

Three-time Hugo Award Nominee

# ABORIGINAL SCIENCE FICTION

Tales of the Human Kind, Issue Nos. 47 & 48

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**Is it the End  
of the World?**

Read: *Whose Millennium?*

By DAVID BRIN

**Special  
Double Issue  
10 Stories**



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# Better Late Than ...



**F**irst, let me thank you for your patience and understanding, and assure you that all pre-existing subscriptions will be honored.

As you may have surmised, there have been some difficulties at the magazine, but it hasn't been as simple and straight-forward as you might have guessed.

*Aboriginal* has been strapped for cash for the past four to five years because it unfortunately made a big push to the newstands just when the recession was crashing into everyone's spending habits. What has made the last 20 months significantly different is that I haven't been as free to deal with the ongoing operation of the magazine as I have in the past.

On June 21, 1994, my mother suffered a major heart attack which put her into a coma and caused stroke-like symptoms (from oxygen deprivation). In fact, for the first 24 hours or so, the hospital was treating her as a stroke victim ... until she had a second heart attack at the hospital. She was in a coma for more than 10 days. After three days, the physicians began saying that the chances of her coming out of the coma were "less than one percent."

She eventually emerged from the coma, much to the physicians' surprise, and regained some responsiveness, but was on a ventilator (respirator). This was complicated by the fact she had a pre-existing asthma/emphysema condition. The doctors implied it might be a long recovery. She recuperated enough to be transferred to a chronic-care facility, but it bungled a few things, causing her to be rushed back to the ICU at a different hospital. The new hospital rectified the second hospital's mistakes, my mother recovered somewhat and again we were thinking of a rehabilitation hospital, but then on Friday of Labor Day weekend, 1994, she came down with pneumonia, complicated by septic shock. This caused her blood pressure to drop drastically, shut down all major organs except her heart, and left her in a much less tenable position. The physicians predicted

her demise, or that, at best: "she will never leave the hospital."

## Miracle Momma

But she again slowly recovered. My youngest sister has taken to calling her "Miracle Momma," with some justification. (My mother is even more stubborn than I.)

She is now once again at a rehabilitation hospital, recovering very slowly. (Please notice that I haven't said anything about health insurance.)

For those of our subscribers who may not know, I have a real-world full-time job (even part-time editors of SF magazines eat, purchase and wear clothing, and need an occasional roof over their heads). The magazine is produced in my spare time (without pay).

I have had *no* spare time since June 21, 1994.

Some of you have written to ask why you haven't seen an issue, or about some other matter, and may have become miffed by our very slow response (or apparent lack of concern), but I just haven't had the time ... *any* time.

I appreciate the patience most of you have shown and ask that you bear with us a little bit longer as we get things back on track.

There is quite a bit more to do to keep the magazine running than just reading the 800 to 1,000 manuscripts which arrive in the mail each month. There is constant database work which has to be done, including the entry of new subscriptions, renewals, changes of address, queries, problems, etc.

Then there is dealing with printers, the post office, distributors. Plus the regular office work, billing, typesetting, proofing -- you get the idea.

Unlike a retail concern like a supermarket, a magazine doesn't receive income unless it initiates a specific action, such as a mailing to get new subscribers, sending out renewal notices, billing wholesalers and distributors, soliciting for advertising, attending conventions where single copies and subscriptions are sold, etc.

Up until my mother's illness, it was something we (barely) managed to

keep up with. Now, we have to do things differently.

Instead of relying on volunteers to assist in this work, we have to take on part-time paid staff again. That will put a strain on the magazine's cash flow, but we've devised a plan to take care of the added expense.

The simple fact is that I can no longer do, or supervise everything. We have negotiated a contract with a management organization (Pawn Press, Ltd., P.O. Box 355, Station H, Montreal, Quebec, Canada, H3G 2L1) to help us run the magazine and reactivate the direct-mail campaign -- which is what made *Aboriginal* successful (growth-wise) in the first place. The fact that this issue is in your hands, means that we have succeeded.

It is our hope that *Aboriginal* can now continue to grow, and that the number and size of the magazine's problems will diminish over time.

Anyhow, we're back -- nearly two years late, but back, nonetheless.

## From the time warp

If you think we're late with this issue, you haven't heard anything yet.

The first week of February 1995, I received a call from Cherry Weiner, a literary agent I know who lives in New Jersey. She had just received a copy of *Aboriginal's* first issue in the mail and wanted to let me know.

The reason this was so interesting is that the copy of the magazine was mailed (addressed to her husband Jack) in *July 1986*.

Now, I know some of our subscribers who work for the U.S. Postal Service get upset each time I mention mailing mishaps, but even they will have to admit this is unusual.

To the Post Awful's credit, Cherry said the copy (unwrapped) arrived (8 1/2 years late) in near mint condition.

Go figure.

## Boomerang Awards

Because of the problems mentioned above, we never announced the Boomerang Awards for 1993. To learn who won, please see page 83.

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# Revisions

## By Chuck Rothman

Art by Jael

Jayne read the sign once more just before she pressed the doorbell:

**Harrington Business Services  
Technical Writing  
Computer Graphics  
Revisions**

Revisions. The word had always seemed to pounce out at her each day as she drove by on her way to work. Today, she finally steeled herself to act. The building seemed dark, but a small computer-printed sign in the window showed Saturday hours, and instructed her to ring.

Jayne waited nervously. She was about to walk away when the door opened.

The man at the doorway was about six-feet tall, with jet-black hair speckled with premature gray. He smiled at her, his warm brown eyes crinkling. "Yes?" he asked.

"Hi. I'm Jayne Clayman. I hope I'm not bothering you, but your sign said you're open."

"Oh, I'm open," the man said. He seemed to be looking her over. "I just don't get much call for revisions these days. Come on in."

She followed him, and he led her into the waiting room: two modern couches facing each other and a glass-topped table, copies of *Time* and *Newsweek* neatly piled on it.

"Sit down," he said. "I'm Chris Harrington. I run the place." He smiled again; it made her feel a bit calmer. "Would you like some coffee?"

"Nothing," she murmured. "And ... how did you know?"

"That you wanted a revision?" He shrugged. "It's the nature of the business. I have to hustle for most of my clients, and when someone comes of her own accord — especially on a Saturday — it's usually for a revision." He leaned toward her. "Are you sure you know what you're doing, Jayne?"

The familiarity made her frown, but she let it pass. It was better than "Mrs. Clayman" under the circumstances. "I think so. You use it go to back and change your past."

Chris shook his head. "Not exactly. You only change your present. The past, after all, exists only in our memories. Any changes you make will give you a different present. But you won't truly have lived through it."

It sounded to Jayne like he was splitting hairs, but the only thing that mattered was that she'd step out of the reviser with a different life. "I heard

you can only stay a few minutes, and you can only do it once."

Chris nodded. "Exactly. Five minutes is all you get. To keep you back six would take all the power the U.S. generates in a year. To make a second try would theoretically take twice that. And, of course, the more memories you have to change — like anything in the history books — the more power you need. You see, Jayne, the universe never gives you something for nothing." He became very serious. "I hope you understand. You will have no second chance. None at all." Once again, he leaned nearer to her. "Are you sure you want to do this?"

God, she had considered it for ages now. "Yes." "What were you planning to revise?"

"I ..." She stopped herself, uncomfortable with telling this to a stranger. "I don't think that's any of your business."

"If you want the chance, you'll have to tell me." He spoke with implacable confidence, as though he had had this conversation many times.

"Are you always this way with your customers?"

He shrugged. "Revisions are only a sideline for me. I thought it might make me a few extra dollars in the slack times, but it turned out to be just a fad. With only one choice, there's no repeat business." He smiled. "I'd toss the machine out if I didn't still owe money on it." Quickly he became serious again. He rose. "Come on. I'll set you up."

"What? I thought you said you wanted to know why?"

"I already know why. There are only two or three reasons these days, and your reaction narrowed it down awfully quickly. You want what we call an instant divorce." He gestured toward a door. "This way."

She followed, subdued.

The clutter inside the inner office was a contrast to the neatness of the waiting room. A computer sat on a wood-topped workstation with piles of paper scattered on all available extra space like gargantuan snowflakes. On a desk on the other side of the room were random piles of bills, magazines, letters, and advertisements.

In the far corner, next to a beat-up filing cabinet, was the reviser. It reminded Jayne of the automatic photo booths of her youth, except that the chair was made of molded plastic and had strands of wire looping around it. A complicated set of controls covered one side of the machine.

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Chris pushed several cardboard boxes aside. "Sorry," he murmured. "Wasn't really expecting company." He looked up at her. "There's just one thing I need to know. Are there any children?"

"Children?" Then she understood. If she were successful, any children would have been snuffed out of existence.

The idea horrified her. "God, no. No children."

He studied her a moment. "Why this?" he asked gently. "Why not divorce?"

"I don't hate Henry." Talking about it was making her feel better. "I just don't want to put him through that." Or myself, she thought. It would be an admission of failure, in the most public way possible. "We married much too young; it was a mistake from the start. I know it, and I think he knows it." She laughed. "Or he would if he ever thought about it. Henry's too self-centered to notice and too self-satisfied to think there could be a problem. But it seems we spend more time bickering than talking. I don't know the last time we had any fun together. Even sex ..." She stopped herself, then shook her head. "No divorce. I just want to get out and forget he was ever part of my life."

Chris shook his head. "You won't forget. The old memories will be fainter than the new ones, like recalling a movie, but you'll still remember that you made a revision, and most of the reasons why."

She hadn't heard about that part. "Will Henry remember, too?"

"If he's not making the revision, probably not. But there may still be a few ghost memories of the previous life. They'll be buried, nearly forgotten, but they might be brought to the surface, especially if he runs into you or something that has been revised away."

She wasn't sure how to take that. "How likely is that?"

Chris shrugged. "I don't know."

Well, she had gone this far. "Let's get it over with."

He nodded. "OK. My fee is \$500. Cash up front. And you have to understand I guarantee nothing." Jayne nodded and counted out the bills from her purse.

"All right, then," Chris said. "We're ready to begin." He paused for a moment. "Don't think of me as some kind of ogre," he said. "I just needed to make you realize what was at stake. I do sympathize with you. If I'm scaring you, I mean to. Things don't always work out the way we want them to, even in the past."

"I won't know until I try, will I?" Jayne asked.

Chris smiled. "No, you won't. Well, get in. The sooner we get it over with, the better."

She found herself smiling back. He was an attractive man. She had grown used to not noticing.

The chair was uncomfortable and the electrode paste smelled sour and felt unpleasantly sticky on her arms and forehead.

"Do you have a date and time?" Chris asked.

She nodded. "March 10, 1989. 8:30 a.m. And if you ask me if I'm sure, I'll bite you. I've spent a lot of time agonizing about it."

Chris laughed. "I'd better set the controls correctly, then. Or make sure you have your rabies shot." He adjusted the dials for a moment, then announced, "All set. You have five minutes. When that's over, you'll return to this exact moment."

"With a new life."

"Maybe." He returned to the controls. "All right. Here goes." He paused, then smiled. "Well, if you do succeed with this, and you're free tonight, maybe we can get together."

She found herself flattered by the proposition. "We'll see. Now, let's get it over with."

Chris nodded and pressed the keypad.

She felt no sense of transition. One moment she was wired inside the booth, the next she was rushing into English 101.

God, she felt so good. She had always kept herself in good shape, but now, fifteen pounds lighter and with sixteen years less wear and tear, she felt like she was dancing while she walked.

The classroom was nearly filled. She spotted Henry, almost missing him before she remembered he had a mustache back then. In a few moments, as Kilbourn passed out the tests, he would ask her out for the very first time.

She could not let that happen.

She thought about sitting on the opposite side of the room, but avoidance wouldn't help. Henry would only try again, and her former self would accept. No, she needed to make him never want to approach her again.

Jayne took her regular seat. Henry smiled at her as she sat down.

Talk to me, she thought.

Almost as though he could hear her thoughts, Henry spoke. "Test is going to be a killer today, isn't it?"

Jayne nodded. Please. Ask.

"We're going to need a break after this one," Harry said. "Want to go to the concert tonight? I've got an extra ticket."

At last!

And despite her resolve, Jayne found herself hesitating. It wasn't too late to change her mind. Maybe there was a way to work things out.

"Well?"

But she knew better. She had to go through with it. "With you?" She pumped fifteen years of frustration into her voice. "Don't be ridiculous."

He looked perplexed, like a sad puppy. "I thought you might like it."

She had always melted at that look; it was one of the reasons she couldn't bear a divorce. "Well," she said, "you thought wrong. I don't like you and I wouldn't let you take me across the street. Get the hell out of my life." She turned away from him.

"All right," she heard him whisper. "You're not the only girl —"

The room faded away.

She was back in the booth. She looked for Chris, and found herself smiling. "Now, about —"

He wasn't there.

And the new memories of her life flooded in.

A series of boyfriends all through her college years. Some were just friends, others seemed like the real thing, at least for a night or two. But none were what she really wanted.

She walked rapidly through the halls, glancing at the room numbers as she sped by. It was late, and these damn state offices were built like mazes. She had been assigned to HESC, and barely understood what the initials stood for, let alone where anything was.

She bumped into a black-haired man, nearly knocking him over.

"Whoa," he said in a soft, yet gentle voice.

"What's the rush?"

"I've got to find room 230A. Could you help me?"

"First day on the job, is it?"

Jayne smiled. She liked the warm way he smiled, and the way his eyes seemed to twinkle. "Is it that obvious?"

"No one who's worked here before would rush anywhere. Come on. I'll show you."

"You don't have to go out of your way."

"I'm not," he smiled again. "It happens to be where I work, too. I'm Chris Harrington."

"So," Chris asked. "Would you like to go to a movie or something tonight?"

"I'd love to," Jayne said.

"I love you, too," Jayne said.

"I now pronounce you ..."

"Push," said the nurse, and Jayne tried to comply. The pain wracked her body as she concentrated on her breathing.

"That's right," Chris said. He put a chip of ice in her mouth and squeezed her hand as though regretting she was the one forced to go through the pain. "You're almost there."

Jayne? Are you awake?"

She opened her eyes. Chris stood by the hospital bed. "Did you see him?" she asked hoarsely.

He nodded. "He's beautiful."

"Takes after his daddy." Her eyes filled with tears.

"Honey? Are you all right?"

She nodded and smiled. "I just never knew I could be this happy."

"Oh, you have been. I've seen you glowing like this before."

"When?"

"On our wedding day." His smile was the sweetest thing on Earth.

"Ma-ma," Billy said.

"Here, Billy." The little boy looked at his mommy. "Take a step."

Uncertainly, the boy took a step forward, then another, then another ...

"I don't think the reviser will solve all our problems, but it will help us broaden our base. We can't depend on GE for all our business."

She looked at the machine dubiously. It had already been a big jump for Chris to go out and start his own company. "Is this just one of your toys?"

"Of course. But it's bound to be successful. Wouldn't you want to go back and make a few changes?"

Jayne thought, then smiled at him. "No. Not one."

Chris laughed. "Well, me neither, now that I think of it." He took her in his arms. "But then, we're both one in a million."

Late afternoons at the lake were the best times of all, Jayne thought as she watched the sun slanting through the trees. It had been the perfect day to end the vacation; only a few small clouds marred the deep blue sky.

Chris leaned over her chair and kissed her. "Having a nice time?"

"Always. And the rest seems to agree with you, too."

Chris nodded. "We haven't had this much time together since our honeymoon." He nodded at the sun-browned little boy playing on the beach. "Although I admit we had a bit more fun when it was just the two of us."

"We've had plenty of that here, too. I'm just glad you were willing to take some time off."

"I'm glad you twisted my arm. But the business is pretty sound and now that Billy's starting first grade and you want to go back to giving me a hand, we might even be able to expand in a couple of years. About the only thing that didn't pan out is the reviser." His eyes twinkled. "And you have the good graces not to say you told me so."

"I told you so."

Chris shook his head. "I guess you don't have good graces." He ducked away from the paperback she launched at him.

"Daddy?" Billy said, running up from the beach. "Can we go for a sail?"

Jayne looked at him. He was so much like his father: playful, always happy. Two people cast from the same mold.

"I don't know, skipper," Chris said. "It's getting near supper." He looked over at Jayne.

"Oh, go ahead, you two. You can start the barbecue when you get back. I'm not that starved."

"Oh, boy," Billy shouted, and ran down to the old sailboat tied to the dock next to the beach.

Chris kissed her. "See you later."

She watched as they hoisted the sail and pushed off into the lake. Billy, looking like a jack-o'-lantern in his orange lifejacket, waved.

She waved back, smiling, then lay back in the chaise to doze.

A drop of cold water abruptly splattered onto her face, waking her. It was followed a moment later by another.

Jayne sat up.

The sky had darkened while she had napped, the blue swallowed by furious gray clouds. She glanced out over the lake, searching for the blue and gold sail. It was about a half-mile away.

A rumble in the distance made her jump. She looked behind her to the east, to the heart of the approaching storm, and saw her fears materialize: a bright flash of lightning.

One one-thousand, she counted. Two one-thousand. Three "

The thunder crashed.

God, so close.

She looked out again at the boat. It was heading for her, tacking against the heavy breeze.

"Go the other way!" she shouted, waving at Chris. "Don't worry about me. Just get to shore!"

Her words were swallowed by the quickening rain. Chris waved back at her, grinning.

Another crash, and the rain became a curtain.

The wind died. Chris took out a paddle and began to fight his way toward shore. She could see determination on his face. No fear.

Another crash, lightning and thunder barely separated. The rain was making it more difficult to see.

Then, through the misty shadows, the boat emerged. It was only thirty yards or so from shore. She could see Chris paddling powerfully, Billy near tears, but hanging on bravely.

"Mommy!" Billy cried.

There was a thunderous crash and time seemed to stop. Then Jayne began to scream.

"Ashes to ashes ... "

Jayne pounded on the reviser until her hands were sore. "Why?" she screamed. "I never used you! Why won't you let me go back?"

She sank to the floor. "It's not fair," she sobbed like a disappointed child. "It's just not fair."

Chris's mother stepped out of the reviser. "I'm sorry, Jayne."

The words were unnecessary. Jayne knew. They had picked the wrong five minutes.

She could see the sadness in her mother-in-law's face and knew they shared the same feelings.

"It's all right," she said, holding her, wondering who was comforting whom. "There are others."

"Sorry, Jayne. I would if I could, but I've already made my revision. Believe me, if I could, I'd be glad to ... "

"Sorry, Jayne ... "

"Please, Paul. You were Chris's friend ... "

Paul couldn't look her in the eye. "I can't do it, Jayne."

"But ... "

"Jayne, believe me, I liked Chris as much as anyone. But I only have this one chance."

Jayne would not let herself cry. "And you're not going to waste it."

Paul reddened. "It's not like that. Look, suppose something happened to Beth? Do you know how I would feel if I blew my only chance to go back and save her?" He paused. "Oh, Jayne, I'm sorry. I didn't mean ... "

"It's all right," Jayne murmured. "It's all right."

The phone rang. Warily, Jayne picked it up. "I saw your ad," a rough-edged voice said.

"How much do want?" There was no point in asking anything else.

"Half a million."

The lowest so far, but it might as well have been the highest. "That's a lot of money. Look, I might be able to scrape together \$100,000."

"I'll think about it," the voice said. "If I don't get a better offer, I'll call."

The better offer would come. If you were rich, you'd pay a million to make a revision. All those who answered her ad already knew that.

"Please," Jayne said. "My husband and son are dead. I want them back."

"I'm willing. Get me the half million."

"I can't."

"Then I guess you didn't really love him all that much." The phone went dead.

The avalanche of years took its toll. Jayne felt like gasping for breath as a half a lifetime of new memories became part of her in an instant. She felt like she had lived through it all, in just a few intense instants. The small, comfortable life she had envisioned would have been enough to digest, but this explosion of feelings left her weak.

The room seemed different, yet perfectly familiar. The computer sat neatly in its corner, the desktop clear except for the term paper she had been working on. She went through the drawers of the desk. Every object neatly filed inside was something she recognized.

In the bottom drawer she found a picture frame lying face down. She picked it up, knowing what she'd find, but needing to look anyway.

Chris was smiling at her, Billy beside him.

The image drove an ice pick into her heart. She dropped it and staggered away from the desk into the waiting room. Glancing out the window, she saw the sign outside:

**Harrington Business  
Services:  
Word Processing  
Resumes  
Revisions**

She remembered ordering the change. Chris had been proud of the business. It wouldn't do to abandon it. But she didn't have his talents, so she had to change its nature.

Jayne sighed and managed to calm herself. She had a new life now, what she wanted when she came in here, a few minutes on the clock, a new life-time in her head. Her previous life was distant and vague, and she was free of ... Henry? Yes, Henry.

And, she told herself, if she hadn't wanted the revision, she'd never have met Chris. She should treasure the happiness they had together.

She couldn't. She had the memories, but never lived through them. Everything she knew about Chris she had discovered in the past half hour.

She could only recall the high points — and the pain. None of the little things that make you feel good, those which aren't important enough to recall.

And there was one more thing: if she had taken Chris's advice, had gotten a divorce, he would still be alive. She could have gone out with him, discovered him a few years later than she had ...

She tried to shake off the thought. There was no way for her to change the past. There was no one to help her.

She stopped. No, she realized. There might still be someone. Someone she never would have thought about, who she never would have known about until right this moment ...

Henry.

She dialed the number that had once been her own from her memory of her first life.

Henry answered it on the first ring. "Hello?"

The sound of his voice triggered double memories: something old, nearly forgotten after so many

Revisions



years and, more weakly, the memory of hearing it just this morning. "Hello. Is this Henry Clayman?"

"Yes." The voice was wary.

"Who's this?"

"My name is Jayne Kernaghan." She paused, but the information brought no hint of recognition. "You probably don't remember me, I guess. We went to Union together."

"What are you selling?"

"What?"

"I asked what you were selling. Or are you asking for a contribution?"

"Nothing." She vaguely recalled he hated telephone solicitors. She needed to cut through his suspicions. "Are you sure you don't remember me? I think we had a class together." Nothing. "Professor Kilbourn." Still nothing. "I sat beside you."

There was a pause. "Jayne Kernaghan?"

"Yes."

"Oh. I remember." His tone was nearly neutral, but she had lived with him long enough to know he was masking his hostility. "I remember quite well. You didn't like me much then."

"I behaved like a jerk to you. I know that. I wanted to apologize."

"After all these years?"

She reddened. "Yes," she said. "It's bothered me a long time and I wanted to make it up to you."

Henry said nothing. She knew he wasn't believing a word.

"All right," she said. "There are other things I want to talk about."

"What?"

How much should she tell him? It was impossible to get a feel for things with just a voice on the line. "I can't really discuss it over the phone. How about over drinks?" No answer, and she had the terrible fear she was blowing it. "Please," she whispered, very softly.

"You make it sound awfully mysterious."

"Well, it's nothing illegal, I assure you."

