knew for sure that this child could not cope with life's daily rigors, perhaps that's what she would have done. But she also wanted ever so much to keep this child. Did she hope that the Minds would provide a better prophecy? Or did she expect something more?

She had grown up with stories of past heroes who had fought against the Minds, who had run sabotage missions to blast away fragments of their omnipotence. She had known several of the Haynlayner scientists, who studied the Minds with the intent of one day stealing the secrets of how they played so freely with space and time. Perhaps, then, the Minds might take interest in a speck of Haynlayner life, spare it for greater things in the future.

Twenty days in a sailship is a long time. Jocasta veiled her emotions and acted as if she were another tourist. She did not allow the agony to become terrible, but it was chronic, persistent, a low-grade fever that would not abandon her. The only relief she felt was that Laius was not here with her.

Jocasta's cousin greeted her at Delphi's welcome gate. Her cousin was wearing robes unlike anything you would see on Haynlayn. They were now worn with age, obviously the cast-offs of someone prosperous, but the intricate designs were still stunning, no matter how the colors had faded. That night Jocasta lay in her cousin's arms while she wept, her body trembling, her body so wracked with sobs that she had to rush to the washroom to heave up sour spittle and bitter air.

The next morning, while Jocasta ate, her cousin spoke of the twin faces of destruction and creation, of how her hands were empty of answers. There was not only this child, but the next child. There was not only this child, there was Haynlayn. There was not only this child, but a wider universe and the need to do what was right. "All life is sacred," her cousin said, "but not all life survives," and perhaps that was what Jocasta had come to hear.

But she said to her cousin, "Can you take me to ask the Minds?"

"Their answer will be no better."

"Can you take me?"

Her cousin hesitated. She did not argue, or ask what Jocasta's family might think. She said, "You understand that the Minds want something in return?"

Jocasta nodded. The Minds would record her. A version of her would live on in mindspace. No one knew why the Minds did this. No one knew how many Minds there were, or if they all wanted the same thing. There was talk that they collected human minds to atone for all those lost when the Earth was destroyed. Or that they used this as an opportunity to influence human minds, to slowly take control of the Hundred Worlds. This was the key fear on Haynlayn. Generations ago, there had been one hundred thirty-five worlds, and now there were ninety-eight. Five had been annihilated by weapons launched by the Minds, each destroyed world a direct retaliation for a Haynlayner sabotage run. But many on Haynlayn were convinced the Minds were behind all the other lost worlds, each slow failure slowly eroding away humankind's destiny. But Jocasta no longer wanted to believe that the Minds would influence her behavior after they had recorded her own mind. Like others, she believed that everything had to come with a price, including prophecy. She said, "I am willing to give what they ask."

Jocasta's cousin said it would take a day for her to make arrangements. "Think about it today and tonight. If you still want to go, I'll take you tomorrow."

The delay only served to increase her agony. Jocasta had been born of a people who believed that you created your own fate. On Haynlayn they did not wait for the human race to slowly die out. Once the scientists who never touched soil knew the secret to faster-than-light travel, they would do the necessary calculations and engineers would make the necessary designs, and one day they would convert Haynlayn into a starship and fly far away. They would find a stellar system with an Earth-like world, and once there, they would remake humanity into the force that it should be.

So how could she wait like this, to passively offer herself to the Minds? In her dreams, she stood, enclosed in a booth, while nearby a woman swayed upon a tripod and muttered unintelligible words. The priest,

dressed in robes, came to her: "You bear your son alone." She saw Laius turn away from her. She saw her crops wither. She saw herself on a ship, her son in her lap, nuzzling at her breast as they are shipped away. All of this because of a tiny, impossible-to-see rupture in each of his cells. Why her son? Why anyone's son?

Perhaps she shouldn't return to Haynlayn. She would not have to hear anything more about evolution's competitive demands, she would not turn away again from a deported friend, she would not have to console herself with the prospect of a better, stronger humanity.

Jocasta did not remember sleeping that night; all she remembered was waking up, again and again, each time finding the room too hot, the air too close, and her cousin's body edging her out of the room's only bed. All she found was a dreadful abyss opening between herself and the person she once had been.

The next day she felt as if she were in a fog. Everything was distant. Only a vague nausea, a feeling that she would throw up whatever she ate, made the baby real for her.

There was no splendor in the place where she would speak with the Minds, no elaborate temple, no laurel trees, no opening in a marble floor revealing the cleft in rock, allowing the vapors to rise up. Every wall was plain, without ornament, as if no human symbol, bearing the weight of human meaning, was meant to be here. Jocasta didn't understand any of the formalities they went through to get to the Minds, but she came to understand that her cousin had spent an enormous sum of money to bring Jocasta here.

Jocasta was bathed, then robes, which were lined with some kind of filament, were draped over her naked body. She was asked to drink a tea that tasted of cinnamon. A cap with a veil was placed over her head. She was left in a room, empty but for a stool with three legs. The door shut, and the room lit up with the dark vastness of space. Against the wall was the sun, about the size of a fist. Between her and the sun, there were dark shapes, moving slowly in a line cutting across the sun like thin, phosphorescent clouds: the Minds.

She expected to hear something, but the room remained silent. In her hand was the chip. A small console emerged from one wall. She walked over, and without looking, she knew exactly where to place the chip. She sat again and waited. Somehow the Minds could read her. It was four light-minutes from here to the Minds, but there was no time lag. The Minds played with space and time. How easy it would be for them to wipe all humanity out of existence, for the Hundred Worlds to disappear as easily as Earth and Mars and Jupiter had disappeared.

She expected some discomfort, but all her anxiety was gone. She was calm, at ease, though she shouldn't be. Her heart should be striking hard at her chest, her stomach should be rising up within her. She wondered if

she were being taken over, if the Minds were making her into something else.

But no, she knew, that wasn't the case. But she didn't know how she could be so sure.

And now did she really want to know? The Minds only knew what humans knew about human chemistry. They didn't capture and cut up humans to find out how they ticked. They knew what they had to know to incorporate whoever wanted to live in mindspace.

What do you want from me in return? she asked. She didn't know if she formed the words in her head or if she spoke them out loud. It didn't seem to matter. Yes, they wanted to record her now and have her presence in mindspace. They had saved few people from Haynlayn.

She found herself rebelling. The Minds had destroyed everything. They should get nothing in return.

But did she want to know about the fetus?

She nodded. They could have her.

She felt her eyes shut, and then she awoke with a start, perched forward, about to fall from the stool. Her back hurt, and she stretched.

She knew now. About the child in her womb. Intellectual impairment. It was certain. No special mutation, no new brilliance to add to the gene pool.

How much impairment?

She tried to understand why it was impossible to say, how the genes were scrambled enough that it was hard to predict what the effect would be. It could be deleterious. It could be mild. The child could learn how to tie his shoes and plant a seed. He might never be able to hold a fork.

Her sense of disappointment was overwhelming. Can't you do anything? Can't you change him?

There was a pause, and it felt like she heard two voices far back in her mind, two conflicting thoughts. She was asking for more; there would be a different price. What if they asked for her life? Would she let her son be pulled out of her, his brain intact, ready to face all of life's other dangers, while she returned here and surrendered her life completely, so she would only exist in the Minds and nowhere else?

She found she couldn't answer. All at once, she didn't trust the Minds, and at the same time all she wanted to do was say yes.

No. It was the other voice. Clear and certain. Not her thoughts at all. *What's done is done. Nothing will be changed.*

She fell to her knees and cried for the other voice to come back, to save her.

And that's how they found her, on her knees, murmuring words they couldn't understand, and she was secretly relieved that they took her away, that she still had her life.

On the twenty-day trip back to Haynlayn, she was inconsolable. There

were so many youthful travelers, and they spent so much energy trying to be kind to her. All they wanted was to know the reasons for her sadness, and she clung to them. Shouldn't she have offered her life, explicitly and clearly? Wasn't she as selfish as Laius thought? She imagined her son walking, his words half-formed, and she knew, with absolute certainty, that she would jump in front of death to save that life. Why couldn't she do it now?

When the sailship reached Haynlayn, she almost stayed on, and for several days afterward she wished she had. Her parents, as she expected, told her she was doing the right thing. Laius did not argue with her, and he seemed to be relieved, which disappointed her. His sister offered to be by her side when it happened.

Tiresias took the fetus from the womb, and when the lungs that breathed water gulped in air, it died. Jocasta and Laius were presented with the tiny form, its skin the color of red rubber, and they wept. For a week Jocasta wept. Sometimes, she pounded her feet on the floor and cried out at the ceiling. The child had been given a name so the death certificate could be notarized, so the parents had a name to mourn.

That's all? you probably ask. King Laius ordered his son's death and was, in turn, slain by his son. Oedipus murdered the king, and a plague was set upon Thebes. The fruits of the earth were consumed by rust. Herds sickened. Children died unborn. Jocasta, like other shamed women, like Io and Phaedra and Ariadne, hung herself. And Oedipus tore the golden brooches from his dead wife's dress and plunged them into his own eyes.

So shouldn't something happen to Jocasta of Haynlayn? to her husband, Laius? Perhaps Jocasta should be deported for speaking with the Minds. Or maybe her crops die and her fortunes wither. Each successive pregnancy could end in miscarriage, or each of her children might die a horrible death. Perhaps the Minds could somehow haunt her with the memory of the child she had cleaned from her womb, though why the Minds should trouble themselves is not at all clear.

Let us ask the more difficult question. What if Laius of Thebes had had the strength to kill his own son? There would be no story for Sophocles to tell, but Laius would have lived. No plague would have descended upon Thebes because its king still lived. Jocasta would not have hung herself for the crime of bearing her son's children. Two brothers would not fight to the death over their father's throne, and sweet, just Antigone would not have to die for honoring her brother with a grave.

And after all this destruction, do the Gods change their policy? Do they give up toying with human fate? Or does the story truly have nothing to say to us about the Gods? Are we in awe of how the greatest can fall? Do we see clearly the destructiveness of Oedipus' pride, the easy way he killed and forgot the man who had slighted him, the man who decades

later he discovers to have been his father? Or do we honor his struggle against fate? Do we revere his final, proud need to act justly?

So because this is a story, perhaps we want the same from Jocasta and Laius. We want them to be self-sacrificing, noble, and strong. And instead they behave like us and make the same decisions we have made, or that our friends have made.

Are we right to be disappointed? Jocasta and Laius do stay together; their love remains, fading, disappearing, reappearing, growing, precarious, tumultuous, persistent. When she is pregnant again a year later, ovum and sperm mixed outside her womb, she lets Laius declare this first child as his. It is a daughter. Two years later she gives birth to her child, a son. The children grow. They taunt and tease each other, and once or twice come to terrible blows. They survive routine sickness and mild accidents. Jocasta and Laius almost come to expect this as their right, not as any kind of luck or providence. They calmly explain to their daughter why her best friend is dying of cancer. When their son's teacher dies of a suit malfunction in space, they explain to him what his teacher should have done differently to avoid the accident. After their best friends' half acre nurtures strange mutation after strange mutation, Jocasta and Laius turn away from their friends; they make no effort to change the community's decision to deport. When their adolescent children question this, as they question everything these days, Jocasta and Laius hear themselves explain in angered tones why those who suffer poverty for two years cannot be allowed to remain on Haynlayn.

So if you are going to be disappointed in Jocasta and Laius, here is where you should stir your anger. Because whatever we have learned from their story and their grief, Jocasta and Laius, like the Gods, have learned nothing. ●

—for Hans Moravec and Taber MacCallum

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Gardner Dozois

COMMUNITY

"Community" marks Gardner Dozois's first solo publication in *Asimov's* since his Nebula-award-winning tale "The Peacemaker" appeared in our August 1983 issue. In addition to that award, the author possesses another Nebula for Best Short Story and seven Hugos for Best Professional Editor. Some of the author's tales have recently been reprinted in *Geodesic Dreams: The Best Short Fiction of Gardner Dozois* (St. Martin's Press). His next book, *The Year's Best Science Fiction: Thirteenth Annual Collection*, is coming out from St. Martin's Press later this year.

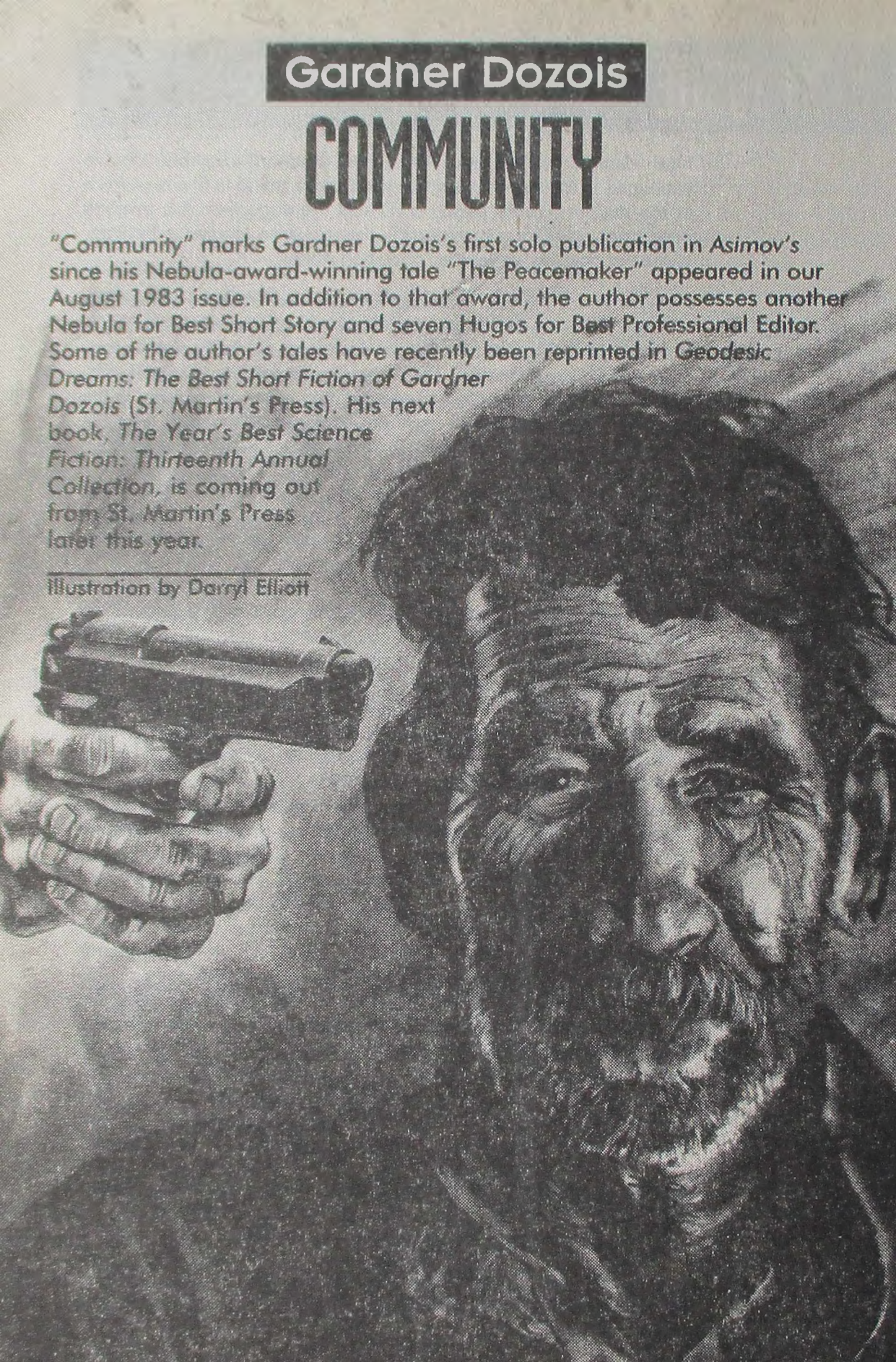


Illustration by Darryl Elliott

About ten P.M., I go out front and borrow my husband's pick-up truck. Henry stays behind watching TV, of course. He has a bad leg, and besides, he has no stomach for this sort of work. Which is okay. The Lord made different kinds of people for different kinds of work, I guess, and I'm content to do what it's been put in front of my hand to do. and not worry about whether other people have been called to do the same thing or not.

Still, some help *is* necessary—some loads are too heavy for a body to carry all by herself. Fortunately, there are others in town who feel the same way I do. I pick up Sam first, as usual, and although he seems to take up every square inch of the front seat with his bulk, jamming me against the driver's-side door, we somehow manage to squeeze Fred in next to him a few blocks later, again as always. They nod politely and say "Evening, Martha," and I nod back; good manners never hurt. I'd prefer that Fred sat in back, actually, as his breath is so bad that you can smell it even when his face is turned away from you, but an unspoken tradition has sprung up that the older men ride in the front, the young men in the back, and putting up with Fred's halitosis is a small enough price to pay for his help in these matters. We stop again in front of the Cineplex on the edge of town, which is closed-down now, of course, along with most of the rest of the mall, and pick up Josh and Alan and Arnie. They climb into the back of the pick-up truck, and we're off.

The town never was very big, and it stopped growing awhile back. Within a few minutes, we're out among the farms, with the cows blinking at us in the darkness as we rush past, and then the road turns from blacktop to weathered macadam to gravel as we begin to climb up into the hills. There's a fat yellow moon overhead, and you can hear water rushing over rock somewhere, hidden by the trees. The night is cold and still; by morning, there'll be a frost.

We have two Interventions lined up, and I've decided to do both of them tonight while I have the boys out anyway, two with one blow, as it were. I figure we'll get the minor one out of the way first, as a warm-up, because the major one is going to be difficult.

Actually, the minor one is unpleasant enough itself in its own way, but we handle it with a minimum of fuss. The old woman refuses to open her door, of course, but it's made of cheap wood, and although the expensive lock holds, the door panels themselves shred like paper. Once inside, the old woman rushes at us brandishing what I at first think is the stereotypical broom old ladies always used to use to shoo unwelcome intruders away in the movies, but which turns out instead to be a somewhat more practical 9-iron from her dead husband's old golf bag. Sam takes it away from her easily, and then holds her swaddled firmly in his arms like a shriveled old child while we begin.

She has twenty-five cats packed into this tiny house! No wonder the

neighbors have been complaining! The smell of cat is overwhelming, and the furry little creatures are everywhere, twining around our ankles and mewling as we get ourselves ready. Josh has brought some heavy gloves, and Alan has his old Louisville Slugger with Reggie Jackson's autograph on it, and so it doesn't really take long to pop them, although we have to chase the last few down, and even pull one down off a curtain, where it's clinging with all its claws and howling in dismay. Josh wrings its neck. Perhaps a few of them escape through the broken front door and run off into the night, but the idea is not to kill cats for the sake of killing cats, or because it's fun, but to abolish a nuisance that has become intolerable for everyone, even for the old lady herself if she'd admit it, and *that* we certainly accomplish, whether a few individual cats escape or not. Of course, some of them may come back later—but then, so will we.

The old woman shrieks at us constantly as we work, like a saw going through sheet tin, but surely somewhere deep inside even she must be secretly glad to have the burden of caring for all these animals lifted off her. It's a decision she would have made for herself if she had the strength of will to do so—now we've done it for her. On the way out, we find several cartons of cigarettes, which we confiscate. I admonish her—we've had trouble with her on these grounds before—and tell her that everything we're doing, all the trouble we're going to, is for her own good, nothing in it for *us*, it's all for *her* benefit, but she's grown sulky and refuses to respond. You rarely get gratitude during an Intervention, I've learned, however well-deserved it is, and no matter how much good it ultimately does for the people you're Intervening for; unfair, but that's the way it is.

Back into the truck. The boys are loosened-up and whooping and feeling fine—now for the night's more difficult work.

We drive further up the hill, the spruce and the firs bulking like ghosts in the sweeping headlights, here and there a silver birch gleaming like bone in the forest. At a bullet-riddled highway sign, we turn off onto a narrow farm lane that winds up and over a hill, and then down into a shallow valley that contains a small farmhouse and a couple of dilapidated, disused outbuildings; we get a quick glimpse of them, and then the trees close in tight around us again.

We go fast down the lane, bouncing on the ruts, the rear end of the truck fishtailing slightly on the gravel, the bushes and trees on either side scratching against the windows. Just before we break into the clearing, I shut the headlights off. The house looms up ahead. There's a light on in the front room of the house, and another upstairs.

I kill the engine, and we glide to a stop in front of the house. I send Josh and Arnie around the back, because I'm sure the boy will light out for the tall timber as soon as he sees us coming; Fred and Alan and Sam and I take the front.

As soon as the truck doors slam, the lights go out in the front room, but it's too late for that. The front door isn't even locked, not that it would have done any good if it was. Fred and Sam and Alan go in fast, and there's the usual confusion, shouting, a woman's scream, furniture breaking and being knocked over, something ceramic shattering, a dish or a vase. It only takes a minute. When a light comes back on inside, I go in.

The table lamp has fallen on the floor, and somebody has switched it on where it lies, giving me mostly a view of shuffling feet and a broken wooden chair. I pick the lamp up, making shadows swing and scurry across the room, and put it back on the table. Everything's quiet, for the moment. You can hear harsh breathing, and smell the sharp odor of sweat, and Fred's breath, heavy with garlic, that reaches out all the way across the room like a thin, rotten lance.

Alan and Fred have their guns on Mary's husband; his hair is disheveled, there's a cut on his lip and a bruise over his eye, but he's standing quietly. Sam is standing behind Mary, with his big hands clamped over her arms; she's struggling against his grip in a way that's going to leave big purple bruises tomorrow, but when she sees me, she stops.

"Good evening, Mary," I say. She says nothing, just stares at me, but people do tend to forget their manners in times of stress, you have to expect that.

The man is staring at me too, and even in the uncertain light cast by the one table lamp, I can see the blood draining out of his face, leaving it white and haggard. The guilty always *know* their guilt right away, of course, and feel it in their hearts. We can *see* it, in his face.

Mary's face is pale too, but there are two bright spots of red on her cheeks, and her lips are set tight. I can see that she's going to make this hard, even though we're doing it for her. That's often the way it is; you just have to learn to accept it.

"This is an official Intervention," I say to Mary, "sanctioned by the local Chapter and by the town council, under the local-standards ordinances of 2006. As an ordained Preacher of the Reformed Church, I have the right to—"

"Preacher!" Mary says, and then laughs harshly. "I went to *fifth grade* with you, Martha Gibbs!" As though this signifies somehow.

There's a commotion out back, more yelling and smashing, and then Josh and Arnie come in from the kitchen with the boy, frog-marching him along. Josh's got one of the kid's arms twisted way up behind his back. "He made a break for it, Martha, just like you said he would. But we got him!" Josh is grinning widely, showing what seems like too many teeth to fit into an ordinary mouth, and his face is sweaty and happy. He gives the kid's arm an extra yank for emphasis, and the boy makes a half-smothered yelp. I frown at Josh, and he eases up on the kid's arm a lit-

tle. Sometimes I think that Josh *enjoys* all this a bit too much. I suppose it's natural for a healthy young man to enjoy the chasing and catching part, the struggle and the fighting; that's in the blood. But the *point* of all this isn't punishment or retribution, or even just getting rid of undesirable elements who could pollute the rest of the town, although that's a part of it—the point is *redemption.* To wipe the slate clean and let someone start again. To do for them what they can't do for themselves, even though many of them secretly want to. The redemption part is what Josh sometimes loses sight of, I think.

The boy starts shouting. "You f---ing" —I won't reproduce what he actually says— "freaks! Why don't you mind your own business? Why don't you leave us *alone?*" I could tell him that the health of every individual in town *is* our business, that that's what a community is all about, that we care not only about his moral corruption spreading to others but most sincerely about the state of his *own* soul—but I can see that there's no point. Not even thirteen yet, and the kid's already quite a piece of work, wearing a black leather jacket and a grungy T-shirt with an obscene slogan on it, hair unkempt and much too long, two or three rings in his nose, more in his ear. I know without even bothering to look that his room is full of heavy metal posters and satanic books and CDs—not that possessing these things is strictly illegal yet, but they are a good indication of the extent of the corruption that's set in, the rot that's spread through the boy's system. Maybe such things don't actually *cause* the disease itself, as some would argue, but they're certainly a symptom that shows that disease *has* set in.

"Mary," I say, "I've known you for many years now. You're a friend, or you *were,* before you let your life get set on a wrong track. You're a good woman at heart, I know, but the weeds have grown up around your life, and there's nothing you can do about it. There's nothing you can do to fix the mistakes you've made. You may not even admit to yourself that they *are* mistakes. But friends don't let friends live like that. We're here to help you fix your life, to clear away the weeds, to help you get yourself back on the right track—"

Mary starts screaming and fighting then, but although she's a tall, strong woman, she's as nothing compared to Sam, and she can't break free of him, although she does put up enough of a struggle that—reluctantly, because Sam's a gentle soul—he has to twist her arm up behind her back in order to get her to stop. I won't repeat what she calls me. It hurts me to hear her say those things about me, but I know that it's not really Mary talking, but rather the corruption that has taken over her life. People say the same kind of awful things when they're being forced to quit hard drugs cold-turkey, I hear, cursing the very people who are going out of their way to help them. Until the poison has been totally removed from their systems, people cling to it. They don't know any better,

and you have to forgive them for what they say and do while they're in the state they're in. And you have to have the strength to make them change, whether they want to or not, whether they fight you or not. No one likes the taste of strong bitter medicine, but that doesn't mean that it isn't good for them to take it.

When Mary's quiet again, panting with pain, her face having gone sick and sallow, I read the charges. Her husband is cheating on her, the whole town knows that, and not for the first time, either. He's a drinker, too, and spends most of his paycheck and far too much of his time down at Murphy's Tavern. Probably he beats her when he gets home; it wouldn't surprise me. The boy's on drugs, of course, and, blood running true, is also a drinker, having two charges of driving without a license and DUI against him already. He's also been brought up once on vandalism charges. They've tried to talk to him at church, but it's been more than a year since he's attended Sunday classes, or even regular services. The husband, of course, has never gone at all.

I give them the blessing then, the forgiveness and absolution of the Lord, which is more than they deserve, really, but the Lord is generous, and will take everyone who is sent to Him, whether they go willingly or not. The boy is spewing a steady stream of obscenities at us now, vile things, but his voice is wobbly and squeaky-high with fright. The man has gone glazed and slack, the way some of them do. Mary, her face ashen, is pleading with me in a low, urgent voice, don't do this, Martha, please, don't *do* this, *please* don't please *don't*, but I harden my heart against her words. This is for her own good, something that needs to be done that she doesn't have the strength of will to do herself.

There's an odd moment of silence then. You can hear the wind sighing down through the spruce trees on the hill, hear the whine of a truck passing on the distant highway. The husband straightens himself with a curious kind of dignity, tugging his clothes into place. He looks at Mary and quietly says, "I love you, Mary," and a pang goes through my heart, because I know he really *does* mean it, in his own way, not that that makes any difference now. I have a moment of weakness then, my resolve almost wavering, but I steel myself against misguided sympathy. True kindness is to do what *must* be done, quickly and efficiently, however difficult it might be, however much pain it may cost you personally to do it. A short-term kindness is often a disservice in the long run.

I nod at Fred, and he steps forward, puts his revolver behind the husband's ear, and caps him neatly. The husband goes limp as a sack of laundry and drops without a sound, but Mary screams as though her heart is being ripped out. The boy makes a break for it, and there's a confused struggle, more furniture being knocked over and smashed. Josh is forced to use his boot knife, and there's blood everywhere before it's over, which annoys me—I find mess and disorder distasteful, and prefer doing

this sort of thing with as little fuss and disturbance as possible, certainly *not* with blood sprayed all over everything, but sometimes it just doesn't work out that way, no matter how hard you try.

In the confusion, Mary has somehow succeeded in breaking free of Sam, and has been hanging from Josh's back, clawing at his face and screaming, although without really managing to slow him down much. Now he shakes himself free and hits her heavily across the face, knocking her to the floor, but I step forward and put a stop to *that*. I've heard the stories, and I know that some squads in some states would go on to gang-rape Mary at this point, supposedly to "teach her a lesson" or "put the fear of God into her," and I suspect that Josh and maybe Arnie would like nothing better than to do *just* that, but that's not what we're here for. We're not here to punish or chastise, but to do the much more difficult work of redemption. We're here to *salvage* Mary's life, not destroy it. I won't have that sort of thing on my missions, I just won't stand for it. Josh and I lock eyes for a minute, and I know he's just itching to haul open that fly of his, and that what he wants to put into her is *not* the fear of God, but at last he subsides, grumbling, and steps away. Josh is a weak reed, and he and one or two of the others are not without imperfections of their own, but sometimes you have to use what tools come to hand in order to get the job done.

Mary's sprawled on the floor, sobbing brokenly, and I feel another wave of sympathy for her. Her grief and bereavement are real for *her* at this moment, however misplaced they are, however much better she'll feel later on, when she finally has a chance to think things through.

"You feel bad now, I know," I tell her, "but really you *have* no problems anymore, if you'd only see it the right way. Your problems have been wiped away. You have a clean slate now. You can start your life over, fresh. . . ."

She starts shrieking half-coherent obscenities at us at this point, without bothering to rise from the floor. Her hair is wild and disarrayed, her shirt torn open in the struggle, one naked breast peeking out—I can see some of the boys eyeing her, and I figure I'd better get them out of here before they all get ideas.

As I herd them to the door, she gets up to her knees, swaying, and begins to shout, "I hope they come for *you* someday, Martha Gibbs! Do you hear me? *I hope they come for you!*"

We leave her tugging hopelessly at the body of her husband, yanking at it and shaking it as if she could shake the life back into it. Of course, only the Lord can do that, and, in this case, He's certainly not going to bother.

She doesn't thank us, of course. They never do.

Outside, the wind has picked up, and the trees are lashing their branches as though they're in pain. Smoky clouds rush by the moon, then

swallow it entirely. Josh, still sullen and sulking from not getting his fun. forces himself rudely into the front seat next to me, Sam's usual place, and when I tell him to get in the back where he belongs, he leans insolently against me and says, "You know, Martha, your own Henry has been drinking quite a bit lately, down to the Tavern nights. . . ." We lock eyes again, but I back him down and make him get out and climb into the back of the truck. You have to use a firm hand with these boys sometimes, if you want to keep them in control. I can still hear Josh muttering to himself back there, although he's smart enough not to use any swear words in front of *me*.

The rest of them climb into the truck, and I clash it into gear, and we take off. I'm tired and drained, but happy with the knowledge of a job well-done—although I feel a pang when I think that my old friendship with Mary may not recover for quite a while, if it ever does. People ought to be grateful to you for clarifying their lives and putting them back on the proper road—but the sad truth is, they seldom are. You accept that as the price of a sincere Intervention, that they're going to resent you for it and have ill-feelings toward you thereafter, unfair as it is. You accept that this can be the end of a friendship or make cordial neighborhood relations difficult. But you do what you have to do in order to make a real difference in their lives.

Before we go home, we stop at Dunkin' Donuts, and pick up a box of assorted for the boys. My treat, of course, but even that doesn't seem to placate Josh, and he's still sulking even as he munches his jelly doughnut. Well, he'll get over it.

On the way home, after I drop everyone off, I roll down the window and let the cold night wind blow hard into my face, and, after a while, I begin to feel better about Mary. After all, she brought it on herself. If there's one sure thing in this life, it's that, sooner or later, you get what you deserve.

What's that old saying? It's one that certainly applies here. I try and try to call it to mind, and finally, just as I pull into my own driveway and shut off the engine, I remember.

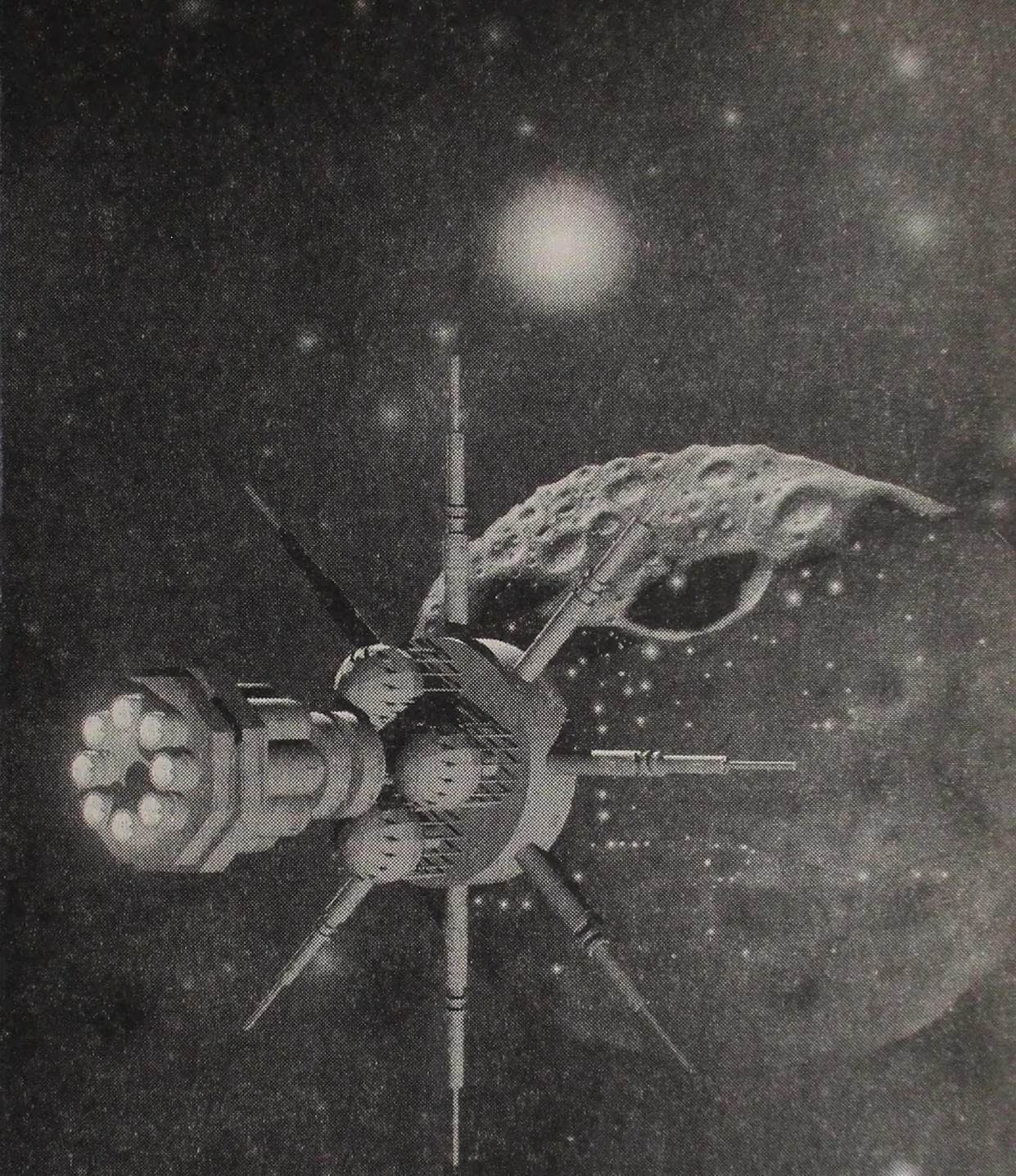
What goes around, *comes* around. ●

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,* 1270 Avenue of the Americas, New York, N.Y. 10020. 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.

Robert Reed

CHRYSALIS

Illustration by George H. Krauter



Robert Reed's main goal for this summer is to take time out from writing his awesome tales of the far future to build a little pond in the backyard. It will be "a small-scale terraforming project that I intend to stock with goldfish, frogs, and mermaids." If he puts his galaxy-spanning imagination to work on this effort, we're sure he'll succeed.

The starship embraced many names.

To the Artisans, it was 2018CC—a bloodless designation for a simple world of ice and cold tars that was long ago gutted, then given engines and a glorious purpose, carrying off the grateful survivors of an utterly inglorious war.

To its organic passengers, human and otherwise, it wore more evocative names: Squeals and squawks and deep-bass drummings, plus names drawn in light, and sweet pheromonal concoctions with no easy translation.

The *fouchians*, a species incapable of exaggeration, knew the ship as The-Great-Nest-Within-Another's-Black-Soil—an honored name implying wealth, security, and a contented slavery.

The whale-like *moojin* sang about the Grand Baleen.

Home was the literal meaning of many, many names.

As were Womb and Egg and Salvation.

Two dissimilar lactators, in utterly different languages, called it Mother's Nipple, while a certain bird-like creature, in a related vein, screeched lovingly, "Our Mother's Green Vomit."

Humans were comfortable with many names, which was only reasonable. They had built the ship and its Artisans, and no other species was half as abundant. In casual conversation they called the starship the Web, or the Net, or Hope, or the Ark, or Skyborn, or Wanderer. In the ancient ceremonies, when reverence was especially in demand, it was Paradise or Eden, or most often, with enduring emotion: Heaven.

A name of chilling dimensions.

If you are admitted to Heaven, then it stands to reason that every other place in Creation is somehow flawed. Tainted. Impure.

And if you deserve perfection, shouldn't you be perfect yourself? Not just occasionally, not just where it matters most, but always, in every ordinary day, from your first sip of milk or green vomit to your very last happy perfect breath?

By any measure, the Web was a vast ship. Even small habitats were huge, particularly when you are a young girl, wonderstruck at every turn.

Sarrie was born in one of the oldest human habitats, in a village of farmers, hunters, and shop clerks. From her playroom she could see the length of the habitat—a diamond-hulled cylinder spinning for mock-gravity, not especially large but substantial enough to hold a few rugged mountains and a stormy little sea. It was a perfect home for a fledging genius. Sarrie's foster parents were gently brilliant and happily joined—shopkeepers who weren't too smart or happy to ignore their carefully tailored daughter. From the instant of conception, the girl's development was monitored and adjusted, reappraised and readjusted, her proven ge-

netics enriched by the peaceful village, an alignment of gloved forces steadily nudging her toward the ultimate goal: Voice.