"Damn," Henry said, and she could hear he was smiling. "You take all the fun out of it."

"How about the Parc V?" It had been one of their favorites. "Seven o'clock."

"Well ..."  
"Please, Henry. I need ..." Your help? No. "I just need to see you. For five minutes."

Another pause, then, "The Parc. At seven. For five minutes."

He was late. She sat at the bar, sipping a whiskey sour, telling herself that he often arrived late, that the traffic on Wolf Road was always bad on a Saturday ...

Finally, she spotted him, stepping inside the door, standing near the ferns as he surveyed the drinkers. Again, the memories clashed, three Henrys now: a moustachioed college student, fresh in her mind from having turned him down only a few hours before; a vaguely remembered boy who was in a few of her classes; a husband she had seen only that morning.

She shook her head to clear it. The conflicting memories could be dangerous. She wondered how many ghost memories he might have.

Evidently none, by the way he was peering around the room, lost.

She breathed a sigh of relief and waved at him. "Henry? I'm here."

He spotted her and threaded his way to her table. "Sorry. I didn't recognize you. Your hair's different."

She stood up. "I'm glad you're here," she said, thinking he'd aged well — and also thinking he looked more haggard than he had this morning.

"You made it seem awfully important."

"It is — to me at least." She had made a vow when she arrived: no mention of her request at first. Maybe not at all. She needed time to feel him out, so she wouldn't scare him away. "And I did want to apologize."

Henry shrugged. "It was ages ago."

"Maybe. But it still bothered me. I don't know why I treated you like that." She smiled at him. "Can I make it up to you? Treat you to dinner?"

He frowned. "What's this *really* about?"

"Nothing. I just —"

"People don't just come out of the woodwork after fifteen, sixteen years and start springing for meals without an ulterior motive."

He's going to leave. Damn. God damn. I've ruined everything.

Henry leaned toward her. "What's wrong?"

"Wrong?"

"You looked like ... look, forgive me for being so brusque. I couldn't imagine this could mean so much to you." He slid into the seat. "I certainly won't mind being treated to a meal."

"Thank you," Jayne murmured.

"Well, there's not much to tell," Henry said as they waited for the chef's salads to be served. "I graduated, then went to work for the state. Department of Transportation. I do studies. Whenever someone

wants a new traffic light, I have to figure out if they really need one."

Jayne nodded, pretending that the words were news to her.

"I've got a nice apartment on Dove Street. Plenty of room for me and Jill."

"Jill?"

"My cat."

"Oh," she said, hiding her relief. "I'm surprised you're single. If you don't mind me saying so, you're too attractive a man to be on your own."

Henry grinned. "Don't mind at all. I tried marriage. It didn't take."

"Divorced?"

He nodded. "There's a lot of it going around." He pointed at her left hand. "I don't see any rings on your finger. You go through it, too?"

"No," Jayne said. "I'm a widow."

The animation in his expression vanished. "Oh," he said, very softly. "I'm sorry."

"Thank you," Jayne said.

"Has it been long?"

"Seven months." The pain she felt was as sharp as ever but she fought to keep from showing it. "I was moping, and I wanted to get out. I thought it would help me forget. But all our old friends were either married or reminded me too much of Chris."

"So you called me."

She nodded. And she realized that, for a part of her, at least, her words were the absolute truth. It had been seven months, and she missed Chris so much.

Henry was silent for several minutes. "Look, I'm sorry I was so hostile to you at first. I didn't realize."

She shrugged it away. "You couldn't have."

There was deep concern in his face. "Are you managing all right?"

"Well enough. I've taken over his business." She realized that this was an opening. "Maybe you've seen it: Harrington Business Services."

"On Central Avenue?"

She nodded. "We — I do a lot of odd jobs. Consulting work." She paused. "And revising."

Henry nodded. "I didn't know there was any demand for that anymore."

"Some. Not very much." She knew she could not delay. The conversation could take a different turn at any moment. "Have you tried it?"

He paused and she tried to read his expression. She realized her heart was thumping.

For a moment, he looked wary, then he smiled. "Trying to drum up business?"

She forced herself to smile back. "Never hurts."

"Well, you've chosen the wrong person."

He had gone. Her last chance ...

"It's a waste of money, if you don't mind me saying so. Too much of a gamble. I've never seen the point of them and you wouldn't get me into one ... are you crying?"

"No," Jayne said quickly, blinking. "Just something in my eye."



The rest of the dinner went smoothly. They talked about the food, the best restaurants, movies, television — all the trivia upon which friendship is built. The talk, the wine relaxed her. She found herself smiling. If a few of the jokes stirred memories of their former life, it was a small price to pay. She had kept to herself for so long.

Over cheesecake that lingered on their tongues like sweet, tart heaven, he asked her to a movie.

"We seem to be hitting it off pretty good," he said. "And there's that new foreign film at the Spectrum."

She accepted, of course. Part was that it fit into her plan, part because she felt so lonely. It was so easy to be comfortable with him.

The movie was pleasant, a frothy French comedy. It felt good to laugh.

And when he asked her to his apartment for coffee, she found herself accepting.

"God," Henry said. "I don't think I've ever hit it off this well with anyone. Sometimes I feel like we've known each other for years."

The words made her tense. Was he remembering? "Oh?"

"Sure. Milk, or do you drink it black?"

"Black," Jayne said. No, he didn't remember. "I haven't had this good a time in ages."

He sat beside her on the couch, offering her the cup. She took it, then noticed his eyes lingering on her. "Is something wrong?"

He shook his head jerkily. "No, nothing."

"It seemed like something."

"It's just ... look, things haven't been going too well for me in the romance department. When Sarah left me ... well, I was bitter for a long time. I thought I had adjusted, but after a night like tonight, I only realize how lonely I was."

She put down her cup and placed her hand on his. "I know about loneliness, too."

He looked into her eyes. For a moment, she thought he was about to say something, then he began leaning toward her.

His kiss was friendly, but there was a stirring of passion beneath. He leaned away from her, his eyes still on hers and came back to kiss her again. She could feel his loneliness in it, and his need.

Oh, Henry, why couldn't you have done this yesterday?

He broke away. "I'm sorry," he said. "I shouldn't presume so much."

She shook her head. "I didn't mind." She kissed him, showing with her lips that she needed him, too.

She realized her hand was still on his. Without thinking, she gently moved it to her breast. The warmth was a further comfort.

He began to unhook her bra ...

Why am I doing this, she thought. I barely know him. Chris has been dead such a short time ...

He made love to me a week ago, she thought. And I've been wanting him to want me like this for such a long time ...

She stopped thinking and let Henry lead the way.

The lovemaking was not like Chris's: less joyful, less responsive to her. Yet it was better than the old Henry. This night their lovemaking was new for him, not the pleasant routine that marriage had turned it into, but rather, a novel experience with a new lover.

Why couldn't you have shown me that last week, Jayne thought. Where was your concern, your gentleness then? My God, Henry, all this never would have happened.

She stirred. "God," she said, "I've never done anything like that the first time I met someone. You probably think I'm terrible."

"No, not at all. You were lonely. I was lonely." He sat up. "I know this sounds silly, but do you believe in love at first sight?"

"Not since I was sixteen."

"Me, neither. But I think I love you. I know it sounds like I'm handing you a line, but I feel like I've known you for years."

She shook her head. "I know what you mean." She thought about her feelings for him and realized there was love there, too, the residue from their phantom marriage and her gratitude at his comfort. "I feel the same way about you."

The words made his eyes twinkle with joy.

It would be nice, she thought, if we really were in love. Then, even if they didn't bring Chris back, they could still find some happiness.

But the smile died on her face. Would their new relationship end up any better than the first? And, a more frightening thought: if it was going to turn into that, why did she have to revise in the first place? Why did Chris and Billy have to die?

Henry's chuckle brought her out of her musing. "What is it?" she asked.

"Nothing. Just ... I feel so strongly that there's something special between us. It's like — oh, hell, this is going to sound terrible, but when we were making love I got a sense — sort of like *deja vu* — that we had done it before." He grinned sheepishly. "Probably in my fantasies, I guess."

She smiled back. "You must have awfully dull fantasies, if I'm in them."

"Dull is in the eye of the beholder. But it was almost like we were lovers for years. As though we were ... married?" He looked perplexed.

Jayne froze.

"Married? We are married, aren't we?" He shook his head, lost in confusion. "No, of course not. I just met you today. But yesterday I saw you, didn't I? We fought about something ..." He frowned. "I don't understand. I remember you, and yet I don't. I know I haven't seen you in sixteen years, yet I'm positive we ... I even remember a ceremony. Outdoors, in a garden. It's so vivid; I can see the

way you smiled as you walked toward me." His voice was uncertain, frightened. "But it's impossible. It's like I'm going crazy."

She could not bear the fear growing on his face. "It was in a garden; it smelled of roses. The minister was about my height, bald, and wore a black pinstripe suit. You forgot the words to our vow."

He looked at her. "How do you know?"

There was no point in lying; he'd recall soon enough now that Pandora's box had been opened. "Ghost memories." She explained them to him.

"Someone went back and revised our lives? No, wait a minute." His face grew cold. "It was you." Jayne said nothing. She could not look him in the eye.

"Why? Why did you do it?"

"You don't remember? You don't remember the fights? You don't remember how miserable we were?"

Henry thought for a moment. "I don't know. I remember ... I remember we were working on making things better."

"You thought you were, Henry. It wasn't working."

"Then why come back to me?"

"I just wanted to see what had happened to you. I wanted to see how you were doing."

But the look in Henry's eyes was that of a lion spotting prey. "You wanted your goddamn Chris back! I wondered why you didn't try to revise out his death. No wonder you were so interested about whether I made a revision or not."

"Henry, I know it seems bad, but —"

"You're using me! Figured if you were a good enough fuck you'd have me tied around your little finger."

"No!" She clung to the only one of his points she could argue with. "I never meant to go to bed with you. But I was so upset, so lonely."

"You were with me last night!"

"In our first life, yes. In this life, I'd hadn't seen you since Kilbourn's class. I won't deny that our marriage made it easier for me to want you — but the same thing happened to you. You just weren't conscious of it until now."

Henry grunted. "You were using me."

The charge was undeniable. "Yes. I didn't think of it that way, but you're right. You see ...?" She got hold of herself; she would not cry. "I needed Chris so badly. That was all I could think of. I just wanted my husband back."

"I was your husband."

"And Billy, too."

His mouth became set in an angry line. "So that's it. I certainly couldn't compete there. But you were the one who kept saying you didn't want to be tied down. If I had knocked you up, we'd still be together." He stood up and picked up her dress from the floor, tossing it at her violently. "I think you should go now." He stalked off into his bedroom, slamming the door.

She knew better than to follow. She dressed silently. When she was finished, she went to the bedroom door. "I'm leaving, Henry. I'm sorry. I know now how wrong I was in revising you away. But it's too late to turn back. We never had a life together. Our memories are just fiction." There was no answer. She wasn't sure if she expected one or not. "And Henry — I'm very sorry your marriage to Sarah broke up. But that was your life, not mine."

The door didn't reply.

"Goodbye, Henry," she whispered.

The printer fell silent. Jayne pulled the paper out of the top and set it aside. She would go over it after she had some dinner.

The doorbell rang. Jayne glanced out the window to the front door.

It was Henry.

She felt panic, but managed to calm herself. It was his decision to come to me, she thought as she opened the door.

Henry looked nervous. "Hello," he said. "May I come in?"

"Sure."

He went past her into the waiting room, looking around, then spun around to face her. "I wanted to apologize."

"Apologize? I'm the one who should apologize to you."

"I shouldn't have kicked you out like that. I guess I can understand how much you wanted him back." He looked very sad. "I feel that way about Sarah a lot." He shook his head, as though trying to get away from a digression. "But there are some things I need to ask you."

Jayne nodded.

"Why did you find me so impossible to live with?"

She tried to think. "It's hard to remember now. I know we used to argue a lot; you always were very argumentative. And once we married, you weren't very attentive to me. It was as though once you had me, you didn't have to pay attention any more. I found your self-centeredness hard to take." She realized how harsh her words were sounding. "You probably don't want to hear any more."

He smiled slightly. "Well, you're right about that." Then the smile vanished like a chip of ice beneath a blowtorch and he seemed almost on the verge of breaking down. "Thing is, I've heard the same thing before. From Sarah. And last night I dreamed ... no, I remembered eight women, former wives who revised me out of their lives. Sooner or later, no matter what I did, they wanted me gone."

He paused for a moment, shaken by the admission. "I don't like to think I'm unable to handle a relationship. I've always felt I was treating them right. But now, who knows? It terrifies me. It makes me feel like I never did anything right."

"I'm sure it's just a dream. No reality at all."

"I hope so." He shook his head. "God, I'm aroused. How about dinner with me?"

She found herself smiling. "So you could be more morose?"

"No. So we could have a little relaxation. We've been miserable for so long we need to forget about everything."

She found the idea attractive, but shook her head. "I'm afraid not."

"I understand," Henry said. "You don't like me."

"No. I do like you. That's what I'm afraid of. Saturday night was so easy for both of us. It could happen again. And, before you know it, we would fall in love with each other. And even, perhaps, marry."

He forced a smile. "I guess one life with me was enough."

"You don't understand. You're different this time around. Divorce, and discovering about me has shaken you; I could see that. You wouldn't blow your chance again — with me, or with anyone else."

"Then what's the problem?"

"Chris and Billy. If they died and all that happened was that I preserved the status quo, I'd be a murderer. I couldn't live with that."

Henry sighed. "God, I wish life were easier."

"Amen."

"All right, then," Henry said. "I'm ready."

"Ready?"

"To go back. To give you back Chris and Billy."

"What? Is this a joke?"

"I'm serious. A present. After all, I owe you a wedding present. Especially since I inadvertently got you together."

"Oh, Henry." She was holding him tightly. "Thank you," she said. "Thank you. You're a saint."

"Me? You know that's not true. But when you talk about Chris, I see ... something I never saw when you were married to me. You love him very much. And I remember that I once loved you so much I'd give you whatever you wanted." He clapped his hands together. "So let's get it over with."

She shook her head, seeing him in a new light. "No, Henry. Not now. Tomorrow. After dinner — and one more evening."

"Ready?" Jayne said.

Henry nodded from the reviser. "Unless you talk me out of it."

She shook her head.

He smiled. "Can't blame a guy for trying. Let's get it over with."

She pressed the button.

The new past caught her by surprise. A voice over the phone, a mysterious warning that she had superstitiously heeded ... "You were the one!" Jayne gasped as Henry got up from the reviser. Then the ghost memories took shape. "Of course it was you."

He nodded.

"Oh, God. Oh, God." The pain of Chris's death seemed far away. Eventually, the memory would be just one more ghost. "Thank you," she whispered, then kissed him.

He seemed to take pleasure in it. "Good luck," he said.

She nodded. "To you, too." Then, as a guilty afterthought, "Will you manage?"

"Well enough, I suppose. Maybe I can't change the past again, but I can sure as hell work on changing the future. Just like anyone else."

The door in the waiting room slipped open. "Mommy!" called a young voice. "We're back!"

Billy bounced into the room, with Chris close behind, holding a pizza box. "Oh," he said, spotting Henry. "I didn't know you had a client."

"I was just leaving," Henry said. He looked at Chris for a moment. "Take good care of her, will you? And if you decide you don't want her, you're a bastard." He left the room.

Chris looked confused as he set the pizza down. "What was that all about?"

"Nothing," Jayne said. She walked to him and held him tightly, and kissed him. Feeling him in her arms was concentrated joy.

"Well," Chris said, surprised. "If I knew I'd get this reaction, I'd go out for pizza more often."

"Yes," Jayne said. "I'm crazy about pizza." □

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# A Bad Case of the Flu

By David W. Hill

Art by Robert Pasternak

When I woke up that morning, I wasn't there. Although I didn't know it at the time, and didn't find out until later, I wasn't anywhere.

I'm always groggy at the start of the day. So I ignored the fact that the lights didn't come on as I got out of bed. Nor was I too surprised when the shower didn't start up when I entered the bathroom.

Sleepily I told myself that there had probably been a brown-out. That always played hell with the apartment peripherals.

I stumbled over to the household terminal, and was about to go on-line to the building superintendent, when I realized that I hadn't woken to the alarm I'd programmed in, a cello concerto by Handel. Instead I was hearing a steady voice counting down second intervals.

Even as I became aware of this odd situation, the count reached zero. The voice said:

"You are now trespassing in violation of Civic Ordinance 13842.736. You must vacate the premises immediately. You have been warned."

A siren came on. It was the standard police pacifier, which is used to break up riots. No one can experience that insane noise unprotected for long without suffering both auditory loss and neural damage.

I went out of the apartment and into the hall so quickly that I have no memory of it.

As the door shut behind me, I heard the automatic click of the lock. At the same moment the siren died out.

I caught my breath and then placed my thumb on the scanner beside the door knob. Nothing happened.

Now this, I thought, was really great.

Generally I sleep in the nude. So here I was, locked out of my apartment without any clothing because of some elementary software malfunction. It was funny, once you considered it. Not that I was in any mood to do so.

I still hadn't understood the full scope of the situation I was in. This became clearer as the morning progressed.

First the elevators didn't respond to my call, so that I had to use the emergency stairway to reach the lobby, some eighty-five stories below.

Then the terminal there, provided for the use of visitors, refused me access.

People passing by glanced curiously at me. It wasn't that I was naked — nudity is, of course, always fashionable in the big city — it was that I was trying to smash the terminal.

Frustration had gotten the better of me. So did the security guards summoned by the lobby algorithms.

"Be reasonable, Sir," said the sergeant politely as his men marched me through the front entrance and threw me out onto the pavement. "The willful destruction of private property is a Class A misdemeanor. I should report this little incident to the police, except that I hate datawork. Just make sure that you don't come back soon, that's all," he finished cheerfully.

"But I live here!"

"In that case I'm certain the door will readmit you."

It wouldn't.

Neither would the public phone booth on the corner, nor the gate to the subway, nor any building that I tried to enter.

In due course I ended up on a park bench. I was confused by what was happening, and having no luck whatsoever sorting events out. Some localized software failure I could understand; but not the fact that my thumbprint evoked absolutely no response anywhere. It was as if I simply didn't exist, and I actually found myself wondering whether I was really there, and not dreaming up the entire situation.

By this time it was just past noon. The park had become crowded with office workers on their lunch break; dumpling, sausage, and ice-cream vendors, jugglers, hawkers, mothers and children, couples strolling arm-in-arm.

I shifted along the bench as a man sat down beside me, only to discover that the space had already been taken by another person. Then I felt a sharp sting on my left buttock.

"You have been injected with a five-minute venom," said the first of my two companions pleasantly. "Make no noise and do exactly as we say, and we will provide the antidote within four minutes. Agreed?"

I nodded. "What do you want?"



"Just your right thumb."

**T**humbers are prepared to work fast. Within thirty seconds I'd received another shot, this of local anesthetic, and my hand had been prepped for surgery.

The two of them chattered and smiled while readying me for the amputation, acting so much like friends out for the afternoon that no one noticed what they were doing to me except for one curious toddler, who they shooed back to her nanny.

They were crew-cut and freckled, no more than eighteen. Whistling idly, the first one took out a plastic bag of sterile solution and a scalpel from his lunch box. The other stood up and casually blocked any view of the operation from passers-by.

"This won't do you any good," I whispered desperately.

"Oh, but there you're wrong" was the nonchalant response. "You'll sleep quite a while after we're finished, you know. We're sure to find use for your thumb in the meantime. I do appreciate your concern, truly. But you needn't worry about us."

That, I knew, was how thumbers operated. Most exercised care not to harm their victims gratuitously. They would simply knock me out and use my thumb to the extent of my credit limit until I finally woke up and reported the theft.

"No, really," I said. "I mean it. Look, do either of you have a phone? Test my print against it."

"Well, we do have a minute's leeway," said the first.

"Not that I'd care to take the chance myself," said the other. "This venom's nasty stuff. Has to be, of course."

"But it's his decision, after all, you know."

They regarded me quizzically. "Hurry up," I finally managed to croak out.

So they rummaged around through various pockets, and after an interminable delay at last produced the phone. I jabbed my thumb to the minuscule scanner. Normally this would have identified me to the communications net, and my name and ID code would have appeared on the tiny screen. But now it refused to boot up and remained utterly blank.

"Say, there is something to it," observed the first thumber.

"What's the story?" asked the second.

"I don't know," I answered. "I wish I did. I can't access anything, not since I woke up this morning."

In any case my thumb was obviously of no use to them.

They injected me with the antidote, which also acted as a soporific. As they ambled off together among the press of other strollers, and as the sedative put me under, I heard one say:

"Now that was a sick puppy, what?"

"Must be a flu," replied his friend. "Let's hope it's not catching."

**I**t was then that I realized what had occurred. I didn't have an opportunity to think about it, however, for another twelve hours.

When I eventually came to, I found myself lying on a hospital bed with a drip in one arm and sensors attached to various parts of my body. A nurse arrived as I was struggling into a sitting position. He glanced at the displays arrayed on the headboard and said:

"Feeling better now, are we? Very good. Thumber venom's ticklish, you know. They never tell you, but the antidote actually has an effectiveness rate of only ninety-four percent. So we like to monitor the recovery process very closely, just in case ... Anyhow," the nurse went on cheerily, "all's well that ends well, that's my opinion. You still have both thumbs, too. From what I've seen around here some nights, that's the real miracle. Which reminds me. You have a visitor waiting outside. I'll inform him that you're up, if not about."

Detective Millet was a thin man with pale white hair in dreadlocks and several ritual scars cut deep into his cheeks. He had on a conservative gray suit, T-shirt, and running shoes. He sat down beside the bed and took a small terminal from a jacket pocket, booting it up while quoting me the revised Miranda:

"You have no right to remain silent. You have no right to an attorney. It is immaterial that what you say can and will be used against you in a court of law ...."

Surprise kept me quiet until he'd read it all. "What's the charge?" I asked at last.

Detective Millet ignored the question. "Tell me exactly who you are," he said.

"Carl Darwin. ID code 075506905."

"Address?"

"2830 6th Street."

"Age?"

"Thirty-four."

"Occupation?"

"Doctoral student. I'm auditing courses on the City College net."

"Marital status?"

"Single."

The interrogation continued a good half hour. I told him about the events of the day, about my encounter with the thumbers in the park, about the conclusions I'd arrived at. Finally Detective Millet put down the terminal and came to the heart of the matter. "Your statement, Mr. Darwin, is that you have been subjected to a viral infection, which has destroyed all files pertaining to you in the civic data net, including records of your thumbprint, retina pattern, and DNA matrix."

"Exactly. I should have recognized the symptoms immediately, Detective Millet. I'm working toward a



degree in software evolution, after all. My only excuse is that it all happened so fast. Even the thumbers guessed what was going on before I did."

He nodded slowly. "I've heard of similar cases. Not many, and not often, however. Normally viruses are aimed at an institution, not at an individual. I wonder who your enemy is, Mr. Darwin."

"I'd like to know that myself."

Then the terminal on his lap beeped twice. When Detective Millet returned his attention to me, his expression was once more as severe as it had been at the onset of our interview.

"Let's start at the beginning," he said. "Tell me precisely who you are."

"Carl Darwin."

"Bullshit. Carl Darwin is at home in his apartment. You're someone else."

**H**e proved it beyond doubt. He linked his pocket terminal to the hospital monitor and displayed file after file: my academic transcripts, my medical and financial history, my military records ... everything that there was about me in any data bank imaginable, millions of bytes of information, hundreds of visual screens.

The problem was that they had all been altered.

Somehow my vital statistics had been tampered with. Down to the chromosomes, they now identified a different person as Carl Darwin.

I studied the photograph on the monitor. Even this obscure graphic data had been infected. Another face had replaced mine.

As final evidence, Detective Millet used his police override to call up a realtime picture of the interior of my apartment. A composite image, compiled from feedback generated by the household appliances, slowly coalesced.

He was sitting in my favorite chair. There was a Sazerac, my usual drink, on the table at his elbow. He was smoking my pipe and wearing my clothes.

Here, I realized, was my enemy.

Here was the man who had stolen my life from me and left me with nothing, not even a name.

In a sudden rush of anger I memorized his features, so that I would never forget them.

Detective Millet cleared the screen. He brushed back his dreadlocks and regarded me with a flat expression. I could guess what he was thinking. His next words made it obvious.

"Hablo español."

It was clear that he thought I was an agent for *Los Estados Unidos de la Sud*.

According to the popular news and to media romances, the actual infiltration of a spy into the country isn't difficult. The typical foreign operative creates a cover identity by eliminating an honest citizen and taking his place. The deception is maintained by skinning the victim and using a graft of

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his flesh to get by any DNA scan. He is relieved as well of his prints and retinas.

"Why don't you tell me how it happened," Detective Millet went on. "Plain bad luck, what? The thumbers got to you before you could settle in place. An accident, of course. I'm sure that you and the Federal boys will have a good chuckle about it together when they arrive."

"I am Carl Darwin." What else could I say?

Detective Millet found this humorous. "You might have been," he chuckled. "But it just didn't work out, did it?"

I panicked. I hit him. More surprised than actually harmed by the blow, Detective Millet reeled backward. His chair tumbled over and his head struck the tiling with a thud.

The monitors attached to me went crazy. I tore them off and stood up.

I knew that I had to be quick. I stripped Detective Millet, lay him on the bed, and connected him to the various sensors. I kept expecting the excited data to summon a nurse to the room, but I wasn't interrupted.

I put on his pants and jacket, leaving off the shoes, which were several sizes too small.

The elevators were across from the nurses' station. Past them was the emergency stairway. Luckily, only a single nurse was on duty, a bald woman with too much mascara and far too many tattoos. Unfortunately she was staring at me. She didn't look away when our gazes met. So I had to go over to her.

"Is something wrong?" I asked.

She avoided the question. "I know what you did in there," she said.

"Is that so?"

"I don't like it, either," she went on. "Do your work down at the precinct, not here. This is a hospital."

I had to remain in character. I took out the pocket terminal and acted as if I was keying it on. "What is your name, Nurse?" I asked.

"Belinda Washington, 021482944."

"Well, Ms. Washington, 021482944," I said deliberately, "the fact is that your patient is a southern operative. Federal agents will be here soon to pick him up. In the meantime I want him given enough sedative to keep him quiet. You don't have a problem with that, do you, Ms. Washington, 021482944?"

"No ... no, I don't, really."

"I'm glad to hear it. I wouldn't want to think that you actually sympathized ..."

The expression in her eyes would have been amusing, if I hadn't been so desperately afraid myself. Nurse Washington grabbed a handful of ampoules and hurried away.

A moment later the elevator arrived, letting off an intern. I slipped inside and rode up to the fiftieth floor in the company of a couple of nurses, stayed on, and descended to the lobby with some doctors. There I joined a group of departing visitors and went through the front entrance without having to key the scanner. I was halfway across town in a quarter hour.

My situation had improved slightly.

For one thing, at least, I was dressed.

I searched Detective Millet's pockets, discovering his credit card (useless without his thumb), his terminal (also useless for the same reason), a wallet with pictures of his children and boyfriend, his badge, some pens, and a leather pouch of Blue Mountain hash. Clipped inside his jacket by a quick-draw holster was a nasty little laser pistol.

I discarded everything else.

I found them the next morning in a different park. They had separated a jogger from the herd thundering around the reservoir, and were escorting her into a cove of bushes. I ducked beneath the greenery and followed them with the pistol in my hand.

"Good day, Gentlemen," I said. "It's a pleasure to see you again." I let off a shot. The beam stroked the grass at their feet, leaving a trail of ash. They turned toward me in wonder.

"You," I said to the thumber with the most freckles, "give her the antivenom. Now."

I underscored my request with another shot. The thumber almost dropped the hypodermic in his haste to comply. The jogger folded slowly to the ground.

"Now," I said, "give your friend some, too."

"But he doesn't need it. I mean, you know, it isn't as if he's been bitten, or anything."

"I know exactly what you mean. Give it to him anyway."

They looked at one another in puzzlement. With an apologetic shrug the freckled one injected his partner, who collapsed beside the unconscious jogger. I said:

"What's your name, thumber?"

"Malachi."

"Well, Malachi, toss your kit to me, and empty your pockets."

I retrieved his kit of vials, needles, and scalpels, and then patted him down. Next I returned the laser to my jacket pocket, holding it aimed at him through the cloth. "Where do you live, Malachi?" I asked.

"On seventy-sixth street."

"Alone?"

"No, with Harrison," he answered, indicating his friend.

"I do hope you're telling the truth," I said. "Let me explain why. You and I are going over to your place. We'll leave Harrison right here. I should be

finished with my business in no more than four hours ... if I'm not interrupted. That will allow you plenty of time to return for Harrison before he's discovered. I don't imagine he'd enjoy explaining to the police what he's doing with a thumber kit, do you, Malachi?"

"No."

"Good." I waved toward the edge of the corpse. "Let's get going."

Malachi hesitated a moment.

"What do you want?" he asked.

For some reason I found the question wildly amusing, and stifled my laughter only with effort.

"Not much," I finally got out. "Just your right thumb."

**T**humbing evidently paid well. The condo to which Malachi led me was wainscotted in mahogany, carpeted with thick Oriental fabrics, gleaming with Irish crystal. These thumbers, at least, obviously had eclectic sensual tastes, too, for the bedroom decor was a melange of silk, iron, and leather. I used one of the three available pairs of handcuffs on Malachi after borrowing his print to access the apartment terminal, a classy affair with megas and megas of RAM, countless gigs of ROM, and an unbelievable baud rate. Then I blindfolded him with one of the ugly, eyeless masks from the collection I discovered in the master closet.

"What are you doing?" he asked.

I didn't answer. I wasn't too sure myself.

I sat down at the terminal and rested my hands on the keyboard.

For a while I simply stared at the screen and attempted to sort out my thoughts and desires.

Yet the longer I mused, the more it became apparent that I couldn't simply become Carl Darwin again. I couldn't see any easy way to reclaim my personal history. At the least, Detective Millet and his associates would be monitoring my files. My enemy, too, must be on the alert for any invasive action.

There was only one thing to do. I, too, must become someone else.

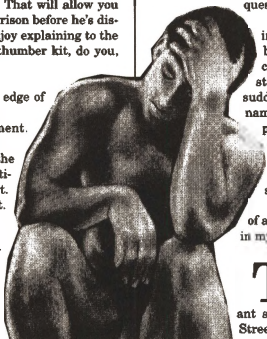
My enemy had accomplished this by infecting the information net with a datatropic virus, which had homed in on my identity and inserted its own matrix, replacing me with him.

I, on the other hand, would have to start from scratch. I would have to create my own virus and set it adrift on the data stream, to infiltrate and replicate in secret, subtly penetrating myriad files, programs, and data banks, evolving the gestalt of information that defines existence in the modern world, until I was reborn. I knew that theoretically it could

be done. Whether I could pull it off was another question.

I tapped the keyboard, sensing the data behind it like tangible things. The screen burst into color, a vivid array of icons and strings. Some furious emotion suddenly gripped me but I couldn't name it. Only when I had set the primary bit into place, beginning the complex molecule of information that would eventually become me, did I finally understand just what I was feeling.

Bereft of all identity, stripped of all past history, for the first time in my life I felt truly free.



**T**hree hours later I left the apartment and proceeded slowly downtown. A pleasant stroll brought me to East 49th Street, where I had no difficulty entering the vast glass structure there. The elevator lifted me to the penultimate floor, an atrium with minimal office furnishings. I strode up to the front desk.

The receptionist, an elegant blond woman with an arresting design of triangular scars along one cheek, surveyed me with languid disinterest until I placed my thumb on the identity scanner. Then she got to her feet in a flutter of expensive fabric. "Oh, Mr. Neumann," she said breathlessly. "The board is expecting you. We all are."

"Thank you, I said. "Ms. ... ?"

"Dahlstrom. Uhuru Dahlstrom."

"Well, Ms. Dahlstrom, perhaps you would be so kind as to lead me to them."

She escorted me along aisles of palm and fern to an escalator that carried us to the pinnacle of the building, a somewhat smaller area also landscaped with tropical flora. Perhaps a score of men and women milled together in a central clearing. Uhuru Dahlstrom's voice cut the muted conversation cleanly:

"Gentlemen," she said, "ladies ... may I present our new CEO ... Cain Neumann."

I strode forward through a scatter of applause. I accepted a flute of champagne from a waitress while shaking hands and being introduced. One plump executive vice president had evidently done some timely and extensive datawork. He cornered me against a scrub pine, saying effusively, "I must admit, Mr. Neumann, I was quite impressed by your recent monograph on chaotic economic theory. I'm sure that it will impact marketing tactics at least until the turn of the century."

"Why, thank you," I murmured.

Another vice president, unwilling to be outdone, put in: "Not to mention your record with OMI, Ltd. I've heard, too, that you were instrumental in their leverage of Nanomech Zaibatsu. One day you'll let us know the real story behind that, won't you?"

I smiled vaguely. "When it can be told ..."

A third VP, the one with a coil of dark henna hair above velvet sloe eyes, edged forward and delicately placed her hand on my wrist. "Feel free to let me know if there's anything I can do to help you get settled in, Mr. Neumann. Anything at all."

"Please," I replied. "Call me Cain."

**I**t took a year. The first six months I concentrated on securing my position as Chairman and CEO. This turned out to be easier than I had expected. It seemed to be a fundamental law of business that the higher you were in a multinational corporate organization, the less actual work there was to do — and I was at the very top. The next couple months I focused on placing a cadre of hand-picked men in the Department of Loss Prevention.

By October we had him under twenty-four-hour surveillance. On November first we were ready to move.

He was still imitating my routine almost to the minute. Classes in the morning, lunch at the corner diner, research in the afternoon, a couple of additional seminars in the evening.

We went in just past seven o'clock. My operatives cut all information access to the apartment, severing it utterly from the communications net. Then they forced the door open and tied him to a chair.

My limo let me off at the building five minutes later. I rode upstairs and my men left us alone together. I sat down opposite him and said one word: "Why?"

He knew who I was, of course, and what I wanted. He didn't answer immediately, evidently thinking the answer over. I waited patiently.

Eventually he said, "Well, the truth is that I was tired. For the last six years, you see, I'd been running contraband data from the Balkans and from the south. The money was good, but it wasn't exactly the easiest life. I wanted to get out. I figured that with my record, the best thing to do would be find a quiet identity somewhere and settle down for a while."

"Why didn't you just create another out of whole cloth?" I asked. He understood what I meant.

"I wasn't good enough. That's one of the reasons I chose you, because you were a student and I figured that I could continue my education. And you had no immediate family, few friends, no distractions, nothing to interfere with the transition. You didn't even attend classes in person, just audited them on the net. And you seemed to be a nice person. I liked you."

"Did you, really?"

He nodded. "Would you mind if I smoked?" he asked. "I've grown accustomed to the habit."

"Not at all." I found my pipe, filled it with what had once been my favorite affordable tobacco, tamped it down and lit it for him. I held the stem to his lips while he smoked, since his hands were still secured.

"What are you going to do with me?" he asked.

I studied him a while before answering. Before me was a man not too unlike myself, perhaps twenty pounds heavier, wearing an old pair of flimsy pajamas, sitting in a cramped student's apartment surrounded by cheap furniture and outdated hardware. I laughed.

"Well," I said, "at first I intended to have you killed. But I've decided against it. Although I *will* have my revenge. No, Mr. Darwin, I'm going to let you live. You took my life from me and now you're stuck with it. I think that's fitting, don't you? Poetic justice of a sort. Just don't ever try to escape. You'll definitely regret what will happen then."

As I stood up, my phone rang. Margaret wanted to rendezvous for cocktails at the Palace and then shuttle down to Aruba or, perhaps, Caracas for a long evening. Unfortunately, I was already meeting Chloe in Innsbruck, although I didn't tell Meg that. I checked my chronograph, the Florentine gold showing nicely against the dark navy Egyptian fabric of the handmade jacket, one of a dozen that I had ordered recently from Saville Row. If my pilot pushed it, the Lear would get me to Austria in two hours.

"Remember what I said, Carl," I reminded him, taking a last slow look at the dingy studio and at the pudgy little man who had become me. "We'll be watching you. Forever. Oh, and there's one more thing," I said, my mind already on the evening ahead and on the international summit I had to attend the following afternoon. I smiled.

"Thank you, Carl. For everything." □

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# Taking Life Four Years at a Time

It's been more than nine Earth years since I was first marooned on this planet and started sending these reports back. Eight years is a long time in these parts, and I find myself in the embarrassing position of being one of the planet's more durable enterprises. I have, after all, outlasted a television program called *thirty-something* and a publication called *Quayle Quarterly*. Not to mention cold fusion, Czechoslovakia, and supply-side economics, as well as three generations of computer chips, hundreds of diet plans, income tax reform, the required teaching of "Creation Science" in the Louisiana public schools, and ceramic geese as a decorating motif.

I have lasted longer than most human marriages, careers, and prison sentences. My observations of these creatures have convinced me, in fact, that a four-year self-destruct mechanism is hardwired into everything they do, with the possible exception of *Police Academy* movies (which are produced about every two weeks and seem destined to go on forever).

To see how the four-year cycle works, look at the U.S. federal debt. Back in the Earth year of 1990, nearly every human being complained about the debt. Some time last year, the complaining stopped. I couldn't understand this at first. Why was the federal debt a cause for complaint when it was billions of dollars but no longer a problem when it went beyond billions into bazillions?

Then I understood: for human beings, any problem that lasts more than four years is no longer a problem, it's an institution.

When human beings are born, they require four years to gain some measure of self-awareness (this is one of the reasons that adults of the species rarely have memories dating from before the age of four). By the time they reach age four, however, they have emerged from self-awareness into self-centeredness, a condition be-

yond which they never progress. They become fixated on a four-year time span. Human beings go to high school for four years, they go



to college for four years. They own their cars for four years. They elect their presidents for four years. They compete in Olympic Games every four years, the coverage of which sets the dividend level of a broadcasting company for four years.

They used to have recessions every four years. But they seem to have conquered that. They are generally able to go more than a decade without a recession now. But they still can't escape the four-year cycle: now when they have a recession, it lasts four years.

The four-year cycle governs philosophy, industrial production, and politics. Even Soviet communism, which looked for a while like it could become the number one human superstition, went down the tubes because its practitioners tried to make it successful with five-year plans. If only they had written some four-year plans, they

probably *would* have buried capitalism.

And Leap Year seems to me a characteristically human answer to a sidereal problem. When they discovered their calendar year was a quarter-day shorter than their astronomical year, they accommodated the shortage by adding a day to every fourth year. (You will remember on our planet when we had the same problem, we added a week to every twenty-eighth year and then gave everybody that week off from work.) The leap year system is also characteristically human in its gratuitous complexity. A year that ends in 00 can't be a leap year unless it is divisible by 400, whether it should have been a leap year or not. I suppose this makes their calendars more accurate, but it seems to me the accuracy is not worth trying to remember the rule. But these creatures delight in obscure rules and arcane knowledge that give some few of them the opportunity for superiority over their fellows. But I digress.

The four-year cycle is deeply ingrained in human affairs. Take any chunk of their history and examine it, and you will see signs of quadrennialism. Here, for example, is a random piece of the nineteenth century human history:

1869 Patent on chewing gum  
1873 Founding of Coors brewery  
1877 First performance of *Swan*

*Lake*  
1881 Shoot-out at the O.K. Corral

1885 Introduction of motorcycle

This chronology is very revealing of the chewing gum-motorcycle cycle. Other chronologies would document similar trends: the corn-hog cycle, the sunspot-hemline cycle, the rinse-wash cycle.

Wars, in particular, almost always last four years. When they have a war that doesn't last four years, it so astonishes them that they call attention to it in its name: the Thirty Years' War, the Seven Years' War, the Six-Day War, and so on. In none of the human history books is there any mention anywhere of a Four Years' War.

I hope my insights about the four-year cycle are useful back home. I feel that I have paid a high price for them. I am not on a four-year cycle, and it looks to me like it will be twenty years before I get a week off. □

# The Salute

By Charlene Brusso

Art by David LeClerc

Here I lie in Mt. Hope Cemetery. Not long to wait now. The wind moves through the leaves in the trees, brittle leaves brown and frosted, crackling in the cold breath of autumn. The sky is gray. The name on the old gravestone beside me is barely legible after decades of acid rain: James F. Bartlett, killed in 1864 at the age of twenty.

Crystal was twenty-five.

Rochester's Civil War dead surround me like brothers, a kind of togetherness I haven't felt for a long time. Behind me is a cement-plugged Gatling gun, antique metal weathered green. It rests on a granite plinth with a plaque that honors men dead nearly two hundred years before I was ever a soldier. I can feel the weight of their names, and their silent approval. They understand about death and killing.

Through the leaves I have a clear vantage of Phase bridge, a metal and concrete umbilical between the old university and the new campus, connecting ivy-bound brick to smooth polished steel and copper-film glass. The bridge is empty now. It's early, and during October break most of the students will sleep in, quick to forget responsibility, as only the young can. Crystal was twenty-five, and I am twenty-six, and she is dead, and I am old.

I lie stomach-down. The frost on the grass crushed under me is melting through my jeans. My jacket keeps my chest dry, and I wear a scarf wrapped around my throat and tucked into my collar, but I don't feel warm. I rest on my elbows, flex cold fingers and rub my hands together, check the rifle sight again. Through the quartz optic I can follow the motion of the red laser spot on the bridge rail. Everything in place. Kurt Andrysic will begin to cross Phase bridge in ten minutes, and I'll line up the crosshairs on his head, behind the eye and above the ear. Easy, just like the Drug Wars: Bogota and Medellin and Cali. Pull the trigger and it will be all over.

The wind blows and leaves sift down and scatter around me. The weather will be gusting later, blowing rain and soggy parchment leaves through the ranks of eroded gravestones. It's a good day for rain.

I remember the way it sounded on the windows beyond the vertical blinds. I remember holding her and listening to it, rain tapping on the tall glass panes. Light would filter in, dusty beams through the drawn slats, but never very much. We were nocturnal creatures, working in the dark, sleeping in the day. Or not sleeping, sometimes, just listening to the rain.

At times it was too peaceful. I remember late one afternoon pacing the bedroom naked when I should have been getting ready for work. Crystal sat lotus-style on the bed and brushed out her long sorrel hair.

Our mid-rate apartment held the northwest corner of the eleventh floor, high enough to see the sunset reflected in the water of Irondequoit Bay, and the burning light filled the room.

"Come on, Moran, stop it. You're making me crazy." She brushed her hair into three smooth ropes and began to braid it, the way she always did before she sat down at her computer to work. "What's wrong?" she asked over her shoulder, twisting and pulling the strands tight.

"Nothing." I looked out the window, down on calm neighborhood activity, distant and soundless.

"I've heard that before." Crystal said. I heard her shift on the bed, probably reaching for a strand of wire from the bedside shelf to fasten her braid. There were always bits of her latest hardware project scattered around. "You've got the wall-crawlies again, don't you?"

I shrugged. "Probably just too much caffeine."

The light on the water was fading; one by one, security lamps popped on across the district where my experience had landed me a job as a night monitor. Four nights a week I put on a gray uniform, snapped a taser to my belt and sat in a dim-lit room to watch vid screens where nothing ever seemed to move. It was ten times worse than sitting a guard post in the rainforest; then, at least, you knew something would happen, if you just waited long enough.

I heard the brush of Crystal's bare feet on the carpet behind me. Her arms came around my waist and her cheek pressed my shoulder.

"You can stop checking your back, you know. This isn't a combat zone." Then she slapped me on the ass. "Come on, get dressed. Time to go to work." I made a grab for her and she danced away, laughing, dispelling the dark mood, and I tried not to let her see me like that again.

With binoculars I scan left from the bridge, along the paved footpath that cuts along the trees behind the biggest dorms to the main library. The carillon in the white library dome chimes three quarters of the hour, Big Ben-style, round notes carried on the wind to my position, and there he is, right on schedule.

He steps clear of the revolving door and walks past the granite pillars that support the protruding stories above the entrance. His suit is gray, well-cut and designed to be kind to the weight he's managed to accumulate in his forty-odd years. His silver hair gleams like a polished helmet even in the dismal morning's gray light. He carries a thick leather

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satchel and bobs along with short bird-like steps. He is on his way to a nine o'clock meeting with the rest of the cognitive science department, which he heads. It will take him four minutes to walk to the bridge, a few seconds more to reach its center, and then it ends. The meeting will have to proceed without him.

Resting on my elbows I follow Andrysic with the binoculars. Halfway across the parking lot between the library and the footpath he turns and pauses, and a woman enters the field of view: Amanda Vandermaas, neurosurgeon and researcher, exiled from her homeland by the South African government during the intelligentsia purges three years ago.

Vandermaas is younger than Andrysic, maybe thirty-five, sinewy and dark, with high Afro cheekbones and startling blue eyes. Her hair is cornrowed into shoulder-length braids, and her skin is the color of sweet milk chocolate. Half-kaffir and educated, she was doubly dangerous in the newest of the unstable South African regimes: a smart woman who understood politics as well as nerves.

Crystal liked her. So did I, pre-two seconds ago.

She shouldn't be here, dammit; I thought she understood. What happened in South Africa, what she said yesterday: it doesn't matter. This morning she is on the wrong side.

Through binoculars I watch as Vandermaas catches up to Andrysic; the fir trees shutter the view into quick strobed segments as they walk up the footpath. What is she saying to him? They're still headed for the bridge. Whether they reach it or turn back to the library, she has to know I'll still get the view I need. She has to know she can't stop me.