Sarrie spoke long before she could walk. Before her second birthday, she could hold her own in idle adult conversation. Barely four years old, she wrote an awful little novel, but sprinkled through its pages were complex and lovely sentences that lingered in the reader's astonished mind. Later, she invented her own language to write a second novel, then taught the language to her best friend—an older and taller and effortlessly beautiful girl named Lilké. To her credit, Lilké read every make-believe word. "It's wonderful," she claimed. But a Voice knows when someone is lying, and why, and Sarrie forgave her best friend, the lie meant to spare her pain.

The Artisans ruled the Web with the lightest of touches. They normally didn't visit the habitats, seeing no need to intrude on the organics. But one particular Artisan made a habit of coming to see Sarrie. His name was Ejy, and he would wear a human-style body out of politeness, resembling any wise old man but smelling like new rubber, his hairless brown face wearing a perpetual smile, oversized black eyes bright in any light and blinking now and again to serve the illusion of humanness.

It was obvious that he had a special interest in the child, and Sarrie's parents were proud in appropriate ways, encouraging her to behave when he was there—as if she ever misbehaved—and to be a good audience, asking smart questions and giving prompt, perfect answers when she knew them. But only if she knew them, of course.

When Sarrie was eight years old, Ejy brought her a thick volume filled with butterflies.

"Select one," he instructed, his voice smooth and dry, and timeless. "Any species you wish, child. Go on now."

"But why?" she had to ask.

"I will build it for you," he replied. "Are you intrigued?"

Sarrie couldn't count the butterflies or find any end to the book. Reaching its final page, she flipped to the front again and discovered still more butterflies, every stage of their lives shown in three dimensions, usually in their natural size. Captions were available in every shipboard language; the young Voice understood most of the audio captions. Some of the butterflies had lived on the lost earth, but most were alien, possessing the wrong number of legs or odd eyes, giant differences undoubtedly buried in their genetics. Lilké was going to become a geneticist; Sarrie tried to think of questions worth asking her friend. That's why she paused for a moment, and Ejy interrupted, asking, "Which one will it be?"

She blinked, a little startled, then turned the soft plastic page and pointed to the first place where her eyes found purchase.

The butterfly wasn't large, and while lovely, she didn't find it exceptional. And the Artisan seemed equally surprised by her choice. Crystal eyes grew larger and more round, thin lips diminishing the smile. Yet he declared, "It's a fine selection." With warm, rubber-scented hands, he retrieved the book, then turned and prepared to leave.

Sarrie waited as long as possible, which was maybe five seconds. Then she blurted out, "When do I get to see the butterfly?"

Ejy was a tease. Glancing over a shoulder, he smiled and made laughing sounds, the dry voice warning her, "To be done well, even butterflies need a little time. Haven't you learned that yet, child?"

"A little time" to the Artisans can mean days, or it can mean eons. But a young girl training as a Voice is too busy and happy to dwell on promised gifts.

Three weeks passed in a pleasant blur. Language lessons were peppered with general studies in science and the Web's glorious history. A Voice was a specialist in twenty areas, at least. That was why they were rare and why their training was so rigorous. Someday, in thirty or forty years, Sarrie would accompany a team of explorers to one of the nearby suns. If the team found sentient life, it would be her duty and honor to make contact with it, deciphering the alien minds. And if they were worthy, she would try to lure them into joining her, giving their devotion to the Web.

Sarrie loved her studies, and after three weeks, when her tutor quit lecturing in mid-sentence, she was disappointed. Perhaps even angry. The tutor told her to go to an isolated valley, and go alone. "No," it warned her, "Lilké is not invited." Of course the girl obeyed, running herself breathless and still gasping when she found Ejy waiting for her. He was in an open glade, wearing green-and-black robes over his human body, and wearing the enduring smile. The trees surrounding them were covered with gemstones, bright and sparkling in the mock-sunshine. The stones were cocoons almost ready to hatch. Ejy never mentioned them. He filled the next hour with questions, testing the Voice. Meanwhile, the day warmed and the cocoons grew dull, then split open within moments of each other. The butterflies were identical, each one a little bigger than Sarrie's hand, emerald wings decorated with white eye patches and margins black as comet tar. A colored, hallucinogenic snow seemed to fill the woods, wingbeats making a thin dry sound, thunderous in the gentlest fashion.

The tailored creatures lived vigorously and fully until their fat stocks were spent. The busiest few were first to drop, but all fell within the next few minutes; and Sarrie watched the spectacle, composing poems in her head but saying nothing until it was done.

Ejy seemed as happy as any Artisan could be.

Afterward, he told her that her chosen species came from a world of insects, and that this particular species had not flown in half a million years.

Sarrie was impressed, and she said so.

"Why am I fond of you, child?"

Startled, she remained sensibly mute. "Voice" was an inadequate name. The best Voices were exceptional listeners, and even when they guessed an answer, some questions were left untouched.

"Tell me, child. If you meet strangers, what will you do?"

" 'Embrace their souls,' " she quoted. " 'Show them the Web's caring face.' "

"How many Voices are being trained today?"

Several hundred, she had heard. At least one Voice would represent each of the ship's organic species—

"Yet you are possibly our finest Voice."

It was an incredible thing to hear. Sarrie was eight years old, her talents barely half-formed, and how could anyone, even an Artisan, know who was best?

"I love humans," Ejy confessed. "More than any other organic, I do."

In a whisper, she asked, "Why?"

He touched the thin false hair on his head. "Human genius designed me. It built me. It gave me a noble mission. And when I wear this body, I do it to honor you and your species."

Sarrie nodded, absorbing every sound, every tiny cue.

"I have lived on 2018CC since its inception. Which makes me how old?"

Several million years, she knew.

"If I could become organic, I should like to be human." It was another astonishing statement, yet he didn't linger on it. "Suppose you could become a different species, child. Not in the abstract, as Voices try to do. But in reality, as flesh and fluid . . . which species would you become. . . ?"

She reached down, gently grasping one of the dying butterflies. It was dusty and strangely warm, weighing almost nothing, its mouthparts adapted to suck nectar from a very specific, very extinct flower. There was a soft chirp, then it sprayed her with a mist of fragrant oils; and for lack of better, she told Ejy, "This."

Doubt shone on the Artisan's face. "And why, child?"

"It's very beautiful—"

"You are lying. To me, you are lying." His voice didn't sound angry, but a fire shone behind his eyes. "I know you, Sarrie. You don't know yourself half as well as I do, and you just lied."

Sarrie shook her head, claiming, "I did not—"

"First of all, these aren't your favorite colors." He pulled the carcass from her hand. "And more important, where's the value in becoming something that's lovely? This species has slept in our library for five hun-

dred millennia, dead and forgotten, and if you hadn't chosen it, it would have remained dead until the end of time."

He dropped the butterfly, both of them watching it flip and spin downward like a paper glider.

"You are exactly who you should be, Sarrie." Wise, ageless eyes smiled, and the pink tongue peeked out from between thin lips. "The universe is full of beautiful, perishable things. Butterflies, for instance. They can take infinite forms, and they are cheap. But a rare skill—the genius of a Voice, for example—is something that will be born and born again, without end."

"I didn't mean to lie," she whispered, in self-defense.

"Oh, yes, you did." Ejy laughed, then assured her, "And I know what you were thinking. I know what you would ask to become."

She said nothing.

"To be an Artisan, of course."

"No!" she roared.

"Oh, yes," he replied. "You envy our immortality. You lie awake at night, wishing you could know everything." A pause. "Given your chance, child, you would happily rule this noble ship of ours. Any human would. It is your simple nature."

He was correct, in a fashion. Deep inside Sarrie were black desires that she'd kept secret from everyone, including herself . . . and she collapsed suddenly out of shame and fear, the dead butterflies pressed against her face, threatening to choke her . . . and warm unliving hands pulled her up again, warm immortal words assuring Sarrie that she was fine, all was well, and regardless of childish thoughts, she was loved and always would be. . . .

TWO

Sarrie's final novel was a tribute to life on the starship.

An enormous, plotless epic, it was consumed, and loved, by every sentient organic. Sarrie was barely sixteen and found herself suddenly famous. Every translation was her responsibility, regardless whether the species read with its eyes or touch or its sensitive nose. Her most avid fans would travel to the village just to give her thanks: A peculiar, but sincere parade of well-wishers. Even the fouchians paid their respects, their massive bodies dressed in woven soil, dim little eyes squinting despite black eye shades. A social species with strict castes and an evolutionary history of slavery, they had thrived under the Artisans' care. Except for humans, no organic was as abundant, and perhaps none was as trusted. There was no greater honor than a fouchian's squeak of applause, telling you that your work had captured the special joy in being

another's treasured property. And with their nose tendrils quivering, holding tight to the precious novel, the mole-like fouchians would bless Sarrie; and she in turn would squeak the proper thanks, and when they turned to leave she would carefully sniff each of their rectums with all the formality that she could manage.

Ejy, as always, seemed pleased with her success, if never surprised. His visits remained irregular but memorable, and always intense. They would discuss her studies, her rapid progress and the approaching future. Then as he prepared to leave, Ejy would give the young Voice an elaborate simulation, its aliens bizarre, their souls almost impossible to decipher. But Sarrie was required not just to decipher them, but to win their trust, too. That was why Voices existed. They brought new blood into the Web—new souls into Heaven—and if Sarrie were ever going to be a true Voice, she certainly needed to outwit Ejy's damned puzzles.

Successes dwarfed failures, but failures lingered in the mind. High-technology aliens were the real nightmares. One of Ejy's scenarios didn't even involve another world. Instead there was a starship as large as the Web, and a xenophobic crew, and Sarrie tried to solve the puzzle at least twenty times, each attempt more disastrous than the last. She wept when the Web was obliterated by nuclear fire and laser light. The situation was absurd—the Artisans had never met their equals—but she was left unnerved and disheartened.

If Sarrie couldn't charm these fictional entities, how could she be trusted out in the universe, coping with reality?

Lilké, always the friend, comforted her with jokes and buoyant little compliments. "Ejy is just keeping you humble," she would claim. "You know there's no such starship out there. Organics destroy themselves. As soon as we learn to fuse hydrogen, it's inevitable that we'll try to pound ourselves into extinction."

Humans were extinct, save upon the Web.

Millions of years ago, a brutal war left the earth and the entire solar system devastated. More wars were inevitable. To save themselves, a small group of humans traveled into the Kuiper belt and there carved a starship out of a comet. They intended to protect what they could of their homeland and past. But they didn't trust themselves, much less their descendants: Why go to this bother today if others eventually forgot the past, and in some other solar system, in the same tragic ways, finished the obliteration?

Artisans were a desperate solution.

Frightened, chastened humans placed themselves into the care of machines—the ultimate parents—relinquishing one kind of life and freedom for a safer, sweeter existence.

And as predicted, the final War arrived.

The Web, still little more than an iceberg with rockets, escaped unseen.

But it left behind robot spies, scattered and hidden, that watched a thousand more years of senseless fighting—living worlds shattered, debris fighting debris, not even a bug left behind to die in the end.

But the little starship prospered. The occasional comet was mined for raw materials. The ship doubled in size, then doubled again. When a living world was discovered, the Artisans obeyed already ancient programs, hurting nothing, taking samples of every species, adding to their cryogenic archives before wandering to the next likely sun, and the next.

An intelligent species was found eventually. How to deal with them? Machines shouldn't leave the ship, it was decided, and the Voices were born. But when the first mission ended in disaster, the Artisans told the survivors that the blame was theirs. They were the ship's masters, and by any definition, masters are always responsible for the mistakes of their property.

Provided it is done well, slavery can bring many comforts.

Later worlds brought success. Better talent and training made for better Voices, and they brought new species on board, enlarging the talent pool and everyone's prosperity.

The starship became the Web, moving along one great spiral arm of the galaxy. Thousands of worlds were explored, billions of species preserved in the archives, and by Sarrie's time there were more than a hundred sentient organics living in habitats built just for them, lured there, as always, by the honest and earnest and easily seductive Voices.

When Sarrie and Lilké had free time—a rare event—they liked to visit the nearby habitats, human and otherwise, or sometimes ride a bubble car back and forth on the vast diamond threads to which every home was strung.

The Web was an awesome mixture of beauty and pragmatic engineering. Thousands of kilometers across, it was sprinkled with cylindrical habitats and moon-sized fuel tanks feeding rockets that hadn't stopped firing in living memory, carrying them toward stars still invisible to the naked eye. Success had swollen the ship; new mass meant greater momentum, hardwon and difficult to extinguish. The far-off future would have to deal with those stars. What mattered to the young women were several dozen nearer suns, bright and dim, aligned like tiny gems on a twisted necklace. Each gem had its own solar system, they knew. Several centuries of work would consume generations of scientists and Voices—a daunting, wondrous prospect. And the young Voice would hold her best friend's hands, singing her favorite songs to praise the Web, and the Artisans, and the wisdom of their ancestors for making their astonishing lives possible.

Behind the Web, in the remote distance, was the diffused brilliance of the Milky Way. They had left its embrace long ago. Momentum was one

reason. It was easiest to let the ship's momentum carry them into the cold between galaxies, finding orphaned suns and saving whatever life had evolved in that solitude. In essence, Sarrie understood, they were making an enormous lazy turn, allowing the Milky Way's gravity to help reclaim them, like some wayward child, pulling them back into the other spiral arm.

Sarrie could see the future from the bubble car, and the past, and she would weep out of simple joy, earning good-natured barbs from the realist beside her.

The realist was bolder than Sarrie, and more inquisitive. Lilké was the product of Artisan ingenuity, genius genes working in concert with a scientist's upbringing, which was likely why she was the one who suggested that they visit the archives. "Like now," she said. "What's the matter with now?"

There was no rule against it. None. Yet Sarrie wanted to ask permission first. "We'll go home, and I'll contact Ejy—"

"No," Lilké snapped. "This time is ours, and I want to go there."

It wasn't a particularly long journey. Their car took them to the center of the Web, to a mammoth triple-hulled wheel bristling with telescopes of every flavor, plus an array of plasma guns and lasers, the weapons meant for defense, nothing to shoot but the occasional comet.

Sarrie felt ill-at-ease. Stepping from the car into a small white-walled room, she held Lilké's hand as if it were all that kept her from drowning . . . and after what seemed like a long wait, though probably it was no more than a minute, the whiteness parted, a doorway revealed, and an Artisan emerged, its body unlike any she had ever seen.

It was a machine's body, practical and elegant in design, but simple, its corners left sharp and a variety of spare limbs stacked like firewood on its long back. Jointed legs clattered on the milky floor. A clean, lifeless voice said, "Welcome."

Artisans were machines. Of course they were. But why did Sarrie feel surprise? And why did she lose the last of her poise, blurting out, "I want to speak to Ejy. Is Ejy here?"

The machine replied, "Certainly, my child—"

"We've come for a tour, if that's possible." Sarrie couldn't stop her mouth, and she couldn't begin to think. "My friend here, Lilké, is a geneticist, or she will be . . . and she wants to see the archives . . . if it's not too much trouble—!"

A soft laugh came from the rolling machine.

"Sarrie," said its voice. "Don't you recognize me?"

Ejy?

And he laughed louder, Lilké joining in . . . then finally, grudgingly, the embarrassed Voice, too. . . .

* * *

Ejy took them on a tour of the ancient facility.

Every surface was white, befitting some logic of cleanliness, or perhaps some ascetic sensibility. Each wall was divided into countless deep drawers, cylindrical and insulated, and sealed, every drawer filled with the DNA or RNA or PNA from a vast array of past worlds.

First and always, the Artisans were insatiable collectors.

They walked for a long while. Sometimes they saw other Artisans, their machine bodies the same but for the details. Sarrie didn't feel entirely welcome, but then again, she couldn't trust her instincts. Voices were bred and trained to know organics, not machines, and she reminded herself that their long glassy stares and chill silences might mean nothing at all.

In one nondescript corridor, Ejy paused without warning, touching a control panel, a skeletal ramp unfolding from a wall.

"Climb," he told the women. "All the way to the top, if you please."

The archive's mock-gravity was less than their habitat's, yet the climb was difficult. Sarrie found herself nervous and weak, eyes blurring as she reached the top. Before her was a ceramic drawer, pure white save for the tiniest imaginable black dot—a memory chip—and beside it, in exacting detail, the black silhouette of a human being.

Lilké touched the symbol, lightly, a low keening sound coming from deep in her chest.

"What is within?" asked the Artisan.

"I am," Sarrie whispered.

"And everyone else, too," said Lilké, her fingertips giving it an expectant caress. "Is this where you keep us?"

"The sum total of human genetics," he affirmed, his pride obvious, hanging in the air after the words had faded. "Every human who has ever lived on 2018CC is represented," he told them, "as are several billion from the ancient earth. Plus, of course, the unincorporated genes, natural and synthetic, that we will implant in future generations, as needed."

Neither woman spoke. A simple drawer, yet it held their entire species. What could anyone say at such a moment?

Ejy continued, voice purring. "In addition, the walls on both sides of us encompass the earth's biosphere. Every possible species is represented, including every potential genotypic variation."

An electric surge passed through Sarrie, bringing a clarity, a transcendent sense of purpose.

Lilké, by contrast, saw more pragmatic concerns.

"You should make copies," she warned. "Of everything, if possible. Then put them somewhere else, somewhere safe. Just in case."

The Artisan ignored the thinly veiled criticism.

Glassy eyes on Sarrie, he said, "Imagine this. Within that modest

drawer are certain traits that, when combined, make perfection. The ultimate scientist, perhaps. Or our best farmer. Or maybe, a singular Voice." He paused, then asked, "If we ever found perfection, in any job, wouldn't we be wise to let it be born again and again?"

Lilké answered for Sarrie, saying, "Certainly. So long as it helps the Web, you have no choice."

Ejy only watched the Voice. "Certain qualities may vary, of course. Gender and height, and skin color, and general appearance are minor details, free to dance where they wish." Mechanical arms gestured, underscoring each word. "But the soul within is constant. Eternal. And if it is reborn today, wouldn't it be a link in the most glorious chain?"

Sarrie nodded weakly, whispering, "Yes."

Without shifting his gaze, Ejy said, "Imagine this. An Artisan finds perfection. Can you imagine it, Lilké? He finds it in the very early days of the Web, which would mean that this perfect soul has been born how many times? You are good with calculations, Lilké. How many times is she brought out of that little drawer?"

"What's her job?" asked the scientist.

"I cannot say."

Lilké shrugged and played with the numbers regardless. After a moment, she said, "Ten thousand and eleven times. Give or take." Then she broke into a quiet, self-satisfied laugh.

Sarrie felt distant, utterly remote, as if watching these events from some invisible faraway sun.

"I can't even say if there is such a soul," Ejy continued. "There are rules that rule even the Artisans, which is only fair."

Both women nodded.

"If you wish to believe in a number near ten thousand, I think you would be rather close. But of course it's a hypothetical problem, and there are no ultimate answers."

It was a strange, compelling game.

The immortal Artisan crawled partway up the ramp, and with a certain quietness asked, "How many lives do you stand on, Sarrie?"

The answer bubbled out of her.

"None," she told Ejy. "I stand on no one else."

"Interesting," was his only response.

Lilké was staring at her friend, astonished and envious and almost certainly dubious of Sarrie's vaunted status. "I'm as good a geneticist as you are a Voice!" her expression shouted.