Andrysic shakes his head in response to Vandermaas, and there is a gleam from his palm as he takes something from his pocket to show to her: an interface socket, maybe the same one he built for Crystal. Modeled on research intended to treat psychiatric disorders, the socket was designed to allow her to tap into the machine she helped Andrysic give intelligence to. Wires, artificial dendrites, carry electric impulses from socket through bone and gray matter to the visual cortex within the brain. Crystal explained once why it was necessary to bypass the optic nerve, but I've forgotten why. I never understood it, anyway.

Andrysic arranged for Vandermaas to perform the surgery at the university med center right after he pushed through the paperwork that made Crystal a doctoral student. By then the frustration at his hold on her had worn off; she was hooked on his dream, so wired she talked about it almost continuously until the day she was scheduled to go under the laser.

"With the interface I'll be able to talk directly to Kurt's program," she explained for the twentieth time as we dodged past each other in the kitchen to make dinner one morning a few days before the operation.

"If Kurt's right, I'll have a new set of senses and a new world to use them in. I'll be learning things along with the AI; we can teach each other."

The afternoon they admitted her, I stood behind her chair and watched her sign the release forms. The last time I'd seen so much fine print was when I'd volunteered for experimental medical procedures to qualify for Special Forces training. Composite fiber skin weave, cybernetic limbs and joints with ten times the strength of human tissue: the Army cutters had called what they did to me "enhancement." I saw Andrysic had used the same word on the forms Crystal signed.

In a white-tiled room I stood in a corner and watched a balding male technician shave her head. Long locks of red-brown hair fell free and slid down her smock to the green-and-white speckled floor. I remember the oblate shape of her head, how shiny her scalp was above her dark brows and enormous eyes. Her hair lay on the floor in coils the color of newly fallen leaves.

"There you go." The tech shut off the razor and laughed. "You can tell your friends you're starting some new retro-fad."

I picked up a handful of smooth chestnut hair and wound it around my fingers.

"Moran, it's all right," Crystal said. "It'll grow back." She took it from me and braided it quickly, shoved it into the side pocket of her canvas carry-all. "I'll save it for you," she told me, and I looked for it later, but I couldn't find it anywhere.

Andrysic had arranged to tape the operation and simultaneously run it on closed-circuit video. "You're welcome to watch with the staff, Mr. Michaels," he invited. "Since the procedure is still experimental, there's bound to be a 'standing room only' crowd."

"You don't have to watch it," Crystal said. Her unprotected skull shone under the hospital fluorescents and I could see a tracery of tiny blue veins beneath the skin above her ears.

I told Andrysic I'd be there.

He saved me a place in the front row. The room wasn't large, might have held fifty people, and nearly every seat was taken. The high-resolution video was projected onto an enormous screen at the front of the room. Static sparked on the screen behind Andrysic as he spoke a few words of introduction to the assembled staff. Then he sat down and pushed a button on the remote control he held. The static on the screen cleared and I saw Crystal.

She lay on her stomach under a sheet, her smooth shaved head bracketed in place by gleaming steel pins. Her sleeping profile was calm. The surgical team stood around her. I knew one of them was Vandermaas, but I couldn't pick her out of the rest of the anonymous green scrubs. My hands clenched as one of the surgeons drew dashed lines on Crystal's skin with some kind of felt-tip marker. Another held the business end of the laser scalpel, a fiber-optic cable connected to a gray console with a few knobs and dials. He flicked a switch on the panel and a streak of static formed across the bottom of the projection screen as the beam came on line.

Vandermaas made the first cut at the back of her neck. There was no blood, but smoke curled away as



churned. I could swear I saw Crystal's eyelid flicker. Then the green smocks surrounded her and the video switched from side view to directly overhead.

The closeups gave you the illusion that the doctors were just practicing on a cheap piece of meat from the local butcher shop. I was the only one in the room who wasn't fooled. I sat with my hands tightened into useless fists and I watched as they cut away the back of her skull and threaded the hair-fine wires into her brain.

The room was too hot. I got up and managed to walk out, swallowed down the bile. The hospital corridor was quiet and a little cooler. For a moment I just leaned on the wall. Then I went to the nearest men's room and threw up.

Andrysic and Vandermaas have reached the point where the path crosses behind Anthony dorm. Now they slow, come to a stop, windowed between scruffy branches. Vandermaas raises a pointing finger and shakes it once, twice, punctuating the words I see her lips shaping. Andrysic shakes his head, jaw rotating in and out of view, a firm "No!" easily read in the movement of his mouth. He makes an openhanded sweeping motion as if to fan her away, drops the interface into his pocket and starts walking toward the bridge again: as if he doesn't believe what she's telling him. Vandermaas runs the few steps to catch up with him, and they keep arguing as they walk. Less than two minutes now, until they reach the bridge.

I shift my weight, stretching my left shoulder where the regenerated tissue has stiffened. Damp weather does that to me, ever since I had the augmented arm replaced last year by a gray market hospital in Toronto. It had been a part of me for so long I never thought about it, not until the night I dreamed of Colombia, fighting off old ghosts; Crystal tried to wake me up and I almost broke her in half.

The arm was the last of the old military blackware: the "enhancements". There's nothing else left in me.

The shoulder is sore most of the time now. This winter the ache will probably become permanent, without her to rub it away. It isn't fair. From the beginning she knew just how to touch me.

We met in a club on the edge of downtown, a smoky, forbidden-fruit kind of place called Venjah's Teahouse. I was on the run, AWOL with a load of internal ware worth far more than my life, and I shouldn't have been there. I'd just come inside to get warm, to look around, to feel like part of something.

She drank coffee at a table in the back, a small sturdy woman with dark hair that shone even in the gauzy murk of the room. Mesmerized by that shine I picked up my drink and walked back for a closer look.

Her head was bent over her cup as though she was reading messages in a swirl of cream. I couldn't make out her face in the haze. Probably nothing special, I told myself. I started to turn away but someone jostled me into an involuntary step forward. She looked up then, and our eyes met through the smoke screen.

They were large eyes, dark and caffeine-haunted, and her posture was edgy, alert; her sharp glance echoed my own barely-reined paranoia. I knew I was being crazy, but I couldn't see that look and ignore it. I felt it too much, too close. Like seeing my own face reflected in a mirror.

Without breaking the gaze she kicked out the table's other chair and gestured an invitation. "If you want to look, sit down; you're drawing too damned much attention just standing there."

On the surface we didn't have much in common. She professed to growing up in Canada, working her way south from Ottawa through Toronto and Buffalo to Rochester. Among the East Coast datarunners she had a reputation for being a slickshot, intuitive and patient and smooth. "Don't believe a word of that," Crystal would say, shaking her head. "If I were *that* good, no one would know who I am, and I could do whatever I wanted in the Net. The problem is, my technique is my fingerprint: after a while people start to recognize it."

That was how Andrysic found her. Traced her down and made her an offer she couldn't refuse. For Crystal it had been an easy choice: get jailed for data crimes, or help create life in software, work intimately with a sentience stored in patterns of electrons and magnetic fields. Andrysic promised to throw in the Ph.D. for free.

After a week of tests Vandermaas finally agreed to send Crystal home from the med center.

"I know you're eager to get back to work, but I don't want you jacking in until you're fully healed," Vandermaas said. "Relax. Enjoy your time off." Then she smiled. "I brought you a going-away present."

She pulled a serpent of red and green from the pocket of her lab coat and laid it in Crystal's hands. It was a batik scarf with the same leaf shield pattern that the rebels in South Africa wear.

"It was my brother's," Vandermaas said. "He wore it during the Johannesburg Revolts. I thought you might like it."

Crystal thanked her and tied the scarf around her stubby scalp with a lopsided grin. When we got home she made faces at herself in the mirror. "Now I really look like a data pirate, all I need is an eyepatch." She rubbed the bandage on the back of her neck and yawned. "And a big cup of coffee. These damned painkillers are knocking me out."

I hooked my arm behind her knees and swung her up against my chest. "What you need is to go back to bed."

"What are you going to do, tie me down?" She wrapped her arms around my neck.

"You don't seem really worried about it."

"That's because I know how to handle you." She yawned again, turned her face into my neck to muffle it, her breath warm on my skin. "You Special Forces types are all alike: too macho for your own good. Go ahead, carry me off, see if I care."

She was asleep when I laid her down on the bed.

Crystal was home for six weeks, sleeping, playing at her workstation and grumbling about the wait while she healed. She did yoga to relax. Her stubby hair grew into a soft dark halo, more red than brown. It felt silky as fur, but I only saw it when she slept; she hid it beneath the scarf the rest of the time, the socket gleaming like cold silver beneath.

Vandermaas called every day to see how she was feeling. Andrysic called to tell her what was going on in the lab. Speaking with him only made Crystal more anxious to get back to work. He needed her, needed the new interface she carried in the back of her skull. "He can't even boot up the damn thing without me there to plug in," Crystal said from a half-lotus on the couch. "He needs the deep link, and that's me."

"Sounds like he's your CO or something."

"He's my thesis advisor," Crystal said, "but sometimes he seems more like my parole officer."

When she went back to work she came home with headaches that made her squint against the light, and she started to keep the blinds drawn all the time. She wouldn't see a doctor, and she couldn't stop working for Andrysic. She swore there was nothing wrong, but she talked in her sleep, in a flat, toneless language that I couldn't identify.

"My field isn't psychology, Moran," Amanda Vandermaas told me over the phone, "but I know it's not uncommon for people not to remember their dreams. Changes in lifestyle or stress load —"

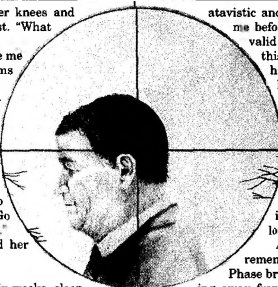
"But she used to."

There was a long pause from the other end of the line.

"It's certainly possible," she said in a methodical voice, "that contact with the AI could be responsible for the condition. I haven't seen any evidence of it in the data Dr. Andrysic's been sending me, but I'll talk to him." She paused. "I'm sure you don't need to worry, Moran. He would never put her into a situation where she could get hurt."

I let Vandermaas reassure me because I wanted it, but I couldn't believe her. In the rainforest I used to get these feelings. Call them instinct, irrational,

atavistic and cold, but they'd never failed me before. I told myself they weren't valid now: this wasn't Colombia, this wasn't the war. But I should have trusted them. I should have made her stop.



The screen of fir trees thins as Vandermaas and Andrysic come up the curving slope to the bridge. Still on target. What's wrong, Andrysic? What are you waiting for? You haven't got much longer.

Andrysic, we're almost there. I remember the last time I crossed Phase bridge, new campus to old, walking away from your lab and everything I'd seen there, everything I'd touched. It was morning, with the sun swimming up through the eastern haze, and she was gone. Not dead, no, you were quick to point that out. No, the meat was stable, still breathing. There was even a faint blush the color of normal sleep on its cheeks.

It slumped over the terminal in your lab, white-jacketed cable snaking down from the back of its neck to the gray-and-white cabinet that held your pet AI. A monitor displayed data windows striped with a series of parallel readouts. A colorkey in the corner of the screen marked the AI's output as red; the body's was blue. The red lines bounced rhythmically, like something by John Phillip Sousa, but the blue lines were flat; there was no brain trace from the body, and its hands were cold, like the frost melting on Jimmy Bartlett's gravestone here beside me.

You told me you were sorry, Andrysic, but I could tell you were already sorting out what to document for scientific posterity. I remember you wouldn't let the paramedics disconnect her until you'd finished your backups. You probably started to analyze the data right after I left.

And now I'm watching you, Andrysic, watching you walk toward the foot of Phase bridge. This is the last time you'll cross it, you bastard. I'm going to make damn sure of that.

Vandermaas touches your arm and you shrug her off. Just ten more paces — there, your toe touches the concrete, followed by the sole of the other foot, and Vandermaas stands back on the footpath and watches you walk away, up the arch to the middle of the bridge. She doesn't try to stop you, she just stands there, with a look that might be anticipation, and she watches you.

You don't know this, Andrysic, but she came to the apartment last night, while I was cleaning the gun. I had the pieces laid out on an old sheet on the kitchen counter, and the case leaned in the corner, gapping open and empty. She saw it all.

"Moran, I'm sorry," she said, and she sounded like she meant it. I picked up the rifle barrel and rubbed

oil over the smooth black steel with a rag. "It'd be a good idea to stay off Phase bridge tomorrow morning," I told her.

She looked away. "I was in Soweto when my brother was killed. A friend brought me his scarf." There was a catch in her voice and she stopped for a moment. "He was buried in a mass grave. I never even saw his body."

I didn't say anything.

Vandermaas leaned on her palms across the counter. "Killing him won't do any good, Moran. She'll still be dead. And we'll never even know how it happened."

She must have gotten the answer she needed, because now she's just letting him walk away.

I exchange the binoculars for the flat 2D field of the rifle sight, and Andrysic's head comes into sharp focus, every silver strand of hair stiff as wire. Finger cocked, my thumb slides off the safety and now the moment comes and he and I are the only two people in the world. Forefinger tightens and the silenced rifle jumps, butt nudging my chest, with the vented hiss of ejected gas and faint smell of propellant. Neat round hole. Red stains silver hair and the opposite rail of the bridge, and I watch him fold, knees giving way with

no outstretched arms to catch himself as he falls. On the concrete, red and gray fluids pool around his head.

I raise my eye from the rifle sight. Vandermaas is standing at the foot of the bridge, looking up to my position behind the trees on the hill. I can feel her watching me. Slowly she raises her arm in a closed fist salute that I've seen before too many times to mistake now. It must be cross-cultural, if it means the same thing in South Africa as it does in South America: defiance and solidarity, and sometimes, victory.

But I don't feel anything. I unwrap the batik scarf from my neck and fold it down the middle once, and twice. Lift the corner and fold back a triangle, keep folding the triangle to the end and tuck in the last corner. Lay it on the grave beside me. Military history teaches that the Civil War generation didn't have the salute. They got flags instead, but the scarf is all I have to give him.

He was a soldier. I think he'll understand. □

## Quad World

By Robert A. Metzger

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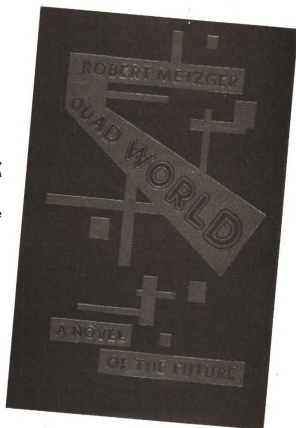
Satellite-based lasers fry anyone who moves too fast, and each day the speed limit becomes slower ... John Smith died, or thought he had, but then he awakes and is thrust into a bizarre future where nothing makes sense, and he, strangely, knows more than he should.

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# Little Miss Trashcan

By Robert Reed

Art by Cortney Skinner

I remember — as well as cats remember anything — a fiery and golden flash of light and the strong aroma of fresh fish.

Of course I can't verbalize my memories, being as I am. Indeed this capacity to write is a convention of storytelling, not reality. But why should that disappoint? Most humans couldn't produce a coherent story to save their lives. And the writers among them, after years of training and discipline, still require many drafts before satisfaction is achieved. Thus, this account seems only slightly more unlikely than their work, at least from my perspective. In the range of what is possible, from the all-knowing to complete ignorance, humans and their cats are not too far removed from one another. We are like red and violet on the spectrum of all radiations, different in ways but fundamentally the same. And now, I fear, I am getting ahead of myself.

I shall begin again.

As I said, I remember the flash and fish smell. That is all. Then I was home again without being aware that I had left home. I found myself stretched out on my owners' couch, and maybe I mistook the flash and odor for a dream. Frankly, I don't recall my assessment. The truth of the matter is that I was gone for a little more than forty-eight hours, stolen away by forces unknown. Every cat in the world had been taken by the golden light. Gone. The proverbial cartoon *poof*. We were sitting on laps or toilet seats, torturing mice or ignoring yapping dogs. Then *poof*, we vanished. I vanished. No heat. No sound. No warnings.

I am a medium-sized black cat, rigorously ordinary.

Female.

Fixed.

But not declawed.

My owners are childless, sentimental people with careers and credit cards. Both work for companies that demand time and loyalty, and I'm their convenient substitute for a toddler. Independent. Self-secure and litter-trained. Undemanding by nature.

No doubt they worried when I vanished. Cat owners around the world worried, asking themselves and the sky if we were alive and well. And of course there came a rash of flying saucer sightings, rumors of odd echoes on government radar screens, and the usual old women calling police, complaining about inhuman strangers peering through their bedroom windows. It must have seemed reasonable, blaming

extraterrestrials. If I had had the mental wherewithal, I'd probably have voted with the pack. Alien designs sound as good as any explanation, our cosmos possibly filled with powerful and indecipherable intelligences.

"CATS STOLEN" and "SCIENCE BAFLED" were the headlines of the day. Cats were the lead story on the nightly news, one newscaster showing his audience photographs of his departed cats, a thin tear shining in the bright studio lights. And quickly it became apparent that it wasn't just the house cats who were missing. It was alley cats and laboratory cats, and even our oversized cousins too. Lions and tigers; snow leopards and bobcats. (Yet never cheetahs. Perhaps they are tainted with too much dog architecture.)

The world was left catless for fifty-two minutes longer than two days. A round of anticat sentiments began. "It's long overdue," said some. "The Martians needed fishbait," said others. But then we were returned, every last one of us. Millions of simultaneous golden flashes put us back in our homes and cages, on operating tables and sprinkled across the shriveling African savannas.

If our disappearance was news, our reappearance was a calamity of the highest order.

Picture, if you will, the questions that had to follow.

What horrors had befallen us? Did we see our captors? Were we probed somehow? Cuddled? What?

How did the aliens treat us?

Myself, I remember nothing out of the ordinary. I was on the living room couch when the golden flash came for me, and I returned an instant later, unaware of my long absence. Perhaps I thought it odd, my owners suddenly home from work. But so far as I was concerned, I had been sleeping and the flash and fish smell were in a dream. I remembered the fish smell while I stretched, then I jumped down from the couch, stretching again before I made the walk to the kitchen, urged along by my stomach.

My owners watched with their mouths ajar.

"It's Poubelle," said the man.

"She's come home," squealed the woman.

"Pou?" they cried. "Are you all right, Pou? Pou?"

Poubelle. These are clever people, perhaps to a fault. My name is French for trashcan; they discovered me as a starving, semi-feral kitten lost in a cavernous steel dumpster. They brought me home and



nursed me back to health, tolerating my occasional excesses. (Involving feces, more often than not.) I don't remember the dumpster, but I have a leftover nervousness brought on by my rugged childhood. As for my clever name .... well, it's nothing more than a familiar sound. It is something I hear amid other familiar sounds, the most important being the sturdy whine of the electric can opener.

"Pou? Where have you been, Pou?"

Of course, I remained reticent. (Imagine their response if I had turned and told them, "I don't know where I went, and get me some tuna fish now!") I was nearly to the kitchen when the woman — I have never learned her name — picked me up and began examining me for wounds. What had those unknown, unmeasurable aliens done to me? "Are you all right, love?" she asked "How do you feel, girl?" the man inquired. "Are you fine? What did they do to our sweet Poubelle?"

By then every cat had returned. The story broke first on CNN, and even the afternoon football games were preempted. Newscasters interviewed hastily assembled experts — exobiologists and veterinarians — and the experts shook their collective heads, nothing to offer the audiences but some half-hearted guesses.

"Poor sweet Poubelle," said my owners. They handed me back and forth, investigating everything about me, squeezing until my nerves were frayed and I had no choice but to hiss. A whisper of a hiss, really. I am a remarkably patient beast by most measures. But it caused me to be dropped an instant later, twisting in midair and landing on my padded feet. Full of cat grace and forgiveness.

And that is undeniably when things began to turn sour.

I was the same black cat that I had been two days before. As I am now, I should add. But people everywhere found themselves worried. The double shocks of our disappearance and reappearance produced powerful and novel thoughts. Perhaps for the first time, people began to study us. I mean in depth. They noticed every twitch of our whiskers, every long gaze out the window. They noticed details in our fur, and were they new? Suddenly our tiniest behaviors seemed full of menace. What was my intent, slapping at that dust bunny? Did I always rub against their legs with such force? And was I watching the birds in the sky, or was I waiting for alien friends to arrive?

You can see my problem, can't you?

No one can know exactly what is behind another creature's eyes. People scarcely know each other, and they have voices. Languages. Culture and history and their sciences. I am a mere cat, incapable of reassuring souls who insist on being scared. Who assume their fears are both reasoned and useful to possess.

It has been made worse by the world's neurotic people. They began appearing on television during the next week. One news special gave a fat lady in Boise fifteen minutes of network time, her talking about her three dozen cats and me sleeping unaware on top of the warm set. Her cats had been changed, she assured the world. They had turned irritable. Even mean. Their purrs sound different. Their feces might be coded messages. "I know they're planning something," she told my owners. "Believe you me. Those aliens tinkered with them, with their minds. I feel it. Know it. Believe you me! I'm sure as sure can be!"

My owners glanced at one another, saying nothing.

Of course I missed their expressions and countless other subtleties too. They use to tell me, "Hold down the fort, Pou," as they leave the house. As if I could understand them. But now they simply leave, mute and cautious. And when they returned home, in the past, they'd tell me about the day's trials and their tiny victories. I don't miss those stories — they could speak gibberish to me, for all I care — but I do notice the silence that seems to reign. Great doses of nervous silence have their effect on me, infecting me with my own nervousness.

I don't sleep quite as well these days.

Fourteen or fifteen hours is the best I can manage, it seems.

If I had the intellect, I would attempt to invent adequate explanations for recent events. The aliens stole me for a zoological study — one possibility. These unseen aliens worship a cat-like god, and I was part of a religious ceremony — another possibility. Or perhaps I wasn't stolen away. Perhaps Earth and every other living thing were abducted — wouldn't that be a tale? — the cats left drifting in stasis while people only thought they were living their own lives!

No, I know none of this. All I understand is that the air here in tense, my owners acting stranger every day. If I whine for food, I'm fed instantly. But they shy away when I brush against their legs and hands. I enter a room, and they leave. I do my usual tricks to gain attention, and they simply clean up the messes, not a harsh word spoken. No words at all spoken.

A glacial quiet rules our house.

And rules the world at large, too.

Something important has just happened. I was napping beneath the big bed upstairs, entirely alone, and my owners slipped into the room and shut the door, locking it for no sane reason. They thought I was downstairs, and I continued napping while they sat on the edge of the bed, talking like conspirators, whispering about how I was different now. Wasn't I? "Pou isn't normal," they claimed. Perhaps I wasn't that cat they found in the



dumpster, the one they had sheltered and fed and fixed.

The woman said, "Oh, poor Pou."

"If she is," said the man.

"Wherever she is," she added. "Poor, poor Pou."

I awoke. Eyes opening, I saw the heels of their shoes before me. And the man said, "It sounds crazy, but what if the aliens have dressed up like cats? What if we've been invaded and don't even know it?"

"Oh, God!" said the woman. "That's the worst story yet!"

"Then you explain it, darling. Be my guest."

Their conversation was so much noise, and just then, out of playfulness and boredom, I decided to take a mild swat at one of the man's tennis shoes. As it happens, a single unfurled claw missed leather and struck his foot, into skin and then the tender white of his Achilles tendon.

He was more startled than hurt. A thousand times more.

The wound scarcely bled, and these accidents have happened in the past. I am a cat, after all. What do people expect?

Yet the woman gasped, "She was downstairs! I'm certain!"

The man hopped about on one foot, screaming, "Shut up and get me some disinfectant! Help me, goddamnit!"

They cleaned and recleaned the little wound, fearing alien toxins. Meanwhile I drifted back to sleep, dreaming of tuna fish; and when I woke, I rose and walked to the bedroom door, whining until my people opened it for me. Not a word was spoken. I stepped out into the hallway, and the door was closed, then locked again. A cold, solid *click*. I whined again, just able to hear more whispering. Then the man said, "We've got to," and the woman began to cry.

My fate has been sealed.

Poor me.

The man is digging in the backyard, in the garden. I watch him from an upstairs window, curious about his motions but not his intent. He won't finish the hole until tonight. He hopes it will be deep enough and that no wandering cat will notice him carrying a plastic-wrapped bundle in the moonlight. Meanwhile, the woman is my constant companion, nervously following me with

dishes of food and a string of "sweet dear Pou" comments.

If I had enough of a mind, I'd wonder if this was some elaborate alien experiment. The subjects are humans, not cats. This is an investigation into paranoia and superstition, perhaps. Perhaps.

But conspiracy theories are beyond me.

A neighbor emerges from his house and begins to dig, preparing a grave for his old tabby. He and my owner do not speak, scarcely even acknowledge each other's presence. I follow their motions with the mildest of interest, and the woman behind me says, "Eat. Can you eat a little something, Poubelle? Please?"

I am full. Satiated. Nearly bloated, in fact.

"What are you thinking, Pou?"

Nothing special. I want to visit my litter box, and I want to nap. A hard scratch behind the ear would be fine, and when I am hungry again, I want to eat well.

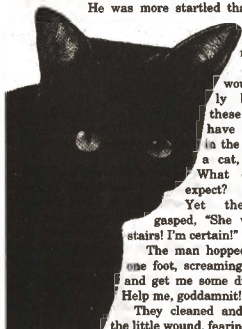
What is there to think now?

Everything alive is riding on the fine line of its talents. A few things are known, but most is unknown and unknowable. This is something cats understand through instinct, and perhaps people need to be reminded of this vital fact. Perhaps that is all this is. An unimaginable force is teasing humanity, much as people tease cats with fancy mouse-shaped toys. A single act reminds an entire species that it lives in a great and strange endless universe.

We all balance on the line of our talents.

"Where are you going, Pou?"

To my litter box, though one never knows. I might find a wondrous distraction along the way. □



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# Justification

## By Jerry J. Davis

### Art by Jon Foster

Los Angeles, CA 90039-3278-34

Notice to Mr. Dale Bently of 7892634 Veracruz Lane, Apt. 982e7, Tuleburg California 95205-1252-08, S.S. #578-23-8493-X-4398:

**D**ale Bently shuffled out of his apartment in his robe and slippers, squinting in the pale fall sunlight, heading toward the mailbox and the letter that would tell him his life was over. In one week it would be his fortieth birthday, and while he had that vaguely in mind, he had forgotten about what it meant. He had forgotten a lot within the past five years, his life becoming a pale blur of featureless days.

He opened the mailbox with his thumbprint and pulled out the small bundle of junk mail, not even seeing the envelope from the Bureau of the Census. He carried it back to his apartment and shuffled inside, the end of his daily trip into the world. He shut the door and locked it, and threw the mail down on the coffee table that separated the couch from the television. As the letters spread out he saw the bright red envelope and it caught his attention. He'd seen that envelope before.

It was easy when Dale Bently was five-years-old; he was a child in good health and was getting good grades in school. Children of his age were rarely judged poorly. It was the same when he was ten-years-old. By the time he was fifteen he'd developed into a bit of a disciplinary problem, but that was normal for a teenager and there was still no real worry. When he was twenty, he was in college and getting good grades again.

By the time he was twenty-five, Dale was making a good living as an apprentice engineer with Lagrange 5 Corp. It was the first time he'd seen the Census as a threat, but as he was actively working for the good of mankind and producing more than his share, he passed. The same when he was thirty- and thirty-five-years old. But then there was the accident, and the hospitals, and the lawsuit which gave him enough money to compensate him for not ever being able to work in high orbit again.

The money, officially, was for his reeducation and new career, but as it turned out, it was enough for him to comfortably survive without working for a considerably long time. He grew inward, reclusive, living for his daily and nightly television favorites. It never occurred to him, never at all, that he was dooming his very existence.

He opened the red envelope and held its contents in his hands. The Census! he thought. The damned Census!

Bureau of the Census  
Dept. of Life Evaluation  
Division of Judgment

**IMPORTANT!** This is your five-year census notice! You must fill out the accompanying form and essay and return them to the Bureau (see enclosed self-addressed envelope) before your deadline of November 1st.

Failure to complete or return the census will jeopardize your status of citizenship. Bureau of the Census

My God! Dale thought. My God, I forgot all about this! What have I been thinking!?

He looked over the form and the instructions for the essay. The form itself only counted for 10% of the evaluation. It was the essay that carried the weight. In big bold letters the instructions read:

**In your own handwriting, justify your existence in 500 words or less.**

Letter held numbly in his hand, Dale walked to a window and looked out. The white sunlight made everything glare, causing him to squint. It looked so unreal, much less real than the television screen. There was no color out there.

Dale looked down at the letter. He looked at the date. November 1st, it read. He had one week.

**T**he trolley rumbled and swayed over the old freeway foundations, steel wheels singing against steel tracks as it whizzed out of Old Town and into the vast spread of cityscape that covered the once vital farmlands. Tuleburg was now bigger than the L.A. basin, with Money and Business drawn around the big space ports like iron filings to a magnet. The sprawl of the California Central College campus was visible miles before the swaying green trolley reached the station, giving the impression that the trolley was barely creeping along. This was pure illusion, as they were traveling in excess of 70 miles per hour. Dale was standing, holding onto a rail and squinting through the windows, when the brakes were applied. He was thrown forward and would have gone tumbling had he not grabbed on with his other hand.

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The walk from the station into the campus had him exhausted before he was anywhere near his destination. He had a headache and he was dizzy and his legs felt like they were going to collapse beneath him. The students milling about all looked impossibly young. He couldn't tell if they were 14 or 24.

One tower stood out from the rest. He entered and rested on a bench in front of the elevators for a while, mentally preparing himself for the interview. Almost five years ago Lagrange 5 Corp. had suggested he take up teaching — he only hoped that it wasn't too late. By teaching the young, he could easily justify his existence.

His watch beeped and said, "You'd better hurry up, your appointment is in five minutes." Dale sighed, "Oh, shut up," and wearily got to his feet. He touched the button for the elevator, stepped inside, announced his destination as the 22nd level, and nearly toppled as the elevator swooped upwards.

On the 22nd floor, he managed to find his way to Virginia Mergle's office. Behind the large hardwood door with a sign that read "PERSONNEL," was a waiting room with a large information screen in a corner and seats all around. A voice said, "State your name and business," as soon as he entered. Dale spoke up in a nervous voice, and the computer acknowledged him and said, "Miss Mergle will see you in one minute, seventeen seconds." The information screen showed several different views of the campus, a scrolling list of job opportunities, and a documentary on keeping full sized whales in captivity.

When the countdown to his appointment reached zero the door swung open and the computer announced, "Miss Mergle will see you now." Dale stepped into the inner office and saw a smooth-skinned black-haired woman reclining in a chair behind a huge desk. Her eyes were closed, and eight data cables trailed from her head like an octopus's tentacles. "Come in, Mr. Bently," she said without opening her eyes. Her voice had an unpleasant, too-relaxed quality about it. Despite her clear enunciation, it sounded like she was talking in her sleep. "Please, sit down and relax."

Dale sat but he didn't relax. "I'm here about a job teaching zero-gravity engineering."

"We have an opening," Virginia said in her sleep-voice. "What are your qualifications?"

"I have a degree in zero-gravity and low gravity engineering from the Tuleburg Institute of Technology, and ten years of practical experience with L5 Corp."

"Yes," she said, her eyes still closed. "I am reviewing your records now."

Dale swallowed, his throat dry. Silent seconds passed while data streamed in and out of the woman's brain. She breathed slowly, her breasts heaving up and down with dream-like calm.

"You have no teaching credentials," she said finally.

"I have practical experience, things that —"

"You have no teaching experience, either. I'm sorry, but I can't give you any teaching position at all without a degree. I am searching for other employment possibilities now."

Again, Dale found himself waiting silently and watching the woman's breasts ease up and then down again.

"Your physical records indicate you would not be able to do any heavy labor. I'm sorry Mr. Bently, but I just don't have anything for you at all."

Dale sighed, and stood up.

"Mr. Bently, I'm curious. Your records indicate you have not been in any schooling nor work for years. Why the sudden interest in teaching? You could have spent all this time enrolled and getting your credentials."

"I don't know. I haven't been feeling that well."

"Your five year life evaluation has come up with the Census Bureau, hasn't it?"

"Yes."

"You need real help, Mr. Bently. Professional help. There are lawyers who specialize in life justification — I strongly advise you to see one."

"Thank you."

"I can recommend one in particular, if you like. His name is Vlad Breenwood. Here is his address and phone number." There was a whirring sound, and a piece of paper slipped out of a printer and into a tray.

Thanking her once again, Dale took the paper and shuffled out of her office.

Vlad Breenwood worked out of a small office in a backwater corner of Tuleburg's eight-story shopping mall. Vlad was a balding man in his fifties with a plastic smile and a jerky, bird-like nervousness about him. But his voice was strong, and he quickly convinced Dale that he knew what he was talking about. "You've really backed yourself into a corner," Vlad was telling him. "Something inane like, 'I think therefore I am' is not going to wash with the Department of Life Evaluation, especially considering you've become a forty-year-old shut in. What do you do with your time, anyway?"

"I watch television."

"Do you ever take notes?"

"Notes?"

"What kind of shows do you watch, anyway?"

"Well, um, entertainment type shows —"

"Like what? Give me some titles. What are your ten favorites, ones that you never miss?"

"Oh, uh, *Android Sluts*, uh ... *Full Tilt*, *Onion Man*, *Goddesses of Lust*, *Zoo Keeper's Daughter* —"

"No docu-dramas? No historic recreations? No educational programming whatsoever?"

"... No, I'm afraid not."

"Do you have any hobbies? Do you build anything, like model trains or anything like that?"

"No."

"Do you watch birds, or keep an ant farm, or have a dog?"

"No."  
"Nothing like that?"  
"No."  
"Do you pay anyone's bills besides your own? Are you supporting anyone?"  
"No."  
"Do you have any family whatsoever?"  
"No."  
Vlad shook his head, and got up and paced back and forth behind his desk. "We don't have a lot to work with, Dale."

"I know."  
"There's only one chance. We're going to have to cheat."  
"How?"  
"I'm going to make something up for you, and write your essay for you. You're going to copy it down —"

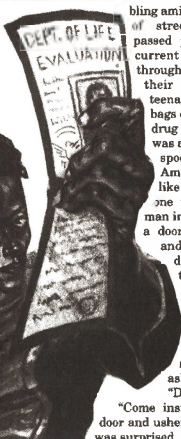
"But I thought that —"  
"Yes, it's true. They make you write it in your own handwriting so that a computer program can analyze it and determine if you're being truthful. That's the key, there, though: If you *believe* you're being truthful — that is, if your subconscious believes you're telling the truth — then you'll fool the computer program."

"How am I going to believe?"  
"Well, it's tricky, and there's no absolute guarantee, but I've had people hypnotized into believing their justification essays and they've passed without a problem. But the important thing you have to do even before we begin this is make a solid commitment to become a honest, worthy citizen *after* we get you past your five-year evaluation. Do you understand?"

"Yes."  
"Okay. I'll make the arrangements, you work on positive thinking. I'll call you at your home when I set up the appointment with the hypnotist. Okay?" They shook hands, and Dale left his office feeling much better.

Two days later, Dale was right in the middle of the newest episode of *Wide Open Beavers in Mexico* when his phone rang and Vlad announced that an appointment had been made. Dale quickly wrote down the details and hung up, rushing to get dressed and ready so he could make the next trolley at the station.

It had been raining off and on that day, but at the moment the sun was shining through a hole in the clouds and the streets and sidewalks sparkled with water droplets. The world looked clean and fresh, and Dale took it as a good omen. It darkened again as he boarded the trolley, and was pouring in god-awful torrents when he reached his destination. It was a small ground-level station on Harding Way, deep within the Old Town. Buildings of brick and concrete a hundred-years-old stood quietly crum-



bling amid the hustle and cries of street salesmen. Dale passed prostitutes who had current wires braided through their hair and into their scalp, and skinny teenage boys offering little bags of pale blue powder, a drug called "Carny" which was actually the processed spoor of some South American beetle. "It's like going to a circus!" one told Dale. An Asian man in a black coat stood in a doorway, watching him, and Dale realized the doorway belonged to the address where he was supposed to meet Vlad.

"Hi," Dale said.  
"You work here?"  
"What's your name?" the man asked.  
"Dale."

"Come inside." He opened the door and ushered him though. Dale was surprised, the inside looked like it had once been a church. There were pews and an altar, and discolored paint on the wall that marked where a huge cross used to hang. "You here to get a doodad installed?"

"A doodad?" echoed Dale.  
"A pleasure interface." His eyes bore into Dale's own. "No?"

"No. I was supposed to meet my lawyer —"  
"Okay! Sorry, my mistake. Right this way." He led Dale across the room and through another door. The room beyond was small, cluttered with piles of computer decks and peripherals, and had one large stained-glass window. In the corner was a chair with a skull cap attached, an old cerebral induction setup. "Take a seat, Vlad should be here any minute. I'll be right back." He left and closed the door behind him, leaving Dale alone. Dale shivered. It was cold and clammy, and smelled of mildew.

He sat in the induction chair and waited. Twenty minutes went by, and Dale was just about ready to get up and leave when he heard laughing voices and footsteps approaching. The door opened and Vlad and the oriental man walked in, stifling their laughter. It gave Dale the impression that they were laughing about him. "Hey, Dale, are you ready?"

"Yes."  
"Okay. Let's get started right now. Professor Aki here is going to put you in a simple Alpha trance and we're going to feed the essay into your subconscious. After we're sure it's firmly in your memory and your attitude toward it is very positive, you're going to write it out. I'll take it from there, and hand deliver

it to the local Census office. And you've got a new start! Okay? Ready?"

"Yes."

"Okay, Aki, let's do it."

Professor Aki adjusted the skull cap and then turned to a computer terminal. He hit a few buttons and suddenly, against his will, Dale felt himself relax. Consciousness dropped away like a stone falling down a deep, black well.

Consciousness came back like a car slamming into a wall.

Professor Aki was still at the terminal, and Vlad was standing in front of him folding a piece of paper and slipping it into an envelope. "That wasn't so hard, was it?" he said.

"What?" said Dale.

"It's over. I've got the essay, I'm about to run it down to the Census for you. Now all we have to do is settle the account, and you're on your way."

"What was — what did I write?"

"You wrote a very convincing report about your independent study of the value of modern broadcast television. You plan on writing a book about it, warning the public of the dangers of video sedation."

"I am?"

"Don't worry, you don't actually have to write it. You just have to get involved in something worthwhile during the next five years."

The amount of money Vlad wanted for his services was a surprise. It was more than half of the money Dale had left in the bank, the interest of which Dale had been living on since the settlement with LS Corp. In the end, though, Dale agreed that his life and citizenship were worth it, and he sealed the transaction with his thumb print.

Several days went by in a blur, and one afternoon during an interesting repeat of *Sexual Deviancies of the Rich and Famous*, there was a knock on Dale's door. He turned down the sound and got up to look through the peep hole. Several people were standing outside, all in uniform. "Dale Bently, please open the door right now," one of them called out. It was a short, pretty black woman with her hair tucked up under her uniform cap. Her voice was very commanding and yet, at the same time, bored. It gave him the impression she did this all the time.

"What do you want?" he called through the door.

"It's very important that we talk to you."

"About what?"

His hesitation made her angry. "Look Mr. Bently, we have a Writ of Total Compliance and we'll burn through this door if we have to. Do you understand that? You open this door right now!"

Dale opened the door. The black woman stepped quickly inside holding a piece of paper, immediately followed by three men and another woman holding clipboards. "By order of the Department of Judgment of the Census Bureau of the National Government you are hereby informed that you failed the justification test as defined by the United Order of

Justification to Society, Articles IV through XV, and your citizenship is hereby revoked for the cause of conservation of energy and resources. Your property and assets are hereby seized for redistribution. You're ordered forthwith to surrender your physical existence in exchange for public social simulation." She took a breath. "You have three phone calls before we proceed. You can use them anytime between now and dissociation." She fell silent, waiting for him to say something, while the others went right to work writing out an inventory of his possessions.

Dale said nothing.

"Okay," she said. "You can take your phone calls later. Are you going to come quietly now or am I going to have to cuff you?"

Dale erupted. "You can't do this! What gives you the right to come barging into my home telling me what —"

She sprayed him in the face with a small aerosol can and Dale's throat closed. The world spun and he pitched over on his back, reeling, making sounds like a startled cow. When his senses began to work properly again he saw a black corrugated rubber mat about two inches from his face. Groaning, blinking his eyes to get them to focus better, he sat up and saw the back of a chair through a heavy screen, and the back of a head. A red sign on the screen read: ELECTRIFIED — DO NOT TOUCH. He was in a police van, by the looks of it. His hands were firmly bound behind his back.

The van bounced slightly as it sped down a city street, the engines making an eerie electric whining sound. I failed! Dale was thinking. I failed the test! How could this have happened, Vlad guaranteed I would pass! Then a dark thought occurred to him: Vlad could have guaranteed anything he wanted, because if he was wrong and Dale failed the evaluation — which he did — Dale was in no position to complain. For one thing, he was not a citizen anymore, which meant he had no rights, but even if he did he had broken the law. The Census agents would laugh at him.

The van came to a stop and the rear door popped open and lifted. To Dale's surprise, a bound and staggering Professor Aki was thrown in, and the door dropped closed and locked with a loud thud. The "professor" — if he actually was a professor — lay face down and drooling on the mat. No doubt he'd been sprayed in the face with the same chemical they'd used on Dale. "Maaawwvwnppfk!" Aki said into the mat. "Yurrrraffrekkkkssphk!"

A half hour later, Vlad Breenwood, too, was thrown into the van. It appeared they had used more than the aerosol on him, as there was a singed hole in the back of his shirt and the burn marks of an electric stun gun. "You!" he said, after regaining consciousness. "You bastard!"

"Me?" Dale said.

"You bastard from hell! You data dump! I ought to kill you — you miserable cretin!"

"Refrigerate, man," Aki said under his breath. "Freeze it."

"To hell with you!" Vlad shouted at him.

"Keep it down or you'll get another jolt," the agent in the driver's seat yelled back at Vlad.

Vlad glanced at the driver, then backed down.

"What are you yelling at me about?" Dale said angrily. "I'm here thanks to your bogus letter..."

"Don't give me that you runty little rat-head! You turned me in!"

"No I didn't! I didn't have the chance!"

The driver stopped the van and turned around. "One more word, one little sound, and I jolt all of you. Keep your mouths shut."

Vlad turned away, glaring at his own feet. Not a word was spoken during the remainder of the ride. When the van stopped, it was in front of the Pacific Avenue Euthanasia Center.

Dale was separated from the other two and escorted to a white-walled room where an attendant strapped him into a bed while an armed guard stood by the door. When Dale was fully strapped down, the guard left. The attendant was a kind-looking young man in a white medical jumpsuit, with long, curly brown hair and warm brown eyes. He prepared a injection gun and gave Dale a smile.

"So this is it," Dale said, his throat dry. "You're going to put me to sleep like a dog."

"No, that's nonsense. Think positively about it. It's not death, it's transition."

"It doesn't seem right."

"Don't worry, I have a lot of relatives in simulation. I talk to them everyday. They say it's much better than reality. In simulation, there's no pain."

"No pain." Dale was thoughtful.

While he was distracted, the attendant took the opportunity to use the injector gun against Dale's neck, right into the jugular vein. Dale gasped, then lay there gritting his teeth. It hurt like hell.

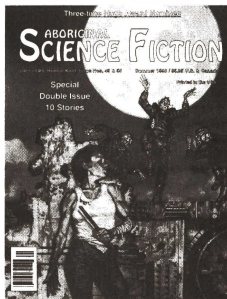
Consciousness dropped away like a stone falling down a dark, deep well.

There was a large living room, much larger than his old one. There was a big, comfortable reclining chair, and a TV screen that took up a whole wall. There was no kitchen, though, and no bathroom, and no bedroom. This was because Dale no longer needed them.

"The absolute necessity of conserving energy and resources forced society into some harsh decisions," his orientation counselor, Marilyn, had told him. "It was either outright genocide, or relocation of a large percentage of the population into simulation. As you know, it takes about 1/10,000th the energy and resources to support a person in simulation than it does in the outside 'reality.' No offense meant, but it was quite obvious to the Census Bureau that your lifestyle could easily be simulated — and so, here you are: your personality and memories recorded and kept alive in a computer simulated world." Which was fine with Dale, since all the latest TV shows were piped in directly, just like in real life.

Dale also found out he had been monitored by the Census Bureau ever since his accident, and had been used by the Census to set up and catch Vlad and Professor Aki. Virginia Mergle, the woman who had sent Dale to Vlad, had done so at the request of the Bureau. "What ever happened to Vlad and the Professor, anyway?" Dale had asked. Marilyn had told him that they were doing time, right there in the same computer, in a simulated jail.

There is justice in this world, Dale thought, changing the channel on his simulated TV. □



## Our Next Issue

The Summer 1996 issue of *Aboriginal SF* will feature a number of stories by former *Aboriginal* contributors making return appearances, including "Sportsmen" by E. H. Wong; and "Walking Backward Through Death's Door" by Karl G. Schlosser.

And, of course, we will have a slew of new faces, including many whose appearance in *Aboriginal* marks their first professional sale. The stories by newcomers include "Don't Dance" by Beatrice J. Corry, who happened to see the above piece of art by Jon Foster at Boskone and wrote a story to accompany it, "The Afterlife" by Delia M. Turner; "Love in the Silicon Age" by Mark Wolverton; "Growing Higher" by P.J.L. Pinder; "The Will" by Stephen D. Haltom (Stephen participates in a writers workshop with Patricia Anthony); "Flashed Shadows" by Morgan Hua; "Into The Labrynth" by Molly Barr; and "Changes" by William Barton.

Plus we'll have all of our usual features.