Then Sarrie, feeling a kind of shame, climbed down the ramp, wondering how many human Voices had visited this holy place, and if Ejy had accompanied all of them, and what answers they might have given to his question: "How many lives do you stand on?"

But there was only one answer, of course, and it was hers.

Then Lilké and Ejy were speaking about the techniques of gene preservation, and Sarrie stood by herself, trying very hard to think of other, more important matters. . . .

THREE

It was a secretly warm world.

Cherry-hot iron lay at its center, blanketed in a roiling ocean of magma. Only its skin was cold, young rock covered with water ice and a thin nitrogen snow, the face deceptively simple, glowing white and pink beneath the bottomless sky.

The lecturer, an adult male fouchian, described their target world as being formed four billion years ago, presumably in one of the local solar systems. It spent a chaotic youth dancing with its more massive neighbors, orbits shifting every few centuries, a final near-collision flinging it out into the cometary cloud. Perhaps a similar near-collision had thrown this cluster of stars out of the Milky Way. Who knew? Either way, the world today was tracing a slow elliptical orbit around a cool M-class sun, its summers barely warmer than its fifty thousand year winters, the original ocean of water frozen beneath a thin atmosphere of noble gases and molecular hydrogen.

Dramatic images floated above the fouchian, fresh from the Web's telescopes. He pointed out volcanoes and mountain ranges and the conspicuous absence of impact craters. Even so far from any sun, heat persisted. Tectonics and the table-smooth plains of ice were evidence of recent liquid water, which meant the possibility of simple life. And with that pronouncement, the fouchian looked out at his audience, reminding them that not every training mission had hopes of finding life. Other, less gifted teams were being sent to survey nearby comets and little plutos, the poor souls. Attempting a human smile, the fouchian laid its nose tendrils against its muzzle, then parted its thin lips, exposing incisors whiter than any ice. "Thank Artisan Ejy for this honor," he told them, his voice box pronouncing words with an eerie hyperclarity. "He specifically chose each of you, just as he selected my Nest-brother and myself to serve as his chief officers. And who are we to doubt an Artisan's judgment?"

Two dozen humans sat together in an open-air amphitheater. It was night in the human habitat, cloudless and warm, and lovely. Curious people stood at the gates, straining for a glimpse. Beyond the stage was a broad calm cove, playful dolphins stitching their way through the water, trading insults as they hunted the living sea.

"A mission at last," Lilké muttered. "We've got something to do!"

Sarrie smiled and nodded, unsure when she had ever felt so happy.

Wearing his human body, Ejy stood on one side of the stage, accompa-

nied by the second fouchian. Sarrie wanted to dance around like a little girl, but how would that look? Instead she punched commands into her monitor, asking for permission to view the files on this wondrous new world.

A young man was sitting in front of Lilké. Without warning, he stood, giving the fouchian a quarter-bow even as he said, "I have to disagree. There's a lot of liquid water today. More than you've predicted, I think."

He was a sharp-featured, sharp-tongued fellow named Navren. A genius with physical sciences, Sarrie recalled. He understood the periodic table better than did the elements themselves, it was said, and he never, ever let an opinion go unspoken.

"Your estimated heat flows are too small," he informed the fouchian. "And I see a deep ocean beneath the ice plains. Plenty of vents, and heat energy, and particularly *here*. This basin on the southern hemisphere is our best bet."

The fouchian's tendrils flexed and became a bright pink. A sure sign of anger, Sarrie knew. Yet the artificial voice remained crisp and worthy. "We know the world's age and mass, and Ejy himself made these estimates, all based on long experience—"

"A volcanic pulse," Navren interrupted. "But more likely, residual heat after a major impact." He launched into a thorough analysis, intuition sprinkled over a technical mastery that astonished Sarrie. If it was an impact, she learned, then it was recent—in the last million years—and it had happened where the ice was smoother than a newborn's cheek.

When the impromptu lecture ended, a cold silence held sway.

Every team member should be grateful for expert advice. Yet only Ejy seemed genuinely pleased. His old-human face smiled and smiled, even as his first officer remarked, "No one can make such a quick analysis. I think our distinguished colleague accessed these files before you gave him permission, Artisan Ejy."

It was a serious breach of the rules, if true. Knowledge, in all its glorious colors, belonged to their masters.

But Ejy chose to ignore any offense. "The boy is eager. I see no crime." Black eyes glanced at both fouchian officers. "This is a training mission, children. A simple world is being given to us to share, and let's not forget our purpose. Our unity. Please."

Navren grinned openly, winking at the two young women behind him.

Again, Ejy said, "Children."

He meant humans and he meant fouchians, and Sarrie didn't need to be a Voice to understand the intent of that one potent word.

It had been centuries since the Web had had so many worlds to investigate; very few organics could recall such adventures, and none of them were human. In honor of their mission, the humans held a traditional

ceremony, but it turned into a static, formal, and desperately dull affair. It took a party to cure the dullness. With strong drink in her belly, the mission's Voice decided to join Navren, complimenting him for being right about the new world's heat flow. Tiny probes had landed recently, sending home evidence of a genuine ocean, deep and warm and exactly where he had predicted it to be.

Compliments made Navren smile. But he wasn't prompted to compliment her in turn, his gaze saying, "Of course I was right. Why wouldn't I be?"

Sober, Sarrie would have seen the soul inside the arrogance. But the drunken Voice persisted, confessing excitement, hoping aloud that she could help their mission, if not as a Voice, then at least as a willing worker.

"Forget worrying," was Navren's advice. "This is a useless little mission. It's nothing."

She winced, then remarked, "That seems harsh."

"We're visiting a snowball," he countered. "A big fancy snowball. This team's real work doesn't begin until we slide past the fourth solar system." His narrow brown face showed disgust. "And we'll be old people before we reach its most promising world—"

"What world? How do you know?"

"I had early access to our mission files. Remember?"

"You've studied what's coming?"

"Maybe yes, maybe no." A big wink, then he said, "Our best prospect is earth-like. Warm and green. Radio-dead, but even light-years away, it shows evidence of agriculture—"

Sarrie clapped her hands over her ears, in reflex. " 'Knowledge too soon is the same as poison,' " she quoted from the Artisan code. And their mission wasn't useless, either.

Navren shrugged, then effortlessly changed subjects.

"You know," he remarked in a casual, self-satisfied way, "you and I won't sleep together. You're wasting your hope trying to seduce me."

Surprise became a fumbling anger. Sarrie muttered, "I was never thinking—"

"Oh, yes, you were," Navren insisted. "You and Lilké talk about me, wondering who's to screw me first."

Astonishing, infuriating words.

And true, but only to a degree. Idle chatter, in passing, and she wouldn't let him entertain the remote possibility. . . !

"You're too conventional for my tastes," Navren continued.

"You don't know me," she growled.

"Of course I do. I read those novels of yours." He shook his head and squinted, telling her, "The second novel was your best."

"You didn't read it."

"In that silly language of yours, yes."

She felt lightheaded.

"Besides," he claimed, "every Voice is the same essential creature. Human or fouchian, or whatever. Voices have an exact job, and like it or not, the Artisans build you along very precise lines."

Sarrie took a deep, useless breath.

"On the other hand, I have twenty-three untried genes inside me. I require things to be *fresh*. New." Emotions that no Voice could have read passed through his face, the eyes flaring. The insufferable man announced, "I think your friend—Lilké, is it?—is more to my taste."

Looking across the green paddock, Sarrie found her parents speaking to Lilké, no doubt wishing her well, and begging her to please watch after "our little Sarrie."

"Tell her what I said," Navren purred. "Tell her to come visit me."

She had enough, cursing him in fouchian and storming off. But later, when Sarrie calmed enough to laugh at the boorish idiot, she told Lilké exactly what he had said. Voices were natural mimics and entertainers, but her lovely friend didn't laugh at the appropriate moments, or even speak, her deep brown-black eyes looking elsewhere, trying to find Navren among all the young, blessed geniuses.

Their scout ship was built on ancient, proven principles—blunt and swift, fuel tanks and engines dwarfing the tiny crew quarters. With supplies and extra heavy equipment, there was no room left for elbows, much less comfort. Humans had to spend most of the eleven month voyage in cold-sleep. Only the fouchian officers and Ejy remained awake, immune to the claustrophobia.

Ten days out from the new world, the sleepers were warmed, then reawakened.

They gorged on breakfasts rich with fat and antioxidants. Then the scientists and engineers were sent to organize their laboratories and calibrate delicate instruments. Lilké found little problems that evaded easy answers. Tests supplied by Ejy? Perhaps, although not likely. Either way, Sarrie helped where possible, then simply tried to stay out of the way. By early evening, she was starving again, teetering close to exhaustion. Yet she felt like a traitor when she excused herself, making amends by promising, "I'll get our cabin in order. Come to bed soon. You need rest, too."

True enough, but her friend didn't arrive by midnight. Bundled up in bed, Sarrie plunged into her first dreams in nearly a year—intricate dreams of being alien, of meeting a human Voice who sang of some faraway Heaven. Waking, she smiled, then realized it was three in the morning and Lilké was missing . . . and of course Sarrie dressed and went to the genetics lab, trembling with worry until she saw that the lab was

dark, and sealed, and she finally thought to ask the ship's computer about Lilke's whereabouts.

The computer gave a cabin number. Navren's cabin.

In the morning, after a string of nightmares, Sarrie saw her best friend sitting with Navren in the tiny galley. What she already knew became a concrete truth, as inescapable as physical law. Despite a fierce hunger, she couldn't eat near them; the next few days were spent hiding in her cabin, pretending to work at Ejy's unsolvable simulation. As always, the xenophobic aliens destroyed the Web. Nothing she did seemed to mollify them. Yet it didn't matter anymore. Nothing mattered except for Sarrie's black mood, and she clung to it for as long as her nature and Ejy allowed.

The Artisan hadn't spoken twice to the Voice since she had risen from cold-sleep. She had barely wondered why. But within a few hours of their landing, he came to her cabin dressed as the old man, and he asked if she would please join him for a little stroll.

They went to the astronomical lab, empty now despite important work on hand. Empty by command? she wondered. The main screen was filled with their nameless world—a pale white ball, cold and nearly featureless. It seemed incapable of holding Sarrie's attention. She forced herself to appear interested. "Have we learned anything new?" she inquired, knowing that learning was as inevitable on this ship as breathing was.

"We've learned much," the ancient Artisan replied. "But most of it is trivial. Nuggets and details only."

The worthwhile discoveries were waiting for the humans to find them. As it was intended to be, she told herself.

A strong false hand gripped her shoulder, squeezing hard.

Sarrie refused to talk about the lovers in the nearby cabin. Instead, with a tone of fearful confession, she whispered, "I want to have a great life."

"You will," her companion replied, without hesitation.

"I want you, you and the other Artisans . . . to talk about me for a million years."

The gripping hand relaxed, almost lifting.

No voice said, "We will," or even, "Perhaps we will." Because it wasn't possible, of course. What single organic deserved such fame?

Without looking at Ejy, she said, "Thank you."

"For what, may I ask?"

"Your help. Your patience." She paused, forcing herself not to cry. "Thank you for making me into the best Voice that I can possibly be."

"You cannot be anything else," he assured, laughing gently.

Fouchians had an insult. "Posturing-on-another's-mound-of-soil." She thought of it until Ejy, affecting a tone of concern, asked her:

"What are you thinking, child?"

She looked at the false face, crystal eyes cool and black—more alien

than any other eyes on the Web—and she confessed, "I feel closer to you than to my own species."

A soft, soft laugh.

Then the hand squeezed until her shoulder ached, and the Artisan said, "Exactly as it should be, sweet Voice. As it always is. . . ."

FOUR

The ship set down on a plain of water ice—hard as granite, smooth as sleep, and relentlessly, numbingly cold. Tradition and practicality called for an unessential crew member to be first to the surface. Ejy gave Sarrie the honor. She donned her heavily insulated lifesuit, gave a general thumbs-up, then with a musical hum of motorized limbs strode into the main airlock, waiting to descend onto the ice.

"For the Artisans, parents to all," she announced, "I claim this lovely bleak place."

Violence had created the ice. Yet Navren seemed unsure which natural process to blame. Comet impacts or vulcanism? Perhaps some combination of both, he decided, and he built elaborate simulations involving rains of comets piercing the crust, allowing plastic rock to rise to within a very few kilometers of where they stood now.

Steady chill winds had polished the ice ever since. Disturbing that crystalline perfection felt sacrilegious, but Lilké wanted deep samples, unmarred by cosmic radiation. Navren helped her erect a portable drilling rig. Their first fist-sized sample, brought up after just a few minutes' work, was sprinkled with treasure: A few dozen tiny, tiny fossils frozen where they had died, swimming in an ocean melted for a moment after a hundred million year winter.

Scarce, as expected, and uncomplicated, the fossils resembled bacteria in basic ways. Lilké isolated their naked DNA, patching gaps and decoding the naked genetics. Then in a long aquarium filling half of her lab—a cold, lightless and pressurized little ocean—she conjured the aliens out of amino acids and lipids, watching as they began to slowly thrive.

Despite this world's poverty, life had persisted. Lilké's bugs were pragmatically sluggish, powered by anaerobic chemistries, and judging by their numbers in the ice, they were scarce. She and Navren warned the others that beneath the ice, even the ocean's secret gardens, life would be scarce. Yet these creatures were survivors and admirable because of it, existing for several billion years—outliving suns, worlds, and even their own pitiful earth.

Ejy called a general meeting, then asked humans and fouchians to find some means to cut their way to the mysterious sea.

Navren proposed using nuclear charges, hammering their way through

two kilometers of ice in an afternoon. But more conservative souls won out. The ship's potent reactors would pump heat into the icecap, sculpting a deep hole, and the superheated vapor would be thrown high overhead, freezing almost immediately, then falling. For the first time in eons, this world would enjoy a good long peaceful snow.

Sarrie was suddenly desperate to feel involved. But the hardware, fat pumps and redundant back-up power systems and such, had been proven on thousands of similar worlds, and her help took the form of sitting inside a prefabricated hut near the borehole, watching for mechanical problems only a little more likely than another comet impact. To someone groomed for intellectual adventure, boredom was a shock. Sarrie stared out at the enormous geyser, feeling its roar more than she could hear it in the near-vacuum . . . and a secret portion of her fearing that nothing more interesting than this would ever happen in her life.

The twisted necklace of suns set during her duty time. The temperature would plummet another fraction of a degree, the sense of eternal night growing worse. On her second day, Sarrie was considering tears when the Milky Way rose behind her—a majestic fog of suns, never more lovely, lending color and depth to the manmade geyser, but the geyser's magnificence all its own.

Sarrie composed a poem in the next few hours, then dedicated it to Lilke and posted it in the galley. But her friend was taking her meals in the lab, studying her bugs twenty hours a day before indulging in private fun with her gruesome boyfriend. It was Ejy who praised the poem first, applauding her imagery and the message. Only then did the fouchians and other humans read it, seemingly appreciating it. But Navren, of all people, offered no opinions. Sarrie was eating a late dinner when he read it, and she braced herself for some terse, biting critique. Surely he would browbeat her for not understanding the physics of expanding gases and phase changes. But no, the gruesome boyfriend seemed to nod respectfully, even as the author sat nearby, sipping juice, pretending to be blind.

That next morning, Sarrie was walking toward her post. The borehole was several kilometers from the ship. The thin winds had fallen off while she had slept, icy snow falling silently on her. She was navigating in a darker-than-night gloom, using her suit's instruments to keep on course, and suddenly, without warning, a dark monstrous blob appeared before her.

A low liquid moan came from Sarrie.

It was some kind of alien, obviously. Her eyes refused to find anything familiar about it. She took a few steps backward, then paused, one hand lifting instinctively, ready to ward off any blows; and finally, at the last instant, she remembered that she was a Voice, for goodness sake. And in a thin whisper, she told the alien, "Hello," in many languages, hoping against hope to be understood.

"Hello," the monster replied, smiling behind his crystal faceplate.

She knew him. The bulky body was a lifesuit, and she finally saw the identification symbol on the helmet—the familiar silhouette of a human—then the sharp, self-assured face.

"Navren?" she sputtered.

But he said nothing else—an uncharacteristic moment—handing her a small pad and making sure that she had a firm grip. Then he walked on past, the blizzard swallowing him without sound, without fuss, his wide bootprints beginning to fill with icy grains. Perhaps he hadn't been here at all.

Sarrie reached the hut without further incident, relieving an extremely bored expert in alien neurology.

Alone and unwatched, she woke Navren's pad. It contained nothing but a long poem about another geyser on a different world. A warm, blue-green world, she realized. Judging by the star rich sky, it was somewhere deep in the Milky Way. No author was named, but clues led to obvious conclusions: The poem had been written by a human Voice. Moreover, its rhythms and imagery were nearly identical to the poem displayed back in the galley. The same symbols, even. The geyser linked life and the stars, emotion and purpose, organics and the blessed Artisans. On and on, point by point. It was obvious—Sarrie's soul had written both versions. But what disturbed her most was that this earlier work, without question, was better than yesterday's effort. Not to mention superior to everything else that she had written in her current life.

Read once, the mysterious poem vanished from the pad, leaving no trace except in Sarrie's mind.

When the neurologist arrived at the appointed time, relieving her, Sarrie went straight to Navren.

Before she could speak, he told her, "I gave you nothing. And if you say otherwise, I'll be *extremely* disappointed."

He was working on some kind of device, possibly of his own design. The machine shop was cluttered and loud, and save for the two of them, it was empty. Yet for some reason, Sarrie found herself glancing over her shoulder.

"I expected more from you, Sarrie." The man plugged components into components, telling her, "The good Voice sees the universe through another's eyes. Am I right? Well, look at *my* eyes. Look! Tell me what I see!"

She hated the man.

"Leave me," he growled. "Get out of here. I'm working!"

She hated him and wouldn't do what he asked. In revenge, Sarrie refused him the simple gift of her understanding.

They reached the living sea exactly on schedule.

A quick celebration culminated with the Artisan blessing his organics

for their good work. The precious water rose almost two kilometers on its own, then was grabbed by powerful pumps and insulated pipes, filling both an empty fuel tank and Lilké's pressurized aquarium. The celebrants filed through the lab for a symbolic quick glance. One of the fouchians, pulling his bulk down the narrow aisle, claimed to see a momentary phosphorescence. "Too much to drink," was Lilké's verdict—a glib dismissal of a colleague whose physiology couldn't survive ethanol. Then the nonessential organics herded themselves into the hallway, standing three-deep, talking too loudly as the geneticist tried to ignore them, starting to make the obvious and routine first tests.

The water was glacially cold and mineral-rich—as predicted—but it also carried a delicious hint of free oxygen. Not predicted, and marvelous. Navren, remaining at his lover's side, said, "Impossible," giggled, then began offering explanations. A catalytic reaction between water and metal ions? Or water and hot magma? Or water and life. . . ? Though that last speculation was absurd—where would the energy come from?—and he giggled again, for emphasis. . . .

Befitting his role, Ejy remained in the lab, standing nearly motionless with his false face showing confidence and a well-honed pleasure.