The issue after next will also introduce a new book reviewer for *Aboriginal*: Mark L. Olson.

# Syrinx

By Terry McGarry

Art by Clyde Duensing III

The ancient Scottish curse has come to haunt you again, Nigel. I told myself, looking out over the swampland of our target planet, Terra-class Alpha Lyrae IX. Seemed kind of unfair, since the curse concerned the play *Macbeth*, and I had done the opera. And done it long ago, before the wreck of my voice and hopes, before my self-imposed exile from the world of music, more a home than any planet could ever be.

Especially this one. Algae, reeds, algae, arborescent reeds, algae, reedlike insects ... So far this planet had diddly-squat in the way of interesting life-forms, and probably less in the way of salable natural resources. Which meant no commission for me or my two co-surveyors.

Our pod — a spitball *ptooyed* from the dropship — had slipped routinely into orbit around the greenish world. The dropship was already light-days away; it was to return for us in four Standard weeks. While waiting for atmospheric test results, we'd formed a band: Chris, our technician-datamonger, on Jew's harp; me on harmonica; and geologist Reb on a specimen-tank drum. We sounded terrible, and elicited snide comments from our podboard AI, which had been endowed with the condescension of its human analog. But jamming beat hell out of listening to Reb recount his completion of the Kama Sutra's sixty-four tasks, or listening to Chris's silence. Or reciting my own litany of woes: the botched laser surgery that had ended my singing career; my hasty decision to fall back on my xenobiology degree and sign up with the survey company; and the fact that these two misfit surveyors were the closest thing to family I would ever have now.

But at last, reaction thrusters flatulating, we had braked to a landing on the surface, just in time for a runny, puke-green dawn — the first of four so far, which seemed four too many.

"Even this blasted mealtube looks like a reed," I grumbled in camp, sucking protein after another uneventful shift. Chris was perusing lapcomp downloads, his long black hair obscuring his face.

"S'gonna be a long frickin' month," Reb sighed. He grabbed a mealtube and plunked himself down next to Chris. "Anything worth anything?"

Chris shook his head, then quipped softly, "Less Nige makes Pan pipes."

That did it. We struck camp and set out in the surface module for the next quadrant on the list.

And there Reb and I found them. An entire lakeful of bladderlike amphibians, their prickly sides expanding and contracting. They looked like bag-

pipes, and emitted a fascinating, harmonic droning. After listening for a few minutes, I was able to unravel some of the sounds: rather than all droning continuously, the creatures seemed to take parts. Each "voice" was actually a combination of two tones, modulated up and down like a tune in harmony with itself while weaving in and out of the other voices. I was transfixed, straining to find patterns. Phrases like "Dorian mode" and "twelve-tone" came into my head.

"It's beautiful," I murmured. Reb elbowed me in the ribs.

"It's a bunch of animals making noise," he said. "Maybe they're purring or something. C'mon, let's move down a little closer; I want to see if there's anything promising near the lake."

As we approached, the singing stopped and the nearest pair of creatures leaped away through the reeds. I gestured to Reb to hold up for a minute, and the music tentatively resumed. One bagpipe creature called to another, and two responded in unison — what sounded like a question-and-answer session, sussing us out. My binocs gave me a view of two eye-stalks protruding from the long, reedy necks above the bladders, and every pair was trained on us in a look of cartoon-character surprise. The necks were flexible, curved toward us, and on a higher magnification I could just make out what appeared to be an embouchure below the eyes. "I've got to get one for dissection," I said. "I bet there's a couple of reeds in there."

"Two hours ago you couldn't stop griping about all the reeds on this planet. Then you tell me these bladder things are beautiful. And now you want to kill one to look at its reeds." Reb shook his tawny head.

"I have no intention of killing anything," I said. "But there might be a dead one lying around somewhere."

Reb got up from where we were crouching; this time the creatures did not respond to the movement. "Well, I'm gonna go check out that rock formation. I'll keep an eye out for any corpses — or a nose out."

I nodded absently, laying the binoculars on my knee and just listening. Most of them seemed to vocalize in minor thirds or diminished fifths, somewhere in the vicinity of middle C, and I marveled at the similarity to human music. At times it sounded Oriental, or Semitic. The tunes rose and fell more in scales than in intervals, and one creature would follow another in shifting from chromatic to diatonic; I got an impression of waves of joy followed by waves

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of sorrow. I told myself I was anthropomorphizing, I told myself Reb was right; I told myself I was neglecting my survey work, that there could be a cure right here at my feet for the most ornery human disease. But I was lured by these creatures' song as by a siren's, and I crept closer and closer to them, until the water threatened to slop over the tops of my hip boots.

This is crazy, I thought, feeling my lips part, my throat tighten. I looked at their alien, animal eye-stalks, regarding me placidly; there could be no intelligence there. Where were their brains? But I straightened my back, expanded my chest with air. I let my ears pick out a note being emitted by the nearest creature, and I willed my throat to obey.

The note came out. It was rough, more than hoarse; it sounded like a cheap viola string played with a sandpaper bow. But as it cracked, I let it flow up into another note, and another. With a voice I had not used in years — a voice that had made me sob, brokenhearted, the last time I'd heard it — I followed the alien melody, which rose and fell like the sides of a sleeper.

And they came toward me.

Here and there, a voice would fall silent as one of the creatures took one hop, then another, in my direction. I am not a linguist; I told myself it was the reaction a dog might have when called. But when the majority of them had gathered in little groups about ten meters away, I struck out on my own with a different tune: I sang them a rasping, aching six measures of Macbeth's "Pietà, rispetto, amore," thinking, as I did, that Verdi had called Shakespeare "the great searcher of the human heart." And one by one, in the queerest harmonies imaginable, they followed me, echoed me, and then led me off into a new tune of their own ....

"Well, hell," came Reb's voice from behind me, "if that ain't whistlin' Dixie."

I jerked out of my near-trance and twisted awkwardly to face him; I heard a flurry of splashing as the creatures sprang away. "You ever learn to knock?" I said. But I couldn't muster much anger at him. Despite his words, his face held a look of interest verging on awe.

"Hey, I'm sorry, buddy. That was a neat little chat y'all were having. But I actually came back for a reason. I found you a carcass. You want to help me lug it back to the pod?"

I had expected it to be badly decomposed owing to the watery environment, but it was in remarkably good shape. Reb had found it near the system of caves he'd gone off to investigate, and he started some geologic tests, muttering about Mohs' scale and haggis recipes, as I set up my equipment.

It seemed to have choked to death. In the center of the muscular underside, just above four sucker-covered pseudopods, was a feeding hole: an orifice of tendrils through which the creatures must sift water for nutrients. This poor brute had slurped up a reed-

snake. The oxygen-breathing snake had drowned and completely jammed up the works — and had apparently drowned quickly, since it had teeth and yhad left no bite marks.

Dissection revealed a sphincter halfway to the body, and a diaphragm by way of which watr was taken in and expelled. The same diaphragm controlled the airflow to the lung sacs, so I thought at first that to feed, they had to sing. There was fact an embouchure between the eyestalks, and inside it a set of reeds that looked for all the world like a bassoon's. But there was also an airhole under the embouchure, and a glottis to stop the flow of air through the reeds. So the singing was voluntary, intentional — and the size of the brain in 'tis specimen's back confirmed, to me, that thrs was a thought process behind the choice of song.

Had there been for my own? I wondered. Back home, the arts were considered Bohemian; prestige lay in science, and my singing had been a extracurricular activity. But just after my dissertation defense, my voice instructor persuaded me to audition for a local opera chorus, and I made it. After two rehearsals — the transcendence of votes blending with mine in a communion the scientific world never offer — I turned down my postdoc position. I was hooked.

What family I had left was mortified by my descent into the ghetto. Maybe that's why, when the big part came at last, I tried too hard, pushed my voice too far. Maybe that's why the argeon "accidentally" removed more than the nodes on my vocal cords; I will always wonder if my relatives paid him off. Maybe that's why I signed th with the sur vey company — because I knew th within two missions, with the time deficit, I wold never have to face my family again. Once I'd lost what really mattered, the only recourse was to throw the rest away ....

"So what kinda brain's this Hover bag got, anyway?" Reb asked, peering over my shoulder. "Anything in there we can sell?"

"We're not selling anything here," I said sharply. "You're tellin' me," Reb said, misunderstanding my comment.

Then Chris looked up from his workstation. "Coal."

I froze, not wanting to believe it. "You mean we're sittin' on a swamp-covered diamond here?" Reb opened his mouth to let loose his eponymous yell, then looked at me and closed it. "Oh, hell, Nige. You gotta be kiddin' me."

I thought of naming this planet Syrnix, for the nymph whose friends turne her into reeds to save her from the satyr Pan, who hen fashioned the reeds into pipes, which emitted the sound of a complaint. I thought about how a Terra parrot talks by manipulating its syrinx, the lower portion of its windpipe, making its tongueless speech look like ventriloquism. A very old parrot was the ast being on Earth to use the language of the extinct Ature Indians ....

What else could I come up with to block out what Chris had just said? Coal, mined out on Earth, could be crushed, not only into synthetic gems but into the crystals used in the stellar drive the Company relied on. It was one of the most lucrative of finds. And it still required either strip-mining of the surface, or pulverization of the planet. Company policy.

"They're sentient," I said to Reb. As if it were enough.

"Hey, so am I, Boychoir —, and I'm poor."

"But you're alive. They won't be if the Company gets wind of this."

A chime announced the computer's imminent two cents' worth. "Too late, my dear Nigel. I've logged the data. You know the rules as well as I do. Hiding discoveries is a no-no."

"Unlog the data, chiphead," I said, feeling blood rush to my face. "Goddamn you, alter it to show that the coal is something useless. These creatures are alien beings. Give me time to figure a way to relocate them!"

As the computer chastised me dryly for my naiveté, Reb rolled his eyes at Chris. "I hate it when he gets all sappy and moralistic, man. I really, really hate it." He dropped into a chair. "I mean, I didn't like what happened to the indigs on Eden and Sander's Orb, either, but you can't fight the Company."

It was known among the contractors, though not back on Earth, that the Company had a tacit policy of wiping out life-forms before a proper study could be conducted to determine sentience. It worked well; out here, where there were no rules except the Company's, it was easy for them to destroy the evidence before anything could be proven. I thought about how the constellation Lyra was once called Vultur. I looked helplessly at Chris; for some reason, both Reb and I always did in times of crisis.

Chris gazed back at me, inscrutable. "Find something else," he said. "Like Reb said. Find bucks in the bags."

I looked at the carcass in the dissection tube. There was nothing valuable about these aliens, from the Company's point of view. What else could be of value on this world, when the chances of finding one thing had been so small to begin with?

But there had to be something.

I attacked my job with a vengeance. I spent the next two Standard weeks analyzing every element of the ecosystem, searching every blasted reed, every bug, every unicellular organism for something that I could recognize as useful. There was an unusual com-

ponent in the water that I kept trying, and failing, to isolate, but there were no grounds for claiming potential value, not against what we already knew the planet contained. Chris and Reb did more than their part; I'd never seen either of them work so assiduously for his own profit. Core samples were taken, analyses begun; the computer told

us querulously that we were taxing its poor brain.

It had occurred to me to destroy the pod and thus the data, saving just our life-suits, some rations, and a distress beacon to summon the dropship, but greedier men than I had already tried that, and the computer

was well-armed, with both hardware and a healthy sense of self-preservation.

Time went by, and there was nothing, and more nothing. Exploring in the surface module, Reb found a few other scattered colonies of bladderpipes; I longed to visit them, to compare the groups, but I couldn't spare the time, and I didn't want to think about how many colonies there might be. In a matter of days the dropship would return for us, and nothing I could do, nothing I could even make up, could stop it.

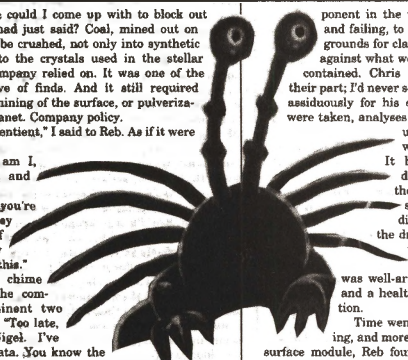
At dawn, I found a big, comfortable rock, and sat with the bladderpipes and sang. A group gathered in the water near me, sounding more somber than usual, as if they could sense through my own broken song my anguish and despair. I suspected that a xenolinguist with a cetology background might, after a few years of study, be able to tell me what they were saying, but I had no doubt that this was language. And I was sure of one other thing: that these aliens had touched the only valuable part of me, the part I'd thought was dead. This, at least, I would not throw away.

I heard Reb and Chris slogging toward me, and tried to sing reassurance to the bladderpipes; only a few remained nearby as my podmates clambered up onto my rock, but none of them went very far, either. They began to sing among themselves, a calm, early-morning kind of song, as I turned my attention to my companions.

"Come to commiserate with me on the second cosmic failure in my life?" I said quietly.

Reb snorted. "Yeah, that sounds like the old Nige. I liked you grumpy. This new, determined guy just wasn't you."

"Well," I said slowly, "I've got one more surprise for you guys. I'm gonna stay down here. I'm abandoning ship. Maybe it's like lying down in front of the bulldozer. But if they're going to destroy these creatures, I want to at least live out my life here with them before the mining ships come. Then if the bulldozer runs me over, well ..."



Chris opened his mouth to speak, then looked at the bladderpipes and grunted, bitterly.

Reb sighed. "What loquacious ole Chris is unable to tell you, my buddy, is that the way things stand now — and he and I have been in this biz a lot longer than you, and we've seen a few real unpleasant things — what we figger the dropship is gonna do, as soon as it picks us up, is send down a couple of low-level nukes to take out most of what's living on this planet."

"I'm staying anyway," I said, wondering if I could go through with it. "I guess our friendly neighborhood AI already transmitted the data to them."

Reb scratched his chin. "As a matter of fact, good buddy, no. And that's what Chris and I are here to talk to you about."

I looked at him, and then at Chris. "What's going on?"

"Knew its human analog," Chris said, shrugging. "Guy went by the book, hated bad stuff, hated crimes. Nukes would be a crime. Talked to comp; told it what I saw on Eden."

"You were *there*?" I said.

"We both were, Nige," said Reb. "Before you joined up. That's probably why we took you on, bitter as you were. We were bitter, too." He cleared his throat, shifting uncomfortably at his own unaccustomed sentiment. "Now, listen. The AI bought you some time by failing to make its transmission when the dropship came in range. The Company managers onboard won't find out about the coal deposits till after the pod is aboard. That gives you at most three days to get these bagpipes to safety. Save one group, anyway."

"How? We can't ferry them up to the ship — there's no room, and they'll claim they're just animals —"

"No. You gotta talk to them. If they really are sentient, you can make them follow you."

"Where? What the *hell* are you talking about?" I was on my feet, raging against the possibility of hopes raised and then dashed.

"Reb will show you," Chris said, and his monotone calmed me.

"Okay," I said, nodding. "Lay on, Macduff."

It was Reb's caves. There was a deep, convoluted system of them not far from the bladderpipes' lake. They had a mild rotten-egg smell, and dark-gray walls. We made our way in, crouching a bit, and Reb showed me a bowl-shaped cavern perhaps thirty meters across; he could rig a pump in a few hours that would fill the central depression with swamp water, and set up a generator to keep it warm and light.

"It's a gamble," he said. "I don't know if it will keep y'all alive long enough for the radiation count outside to come down to a tolerable level. We'll leave you provisions, but there'll have to be enough nutrients in the water for the bagpipes. And you'll have to keep your fingers crossed that they don't kill themselves with their own waste products."

"I don't think they will," I said vaguely. "I think the system's tight enough ... the algae seem to process most of the waste .... I think the vegetation will keep me going once we get out ...." I turned to him. "But I don't think a bunch of limestone is going to keep us from getting zapped, Reb."

Reb grinned. "That brings me to the nearest trick of the week. Scratch that wall with your fingernail."

I looked at him dubiously, but obeyed — or tried. My fingernail wouldn't scratch it.

"Two and a half on the Mohs scale," Reb said. "A pocketknife would scratch it. I thought it was stibnite at first, but it's darker, and I ran some tests. Galenium sulfide. Sometimes you find it as large replacements of limestone or dolomite. Like here."

"C'mon, Reb, I'm a goddamn biologist —"

"It's like lead, good buddy. Back this far, I'd say you'll be perfectly safe, with an air purifier to get rid of some of those sulfur fumes. We can set you up just right, Chris and me ... and ..." He looked at Chris, who nodded, and then continued. "Well, we thought, when we got back to Earth, that we might just raise a little hell about deep-space Company abuses. It's something we should have done a long time ago. So whaddya say?"

I wanted to thank them. I wanted to demand that, having done this much, they find a way for me to save the other colonies, too. I wanted to tell the bastards they were crazy, that I'd never let them do this. I said, "Hell, then. Let's get to work." And let out a whoop, in my cracked, ruined voice, that echoed and echoed and echoed in my cave.

What happened at the end was an accident. But finding a use for moldy bread was an accident, too, so what the hell. The bladderpipes followed me, all right; I don't know if it was curiosity, or the desperation in my hideous singing voice, or genuine communication, but it only took me a couple of hours after we flooded the bowl cavern to get them in there and be sure they would stay. The dropship arrived later that day; I slapped Chris on the shoulder and shook Reb's hand, and we wished each other luck.

"Don't know where we'll find a third for our band," Chris said quietly. Reb grinned at me — a grin somehow reassuring and sad — then gave Chris a shove toward the pod.

I turned to go back to the cave; I had now officially jumped ship. Before I had taken three steps, it hit me like a bludgeon that I was going to be the only person in this place for the rest of my life. I staggered, part of me struggling to turn around — it wasn't too late yet, I could still go with them —

And I tripped, and sliced open my arm on a corner of the instrument case I was carrying, and landed facedown in the swamp muck. I was soaked to the skin in chilly, slimy liquid; the cold shock of it made everything very clear, and I didn't look back as I heard the pod power up for liftoff. I slogged onward to the cave, forcing down the cold lump of fear in my

belly. Then I went to stitch up the gash ... and discovered only a thin scar.

Of course it was something in the water — whatever I'd been unable to isolate in time. It was too late to tell the ship; I had no means of communicating with it, with the pod gone. And even if I had, I wouldn't have been able to corroborate my sudden empirical data; they would have assumed it was a last-ditch effort of mine to keep the planet for myself, and either arrested me or nuked me anyway.

It was why the reedsnake had left no bite marks in the dead bladderpipe. It might be no more than a fast-healing agent, but it would be valuable, and if the radiation didn't neutralize its properties — which would be a cosmic irony — it would make my arguments for sentience moot. I sat there, in a cave resounding with the droning harmonics of four dozen bladderpipes, and, for the first time in years, could not stop laughing.

**I**t's dawn, according to the timer on the generator, which just kicked on the lights. It's been about two weeks since I first sat down here at the lapcomp. I'm still grieving for the lost colonies outside, but I know we did all we could, and the pain is something I'll just have to live with. I'm terrified of loneliness, but it hasn't really hit yet, and so far the confinement's not too bad; if I could stand the pod, I can stand this, and the bladderpipes don't seem to mind much at all.

A couple of them pressed up next to me during the night, when I rolled to the water's edge in my sleep. They felt funny — like fuzzy balloons. I wonder if they were trying to comfort me, keep me company. It could be another step in the communication process, a reaching-out. I'm keeping track of what I perceive to be linguistic patterns; at least it keeps me busy, and who knows? Maybe I've fulfilled not the curse of the Scottish play but, like Macbeth, a destiny I misunderstood.

I wonder what Reb and Chris will do when they get home. I guess in about fifty years I'll find out — and by then I should have enough documentation of the bladderpipes' sentience, and of the healing properties of the water, to convince anyone, all sealed up safe and sound in case I'm no longer around. Even if I run out of cubes, and end up writing on reed parchment.

Because this morning I'm going to try gargling with the water. It'll either kill me ... or cure me. My voice is going to be the first test. The timing might be a little late, and there won't be any reviewers to hear me. But the bladderpipes will. I will.

The 'pipes are droning away now, the sound echoed by the cave until it makes my bones hum; for now, at least, the air and radiation levels are where they should be. Will we make it? Will the water work on me? I don't know.

But I still feel like singing. □

## Competitive Sex in Your Car

By Sarah Smith

*She thought that she was Colette with an airbrush  
And he was Gauguin with a gun  
Hedy LaMarr was a natural follower  
Life with Jimmy was fun  
They met at a party at night  
By the end of the evening they knew they'd go far  
Jimmy Cagney and Hedy LaMarr  
Having*

*competitive  
sex in your car.*

*Jimmy's in love with her hype and her haircut  
Hedy's along for the ride  
Jimmy likes handguns, holsters, and Hedy  
He's spent time inside  
They dress up in leather  
together  
They spend their nights at a leather bar  
And then they settle down with a roll of quarters  
To play competitive*

*sex in your car.*

*Heisenberg explains these occasional excursions  
beyond the boundaries of rational thought  
By saying you can either be who you are  
Or know what you want.  
Those with goals go a little bit faster  
Sometimes a little too far  
You really oughtn't to know them  
They're  
so bad for your car.*

*Downstairs tonight in your parking garage  
Downstairs in the dark  
Hedy's in your backseat with a leather-covered Uzi  
And her eyes are beginning to spark  
And Jimmy with a big roll of quarters  
And a long steel-studded cigar  
Will invite you in  
And he'll start to grin  
And Jimmy and you  
And Hedy too  
Will soon engage in (unh)  
Engage in (oooh)  
Competitive  
Sex in your car.*

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# The Last Snicker

By Sally Kohonoski

Art by Carol Heyer

**“Y**ou mean they really dressed like *that*?” The kid waved a hand at the diorama. “And all that stuff was in the stores for anybody to buy?”

Bertie leaned on the handle of the buffing machine, tickled at the kid's eager questions. “Sure. Malls used to be full of stores. I used to go with my buddies after school and on weekends to hang out. Everybody did.”

The lights in the 20th Century Commerce displays dimmed. Bertie looked around at the deserted gallery. “Listen, Kid. It's closing time ...”

“I'll wait till the guards come. This is *interesting!*”

... and I could get in trouble. Tell you what. Come back real soon and we can talk some more.” Bertie glanced out at the corridor. “But you got to go now. The museum's closing.”

The kid squinted up at him. “You *really* did all that stuff?”

“Look. Come back next week, and I'll have something for you.” Bertie nodded toward the convenience store diorama. “Something you'll really like.”

The kid narrowed his eyes. “Some of that stuff?” He pointed where child-sized mannequins in neon shorts and tees pushed coins across a counter.

“Sure can.”

“Can't come back 'til a week from Saturday.” The kid jammed both hands in his overall pockets. “I used all my transit credits to get here today. My Mom's gonna be mad.”

Bertie assessed the kid's age — nine? Ten at the most. “You're a smart boy. You'll figure a way.”

“You'll keep your promise?”