Life was easy to find, and it too held surprises. The biomass was two or three hundred times higher than predicted. But more astonishing were the natives themselves. A stereomicroscope focused on them. Projected images swam in the air above the central lab table. As if injured, Lilké gasped aloud. Bacteria were darting along like grains of enchanted rice, seeping a kind of firefly light as they moved. Even Sarrie, standing her ground in the narrow doorway, knew their significance: These bugs were a different species, operating on some radically different, spendthrift metabolism.

The rest of the audience grew silent, watching over Sarrie's shoulder or using portable monitors. A baffling moment, and holy. . . !

Without warning, something else glided into view. A monster, perhaps. It was burly and vast, and powerful, remaining blurred until the automatic focus could engage, recalibrating data made from bent light, the monster suddenly defined, suddenly utterly familiar.

It was a protozoan. Sarrie knew a sophisticated organism when she saw it. That general design had been repeated on a multitude of worlds, always with great success. The nucleus and engorged food vacuoles lay within a sack of electric broth. A thick golden pelt of cilia beat too rapidly for an eye to follow, obeying the simplest reflexes. Without conscience or love, the monster hovered, feasting on the hapless, minuscule bacteria. Then it moved again, without warning, covering some enormous distance—the width of an eyelash, perhaps—and passing out of view before the lenses could respond.

One of the fouchians gave a deep moan, his voice box asking, "How? How, how, how?"

Explanations were obvious, and inadequate. The fossil ocean from a million years ago had been replaced by another ocean, richer by any measure: Oxygen metabolisms; rapid growth and motility; the extravagance of trophic levels. But how could a new ocean evolve so quickly? Lilké claimed that's exactly what had happened, then she just as quickly dismissed the idea. No! Their borehole had to be situated directly above some local paradise. A volcano. A vent site. Whatever the physical cause, free oxygen was being generated in this one locale. In tiny amounts, no doubt. The bulk of the unseen ocean was exactly as the ice had promised, she maintained—cold and dark, and impoverished, and content with its poverty.

Navren made fun of the free oxygen. His magma and metal ion hypotheses had been half-jokes, nothing more. Under these circumstances, he admitted that he couldn't see any trick that would split water molecules, and his features seemed to sharpen as his frustrations grew.

Sarrie enjoyed the befuddlement, part of her wishing this moment wouldn't end.

But wise old Ejy knew exactly what to do. Obviously this new world had mysteries, delicious ones, and everyone needed to work as one to solve them. He began to move, dispensing assignments. Humans and fouchians were sent where they could help, or at least where they brought the least distraction. Sarrie knew enough about biological instruments to help Lilké prepare specimens for mapping; and Ejy, perhaps wishing to heal wounds between friends, ordered his young Voice into the lab, hovering nearby while Lilké gave instructions, both humans pretending to cooperate for the moment.

Sarrie worked with DNA drawn from a protozoan's nucleus, making it legible for their machinery. Lilké was already reading genes from the oxygen-loving bacteria. Silence was followed by curses. With the mildest of voices, Ejy asked what was wrong. Lilké said, "Nothing." Then after more transcriptions, she amended herself. "Somehow, I don't know how . . . I managed to contaminate this sample, Artisan Ejy. . . !"

Ejy's face was sympathetic, but his voice was all barbs and disappointment. "That doesn't sound like you, Lilké. Now does it?"

The mission's geneticist turned to Sarrie. "Is your sample ready yet?" Nearly, yes. "Let me finish up. And you get started on another bacterium. Go on."

The protozoan was genetically complex. Even in an expert's grip, interpretations took time. Lilké entered a near-trance, skimming across long, long stretches of base pairs, trying to decipher the codes. And Sarrie tried to convince herself that her friend deserved absolute control. This was Lilké's lab, after all. Only a selfish, inadequate organic would feel angry about being pushed aside. Pushed like an untrustworthy child. Yet she wasn't a child, and she was confident in her abilities . . . except for some

reason she couldn't work, or think, and her hands trembled as if some degenerative condition were eating at her nervous system.

"What the fuck's wrong?" Lilké shouted.

Sarrie was startled, a vial slipping from her fingers and bouncing, then rolling out of reach.

"We've got a major contamination problem," Lilké explained, embarrassed to tears. "I'll need to clean up and start over. I'm sorry, Artisan Ejy. As soon as I can track down the problem, I'll run more samples. But I can't do shit just now. . . !"

The Artisan did not speak, or move.

The women watched him, waiting for his sage advice or the perfect encouragement. Yet he remained silent for an astonishing length of time. The old-man face was hard and flat, inert as a mask, but behind the eyes was a flickering, hints of a swift elegant mind being applied to intricate, uncompromising programs.

Then he spoke. With the mildest of voices, he asked, "From where does your contamination come?"

"From us," Lilké muttered. "These codes and the genes . . . they're all *Terran*. . . !"

The Artisan nodded, contriving a smile. "But of course," he replied, "there's another conclusion supported by your data. Yes?"

In a whisper, Lilké said, "No."

Ejy stared at Lilké. He didn't blink or offer another word, waiting until the geneticist finally, grudgingly said, "Maybe."

"I don't understand," Sarrie confessed.

No one seemed to hear her.

"What other conclusion?" Her voice was soft, weak. Useless.

Lilké shook her head, telling Sarrie, "That there's no contamination. Our data are perfectly valid."

But if Sarrie was extracting earthly DNA, that meant . . . no. . . !

Ejy turned to Sarrie, the dead face opening its mouth, saying nothing. The eyes were what spoke, surprise and pain mixed with pity.

Why pity? she asked herself.

And then she understood everything. Not just what was in the ocean far beneath the cold hard ice, but what was in the mind of the machine, the mind behind those pitying eyes.

FIVE

News of the discovery spread at a fever's pace.

And one fever-induced explanation was produced almost immediately: The microbes came from the Great Web. One of its earthly habitats must have sprung a leak—a common enough event in those ancient struc-

tures—and the escaping water froze, tiny ice crystals set free to wander the universe, hitching a ride on one of their probes, or maybe just carried along on the chill starlight.

It was an inventive, ludicrous explanation. Yet both fouchians and most of the humans tried to believe it just the same. Everyone knew that the earth was far away, and dead; there was no reason to mention it. Of course the Web was to blame. That was the consensus. Improbabilities were better than impossibilities. In voices growing more feeble by the moment, the crew promised each other that eons of tranquillity and purpose wouldn't be threatened, at least not because of some damned little bugs swimming in an ocean nobody had even seen yet.

Ejy remained quiet about the pregnant snowflake, panspermian nonsense. And quiet about almost everything else, too.

He wandered from lab to lab, then out to the borehole itself; but he rarely offered encouragement, much less advice, watching the organics with a peculiar intensity, leaving everyone ill-at-ease.

It was Navren who asked the obvious: What were the odds that a pregnant snowflake would come here? And how would frozen spores migrate through kilometers of solid ice? And even if they found the means, then where did the damned bugs get their energy and free oxygen? And how did they become so common so quickly?

But geniuses are nothing if not clever.

A second explanation was built from scratch. This was a training mission, people reasoned. Ejy, the great old Artisan, was simply testing them. The microbes had been planted. Who knew what else was falsified? Perhaps every team endured this kind of trickery. It had been generations since the last important field mission, right? Absolutely! But the sweetest advantage of this explanation was that Navren could ask any question, find any flaw, and none of it mattered. This was an elaborate practical joke, nothing else, and at some point, probably in a minute or two, Ejy would tell the truth, and everyone would laugh themselves sick.

The obvious next step was to visit the hidden ocean. A blunt diamond balloon was assembled in the machine shop. It was a submersible, crude but proven in a thousand seas. It had room on board for two cramped humans. Navren and Lilké were originally slated for the dive. But Ejy ordered the seats removed, then picked one of the fouchians to go in their place.

No explanation was necessary, yet he offered several. Experience. Expendability. And the light-sensitive fouchian eyes.

Reasonable enough, people told each other. The fouchian was probably a co-conspirator in the practical joke. Suddenly a false exuberance took hold of them. The borehole out on the ice had been capped, there was

warm breathable air beneath the tent-like structure. The chosen fouchian drove himself out in one of the mission's three big-wheeled buggies, and without the slightest ceremony forced his way through the tiny hatch—like a fat rat through a knothole. Spontaneous applause broke out in the galley. Everyone was in the galley, save for the submersible pilot. When the submersible was lowered into the hole—a vapor-shrouded puddle nearly eight kilometers deep—most of the audience cheered aloud, telling themselves that everything would be answered soon, and with answers, everything would return to normal.

Navren acted distant, and exactly like Ejy, he rarely spoke, and when he did speak, his comments were brief and remarkably bland.

Sarrie kept her eyes on Navren. She sat close to him in the crowded galley, practically ignoring the banks of monitors on the far wall. Video images and raw data enthralled most of the humans. Vacuous conversation came and went. The ship's reactors were still heating the borehole's water. Its ice walls were smooth, translucent. Spotlights dove into the pure ice, shattering on ancient fissures, sudden rainbows forming and fading as the submersible continued its descent. And with that same false exuberance, people commented on the beauty of their seemingly simple surroundings, and wasn't the universe a marvel. . . ?

Navren didn't insult their sentimentality. He sat beside Lilké, holding his lover's hand with a wrestler's grip. Sometimes he would lean in close to her, making some comment about the oxygen levels or other dissolved treasures. But most of the time he just watched the monitors, his face tense yet strangely happy, his eyes missing nothing even when nothing at all happened.

Sarrie watched the monitors through his face.

When the submersible left the borehole, entering open water, there was more applause. But softer now, somehow less genuine. Navren blinked and took a breath, as if preparing for a long swim. Away from the ice there was much less to see. The spotlights reached out for hundreds of meters, finding nothing. Yet the tension in the galley doubled, then doubled again. Navren lifted Lilké's hand as if to kiss it, then hesitated. In a smooth and astonished voice, he said, "Look at the oxygen now. Look." Then he gently took a flap of his own skin into his mouth, and he bit down hard enough to make himself wince, to make his eyes tear.

The ocean floor remained remote, unimaginable. It would take forever to reach, which was unfair. More than once, in a quiet way, someone would whisper, "I wonder what's supposed to happen next." Because it was all a test, of course. Conceived by the Artisans. Run by Ejy. An elaborate means of determining *something* about this very young, very inexperienced team.

The fouchian was still a full kilometer from the bottom when he reported seeing a distinct glow. Built from many little lights, he claimed.

And probably an illusion, since the lights were arranged in a definite pattern, as regular as the vertices on graph paper—

"Have him cut his spotlights!" Navren shouted. "Tell him, Ejy!"

But the Artisan, standing at the back of the galley, must have already given the order on a private channel. Suddenly the monitors were filled with black water. The native glow was magnified a thousandfold. Suddenly the submersible was a tiny balloon floating above a rolling landscape, narrow towers erected at regular intervals, each one perhaps two hundred meters tall, capped like a mushroom and a brilliant light thrown down from the cap at what seemed to be trees.

No, not trees. Lilké told everyone, "They look like kelp, or something similar." Then an instant later, "Growing in rows. Columns. Do you see?" Then she screamed, "It's a farm! Someone's cultivating seaweed down there!"

Sarrie looked at her best friend, then Navren, and she felt a warm weakness spreading through her.

Navren turned, glancing over his shoulder at Ejy.

The Artisan said nothing, did nothing.

Navren opened his mouth, words framed. Carefully, slowly, he turned forward again, taking one more deep breath, then remarked with all the sarcasm he could muster:

"Goodness! I wonder whose farm this is!"

The fouchian, crammed into that tiny submersible, utterly alone, began to beg for guidance. Should he investigate the unexpected forest? Should he snip off samples? Surely no one would miss a few brown leaves, he advised. Then he adjusted the focus on his cameras, revealing that the nearest water was filled with life: Clouds of plankton; schools of jerking copepods and delicate shrimp; and a single fish, long as a forearm and nearly transparent.

The placement of its fins, gills, spine and pulsing pale heart were exactly the same as earthly fish. Sarrie knew enough taxonomy to feel certain. But the transparency of its meat gave her hope. No pigment in the blood implied an alien physiology, which was exactly what she hoped to see . . . except Lilké quickly and thoroughly dashed any hopes, turning to Navren to tell him and the room, "I don't know the species, but I know their cousins. Icefish. Very low-energy. No hemoglobin. They lived on the shoulders of Antarctica, bodies laced with antifreeze, oxygen dissolving straight into their plasma."

Again, in fouchian squeaks and translated human syllables, the pilot begged for instructions. Directions. Purpose.

Artisan Ejy was as rigid as a statue. No doubt he was hard at work, his mind spliced directly into the ship's main computers. The black crystal eyes were superfluous, and vacant, and seemed to lend him the appear-

ance of utter helplessness. But with the fouchian's next words— "Do I continue my descent?" —he moved again, suddenly tilting his head, smiling for perhaps half a moment too long. Then with a calmness that unnerved the entire room, he told the pilot, "No." The old-man face was overly serene, if that was possible. "No, you've seen enough. Come back now. Back through the borehole, please."

The fouchian hesitated for an instant, then dropped his ballast.

Silence in the galley became a soft murmur.

And within the murmur: Excitement, confusion, and the ragged beginnings of a stunning new explanation.

A wondrous explanation, it was. Always unthinkable, until now.

"It's Terran life," Sarrie heard, from all sides.

"And someone has high-technology," people whispered. Sang.

"Who could have imagined it?" said a voice behind Sarrie.

She turned, eager to confess to a lack of creativity. But as she spoke she spied Navren placing both hands around Lilké's head, pulling her close and saying a word into her ear, then two more words, or three, and kissing the lobe softly.

Something about that tenderness was perplexing. Almost terrifying.

Then someone else—in the distance, from beside the tiny beverage counter—shouted in a clear, joyous voice, "Humans! That would explain everything! On this world somewhere . . . could they be. . . ?!"

The word *human* held magic, potent and ancient, dangerous beyond all measure.

As a chorus, a dozen voices responded by saying:

"Humans are extinct! Everywhere but on the Web."

But the engrained words held no life, no fire. Spoken, they dispersed into an atmosphere filled with electricity and possibilities. Two dozen youngsters were suddenly free to jump to their feet, asking the obvious:

"What if other humans escaped the Wars?"

Sarrie found herself standing, almost jumping, hands clasped over her open mouth. She couldn't speak. The great Voice was mute and lost. She could barely think, struggling to piece together clues that led to the inescapable conclusion—

Ejy moved, walking down the galley's only aisle. Only he seemed immune to the excitement, every step slow, even stately, the smile on his rubbery face never larger or less believable. It was the greatest discovery in eons—a pivotal moment in the Web's glorious history—and he resembled a grandfather strolling down his garden path.

An engineer beside Sarrie took her by the arm, pulling hard as she jumped up and down. "What a training mission! Can you believe it? Oh, Sarrie . . . who would have guessed. . . ?!"

Again, the Voice glanced over at Navren.

Suddenly he seemed old. Older than Ejy, even. He sat among the wild

children, his expression black, thin mouth trembling, the eyes tracking sideways until they intersected with Sarrie's eyes.

He willed himself to smile—a brief, bleak attempt.

Then without sound, he carefully mouthed the words:

"Our. Mission. Is. Canceled."

Ludicrous. Wasn't it just beginning?

Ejy was standing under the largest monitor, facing the raucous youngsters. A radio pulse from him made the screen go black, and with a delicate firmness, he demanded silence. Then when the prattle continued, he raised his voice, saying, "Look at me now. Look here."

Ejy would explain everything, Sarrie believed.

This was the standard hazing, doubtlessly employed since the Web was born. On its first mission, every young team was tricked into believing that they'd found some viable splinter of humanity among the stars. Sarrie could believe it. Absolutely. She even felt a smile coming, anticipating Ejy's first words and his crisp laugh. "I fooled you," he might tell them. "I made you believe the impossible, didn't I?"

But the old machine said nothing about tricks. Instead, speaking with a cool formality, he repeated the words, "Look at me."

The silence was sudden, absolute.

"Before our submersible breaks the surface," he told them, "I want our ship's systems prepared for launch."

No one spoke, but the silence changed its pitch. If anything, it grew larger, flowing out of the galley, spreading over the glacial world.

"And please," said the Artisan, "prepare for cold-sleep. Each of you, as always, is responsible for your own chamber."

The second fouchian, filling the galley's far corner, lifted a powerful digging hand, pointing a claw at Ejy. "I assume this is a precaution," said his voice box. "You wish us ready to leave should the natives prove hostile."

The Artisan said, "No."

People turned and turned again, looking for anyone who seemed to understand that reply.

"No, we will launch," said Ejy. "In 128 minutes. And each of you will place yourself into cold-sleep—"

"Artisan Ejy," the fouchian interrupted, "you don't mean me, of course."

"But I do. Yes."

The nose tendrils straightened and paled—an expression of pure astonishment. "But who will pilot our ship?"

"I am more than capable," Ejy reminded him, and everyone.

Sarrie found herself weak and shaky. Turning to Navren, she hoped for one good tough question. She wasn't alone. But the genius sat quietly with his lover, and Lilké held his hand with both of hers, neither of them seemingly involved in anything happening around them.

Ejy admitted, "Our mission has taken an unexpected turn."

Sarrie tried to swallow, and failed, then looked at the Artisan. His smile meant nothing. The eyes couldn't appear more dead. And the words came slowly, too much care wrapped around each of them.

"It has been a wonderful day," he promised. "But you are too young and inexperienced to carry this work to its next stage—"

We're as old and experienced as anyone else! Sarrie thought.

"I congratulate each of you. I love each of you. You are my children, and I thank you for your hard work and precious skills."

Why did those words terrify her. . . ?

Then she knew why. Ejy was looking at each of their faces, showing them his perfect smile; but he could never quite look at Sarrie, unwilling to risk showing their Voice his truest soul.

SIX

With no technical duties, Sarrie filled her time shoving her few possessions into the appropriate cubbyholes, cleaning her scrupulously clean cabin, then making sure that her cold-sleep chamber was ready to use. It was. But nearly an hour remained until they launched, which was too long. Sarrie considered placing herself into cold-sleep now. She went as far as undressing, then climbing into the slick-walled chamber, fingers caressing one of the ports from which chilling fluids would emerge, bathing her body, invading her lungs, then infiltrating every cell, suspending their life processes until she would be indistinguishable from the dead.

A seductive, ideal death. Responsibilities would be suspended. She wouldn't have to prove her value to this mission and the Web, and there wouldn't be the daily struggle with loneliness and self-doubt. Even if she never woke—if some unthinkable accident killed this body, this soul—then the best in her would simply be reborn again, brought up again under Ejy's enlightened care, and why was she sad? On no day did a child of Heaven have any right to be sad.

In the end, she decided to wait, climbing from the chamber and reaching for her clothes . . . and she noticed a familiar and bulky beetle-like form standing in the hallway, watching her now and possibly for a long while.

Sarrie gave a start, then whispered, "Ejy?"