Bertie hesitated as the kid's sun-bleached hair glowed in the dim light like dandelion fuzz — made him want to touch it, made him remember another ten-year-old long ago. “It'll be worth the trouble,” he said.

The kid ducked as Bertie reached to pat his head. “Maybe I don't believe you, Mister.”

Then he ran out, the sound of his footsteps echoing in the corridor until he was gone. Bertie shrugged. He'd be back.

Bertie punched the buffer's controls, its muffled rumble breaking the silence. He guided it around railing stanchions and into hard-to-reach corners, then pushed it out onto the gallery floor and set the pre-programmed cycle. Bertie leaned against the supermarket diorama to watch as the machine obediently back and forth, wiping away suff marks — all that remained of those who came

to gawk at the funny way people lived in the Gray Nineties.

Bertie snorted. Oh, they all came to laugh at the old ways: the silly stores, merchandise and clothing in the exhibits. Then every one of them beat a path to the repro stores to exchange commodity credits for souvenirs.

The Collapse. What a crock everyone'd been handed afterwards! Couldn't anyone else see how the government used it — an excuse to control everything — just like Project Savior? He was sick of hearing how much better things were now. He remembered how things used to be ... *really* used to be. How would anything ever change if the kids weren't told?

But this kid was smart. He'd always preferred smart ones, because they didn't run off right away. You could work with them, show 'em stuff, keep their interest a while, once you got their attention.

The world he'd known was long gone, except for bits and pieces squirreled away in museum archives. And he could get to it.

A small pain twisted in his gut. No ... dammit! Not stealing! Bertie pressed hands against his stomach until it passed. He was not going to *steal!* Damn the justice system, psychoconversion, Project Savior ... all of it! He only wanted to keep his promise. His little friend would be back, and Bertie didn't intend to let him down.

**H**e stood in the musty gloom of the archives, bin upon bin stretching into darkness. Months of patience had gone into figuring a way in, though nothing like the patience he'd needed for what he'd pulled off inside. There, subterfuge was survival. Others had been too crude to figure that out. Wasn't he living proof of how cooperation with the primal whims of guards and inmates made you invisible — just like here?

Once it would have been degrading to wipe and dust and flush away the daily traces of the idle curious. But compared to the indignities of prison, this job was okay. One reward was the children ... the little mobs trailing shrieks and giggles after harried teachers. And, sometimes, the occasional kid brave enough to ask an old man questions.

He shook himself and quickened his steps down the aisle.

At the first sign of nausea, Bertie began the litany ... *borrowing, not stealing; borrowing, not stealing ...* The words helped keep the sickness at



bay as he headed for the drawer ... *borrowing, not stealing; borrowing, not stealing* ...

He located the file he wanted, then selected one clear plastic envelope. Bertie crouched to examine its contents, a carefully preserved candy wrapper. He yanked the pencil and tissue from his shirt pocket, glad that the brown, red and blue design was simple to trace. He finished as his hand began shaking from the strain.

*I'm putting it back, putting it back* ... He repeated the magic words over and over as he jammed the envelope back in place. Bertie got all the way to the maintenance room before doubling over.

He lay on the floor warring with the aftereffects — the nausea and pain in his guts. Even with his mission done, the wrapper back in the drawer and no one the wiser, it hit — despite his innocence.

Damn Project Savior, damn every stinking do-gooder, and double damn the prison riot — everything that had done this to him!

After all, his little worm had worked. He could have walked away, his sentence done, and every trace of Bertold Mahoney expunged from every computer that ever contained pieces of his life and crimes. But the riot ruined everything. Afterwards, nothing could save him from the reformers who were intent on eradicating crime, who insisted on purging him of some vice before he could get clean of Inside.

But he was smarter than they were. Smart enough to stay until his memory 'returned'. Smart enough to 'confess', although thievery had never been his crime.

How tickled they'd be. "What are you thinking?" they'd ask, testing and probing. "How do you feel?" they'd ask, pushing in needles and electrodes. Sometimes Bertie believed Project Savior had bleached out every brain cell capable of larcenous thought, short-circuited every synapse that could relay a thieving impulse.

Wiping the sweat from his face, Bertie cursed through clenched teeth. Then, as sweet relief swept his body, he chuckled. Bertold Mahoney had beat 'em then, and he would again.

**T**he next Friday, Bertie made his way to the Federal Transit Authority station with careful plans laid for his boarded commodity credits. He disliked the transports. They were shiny slugs careening around the city like beads on wires. Traveling in the immaculate, clean-smelling coaches always made him suspicious, made him long for the smell of gasoline, a good old-fashioned traffic jam, even the sight of a little graffiti.

Patiently waiting until the metro workers with priority credits thinned out, he took a place in line. He maneuvered to the front, boarded. As usual, someone yielded a seat in deference to his age. Today, however, his feebleness was not totally an act.

Bertie passed a shaking hand over his face as the transport lurched out over the city. The last ten

nights left him starved for sleep. It had to be the heat that caused the nightmares, the ones that brought back the riot, that made him wake shivering, afraid to close his eyes again. Ugly memories of being sealed in the tower where no one, not even the warden, could get at him, of days and nights without food, of watching every conceivable atrocity, of the Fed's raid, of the few demented who had survived ...

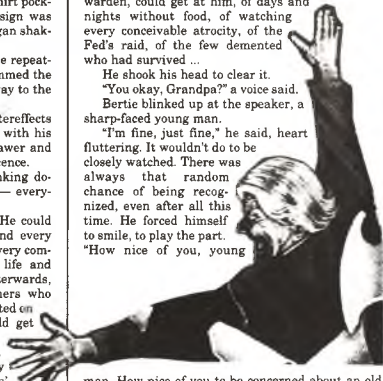
He shook his head to clear it.

"You okay, Grandpa?" a voice said.

Bertie blinked up at the speaker, a sharp-faced young man.

"I'm fine, just fine," he said, heart fluttering. It wouldn't do to be closely watched. There was always that random chance of being recognized, even after all this time. He forced himself to smile, to play the part.

"How nice of you, young



man. How nice of you to be concerned about an old man."

The younger passenger's eyes swung away to rivet upon a safe spot over the window. Bertie sought the eyes of others around them. "Isn't he nice?"

That did it. Everyone nearby blanched at the intimacy of eye contact, at his eager friendliness, and turned their faces away. Bertie added to their discomfort by rocking and humming under his breath to assure being avoided ... and forgotten.

Grandpa indeed! He was years from retirement subsidy credits. Maybe the eighteen years Inside had taken their toll, but he was strong and maintenance work helped him stay wiry.

The FTA stop was a couple blocks from the Import Commissary he'd chosen. As he walked, the morning breeze felt good after the closeness of the night. When he got there, a good-sized line had already formed. Bertie waited with an air of decrepitude, and, when at long last he reached the big counter and made his request, the clerk told him to go to the other side, another line, like they always did. A couple behind him watched with curiosity as he moved toward the much shorter line — the one under the sign that read "NONESSENTIALS".

The clerk shook his head, like they always did, when he painstakingly inquired how much his credits would buy. When he turned to go, the package safe in his pocket, he heard the clerk comment to another. "Can you believe that? He used enough



credits for a whole week's groceries! Just for a piece of chocolate."

The art work used to take a lot longer before he found out about plastichrome. Bertie loved how you could cut it any way you wanted, layering and overlapping it to make designs. How, when exposed to lamp light, it developed itself onto paper, cloth, even metal. By fishing larger pieces from waste cans in the graphics department, he'd acquired a pretty good selection. Bertie hummed as he snipped and arranged pieces to match the tracing, glad he had all the right colors.

The value of keeping a critical eye on all kinds of trash had been a lesson learned inside. Security, alert to anything suitable for making weapons, ignored most everything else. With patience he had finally found a usable diskette for his little worm. Of course, you wouldn't find that kind of thing lying around anymore. Not since The Collapse.

He finished the wrapper. Crumpling up two unsatisfactory attempts, he brushed up snippets of plastichrome into the waste bin. Only after a visit to the flusher down the hall to dispose of them did he remove the parcel of chocolate from his jacket pocket. He placed it reverently on a clean sheet of paper and looked at the chocolate with pride. Somebody else might settle for carob or that waxy imitation stuff — but not him. Smiling, Bertie retrieved the straight razor from its hiding place behind the desk drawer and began.

It was almost a ritual now. First a slice off the end. That was for him. Then parings to achieve the right shape for his creation. For that he relied on memory. He savored the parings, too. Finally, the rest went into the wrapper for his little friend.

Bertie examined it critically. One of his better efforts, he thought. He'd check it against the ones in the diorama at work. Humming off key, he returned the razor to its hiding place and nestled his creation next to it. Checking the tiny room once more for overlooked scraps, he hummed louder with satisfaction and left for work.

Friday afternoons, school transports usually clogged the museum courtyard while crowds of kiddies herded aboard. Bertie watched them during the minutes remaining before he logged on duty. He hated the coveralls they put on kids nowadays. Since The Collapse everybody seemed to affect some kind of uniform, but they looked unnaturally ugly on little kids. He watched a line of tots straggle up the ramp of a daycare transport; you couldn't tell the boys from the girls. He could remember the flounced dresses mothers used to put on little girls, and how cute little boys used to look in shorts ...

"Hey! Remember me?"

Bertie spun around. The kid stared back at him. "What ... what are you doing here?"

The kid pouted. "You forgot!"

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Bertie looked quickly around the courtyard. This couldn't be happening. He must calm down, keep the kid calm. He swallowed the chunk of panic in his throat and forced a smile. "Sure I remember you."

He started edging toward the big front door, casually, to avoid unwelcome attention. "It's just that you said you were coming tomorrow."

The kid stopped and jutted out his chin. "You probably lied anyway."

Bertie could feel the kid's disappointment. He couldn't let him down. Not now. But he had to distract him. "So, you show up a day early and call me a liar again. I think maybe some other kid would really appreciate what I was going to give you."

That made the kid think long enough for Bertie to maneuver him into the shadow of the big double columns. The kid jammed both hands in his pockets and tilted his head.

"I'm sorry. Okay? Now, can I have it?"

"What are you sorry about, exactly?" Bertie said, teasing.

The kid made a pouty face again. "I'm sorry I called you a liar. Now, where is it?"

Bertie smiled in spite of his nervousness. "It's safe at home. I was keeping it for tomorrow. I'm already late for work ..." The kid frowned and Bertie paused a heartbeat before adding, "... but you go on inside. I'll be right back."

"Tell me what it is," the boy demanded.

"Patience, Kid. Just walk around like always. Remember, this is a secret." Bertie left before the kid could say more.

Why didn't things ever go like planned? Just like inside. All his careful arrangements ruined. He'd trusted a few to create the disturbance for the extra time needed on the computer. But everything got out of hand. Then the crude ones took over and turned it into the riot. Even then, it was only his superior thinking that had saved him.

How ironic that The Collapse itself kicked off before it was all over. Everything he'd sweated over to erase about himself and his friends from society's collective databanks became trivial compared to the computer virus unleashed from who-knows-where. Experts had stood helpless worldwide while millions upon millions of databases were ravaged. Banks, corporations, and bureaucracies floundered as electronic brains gasped a death rattle that echoed round the globe. It still tickled Bertie to remember stepping into the world again, and finding millions bereft of identity and property — just like him.

Bertie puffed up the steps to his room, grabbed the stuff from his hiding place and ran outside again. He slowed to a walk when he realized running had given him a headache. This was just a little setback, he admonished himself. After all, it wasn't his fault details changed. In fact, he thought with a thrill, it made things more challenging. He had to be flexible. Bertie thought instead about how the kid's hair glowed in the light.

Wait until he saw this! Bertie patted the lump in his pocket.

When he logged in, he was relieved to see he was only ten minutes late. Not enough to get in trouble. He thought about locating the kid, but decided it would be more fun to be found.

He was setting up the controls on the squeegee when the kid showed up. Bertie pretended not to notice and watched the big blade squeak up and down the Arcade Games window until the kid tugged at his elbow.

"You got it?"

"Yeah." He looked back at the squeegee, savoring the moment.

"Hey, I got to catch the FTA soon."

Bertie decided not to answer. The kid stood quietly. Good, Bertie thought, he's not a whiner.

Licking his lips, Bertie looked around. Except for an AARP group in the corridor, no one else was in sight. Heart pounding, he patted the kid's shoulder. "I'm gonna go over there," he said, pointing to a doorway deep in an alcove between exhibits. "You make sure nobody sees you and meet me back there in a couple minutes. Keep cool."

The kid looked confused, then giggled. "You talk funny. 'Keep cool,'" he said, giggling again.

Good God, he's a giggler, Bertie realized. Got to keep him from doing that. Massaging the bridge of his nose to relieve the headache, he walked into the alcove. His mind calmer, Bertie reached in his pocket and thought of the next step.

He would start by saying, "Look, Kid, what I've got for you. The world's last Snickers candy bar." Then he would ...

His headache erupted in a spasm of agony, as though a phantom hand squeezed his skull. Shards of pain stabbed his gut. Bertie dropped to his knees clutching his midsection. The candy bar tumbled to the floor.

"Where is it, Mister?" a small voice said.

Bertie squinted up, bleary-eyed, tears rolling into his mouth. It was the kid. Bertie scrambled for the candy bar, but somehow found himself curled up at the boy's feet instead.

"Is this it, Mister?" The kid dangled the candy bar in his face.

Bertie tried swiping at it, but the pit of his stomach lurched into his throat.

Eyes round with surprise, the kid dodged him.

Bertie fumbled for the razor. Another crushing wave of nausea forced him to his hands and knees.

"Yucko," the kid said, watching as Bertie heaved.

He fought to stand. A new round of pain gripped his skull. Bertie grabbed at his temples. The razor fell skittering across the highly polished alcove floor. As he searched the shadows for it, he could barely hear past the roaring in his ears.

"Um ... gotta catch the FTA," the kid said through a mouthful of chocolate. "Keep cool," he added as he took off. And giggled. □

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# Best of the Best

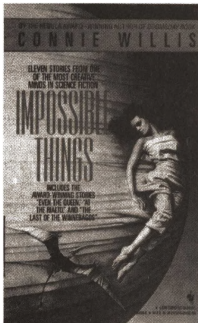
## *Impossible Things*

By Connie Willis

Bantam/Spectra, 1994

461 pp., \$5.99

Connie Willis is one of the very best writers in the SF field. Her stories feature brilliant plotting and great characterization, and she's won countless awards. As Gardner Dozois points out in his perceptive introduction to her new collection, *Impossible Things*, those who class Willis's writing as



"sentimental" have read it only superficially. There is a grim, hard-headed tone to much of her work. It is a loss to the literary world that her work is only known to the SF audience.

"The Last of the Winnebagos," for example, is not really about

### Rating System

☆☆☆☆☆	Outstanding
☆☆☆☆	Very Good
☆☆☆	Good
☆☆	Fair
☆	Poor

how sad it would be if all the dogs died. It's a story of love, loss, and guilt, as well as a warning about man's gradual destruction of his environment. "Even the Queen" is a story about what would happen if menstruation were abolished, but it is also a pointedly hilarious satire of radical feminist rhetoric.

Some of the stories are not really SF, though most of those are at least *about* science: "At the Rialto," "Schwarzchild Radius," and "In the Late Cretaceous." The one that doesn't fit is "Winter's Tale," a story of Shakespeare told from Anne Hathaway's viewpoint; SF or not, I wouldn't have missed it for the world.

"Chance" and "Time Out" take very different approaches to housewifely dissatisfaction, the one genuinely tragic and moving (it made me cry, which isn't easy to do), the other exceedingly funny. "Ado," a story of political correctness of both right and left run amok, is funny but uncomfortably close to the truth. "Spice Pogrom" is a classic screwball comedy in a well thought-out science-fictional setting. "Jack" returns to the London Blitz (featured in Willis's award-winning "Fire Watch") for a meditation on the benefits war brings to some.

This is a brilliant collection, not to be missed. If you're not reading Connie Willis, you're not reading the best SF has to offer.

Rating: ☆☆☆☆☆

### *Small Gods*

By Terry Pratchett

Harper/Collins, 1994

272 pp., \$20.00

(Also a Harper paperback)

Terry Pratchett has outdone himself. His thirteenth Discworld novel, *Small Gods*, is the best yet. With this book he has moved

away from parody and written a real fantasy novel, with solid characters, philosophy, and point of view — all while being screamingly funny.

*Small Gods* is completely accessible to people who haven't read any Discworld books before; they'll just miss a couple of jokes. It does, though, help to know that the Discworld is in fact flat, and rests on the backs of elephants standing on the back of a giant turtle swimming through space (a



cosmological debate is central to the novel).

The philosophy of life Pratchett presents here is nothing you haven't heard before, but you could do worse than live by it. The author has lots of interesting things to say about good and evil and the distinction between religion and belief. There is a well worked-out fantasy system of how the gods operate; while there's nothing new in the concept that

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gods need believers to stay alive, there is something new in what Pratchett does with it.

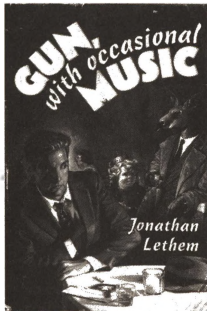
And, of course, the book is hilarious. Terry Pratchett is not Piers Anthony; though he makes the occasional pun, he doesn't rely on them for humor. I would be hard put to pick out a favorite bit, but in particular the parodies of famous stories about ancient Greece are priceless.

*Small Gods* is recommended without reservation. Go learn why Pratchett is a best-seller in England.

Rating: ☆☆☆☆ 1/2

*Gun, with Occasional Music*

By Jonathan Lethem  
Harcourt Brace, 1994  
272 pp., \$19.95  
(Trade paperback from TOR)



Jonathan Lethem's first novel, *Gun, with Occasional Music* is a hard-boiled mystery set in a bleakly funny dystopian future.

In a hard-boiled novel, tone is everything, and Lethem pulls it off beautifully, though occasionally there's too noticeable a striving for effect. The mystery has a classic Chandleresque plot, featuring immoral rich people, a femme fatale, a hapless fall guy, murder, illegitimacy, adultery, a criminal boss, corrupt police, and a lone investigator seeking the truth. I

figured out part of the mystery before the end, but the puzzle is not the main interest.

The details of Lethem's future are consistent and convincing even when they're silly, as with the "evolved animals" who feature prominently. The future gets creepier and creepier as you proceed through the book, as you learn about make, and Forgettol, and babyheads, and slaveboxes. The reason for some details (like all TV broadcasts being abstract) is unclear, but they add to the atmosphere.

The characters are good, if rather one-dimensional. They are the standard cast for this sub-genre. The narrator, Conrad Metcalf, has an unusual science-fictional sexual problem, but is otherwise right out of Chandler. He's likable even though he can be obnoxious.

*Gun, with Occasional Music* is a very good mystery and very good science fiction, with SF details that are not just window-dressing. It is a notable first novel.

Rating: ☆☆☆☆

*Hour of the Octopus*

By Joel Rosenberg  
Ace, 1994  
263 pp., \$4.99

Here's another hard-boiled novel, this one a fantasy. *Hour of the Octopus*, Joel Rosenberg's second novel about Kami Dan'Shai, is highly enjoyable. Kami is a hard-nosed narrator with a style that's distinctly his own, not an imitation of the classic hard-boiled writers, and distinctly fantasy. I haven't read the first book, *D'Shai*, but this book is easily appreciated without it (though it made me want to go back and read *D'Shai*).

The murder mystery, which doesn't come in until late in the book, is important, but not central to the novel; what is central is Kami's attempt to make his way safely through the hazards of life as a bourgeois among the ruling class. *D'Shai* is a fascinating, vivid, many-layered society, not just your standard medievaesque

fantasy world. The details of magic in *D'Shai* are also of interest, with some delightful pseudo-scientific terminology and a few original touches.

Kami is an engaging character. All the characters are involving, though the villains are not as well-rounded as they could have been — a common problem in detective novels.

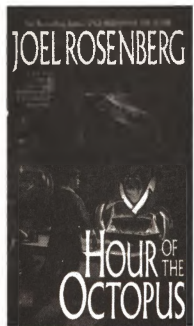
I recommend *Hour of the Octopus*, even if you're not a mystery fan.

Rating: ☆☆☆☆ 1/2

*The Big Empty*

By James Luceno  
Del Rey, 1993  
291 pp., \$4.99

James Luceno's *The Big Empty* is a witty far future novel. It features intersecting suspense plots,



lots of good details, and some sly satire on the human condition.

One of the novel's best features is the interaction of the intelligent machines with people; the religion imposed on these artificial intelligences, called Machristism and based on Christianity, is a fine detail (though I find it hard to believe people would abbreviate the word "machine" to "mac").

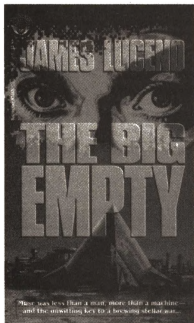
The society depicted is complex and colorful, and the trends are believable, even when they veer

into satire. This is a galaxy-spanning novel, with its multiple planets and alien races, yet it always remains on a human scale.

The two main viewpoint characters, Jayd Qin and Aksum Muse, despite their alienness to us (especially Muse's), are real and sympathetic. Ank Theft, the obese and self-indulgent crime boss, is too stereotypical — he jars among so many more realistic characters. The subplot about a serial mac-murderer is entertaining, if a bit old hat.

The ending feels slightly anticlimactic and might even be considered a cheat. Overall, though, *The Big Empty* is an involving, enjoyable, original novel.

Rating: ☆☆☆ 1/2



*Scissors Cut Paper Wrap Stone*  
By Ian McDonald  
Bantam/Spectra, 1994  
133 pp., \$3.99

Ian McDonald's short novel is musical, a cyberpunk poem, flowing effortlessly along the pilgrimage of Ethan Ring. In *Scissors Cut Paper Wrap Stone* the style is far from invisible, but it works.

Not only does the style work, but so does the slow revelation of what's going on through flashbacks. The central SF idea is evocative, although the basic con-

cept — the good man who discovers a horrible weapon the government then forces him to use — is not new.

Ethan is very believable and sympathetic; we see less of his friend and fellow pilgrim Masahiko, but that description fits him too. I found Luka, Ethan's artsy girlfriend, too stagey; her lines seem like they were written for her. One thing McDonald handles very well is the mind-set of college students and how that changes as they age.

*Scissors Cut Paper Wrap Stone* is full of beauty and wonder. There's a carefully developed background with realistic sociological changes, and it gradually turns into a thriller which works, too. There's an awful lot packed into a thin book by one of the SF field's only true stylists.

Rating: ☆☆☆☆

*Minerva Wakes*  
By Holly Lisle  
Bantam, 1994  
273 pp., \$4.99

*Minerva Wakes*, by Holly Lisle, is a fun fantasy novel with a worthwhile lesson (bowdlerized on the cover): never screw with the mommy. It is a well written, sometimes ribald, tale of ordinary people doing extraordinary things.