"I scared you. I apologize." The machine's words were warm and wet, in stark contrast to the mechanical body. "I came here to ask for your help. Will you help me? I need a Voice—"

"Of course." Ejy must have changed his mind. Jumping to her feet, she started pulling on her trousers. "If there are humans nearby, I'm sure I

can talk to them. We should start with underwater low-frequency broadcasts. In all the dead languages. I want to send audio greetings, and maybe some whale-style audio pictures of us—"

"No." A ceramic hand brushed against her cheek, then covered a bare shoulder. "I want you to speak with Lilké. I know that you and she have been at odds, but I know, too, she still feels close to you."

"Lilké?"

"Speak calmly. Rationally. And when you can, gain a sense of her mind." He paused for a moment, then admitted, "This is unexpected, yes. Remarkable, and unfair. But when you're finished, return here. Here. As soon as possible, please."

The hand was withdrawn.

Sarrie whispered, "Yes." She knelt, unfolding her shirt, then thinking to ask, "Where is Lilké?"

"In Navren's cabin," he answered.

"Navren—?"

"Is elsewhere."

The Voice pulled on her shirt, again wishing that she was cold and asleep, deliciously unaware. Then something in his last words caught her attention. "Where is Navren now?"

"I don't know," the Artisan replied.

The machine within, linked to every functioning system on the ship, confessed to Sarrie, "I cannot see him. And to tell the truth, I haven't for a little while."

Lilké expected her arrival.

That was Sarrie's first conclusion—an insight born not from innate talent, but friendship.

They showed one another smiles, Sarrie claimed the cabin's only seat, then she tried to offer some pleasant words . . . and Lilké spoiled the mood, remarking, "I guessed Ejy would send you."

"Why?"

She wouldn't say why. Red eyes proved that Lilké had been crying, but the skin around them had lost their puffiness. She had been dry-eyed for a long while.

Opening a low cubbyhole, she removed a homemade device, pressing its simple switch, a high-pitched hum rising until it was inaudible and the cabin's lights dimmed in response.

"Now," Lilké said, "we can speak freely."

"Navren isn't here."

"I don't know where he is, but I know what he's doing." She took a seat on the lower bunk, always leaning forward, ready to leap up at any time. "He and the others are working—"

"What others?"

"You don't need to know."

Sarrie hesitated, then said, "I want to understand. For my sake, not Ejy's."

"I'm disappointed with you. I thought you'd be better at this game." The geneticist shook her head, a wan smile appearing. Vanishing. "Answer a question for me, Sarrie. What have we found here?"

"Earth life. High technology." She hesitated before adding, "Some evidence, rather indirect, that other people survived the Wars."

"On a ship like ours, you mean." Lilké looked at the low ceiling as if it were fascinating. "A second starship. And its crew left the sun behind, and the Milky Way, coming here to settle this hidden sea . . . is that what you believe?"

"It is possible."

"Two starships, and we cross paths *here?*"

Sarrie said nothing.

"Calculate the odds. Or I can show you Navren's calculations."

"There's another possibility." She paused, waiting for Lilké to glance her way, a thin curiosity crossing her face. "The Artisans brought us here intentionally. They heard something, perhaps eons ago. A beacon, a leaked signal. Nothing definite, but certainly reason to come here."

"Why would humans leave the galaxy?"

Some cultures might relish the idea of this empty wilderness. An ascetic appeal; a spiritual chill; the relative safety of islands far from the galaxy's distractions. Sarrie devised her explanation in an instant, then thought again. Better to point out the obvious. "We left it behind, didn't we?"

Lilké dismissed the obvious, shrugging and changing subjects. "Why have we always been sure that our home solar system died?"

"We watched its destruction," Sarrie replied.

"How did we do that?"

"Our ancestors did. With probes."

"Machines sending coded signals, received and translated by still more machines—"

"What are you implying?"

Instead of answering, Lilké posed more questions. "But what if the wars weren't as awful as we were taught? What if a few worlds survived, perhaps even the earth continued on . . . and our species recovered, then built starships and colonies. . .?"

"Our ancestors would have seen them. Leaked radio noise alone would have alerted them—"

"Who would have seen them? Who?"

The implication was absurd. Sarrie said, "Impossible," without the slightest doubt.

Yet beneath the word, simple fear was building. What if it was true? What if the Artisans, even for the best reasons, had lied to their organ-

ics? Yet she couldn't imagine them lying for simple human reasons. Certainly not for vanity, or to be cruel.

Sarrie had come here to read Lilké's soul, but suddenly it was her own hidden soul that captivated her.

"Go back to *him,*" said a quiet, composed voice.

What was that?

"Or stay here with me." Lilké touched the Voice's knee, promising. "If you do nothing against us, nothing happens to you."

A sigh. "You know I can't stay."

The hand was withdrawn.

"Ejy's waiting," Lilké remarked, eyes bright. Bitter. "Be with him," she advised. "Immortals like you should stand together."

Sarrie never reached the cold-sleep chambers.

She was running, in a panic, threading her way past empty labs until every light suddenly flickered and went out.

Sarrie halted. The darkness was seamless. Pure. But what terrified was the silence, the accustomed hum of moving air and pumps and plumbing apparently sabotaged, replaced by the galloping sound of her own breathing.

Every on board system was failing.

"Rebellion," she whispered. An ancient word, and until this moment, useless, save as a blistering obscenity.

Days ago, in a lost age, someone had built an aquarium out of spare materials, placing it in the hallway and filling it with the deep ocean water. As Sarrie's eyes adapted, she saw the aquarium's faint glow, and she crept forward until her fingertips touched slick cool glass, their slightest pressure causing millions of bacteria to scream with photons, the thin ruddy glow brightening for a half-instant.

Someone moved. Behind her.

A great clawed hand closed over her shoulder, delicate tendrils grabbing the closer ear. "The-Nest-Is-Sour," the fouchian squeaked. No voice box gave its thorough, artless translation. With a sorrowful chirp, he told Sarrie, "The-Loyal-Must-Escape."

She turned and grabbed his stubby tail, then followed, the scent of his rectum meant to reassure.

The fouchian managed a terrific pace, fitting through narrow hatches and turns, twice nearly leaving the tiny human behind. But Sarrie never complained, never lost her grip, and when they reached the airlock, she donned her lifesuit in record time, then helped her vast companion struggle into his bulky, unwielding suit.

Reflexes carried her out onto the ice, and there they faltered.

Two buggies were parked in the open. With heavy limbs meant for construction work, one of the buggies was expertly and thoroughly disman-

tling the other. Ejy filled the buggy's crystal cockpit. A radio-born voice told her, "Welcome." He said, "A change of plans, child. Hurry now."

Sarrie lost her will. Her urgency.

Despite the servos in her joints, she couldn't seem to run. The fouchian scurried past, and she responded by hesitating, pulling up and looking back and up at the looming ship. A lifetime of order, of knowing exactly where and what she was, had evaporated, and Sarrie felt more sorry for herself than afraid. Even when she saw a figure appear in the open airlock, she wasn't afraid. Then the figure lifted a tube to his shoulder, and the tube spouted flame, and she watched with a certain distant curiosity, observing a spinning lump of something fall on the hard ice and bounce and stop. Ten or twelve meters away, perhaps. A homemade device. She almost took a step closer, just to have a better look. Then she thought again, or maybe thought for the first time, turning away an instant before the bomb detonated, its blast lifting her off her feet and throwing her an astonishing distance, her arms outstretched in some useless, unconscious bid to fly.

"He tried to kill you," Ejy assured. The machine and Sarrie were inside the buggy, its cabin unpressurized and her still in her lifesuit, laying on her sore left side. The fouchian was in the cockpit, protected tendrils and heavy claws happily holding the controls. "If you have doubts at all," said Ejy's earnest voice, "watch. I will show you."

A digital replayed the scene, but from the buggy's perspective. Sarrie saw herself step toward the bomb, then turn away. Then came the blast, not as bright as she remembered it. The digital also allowed her to watch as her assailant received swift justice. Ejy had used a limb that Sarrie didn't recognize—a fat jeweled cannon-like device—focusing a terrific dose of laser light on the rebel's lifesuit, melting it in a moment, then evaporating the body trapped inside.

Sarrie grimaced for a moment, then quietly, almost inaudibly, asked, "Which one? Was he?"

Ejy gave a name.

She remembered the face, the person. And with a kind of baffled astonishment, she asked herself: *Why would an alien neurologist want to murder me?*

The machine seemed just as puzzled, in his fashion.

"I'm the object of their hate," Ejy promised, ready to take any burden. "Attacking you was unconscionable. It only proves how quickly things have grown ugly. Unmanageable. Tragic."

Sarrie discovered that she could sit upright without too much agony.

"We never should have come here," the machine confessed. "I blame myself. If I'd had any substantial clue as to what we would find, we wouldn't have passed within ten parsecs of this place."

They would have missed the local suns altogether.

"What about Navren?" she inquired.

"Oh, that may be. The clever boy did notice at least one clue, didn't he? This ocean's heat is plainly artificial." A pause, then with a mild but genuine delight, he proposed, "The boy had an inkling of the truth, perhaps. Even before we left 2018CC, perhaps."

Shaking her head, Sarrie whispered, "No."

She told him, "What I meant to ask . . . do you blame Navren at all?"

"For following his nature? Never, no!" The faceless machine showed no recognizable emotion, but the voice seemed sickened with horror. "The errors, if there are such things, belong to the Artisans. Mostly to me, I admit. I allowed that boy too many novel genes, and worse, far too many illusions. Illusions of invulnerability, particularly." A momentary pause, then he added, "Blame is never yours, child. Or theirs. It all rests here, in me."

Mechanical hands gripped the armored carapace, accenting the beatific words. The cannon-like laser merely dangled off the back end like some badly swollen tail.

Sarrie felt the buggy slow, then bounce.

Directly ahead was the tent-like cap over the borehole, and near it, familiar and unwelcome, the prefab hut. They had bounced over an insulated pipe. They approached another, but frozen water made a serviceable ramp and the buggy was moving slowly, its oversized wheels barely noticing the impact.

The submersible and second fouchian must be near the surface by now. Yet no fouchian shape was obediently waiting for them. And the last buggy . . . where was it now?

Again they were moving, accelerating as rapidly as possible. Whatever Ejy's plan, time seemed precious.

Sarrie stood, half expecting to be told to sit down and keep out of sight. But no one spoke, no one cared. She walked carefully to the back of the utilitarian cabin, dancing around assorted machinery and scrap. From the wide rear window, she gazed out at the bleak ice, and above it, the dark bulk of their ship.

"Where are we going?" she asked. And when Ejy didn't respond in an instant, she became pointedly specific. "When can we go home?"

"The ship is dead," Ejy answered, his voice stolidly grave.

"Did Navren do it—?"

"Not entirely, Sarrie. He and his cohorts were stealing its systems, which left me with no choice. I had to put everything to sleep."

She said nothing.

"Giving him a fully functional ship was unacceptable." A pause. "You do understand, don't you?"

With conviction, she said, "Oh, yes."

Something else was visible on the ice. Something was moving toward the ship. The third buggy?

Ejy kept speaking, in human words and fouchian squeals. "But how dead is dead? Given time and the desire, someone might regain control of any ship." Both voices were trying to reassure. "That's why there is one choice, one course, and you must trust me. Both of you, do you trust me?"

The Voice tried to say, "Yes," immediately, but the fouchian driver was faster. Louder.

"We have supplies here. Power and food and air. We will rescue our friend and leave." A pause. "There is a large team of fouchians on a nearby world," Ejy reported, now using only human words. "Accompanied by another Artisan, of course. They are exploring a pluto-class world. I have already warned them about our disaster. A reactor mishap, I have called it. At full acceleration, they will arrive in eighteen days."

"What kind of reactor mishap?" Sarrie asked.

But the fouchian answered, already intimate to the details.

"The-Light-That-Blinds-Generations!"

A nuclear explosion, she understood. The ship's reactors were sabotaged, or a bomb was hidden somewhere out of reach. Either way, she realized that the rebellion wasn't too astonishing to catch the Artisans unprepared. How many times in the past had they resorted to booby traps and other outrages?

But she didn't ask, knowing better.

And Ejy made his first and only true mistake. With a mixture of sadness and burgeoning awe, he told his most loyal organics:

"The blast will be vaporize much of this crust. We have very little time to waste."

Vaporize the ice, then fling it into the sky, Sarrie realized. Creating an enormous, temporary geyser.

She shuddered, in secret.

Then other secret thoughts followed, one chasing after another, the universe changing in an instant.

The stars and the black between made new again.

SEVEN

The buggy stopped beside the capped borehole.

"Your nest-brother has finally surfaced," Ejy told the driver. "Help him disembark. Help him understand what has happened. And he must, must put on his lifesuit quickly, or what are my choices?"

We will leave your nest-brother behind, thought Sarrie. And you too, if it comes to it.

The fouchian didn't spell out consequences, much less complain. Opening the pilot's hatch, he scrambled down and crossed to the airlock, vanishing.

Calmly, quietly, Sarrie observed, "Artisans can tolerate high radiation levels and heat. If we need to remain here a few minutes longer—"

"But I won't risk *you*," Ejy promised.

"I'm willing to take that risk," she confessed. "If it means saving one or both of my colleagues, I'd do it gladly."

Silence.

But of course she didn't own her life, and it wasn't hers to sacrifice. Was it? Again, she walked to the back of the cabin, watching the doomed ship and the tiny, distant buggy. The buggy was definitely moving toward them, but not fast enough. She imagined its cabin crammed with humans, weighing it down, Navren hunched over his pad, desperately trying to calculate blast strengths and the minimum safe distance.

"What would have happened to us?" she asked.

"What would have happened when?"

"After we put ourselves into cold-sleep." She didn't look at the machine, didn't expose her face to scrutiny. "You wouldn't have dared allow us to wake again. Am I right?"

Outrage, sudden and pure.

"Sarrie," said the shrill voice in her headphones, "Artisans do not casually murder. I intended the cold-sleep as a security measure, to give everyone time to prepare—"

"We couldn't go home again. We might have told the truth."

"2018CC is a large vessel," Ejy reminded her. "There are simple, kind ways to sequester."

With eyes closed, she envisioned such a future. Life in some tiny, secret habitat. Or worse, hidden within the sterile white archives. . . .

"It's happened before, hasn't it?"

"What has?"

"All of this," Sarrie replied, turning to show Ejy her face. Her resolve, she hoped. Her desperate courage. "A team finds unexpected humans. Then they're quarantined. Or they rebel against the Artisans." A moment's hesitation. "How many times have these tragedies happened, Ejy? To you, I mean."

Again, silence.

She turned, squinting at the slow, slow buggy. It was a naked fleck beneath the fine bright snows of the Milky Way. With little more than a whisper, she asked, "How many humans are alive today?"

"I have no way of knowing."

"I believe you," she replied, nodding. "If they're so thick that they've got to come here to find a home—"

"We may very likely have found an exceptional group," Ejy speculated.

"Sophisticated agriculture coupled with the lack of radio noise implies an intentional isolation."

Again, she looked at the machine. "Your telescopes watch the galaxy. You have some idea what's happening there."

"Of course." The old pride flickered. "Judging by radio noise, misaligned com-lasers, and the flash of extremely powerful engines . . . yes, we have a working model." His various arms moved apart as if to show how big the fish was that Ejy had caught. "Since the wars, humans have explored the galaxy, and they have colonized at least several million worlds. . . ."

What astonished Sarrie, what left her numbed to the bone, was how very easily she accepted these impossibilities. Nothing was as she had believed it to be, in life or the universe, and the idea of the Milky Way bursting with her species just confirmed this new intoxicating sense of disorder.

She took a step toward Ejy. "Why lie?" she asked.

Then she answered her own question. "You were instructed to lie. Your human builders ordered you to pretend that the worst had happened, that my species was extinct everywhere but on the Web."

Ejy had to admit, "In simple terms, that's true."

"Can you see any wars now?"

"None of consequence."

"Maybe humans have outgrown the need to fight. Has that possibility occurred to you?"

A long, electric pause.

Then with a smooth, unimpressed voice, the Artisan told her, "You are a child and ignorant, and you don't comprehend—"

"Tell me then!"

"These humans aren't like you anymore. They have many forms, they live extremely long lives. Some possess vast, seemingly magical powers."

Sarrie was shaking, and she couldn't stop.

"But they remain human nonetheless," said Ejy. "Deeply flawed. And the peace you see is temporary. Temporary, and extremely frail."

With an attempt at nonchalance, the Voice stepped closer to Ejy and closer to one of the buggy's walls.

"When the peace fails," the Artisan continued, "every past war will be a spark. An incident. When your species fights again, the entire galaxy will be engulfed."

Turning again, she glanced at the nearest hatch.

"Is that why you brought the Web out here?" she asked, showing him a curious face. "To escape this future war?"

"Naturally," he confessed. "We intend to circle the Milky Way, once or twenty times, and the next cycle of wars will run their course. The galaxy will be devastated, and we, I mean your descendants and myself, will inherit all of it." A pause. "By then, the perfection that we have built—the

perfection you embody, Sarrie—will be strong enough to expand across millions of unclaimed worlds."

She looked straight at Ejy, guessing distances, knowing the machine's most likely response.

Ejy wouldn't kill her.

Not as a first recourse, not when she embodied perfection.

But Ejy noticed something in her face, her posture. With a puzzled tone, he asked, "Child? What are you thinking?"

"First of all," Sarrie replied, "I'm not a child. And secondly, I can save my friends, I think."

Servos and adrenaline helped her hand move. And with a sloppy, jarring swat, she caused the rearmost hatch to fly open.

Softly, sadly, Ejy said, "No."

Sarrie dove through the open hatch, fell to the ice below, then sprinted toward the prefab hut.

She might have meant the fouchians when she said "my friends," and for as long as possible, Ejy would resist that corrosive belief that his precious Voice—symbol of his goodness—was capable of anything that smelled like rebellion.

Sarrie lived long enough to reach the hut, pausing and turning, hazarding a fast look backward. The Artisan's body was large but graceful, pulling itself out of the same hatch and scrambling over the open ice, already closing the gap. "No, no, no," the whispering in her ears kept saying. "No, no, no, no. . . !"

She opened both airlock doors, the tiny hut's atmosphere exploding outward as a blinding fog. Then she was inside, in the new vacuum's calm, knowing exactly what to do but her hands suddenly clumsy. Inept. Standing over the bank of monitors and controls, she hesitated for perhaps half a second—for an age—before mustering the will to quickly push the perfect sequence of buttons.

Ample reserve power was left in the borehole's cells, as she had hoped.

She called to the pumps, waking them, then made them pull frigid seawater into the insulated pipes, the utterly reliable equipment utterly convinced that the ship wanted as much of the precious fluid as it could deliver. Now. Hurry. Please.

Through her feet and fingers, Sarrie felt the surging pumps.

More buttons needed her touch. She almost told herself, "Faster," then thought better of it. What mattered most—what was absolutely essential—was to do nothing wrong for as long as possible, and hope it would be long enough. . . .

So focused was Sarrie on her task that she was puzzled, then amazed, to find herself being lifted off the floor . . . and she just managed to give the final, critical command before Ejy had her safely in his grip.

He kept saying, "No, no, no," but the tone of that one word had changed. Sadness gave way to a machine's unnatural fury.

Suddenly she was dragged outside, held by several arms and utterly helpless.

Far out on the table-smooth plain of ice, the twin pipelines closed the same key valves. Yet the pumps kept working, faithful to the end, shoving water into a finite volume and the water resisting their coercion, seams upstream from the closed valves bursting and the compressed water escaping, then freezing in an instant—hundreds of metric tons becoming fresh hard ice every second.

It was happening in the distance, without sound, almost invisibly.

But the Artisan had better eyes than Sarrie, and an infinitely faster set of responses.

Quick surgical bursts of laser light killed the main pumps.

Emergency pumps came on-line, and they were harder to kill—smaller, tougher, and set at a safe distance. Redundancies built on redundancies: the Artisans' driving principle. It took Ejy all of a minute to staunch the flow, killing pumps and puncturing the lines and finally obliterating the tiny hut. But by then a small durable new hill had formed on the plain.

If the buggy could somehow reach that new ice, reach it and use it as a shelter, then some portion of the blast would be absorbed, however slightly, its radiations and fearsome heat muted—

"Why?" cried the Artisan.

She was slammed down on her back—the almost universal position of submission—then again, harder, Ejy drove her into the granitic ice. The impact made her ache, made her want to beg for Ejy to stop. But Sarrie said nothing, and she didn't beg even with her face, and when he saw that bullying did no good, he let her sit up, then more quietly, almost reasonably, said, "Please explain. Please."

At last, the fouchians emerged from the capped borehole. They seemed small, hurried, and inconsequential.

"I know the answer," Sarrie whispered.

No surprise, no hesitation. "What answer?"

"To the xenophobes' scenario. I know how to succeed." She let him see her pride, her authority. "It's simple. They cannot be won over. Never. And it's the good Voice's duty to warn you, to tell you as soon as possible that they're malevolent, and leave you and the other Artisans time to defend the Web—"

"Yes," said Ejy.

Then he added, "It's remarkable. A Voice so young has come to that very difficult answer."

She ignored the praise. Instead she asked quietly, "How many starships have we met, then destroyed?"

"You've destroyed nothing," the Artisan reminded her.

"Responsibility is all yours."

"Exactly."

She felt a shudder, a sudden rippling of the ice.

And so did Ejy. He rose as high as possible on the mechanical legs, measuring a multitude of useless factors, then guessing the answer even as he inquired, "What other clever thing have you done, Sarrie?"

"The plasma drills believe that we need a second borehole. Now."

Crystal eyes pivoted. The laser started hunting for targets.

"You destroyed their control systems," Sarrie warned. "You can't stop them."

Between the scrambling fouchians and Ejy, out of the ancient ice, came a column of superheated vapor, twisting and rising, a wind lashing at everyone in a wild screaming fury.

Sarrie was knocked backward. Knocked free.

She tried to climb to her feet, falling once, then again. Then she was blown far enough that the scorching wind had faded, and she found herself standing, then running, trying to win as much distance as possible.

From her headphones came fouchian squeaks begging for instructions, then Ejy himself calling after her, the voice wearing its own loss.

Sarrie allowed herself to shout:

"Thank you."

A pause.

Then from out of the maelstrom:

"Thank you for what, child?"

"The butterflies," she told Ejy, almost crying now. "I liked them best."

Later, trying to make sense of events, Sarrie was uncertain when the blast came—moments later, or maybe an hour. And she couldn't decide what she saw of the blast, or felt, or how far it must have thrown her. All she knew was that suddenly she was half-wading, half-swimming through slush, and the sky was close and dense, fogs swirling and cooling, then freezing into a pummeling, relentless ice, and she staggered for a time, then stopped to rest, perhaps even sleep, then moved again, eating from her suit's stores and drinking her own filtered urine, and she must have rested two more times, or maybe three, before she saw the tall figure marching along the edge of the fresh pack ice.

She couldn't make out any details. She wasn't even certain if it was exactly a human shape, although some part of her, hoping against reason, decided that it was Lilké, that her friend had survived, and everyone else must be somewhere nearby.

But if it was Lilké, would she forgive? Could she forgive Sarrie for everything?

And of course if it wasn't, then it likely was one of the natives. Whoev-

er they were. Surely *they* would send someone here to investigate the blast . . . to see who was trying to shatter their peaceful world. . . .

Sarrie realized that she could be seeing an immortal, god-like human.

With every last reserve, she started kicking her legs and tossing her arms in the air, thinking: *Whoever or whatever they are, they don't know me.* ●

(Continued from page 11)

COVER ARTIST

1. BOB EGGLETON
2. Jim Burns
3. Todd Lockwood
4. Kinuko Y. Craft
5. John Maggard
6. Chris Moore
7. Peter Peeples
8. Bruce Jensen
9. George Krauter (tie)
9. Mark Harrison (tie)
10. Gary Overacre

INTERIOR ARTIST

1. RON CHIRONNA
2. Steve Cavallo
3. Mike Aspengren
4. Laurie Harden
5. Gary Freeman
6. Dell Harris
7. Kandis Elliot
8. Alan M. Clark
9. Darryl Elliot
10. George Krauter

Both our Readers' Awards and *Analog*'s Analytical Laboratory Awards were presented on April 27, 1996, during a breakfast aboard the *Queen Mary,* the famous, old ocean-liner that now serves as a floating hotel, in Long Beach, California, where we had gathered to attend SFWA's Nebula Banquet weekend. The breakfast was presided over by the editorial director of Dell Magazines, Fran Danon. Each winner received a cash award and a certificate. Of the *Asimov's* winners, James Patrick Kelly was on hand to accept his Readers' Award—his fourth. Other notables present at breakfast included Charles N. Brown, Robert Silverberg, Karen Haber, Nancy Kress, Charles Sheffield, Nicola Griffith, and Kelley Eskridge. Later that evening, at the Banquet, Esther M. Friesner took home the Short Story Nebula Award for her *Asimov's* story, "Death and the Librarian." There were too many other Famous People aboard the *Queen Mary* that night to list them all, or even some of them, but the old ship was packed to the scuppers (what are scuppers, anyway?) with Big Name Writers decked out in their finest formal clothes. And, in spite of the numerous voices urging me to go bungee-jumping at the tower set up on the dock for this purpose—heart-warming to know that your friends and colleagues would be happy to see you throw yourself from a three-hundred-foot-tall drop—I managed to resist these blandishments and settle for the somewhat (somewhat!) safer pastime of partying long into the night instead.

ON BOOKS

Moshe Feder

GROLIER SCIENCE FICTION: THE MULTIMEDIA ENCYCLOPEDIA OF SCIENCE FICTION

Grolier Electronic Publishing, Inc., $39.95 (CD-ROM for Macintosh or Windows)

Founded on the solid base of John Clute and Peter Nicholls's Hugo-winning *The Encyclopedia of Science Fiction* (*TESF*) of 1993, this recent computer-readable version is a three-way collaboration between those two fine scholars and the multimedia creative team at Grolier, who have enhanced the original text with hyperlinked cross-referencing, color art, audio and video clips, and so on. The result is a science fiction treasure trove squeezed, by what once would have seemed science-fictional means, onto a 110 mm disk. Though not a replacement for the book if your aim is ready reference, it can be superior for some of the other uses to which encyclopedias are put.

The main screen, a handsome if distinctly arbitrary piece of symbolic art, gives you access to the five main modes of *Grolier Science Fiction* (*GSF* hereafter): Archives, Book Browser, Themes, Time Machine, and Gallery. Once selected, each of these modes has its own main screen that is divided into a Content Region in the left 70 percent—where the text and pictures appear—and an Info Region in the right 30 percent for selection, navigation, and other functions. The combined viewing area fills most, but not all, of your monitor's screen, and is not resizable.

The Archive is the heart of *GSF*, consisting of the complete updated and corrected text of *TESF*. The Introduction (accessible, I discovered at last, through the Help menu) explains that the editors have here corrected all the errors in the '93 book version of which they were aware. In addition, the text's currentness was brought from mid-'92 to roughly the end of '94, with a few important '95 dates and items added too. *TESF*'s length has been increased by 25,000 words of new entries and another 25,000 words updating existing articles to a new total word length of about 1.4 million in *GSF*. Those words deal with over 2900 authors, with 65 artists, 35 publishers and 34 film makers. There are 212 theme articles and 65 on terminology. There are 580 film entries, 250 on magazines, 110 TV entries and 59 on comics. Unlike many works that bear that medal in their titles as vain jewelry, *GSF* really deserves the term "encyclopedia."

I've made passing reference in previous columns to the excellence of all this material, both in content and lively style. The research has been thorough and the authors aren't afraid to take a stand rather than hide behind the blandness of most references. It's hard to imagine a better job of creating an SF encyclopedia in book form, and I'm in awe of the editors' accomplishment. Assuming you're comfortable reading on screen, all those virtues survive in this new medium. So I'm going to concentrate here on the other aspects of the migration from paper and on the new content that comes with it.

Since there are no pages to turn, you get around the Archives either by typing a topic into the search field in the Info Region, which immediately activates a scrolling search to the nearest matching title in the adjacent list of articles, or you can simply scroll down the list until you see what you want. (If the former, it's most efficient to type only the minimum number of letters you need. The search engine matches letter by letter, so it will continue chugging away—preventing you from proceeding even after you find your object, if you give the engine too much to chew on.) The list to be searched can be a complete one of all the articles, or it can be one of five subsets, such as articles about authors or articles about films and TV.

When you've chosen an article, the title appears promptly in large type in the upper left corner of the Content Region. Next, in some cases, a thumbnail graphic will appear indicating the availability of one or more illustrations (or audio or video clips) relevant to the article. Clicking on a button under the small graphic gets you a larger complete display of the image. Finally, a window opens below the title with the body of the article in an unprepossessing but readable typeface.

Amidst the text of the article, book titles highlighted in blue connect you to a synopsis in the Book Browser. More frequent magenta highlights are hypertext links to other articles, the electronic version of cross-references. These are great, allowing a kind of turbocharged intellectual grazing that can stimulate and entertain, not to mention painlessly educate.

Beware, though; unlike your web browser, there's no left-pointing arrowed "Back" button here to restore you to the point at which you decided to explore a byway. It's easy to get lost in the woods. There is, however, near the bottom of the Info Region to the right, a "History" button that reveals a list of everything you've looked at. You can use this to get back to where you were. Still, a handy "Back" button might be the single most useful addition to the *GSF* interface, given the wandering tendency that hypertext encourages, and the variety of directions in which one can go.

As an example, the longer than average article on Isaac Asimov has eight links to the Book Browser, forty-three hypertext links in

the main body of the article, and sixty-three more in the appendix that follows. Many links are to entries on other authors or to broader discussions of themes; a few are duplicates. Regardless, that's still over a hundred hyper-browsing pathways stemming from just one article! Garden of Forking Paths, anyone?

If I just want to look something up and the CD isn't already mounted, I'll use the book. If I want to explore a subject in depth and breadth, I'll use the CD, simply because of the power of hypertext.

There's still another way to access the Archives, and the rest of the *GSF*'s content, and that's via the Word Search feature. You can input up to three words (connected, at your option, with AND or OR Boolean operators) and search the complete encyclopedia or some subset of it, producing a list of all the articles in which they appear. When you then call up the entries, the target words are highlighted. It's easy to look through a succession of articles from your search results list and find your target word in a variety of contexts. Watch out for those tempting cross-reference hyperlinks, though. Take one, and you'll lose the results of your word search. Still, despite this little glitch, the automated index is a powerful tool.

If you find articles via Word Search or any other time that you want to refer to frequently and get at quickly, you can use *GSF*'s Collections feature to save and associate them into clickable lists. You can have as many of these customized collections as you wish.

The Book Browser, to which I've already referred, is a collection of more than three hundred brief synopses of important SF works. They're useful as memory joggers, but are too short to do more than tantalize someone who hasn't already read the work in question. Some are inferior to the plot descriptions incorporated in *GSF*'s Archive articles about particular authors. For example, the Book Browser synopsis of Don Kingsbury's *Courtship Rite* doesn't mention cannibalism, a key element of the book, while the one in the article about Kingsbury does, and is better overall besides. I was surprised by this discrepancy, especially when I learned that the Book Browser's synopses are drawn from *Anatomy of Wonder,* a work I've always admired. Perhaps the problem is that what appears here are actually synopses of synopses. The choice of books for inclusion is uneven, as well. What's the point, for example, of including an unsummarizable short story collection?

The synopses appear as a rather narrow column of type at the left of the Content Region. This is to leave room in the center of the space for a picture of the book's cover where available. However, when one is not available, as is often the case, the narrow column of type is just annoying. Another quirk of the Book Browser lies in its selection controls, which allow you to subdivide what's available

into twelve categories (time travel, humor/satire, Hugo/Nebula, etc.), all of which are turned on when the Browser is first activated. So if you do want to examine just one category, you have to individually turn the other eleven off. This is bad design.

The Book Browser is a good feature, which perhaps can be enriched and perfected for future editions. There ought to be room on a CD-ROM for more complete synopses, particularly if some other less useful element is dropped.

In the Themes mode you can explore an idea across different subjects and media. Each theme has a video overview, a sort of illustrated preface. Some subjects have videos of authors discussing them, briefly but cogently. Then, of course, there are the relevant encyclopedia articles. The theme articles make up about a quarter of the main text, constituting as a group a virtual history of SF, and they're rich with all kinds of connections.

You probably won't watch the videos repeatedly, but for those who don't attend conventions, they're a great way to get some sense of the authors' physical presence. As time goes on, the videos will increasingly become sentimental souvenirs of *fin-de-siècle* SF creators. They're certainly worth having.

Of course, the Theme area is not the only place where there are pictures, audio clips, and videos. The Gallery mode allows direct access to all of *GSF*'s multimedia content. Here, as in other modes, you can scroll through a list of everything, reduce the list by choosing a categorical subset of it to examine (just pictures, or sounds, or portraits, etc.) or type a title into a search field. The lists would be better if they were more informative. Having, for example, fourteen listings of covers, each saying only "*Amazing Stories*" with no dates to differentiate them, isn't very helpful. When you've made your selection, it pops up in the Content Region with a scrollable caption beneath it.

The multimedia content of the disk includes 321 author portraits, 33 audio clips and 15 videos of authors, 1718 book and magazine covers, 65 movie stills, and 6 movie trailers. Of course it's the author audio and video clips and the trailers that most distinguish the CD-ROM from a printed book, so it's a shame they're in such relatively short supply. Space, rights, and the expense of taping new material from dispersed authors probably all played a part. Maybe if lots of people buy this CD-ROM, Grolier will be encouraged to add more of this material in the future. Meanwhile, let's remember that there were complaints when the '93 book edition of *TESF* left out the author photos used in the old '79 edition. The portraits, videos and sound bites offered here are handsome compensation.

The idea of the Time Machine mode is to put SF in its historical context. A band at the top of the screen provides a chronological scale and another at the bottom shows what was happening in the

world outside of science fiction. Eight bands in between carry images of book jackets or magazine covers to locate the publication of significant works. There are also icons representing loudspeakers, associated with short explanatory files.

This is a good idea that hasn't been carried out very well. Maybe Grolier's team needs to study the superior time lines in John Clute's *SF: The Illustrated Encyclopedia,* which I reviewed last time. There's so much more they could have done here. The jackets and magazines should be clickable to produce a larger image. Right now, on a typical small screen they're subpostage stamp size and hard to distinguish. Small author portraits might have been used to indicate when important figures entered the field. Clickable movie posters or TV-screen icons would also be logical additions. Instead, behind those speaker icons, we're given the dumbest idea of the *GSF*—brief texts that can be read to you by an anonymous male or female voice. I'm baffled as to the point of this. The texts, if hardly profound, are reasonable historical commentary, but why waste storage space on these sound files? Surely this is not what multimedia is for? I say drop them and give us fuller synopses in the Book Browser instead.

Despite my grousing, I hope you can tell that overall I consider *Grolier Science Fiction* to be a remarkable accomplishment; in many ways, a dream come true. I know the original authors are delighted, if only because of the scope the disk offers for updates and corrections. A new run of CDs is relatively cheap compared to the cost of a new print run of the massive *TESF*, and Nicholls and Clute expect to be able to refine and revise *GSF* much more often than the book. If you have a CD-ROM drive and a love of SF, I urge you to get this disk.

THE TIME SHIPS

by Stephen Baxter
HarperPrism, $5.99 (paperback)

When published in the United Kingdom last year to celebrate the centennial of H.G. Wells's *The Time Machine,* this book was issued as a hardcover. If that format can be equated with "importance" then surely it should have been a hardcover over here as well. Is there a term for a sequel that one author writes to another's work? A tributary sequel perhaps? Surely this book must be one of the finest of that kind ever done.

Wells's first masterpiece is one of a handful of seminal works that underlie all SF, and sequels have been attempted before. *The Time Ships* is the first one to be worthy of the original. It brings to the story the one major aspect of time travel that Wells didn't use, the time paradox; the crucial science Wells didn't have at his disposal, quantum mechanics, and with it such attendant concepts as alternate histories. Baxter does this in a way that makes the innovations seem perfectly natural evolutions

from the familiar story. At the same time, he reproduces the flavor of the original in pacing, tone, and mood. Even the anonymity of the narrator is preserved, although at one classically paradoxical point he assigns himself an alias that personally tickled me.

As in the original, the scope is stupendous, and it now extends into the distant past as well as the future. Some of the episodes could easily have been expanded into novels in themselves. One, taking place in a domed London at war, can easily be pictured as a Terry Gilliam movie. Another deals with being marooned and learning to survive in a primitive environment. Still another is effectively a first contact story. A continuing theme is the narrator's reluctance to change while slowly having to come to terms with the fact that a late nineteenth century British gentleman scientist is not evolution's peak.

I've heard it said, by some who have already read this book in its British edition, that American readers won't appreciate its measured tone, its lack of superficial flash, its general air of maturity, its reproduction of late Victorian virtues. I don't agree; because the quiet solidity of those qualities only serves to set off the book's science fictional ideas, enhancing their sparkle like that of gems set against red velvet. And there's plenty here to be dazzled by. For a start, consider a different brand of Morlock that lives not in tunnels but in Dyson Spheres.

So I hope and trust that American SF readers know the debt we owe to H.G. Wells, still appreciate and enjoy his work, and will relish this sequel as well. Certainly Stephen Baxter has proved himself Wells's loving pupil. At one point, he has the Time Traveler say about his friend, the Writer: ". . . An odd chap in some ways—very intense—and yet with a way of looking at things . . . He seemed to go *beyond* the surface of it all—beyond the Here and Now that so obsesses us all—and to the quick of it: to the trends, the deeper currents that connect us to both past and future. He had a view of the littleness of Humanity, I think, against the great sweep of evolutionary time; and I think it made him impatient with the world he found himself stuck in, with the endless, slow processes of society—even with is own, sickly human nature. It was as if he was a stranger in his own time. . . ." Wells would have recognized himself in that, as might any true lover of the genre he helped create.

WAR OF THE WORLDS: GLOBAL DISPATCHES

Edited by Kevin J. Anderson
Bantam, $22.95 (hardcover)

The centenary of *The War of the Worlds* is still two years away, but that masterpiece, like *The Time Machine*, is important enough to be fair game for appreciative pastiche at any time. The basic premise here is simple and fruitful. Wells showed us how the Martian

invasion proceeded in Britain, but what was happening in the rest of the world? To gild the lily, the accounts have been presented as if the events were witnessed and written about by various famous figures who experienced that terrible year of 1898. There are eighteen stories, plus a foreword and an afterword that are written as if by Wells and Verne respectively. All but one of the stories are new, the exception being Howard Waldrop's classic 1987 model for this exercise, "Night of the Cooters," in which the Martians encounter the Texas Rangers.

This is fun all the way through, despite some repetitiveness, and the snacks that compose it are more quickly assimilated than the more substantial meal Stephen Baxter is offering us. Although having read the original will maximize your enjoyment (You *have* read the original, I trust?), the essentials of the story have achieved such broad cultural penetration it probably isn't even strictly necessary.

Among my favorite dispatches from the Martian front: Mike Resnick recounts how Teddy Roosevelt first learns of the invasion by bagging a Martian on a hunting expedition. Walter Jon Williams shows us how the invasion affects the Dowager Empress of China and the future of the Chinese state. Robert Silverberg offers us the long-lost invasion journal of Henry James. It describes his adventures with Wells and enables us to see why he put off writing *The Ambassadors* to create his classic, *The War of the Worlds*. George Alec Effinger, with his typical cleverness, explains the connection between the fearsome Martian invaders and the Mars of John Carter and Dejah Thoris. Tolstoy's response to the emergency is recounted by Mark W. Tiedemann, with a cameo appearance by a certain Iosef Vissarionovich, who hadn't yet changed his name. Gregory Benford and David Brin show us how Jules Verne helped to defend Paris and the surprising role played by the Eiffel Tower. There are twelve more stories besides these, and although they vary in invention, and a few might be described as slight, not one of them is actually bad, a rare distinction for any anthology. This enterprise has been carried out with both a respect for Wells's great work and a sense of humor about its own purpose that makes it easy to recommend. If it also encourages readers to revisit the original, it will deserve our applause all the more.

HIGHER EDUCATION

by Charles Sheffield and Jerry Pournelle
Tor, $21.95 (hardcover)

This novel is an expansion of the novella of the same name that appeared in *How to Save the World*, an original anthology I reviewed in the December '95 issue. The shorter version was my pick as the best in that book; so I was pleased to see it developed into a longer story.

It's set in a troubled near future

in which all the excesses of an indulgently liberal education system more interested in custodianship than teaching have reached an absurd extreme. Discipline, standards, and achievement are forgotten concepts. In such circumstances, the kids can get away with murder, or so they like to think. Then one day, after carrying out what he considers to be his best practical joke ever, Rick Luban is shocked when he is caught, and even more stunned when he is actually expelled. Having lost the right to any education incentive payments, Rick believes that his life is ruined. He faces a crime-ridden world without any prospect of a job, even in one of the rackets. Then, to his surprise, he is offered, and accepts, a second chance. He signs up to resume his education on a literal higher plane, and if he's good enough, it will take him to a previously unimagined career in asteroid mining.

What follows is very much in the best tradition of stories about cadets in challenging academies. Rick has some hard and important lessons to learn about application, persistence, responsibility, teamwork, and his own limits—not to mention orbital mechanics. Identifying with him, you're simultaneously glad you're not going through his ordeal and envying his chance for self-actualization. Come to think of it, hardships and all, I suspect there are few SF fans who wouldn't jump at the chance to undertake such a space-borne training program!

The original story carried Rick to the end of basic training. The novel continues the story out into the asteroid belt, where training continues. There, we and Rick learn more about his company and the other firm competing for the belt's riches, and about the two ways mining is done by the two companies—the obvious way and, by Rick's employer, the spectacular way. The book is at its best when dealing with such purely technical matters and nearly as good in getting us inside a bright young man facing challenges he never imagined. It's weaker when it turns to student social life, which at times may remind some readers of a certain class of YA paperbacks with high school settings. Still, the mere inclusion of this aspect of life must be considered an improvement over its artificial absence in the books that are a prototype for this one. Heinlein's juveniles are wonderful, but his characters were implausibly sexless (which was probably a publishing constraint, not Heinlein's fault).

The comparison is not an idle one. It's clear that the authors hope to re-establish a part of the SF genre that once catered to the young adult audience, while duplicating Heinlein's achievement in making the books as enjoyable for adults. They can take some pride in how well they've succeeded; now it remains for the market to tell us all whether the concept is still viable. Tor is certainly betting on it. They've designated this the inaugural volume of a new series,

Jupiter Books. They don't indicate where the name came from. I wonder if it might have been inspired by Greg Benford's Heinleinesque YA *Jupiter Project* (1975). I can't say what today's actual teenagers will make of *Higher Education* and the Jupiter Books line, but this mental teenager thinks they're swell. Good luck and hot jets to all concerned!

THE PHYSICS OF *STAR TREK*

by Lawrence M. Krauss
Basic Books, $18.50 (hardcover)

When I was a kid, we used to sit around learnedly debating the physics of Superman. We weren't satisfied with the cursory rationalizations of his powers provided in the comics, and we felt that some of them were obviously out and out wrong, so we set out to provide explanations of our own. In this slim volume, Lawrence Krauss, a physics professor at Case Western Reserve University, does something similar for *Star Trek*. He offers better science where he can to make Federation technology more plausible and, where he just can't, explains the real limitations of the universe as science currently understands them. Some may see this as taking a TV series too seriously; others may consider it disloyalty to the canon. With the endorsement in the foreword of physics' most distinguished Trek fan, Stephen Hawking, you can proceed without guilt either way.

Writing in a friendly, casual style befitting his affection for the show and love of physics, Krauss painlessly explains why the *Enterprise*'s inertial dampers are essential to preventing a lot of pain (and worse!) on board, cheerfully outlines the implications of relativity for interstellar travel and offers his own idea of a defensible underlying principle for warp drive (leaving aside, to be separately addressed, the problem of energy supply for it), while suggesting that the seemingly modest impulse drive actually presents big problems itself. According to his calculations, each time the *Enterprise* accelerates to half impulse (i.e., .5 c) it must burn eighty-one times its entire mass in hydrogen fuel. Even using a matter-antimatter reaction would not solve the problem. It would still take twice the ship's mass in fuel for each such acceleration. The same goes for stopping. Uh oh.

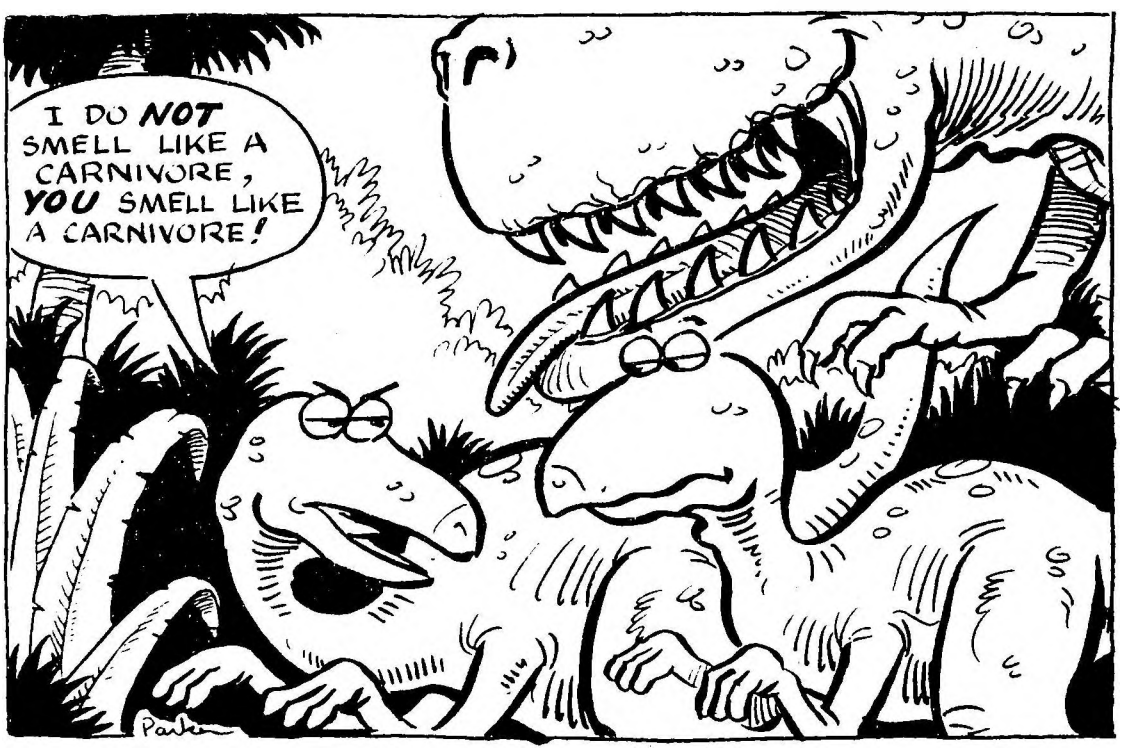
There's an extensive discussion of time travel, which has occurred surprisingly frequently in *Star Trek* history, and wormholes. The two turn out to be related, and while difficult to achieve, they can't be ruled out completely, although Krauss notes that Hawking now considers time travel impossible.

One of my favorite parts was his discussion of the transporter. I've always felt that this technology was too advanced, out of synch with the rest of Federation science, as if its inventor had a lucky break akin to Volta discovering radio waves. Krauss shows why you'd have to be lucky indeed to be successfully broken down, transmitted and reassembled. I agree.

That's why I only teleport by dimensional means; no deconstruction (that's for fancy critics, not reviewers) up my sleeve, and the hand never leaves the arm.

There's more in the same vein about the difficulty of finding antimatter fuel in quantity, the possibility that something like the holodeck could actually be built (tangibility is the problem, but at least holographic technology, unlike much else on *Star Trek*, already exists), and the probability of new life and new civilizations. The final chapter offers a list of Krauss's top ten Trek physics blunders, some suggested by other physicist fans of the show. It would be unfair to give these all away, but as a sample, consider this: Phaser beams travel at the speed of light, yet over the years many characters have ducked out of the way of oncoming beams. Nope, it wouldn't work, and it's not just a question of how fast they could move, either.

Any science-minded *Star Trek* fan or Trek-watching physics aficionado will be transported by this book. ●



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SF CONVENTIONAL CALENDAR

Note deadlines coming up for WorldCon rates to rise. Plan now for social weekends with your favorite SF authors, editors, artists, and 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 behind the Filthy Pierre badge, with a musical keyboard. — Erwin S. Strauss

JULY 1996

19-21—**ConVersion.** For info, write: **Box 1088, Stn. M, Calgary AB T2P 2K9.** Or phone: **(403) 259-3938** (10 AM to 10 PM, not collect). Con will be held in: Calgary (if city omitted, same as in address) at the Glenmore Inn. Guests will include: C. J. Cherryh, Mel Gilden. Canadian national con for 1996. Join for C$40 at the door.

19-21—**NECon. (401) 739-2060.** Roger Williams College, Smithfield RI. Holder, Landsdale, Massie. Horror con.

26-28—**ConFluence. (412) 344-0236.** Sheraton, Mars PA. Swanwick, Tenn, Gilliland, Wolfe, Morrow, Robin Wood.

26-28—**MythCon. (303) 741-1146.** U. of Colo., Boulder CO. T. Nasmith. Dr. D. Myers. High fantasy (Tolkien, etc.).

26-28—**ConVocation.** Family Inn Downtown, Wichita KS. K. W. Jeter, Ed Moore.

26-28—**ConCussion. (402) 488-8441.** Holiday Inn, Council Bluffs IA. W. A. Tucker, R. Knaak, M. Z. Reichert.

27-28—**NovaCon. (703) 280-5373. (Prodigy) pvht15a.** Washington DC. A Star Trek and media convention.

27-31—**Asimov Seminar. (717) 389-4797.** White Eagle Conf. Center, Hamilton NY. Stanley Schmidt, de Camp.

AUGUST 1996

2-4—**DiversiCon. Box 8036, Lake St. Stn., Minneapolis MN 55408. (612) 822-8303 or 825-9353.** Maureen McHugh.

2-4—**Toronto Trek, #0116, Box 187, 65 Front St. W., Toronto ON M5J 1E6. (416) 699-4666.** Regal Constellation.

2-4—**PhrollCon, Box 42195, Philadelphia PA 19101. (215) 342-1672.** Clarion, Mt. Laurel NJ. Resnick, Shapero.

2-4—**FantastiCon, Box 871673, S. Fla. FL 33082. (954) 934-6060.** LAX Hilton, Los Angeles CA. W. Campbell. Trek.

3-4—**Creation, 411 N. Central, Glendale CA 91203. (818) 409-0960.** Minneapolis MN and San Francisco CA. Media.

8-11—**GenCon, 201 Sheridan Springs Road, Lake Geneva WI 53147. (414) 248-3625, x424.** MECCA, Milwaukee WI. Big gaming con.

9-11—**RiverCon, Box 58009, Louisville KY 40268. (502) 448-6562.** Executive West Hotel. Kress, Carrico, Steele.

9-11—**OtaKon, 661A Waupelani Dr., State College PA 16801. (814) 867-3478.** Marriott, Hunt Valley MD. Anime con.

10-11—**MallWorld, Box 188993, Sacramento CA 95818. (916) 447-0856 or -6608.** Florin Center Mall. Daytime only.

16-18—**VikingCon, VU 202, Box V-1, Bellingham WA 98225. (360) 738-9898.** Western Wash. Univ. F. Dyson, G. Bear.

29-Sep. 2—**LACon 3, Box 8442, Van Nuys CA 91409. (508) 283-0802.** Anaheim CA. WorldCon. $130 through July.

AUGUST 1997

28-Sep. 1—**Lone Star Con, Box 27277, Austin TX 78755. (512) 435-7446.** San Antonio TX. WorldCon. $95 to July '96.

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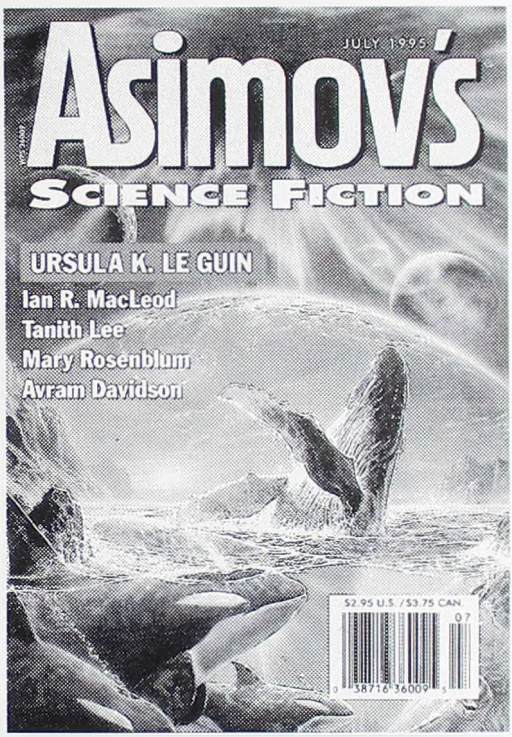

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Fifteen years of microelectronic research makes conventional antennas a thing of the past!

This little box uses your home's electrical wiring to give non-subscribers, cable subscribers and satellite users better TV reception on your local broadcast networks!

by David Evans

Technology corner

1. Why don't conventional antennas work as well as the Spectrum?

■ When TV signals are tuned at the TV channel's center frequency, optimum tuning has been achieved.

■ Other antennas can't offer center frequency tuning like the Spectrum Antenna can. They only offer such tuning up to the edge of the center frequency. As a result your TV picture remains snowy.

2. How does Spectrum use a home's electrical wiring as an antenna?

Believe it or not, the Spectrum Antenna simply "activates" the giant antenna that already exists in your home. Essentially, it uses all of the wiring throughout your home's walls and ceilings to make an antenna as large as your house for unbelievably clear reception of local broadcasting.

3. Spectrum antenna features

Parallel 75 ohm resistance
For minimum loss of signal

Signal search control
For selecting multiple antenna configurations

Polarized three-prong plug for grounding
For optimum signal grounding to eliminate noise and static

Resonant fine tuner control
For clearing in crisp, clear TV/stereo reception, eliminates ghosting

Dual AC outlets with built-in surge protection
For plugging in additional TV/stereo equipment guarding against damage and electrical surges

Until recently, the only convenient way to guarantee great TV reception was to have cable installed or place an antenna on top of your TV. But who wants to pay a monthly cable fee just to get clear reception, or have rabbit-ear antennas that just don't work on all stations? Some people just aren't interested in subscribing to cable. Or they may live in an area where they can't get cable and TV-top antennas aren't powerful enough. And what about those people who have cable or satellite systems but still can't get certain local stations in clearly?

Now, thanks to fifteen years of microelectronics research, a new device has been developed that is so advanced, it actually makes conventional antennas a thing of the past. It's called the Spectrum Universal Antenna/Tuner.

Advanced technology. Just imagine watching TV and seeing a picture so clear that you'd almost swear you were there live. Just plug the Spectrum Antenna into a standard AC outlet and plug your TV into the Spectrum. You can remove the unsightly clutter of traditional TV-top devices gathering more dust than television signals. Get ready for great reception. Your TV will suddenly display a sharp, focused picture thanks to its advanced design "Signal Search" and "Fine Tuner" controls.

Who can use Spectrum?

- ***Cable users*** *You have cable but you can't get certain local stations in clearly.*
- ***Non-cable users*** *You don't have cable and want the stations to come in more clearly*
- ***Satellite users*** *You have a digital satellite system but can't get local stations in clearly*

Uses your home's electrical wiring. The Spectrum Antenna is a highly sophisticated electronic device that connects into a standard wall outlet. The outlet interfaces the Spectrum Antenna with the huge antenna that is your home wiring network. It takes the electrical wiring in your house or apartment and turns it into a multi-tunable, giant TV reception station which will improve your TV's overall tuning capability. The results are incredible. Just think how much power runs through your home's AC wiring system—all that power will be used to receive your local broadcasting signals.

How it works. Broadcast TV signals are sent out from the local broadcast station (ABC, CBS, NBC, etc.). They interface with your home's AC power line system, a huge aerial antenna network of wiring as large as your home itself. When the Spectrum Antenna interfaces with the AC line, the signal is sent to its signal processing circuit. It then processes and separates the signal into 12 of the best antenna configurations. These specially processed signals route themselves into 12 separate circuits. The Spectrum Antenna includes a 12-position rotary tapping switch, the "Signal Switch" control, which gathers twelve of the best antenna configurations.

The "Signal Search" offers varying antenna configurations for the user to select from the best signals of all those being sent. The signal then passes through the Spectrum Antenna's special "Fine Tuner" circuit for producing crisp, clear reception.

Risk-free offer. The Spectrum Universal Antenna/Tuner comes with our exclusive 90-day risk-free home trial and a 90-day manufacturer's warranty. Try it, and if you're not satisfied, return it for a full "No Questions Asked" refund.

Limited time offer! We realize that most people have more than one TV in their home. We are offering a special discount on additional Spectrum Antennas so you got great reception on all your TVs!

Spectrum Antenna .....$39 $4 S&H

Additional antennas just .....$34 S&H free

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