Minerva and Darryl Kiakra are in a decaying marriage with jobs they hate, having abandoned their dreams (art and playwriting, respectively) to support their lifestyle and three children. All that ends one night when Minerva sees the children kidnapped by a magical force from another dimension and follows along to rescue them. Meanwhile, Darryl does his part in our world, with the aid of an often obnoxious dragon. Along the way they rediscover their dreams and their love for each other.

This is much better than many books about ordinary people thrust into fantasy quests, because Minerva and Darryl (and the children) feel real. They don't do impossible things, just very dif-

ficult ones, and for the strongest motivation in the world.

The way the magic works is interesting, particularly the idea that pursuing your dreams is good magic while ignoring them is bad magic. We don't see much of the fantasy world, but what we do see is clever, particularly the tourist problem. I like the dilemma Minerva is put in, with both the good and bad guys being after her. Parts of the book are written from the viewpoint of a four-year-old, and they're remarkably good.

Though the ending is a bit silly — I would have preferred to see the Kiakras back in the real world pursuing their dreams and facing the consequences — *Minerva Wakes* is an enjoyable adventure.



You may want to take away a half star if you don't like kids.

Rating: ☆☆☆

*The Princess and the Lord of Night*  
By Emma Bull;  
Illustrated by Susan Gaber  
Harcourt Brace/  
Jane Yolen Books, 1994  
32 pp., \$14.95

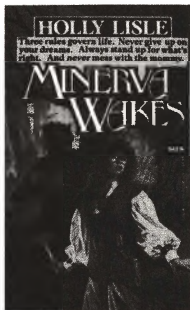
Some remarkable work for children and young adults has come out in the Jane Yolen Books line from Harcourt Brace. Emma Bull's fairy tale, *The Princess and*

the *Lord of Night*, is a worthy addition.

This is a story of a princess under a curse that requires she get everything she wants, but who manages to remain unspoiled. How she removes the curse is absolutely delightful. The heroine is spunky, compassionate, and resourceful. The writing is poetic in the best fairy-tale tradition, and the lovely artwork complements the story beautifully.

The publisher says this is for ages 4 to 10; I'd guess 4 is too young (my son, unfortunately, isn't old enough for me to consumer-test this). *The Princess and the Lord of Night* would be wonderful for children of 5 or 6 and up; it's a book that adults will enjoy reading aloud as well.

Rating: ☆☆☆



#### A CD-ROM:

*Isaac Asimov's The Ultimate Robot*  
Produced by Byron Preiss;  
Illustrations by Ralph McQuarrie  
Byron Preiss Multimedia/  
Microsoft. 1993  
\$79.95 list (you can do better)

*Isaac Asimov's The Ultimate Robot* is a very interesting CD-ROM, both an exploration of robots and a tribute to the late Isaac Asimov. This dual nature is

most apparent in the Chronology section, where half the screen is devoted to milestones in the development of computers and robots and the other half to milestones in Asimov's life.

The disc contains 36 of Asimov's science fiction stories (robot and otherwise), including some of his best, and 17 of his essays on robot-related topics. In addition, there are clips from movies that featured robots, samples of computer-generated animation, some brief clips of Asimov speaking on robotic subjects, films and illustrations of real robots, a detailed introduction to robotics and robot movement, clever robot screen savers (compatible with the popular program *After Dark*), and an art gallery including Asimov book covers, photos of Asimov, and art featuring (and by) robots. Also, with great appeal to children (and the childish), there is a feature enabling you to build and animate your own robot from parts designed by *Star Wars* designer Ralph McQuarrie. A little more selectivity might have been in order, but when you have this much room it must be tempting to throw in the kitchen sink.

CD-ROMs tend to be slow, and *The Ultimate Robot* takes forever to load — bring a book when it's actually running, though, the speed is reasonable. The interface is simple to use once you get the hang of it. Hypertext features are used well, with any word that could possibly raise a question for anyone having an available definition with cross-references, and the ability to jump to stories, film clips, or articles of related interest.

The film clip quality, unfortunately, leaves a lot to be desired, especially since it uses a tiny portion of the screen; you're not going to get the full impact. The quality of most of the color images, in fact, is poor, but the black-and-whites are sharp.

This CD-ROM would make a great present for a 12-year-old interested in robots, and the adults in the family can have fun with it, too. I sure did.

#### A Note to My Readers:

You may remember, from a couple of years back, my very positive review of Kate Wilhelm's *Death Qualified*, a mystery novel with a science-fictional premise. Well, the heroine of *Death Qualified*, Barbara Holloway, is back in *The Best Defense* (St. Martin's; June 1994; \$21.95). I can't review Wilhelm's new book here, since it's not SF, but I wanted to let those who enjoyed *Death Qualified* know about this dramatic, suspenseful mystery. □

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# The Day Before

## By Deborah Abshire Hobbs

*I dreamt one night, when still I lay on cotton sheets washed the day before,  
when the sky was as barren and dank  
as the bottom of a field well at midnight  
that we  
that is, all of us were connected  
by only dreams, and of course, computers.  
There were wires, the smell of copper, burning  
and the waspish hum of tiny circuits.  
We didn't notice as years passed by.  
We were hooked up like telephones used to be,  
connected, addicted, a colonial clone, one-celled and whispering  
the drone of fluid dripping steadily into our veins  
sustaining our sleep  
shiny chrome-plated gizmos and whirly-gigs  
removing waste, moving our limbs in circling fashion  
as prescribed, they that recommended the studies that showed  
how we could do without our eyes wide and blinking,  
reality a constant surge but not, they proclaimed  
without REM, wishes and fantasies.  
Even they, the scientists and doctors,  
went under, connected, dozing, distant.  
No one was left to walk, to dance, to sweat, to pollute the earth  
at last a one world government without an office, crime or  
the vote almighty, capitol V please.  
The earth was monitored. It became promiscuous in our absence  
without endangered lists to hold it chaste.  
Gadgets kept the animals from tripping wires  
while thing-ama-gigs sang gentle lullabies.  
So we slept. In our dreams becoming anything-  
pilots flew or were the wind itself  
disassembling into imagined colors, and shattering at will like  
stained glass in bombed churches.  
I became a fantastic animal without a circus any longer  
half stallion, half eagle and travelled to  
each and every planet, some were only make-believe.  
My genomes faltered and collapsed unnoticed  
my hair grayed and grew fungus, falling out in woolly lumps  
I was no longer recognizable from that original mold  
it was alright, even better than that, I saw Eden.  
I held elevated conversations with the ghosts of Shiloh and Rome  
Catherine once Great, gave me a diamond necklace,  
even my mother had nothing more to criticize.  
No one noticed when the power stopped  
and the tiny silver people on wheels  
began to have babies.*

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# Wow! Fantasy Writers with Literary Ambition!

I know a good line when I steal one, but I like to give credit. This comes from Michael Swanwick. He, Gregory Frost, Gardner Dozois, Susan Casper, and I were sharing a panel discussion at a Borders Bookshop recently. He was, of course, promoting his recent novel *The Iron Dragon's Daughter*, and chanced to remark that his book was not an isolated phenomenon. There are more non-formula fantasies out there. Like the science-fiction writers of the late '60s, he observed, fantasy writers are getting bitten by the bug of literary ambition. It is no longer necessary to cede the field to Terry Brooks and Dennis McKiernan.

My first response, which I left unsaid, was, "Gee, I've had literary ambition all along." My second, also left unsaid was, "I hope you're right, Michael. A lot of us have been waiting for this, particularly those who have had literary ambition all along."

Let's review a little history. Fantasy is a fallen artform. There was a time, as recently as the late 1960s, when fantasy, as such, did not exist as a publishing category. That meant that for a fantasy to get published, it had to be so extraordinary that somebody was willing to squeeze it into another category. The classic strategy, which goes back as far as William Morris in the 19th Century, and was certainly applied to Lord Dunsany, James Branch Cabell, E. R. Eddison, T. H. White, Tolkien, and other greats, was to publish it as Literature, at the upper end of the mainstream market, for people with some taste and sensibility.

## Rating System

☆☆☆☆☆	Outstanding
☆☆☆☆	Very Good
☆☆☆	Good
☆☆	Fair
☆	Poor

The viability of this approach began to deteriorate in the 1930s. Realism ruled the roost, not only on the bestseller lists, but in academe. The party line became that any imaginative writing wasn't properly "serious." This largely persists to the present day, although, of course, much fantasy is still published as literary mainstream, particularly if it is by insiders. One thinks of Sylvia Townsend Warner's *The Kingdoms of Elfin* (1977), a collection of urbane stories of Elvish life originally published in *The New Yorker*. You can be certain that if they'd been by Jane Doe, they would not have been published there, but Ms. Warner was an old-time *New Yorker* hand, so it was OK. And, of course, there's a lot of fantasy published as "magic realism" these days.

That's one approach. Another was to sneak it into the Young Adult category. This has been done as far back as Kenneth Morris's masterpiece, *Book of Three Dragons* (1930), and brought us, more recently, the Earthsea trilogy.

Or, you could pretend it was science fiction. Terry Carr slipped Avram Davidson's *The Phoenix and the Mirror* into the Ace Science Fiction Specials, and whoever was editing at Doubleday in those days (1969) published it as a Doubleday SF hardcover. Probably some hardcore SF fans felt cheated, but we can be glad those editors did it.

Fantasy books could find their way into the strangest niches. The religion editor at Macmillan, having purchased John Bellair's wonderful *St. Fidgetta and Other Parodies*, then received *The Face in the Frost*, and published it; completely out of category.

Then, along came Lin Carter, himself a godawful hack novelist, but an editor of taste and vision. Lin brought us the Ballantine

Adult Fantasy Series, which reprinted Dunsany, Cabell, etc. and educated a whole generation of readers — and writers — about the possibilities of the form. It looked like a renaissance was underway.

No such luck.

Not being a superstitious sort, I am going to speak ill of the dead.

The nascent fantasy boom of the early '70s was nipped in the bud, no, *bludgeoned to death*, by a single editor, Lester del Rey, who took over at Ballantine from Carter. The effect was as devastating as what might have happened in science fiction in the 1940s if Ray Palmer, not John W. Campbell, had prevailed, and the Golden Age had turned into lead. I knew we were in trouble when del Rey was fielding questions from a convention audience (probably Lunacon, 1974) and someone asked him, "Will Ballantine continue to publish Ernest Bramah's *Kai Lung* books?" "Not while I'm editor," said del Rey sternly. Someone then asked him, were Lord Dunsany alive today and submitting to Ballantine, would he (del Rey) buy, say, *The King of Elfland's Daughter*. "Yes," said del Rey, "but I'd tell him he didn't need all that fancy style to tell a good story."

The clap of doom followed as del Rey then went on to extol the virtues of Terry Brooks's unbelievably awful *The Sword of Shannara*, which, he insisted, would revolutionize the fantasy field. The problem was, he was right. It did.

After that, the deluge.

Once upon a time, fantasy advocates looked down their allegedly aristocratic noses at science fiction. Fantasy was supposed to be a higher artform, not of pulp origin at all, but Literature from the word "Go."

Del Rey taught us better. The revolution came, but it was the *wrong* revolution. His kind of book

made the bestseller lists. Other publishers imitated. It came to pass that Fantasy became an exceptionally degraded category of formula fiction, aimed at not-too-bright juveniles, often tied in to role-playing games. "Generic fantasy" became the ultimate term of dismissal, particularly in hard-SF circles, where folks could not help but notice that High Fantasy was a lot less high-falutin' than it was supposed to be, and had eerily come to resemble, say, the Nurse Novel. Del Rey turned Fantasy into virtually indistinguishable product, packaged in a precise way, selling a predictable number of copies.

While a few good books managed to sneak through, the fantasy writer with ambition could mostly either go unpublished, or do the occasional short story. The editors, emulating del Rey, envying his sales figures, demanded the same sort of formulaic junk.

But, if Michael Swanwick is right, we're about to have a counter-revolution. Enough writers, readers, and, yes, even editors, have gotten sick of the state of things that they're saying to themselves, "Hey, where are the fantasy equivalents of Norman Spinrad or Gregory Benford, not to mention William Gibson or Kim Stanley Robinson?" Sure, science fiction contains a lot of hackwork, too, but it has a substantial stratum which is worthy of respect. Why can't fantasy try to be at least as good?

The answer is, such writers have been there all along. Now the publishing climate might just be willing to accommodate some of them. The fantasy renaissance that Lester del Rey managed to delay for twenty years may actually be happening.

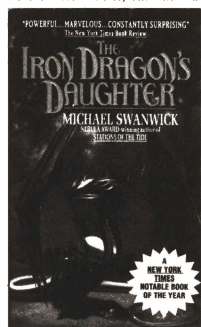
A case in point is Swanwick's own novel:

*The Iron Dragon's Daughter*  
By Michael Swanwick  
William Morrow and  
Co., Inc. 1994  
424 pp., \$23.00  
Avonova Books 1995  
424 pp., \$4.99

This is a novel about Faerie, which might not be where you would expect literary growth, but the first thing you notice when

reading *The Iron Dragon's Daughter* is that this is no Faerie you've ever seen before. Even if the book were dreadful in every other aspect (which it is not), it would still have this to its credit: the images are new. It is not made up of prefabricated parts, derived from other fantasy novels and ultimately taken from popularizations of folklore.

Swanwick has given us a 20th Century Faerie, which is only fitting. Faerie, or Efland, the Otherworld of Celtic mythology, has traditionally been a place of insubstantial wonders and deadly perils. Fairy gold turns into dry leaves, but the clever, vain, shallow, cruel, but ravishingly beautiful inhabitants of Efland have more sinister habits, such as kid-



napping human children and offering some of them in sacrifice to Hell. From the hints in Irish sagas, medieval ballads, and *A Midsummer-Night's Dream*, it has always been clear that the social organization of the enchanted realm mimics human society. Indeed, *The Secret Common-wealth*, a 17th Century treatise by a Scottish clergyman, Robert Kirk, described Elfin kingdoms and politics — with at least as much seriousness as modern UFO literature — in such detail that the irate supernaturals reputedly carried him off. Kirk's Efland was a mirror of the Europe of his day.

Faerie, it would seem, changes with the times. Swanwick has made a considerable imaginative leap in presenting a vision of a distinctly contemporary Other-world, which still resonates on a mythic level. His heroine is a changeling whom we first meet as a child laborer in a Dickensian horror of a factory which manufactures living war-machines: dragons. This is a place of spells and magical creatures, but also of electronics, heavy industry, and, as the heroine discovers after her escape from the factory, shopping malls, go-go bars, high fashion, drugs, university riots, and brutal class exploitation, with Elves on the top of the social ladder. It even has its own uniquely magical techno-babble:

... *Thaumaturges emerged from the labs and walked through the grounds in orange environmental suits, scattering particulate radio-isotopes from thuribles and censers and muttering incantations which stiffened the air with dread. In their wake, the ground was criss-crossed with ley lines glowing blue and red and yellow, like a wiring diagram gone mad ...* (p.76)

Like a lot of literarily ambitious fantasists, I suspect, Swanwick has been lurking in science fiction until the changing publishing climate gave him his chance. He won a Nebula Award for *Stations of the Tide*, and many of his shorter works (collected in *Gravity's Angels*, Arkham House, 1991) are beautifully crafted.

I can't say I've been 100% pleased with his novels. They can get confusing, but if they seem a bit ragged in their development, they are redeemed by both vividness and prodigious invention. *The Iron Dragon's Daughter* has the same strengths and weaknesses. I'm not sure I understand the ending. The plot may seem to lose track of itself, and even forgets about its magnificent rogue dragon for a hundred pages as the heroine evolves from waif to shoplifter to alchemy student to avenger, but the reader's interest never wanders, because Swanwick knows the magic of making both his baroque settings and his characters real, touching down to Earth, as any writer of fantastic fiction ultimate-

ly must, with familiar, identifiable emotions. It is a memorable combination.

*The Iron Dragon's Daughter* may well prove to be a leader in a second wave of post-Tolkien fantasies. Now that we've had far more than enough cloned trilogies, the form is, at least in Michael Swanwick's hands, showing the ability to evolve into something genuinely new.

Rating: ☆☆☆☆

#### *Finder*

By Emma Bull  
Tor, 1994  
317 pp., \$21.95

By contrast, here's another literarily ambitious fantasy on a very similar subject which I enjoyed a whole lot less. Emma Bull is clearly part of that trend Swanwick has noticed. Her *War for the Oaks* (1987) served notice that here was a writer capable of more than book-product. But she is also, more than many, burdened with an excess of generic baggage.

I can't fault *Finder's* impeccable writing. The setting is clear. We know the basic who/what/when/where/why. Descriptions describe lucidly. The problem is a more subtle and subjective one of failing to hold interest.

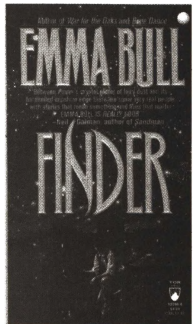
I think it's that baggage. *Finder* is a novel of the Borderlands, a franchise universe, created for a series of anthologies edited by Terri Windling. The premise is that Faerie, Elfland, has burst into the modern, urban world, co-existing with "normal" reality rather than Toon Town does in *Who Framed Roger Rabbit?*, save that humans cannot enter into Faerie, and the boundary isn't so precise: hence, the Borderlands, a rundown district, half-magical, filled with human and elven riff-raff.

This is, inevitably, a stunt, like *Roger Rabbit*. We've got streetwise, punk elves. Generic fantasy is stretched out of shape. Nothing grows organically out of the story itself. It's all a matter of generic expectations: "Hey, fantasy is usually like *this*, but I'm doing it like *this*."

Now, add to this exactly what was added in *Roger Rabbit*: the generic detective plot. Why the detective plot? Because it gives a

good excuse for the characters to examine layers of society, to go where most people never go, and demand explanations. It's a natural way of getting information across. Not surprisingly, regular detective novels often become excellent social portraits, and the science-fiction (and historical) and detective forms blend easily and frequently. What better way to explain a setting to the reader than to have the detective take it apart bit by bit, looking for clues?

This is not, I think, a very good way to explain Elfland. Science fiction and historical fiction have the advantage that their settings are, in some sense, *real* (or at least possible). This is not true of fantasy, where world-creation is more a matter of sheer aesthetics. There



is, for example, no "logic" in the world of Lord Dunsany's *The King of Elfland's Daughter* (where, as in *Finder*, Elfland borders on the human world); instead it's a matter of metaphorical "magic." The rightness of Dunsany's image ("Elfland came racing back, as the tide over flat sands") transcends realism.

In *Finder*, the "magic" rapidly dissipates into literalism and becomes contrivance. The effect is like a parody without any jokes. The double-generic detective/fantasy expectations merely remind the reader on every page that this is "only a story." *Roger Rabbit* didn't convince either, but it was fast-

moving and funny and held the viewer's interest through sheer razzle-dazzle. *Finder* moves a lot more slowly and attempts to become a serious novel, not a joke at all.

The reason I like *The Iron Dragon's Daughter* a lot more than *Finder* is that Swanwick has only one generic layer. He then goes on to write a "real novel" of character, honestly dealing with universal things like growing up and finding one's place in the world.

Alas, I found it impossible to care about the characters in *Finder*. Nothing is at stake emotionally in a story which merely impales one generic scenario on another. A fantasy novel has to touch the heart. And once the novelty has worn off, that is precisely what we find that this police-procedural in punk Elfland has failed to do.

Rating: ☆☆☆

And now, a book I somehow respect, but couldn't even finish:

#### *Moonwise*

By Greer Ilene Gilman  
Roc, 1991  
373 pp., \$4.95

I confess I had been eagerly anticipating a chance to read *Moonwise* for quite some time, especially since it has a truly extraordinary word-of-mouth reputation. My colleague, D\_\_\_\_\_, every time I see him at a convention, would inevitably say, "Have you read *Moonwise* yet?"

Well, I tried. To sum it up in one sentence: imagine James Joyce writing Robert Holdstock. Gilman has a fine sense of *magic*, in the deepest sense, and of the music of language. Unfortunately, she has far less control over the *content* of language. The experience of reading *Moonwise* is that you can definitely hear the music, but you can't make out the lyrics. One moment, it's beautiful, poetic, vivid, and then it goes opaque for twenty pages. I gave up after about eighty. It's got something to do with two women who shared a fantasy world in their college years. Now, in early middle age, they're reunited, on account of some crisis (I couldn't make it out), and somehow (vague-

ly) the fantasy world is manifesting itself.

No doubt about it, the prose is unusual:

She cried out: for her soul became the wick, her scathed nerves twisted into fire. The lightning spoke through her, shrill as a harp. The leaves were burning on the branches, unconsumed; the sybil's leaves were burning in the wind. The ash was snow. Her brazen talons scythed within the child's ribs, grating on bone; she laid it open.

Owl-stiff, her hair was clogged with its formal blood. She caught its soul, a stone made of light.

(p.63)

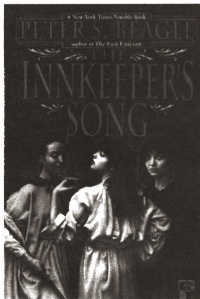
You see the problem. We tolerate this sort of imprecision in poetry, because convention tells us to and most poems are short anyway, but for a novel, particularly a long novel, the reader requires more. The passage is grasping at something, but doesn't quite catch hold. What is the "it" that she "laid open"? Bone? What is "formal blood"? What is going on in this paragraph anyway? We have only a vague sense, as if we're watching shadows. But the effect of the confusion is cumulative. After forty pages or so, too much essential information has been lost.

Nevertheless, I can only express admiration for the editorial courage (probably John Silbersack's) which got a book like this into print, particularly in as conservative and simple-minded a category as fantasy. Here we have one of the most difficult works in the whole history of fantastic literature, next to which Brian Aldiss's *Barefoot in the Head* is easy reading. My guess is that *Moonwise* is going to develop a reputation as the Mount Everest of experimentalism, austere, forbidding, and admired, but seldom attempted. Could an editor have gone through this line by line and de-murked it without destroying its unique qualities, or is that like rewriting *Finnegans Wake* into plain English? It would have been an agonizing dilemma. I'm glad it wasn't mine. I might have tried.

So, why was my colleague D\_\_\_\_\_ so excited about *Moonwise*? Not surprisingly, he also admires

the later Delany. This is probably a book for people who read/analyze/deconstruct *prose* word-by-word rather than people who read fiction as narrative. There are also, just as probably, a handful of people out there who think I'm crazy, and think Ms. Gilman's prose is perfectly clear. Then again, there are people who can read *Finnegans Wake*, a curious phenomenon in itself, because they can never explain how they became able to. D\_\_\_\_\_ can't explain himself either. He even admits that very few people he knows have managed to finish *Moonwise*. Most of them quit about where I did.

So, then, what's the use of an ambitious, literary fantasy nobody can actually read?



It sets an example. Think of it as a blow for freedom. Another crack in the ghetto wall that del Rey built.

No rating.

#### *Finn MacCool*

By Morgan Llywelyn  
Tom Doherty Associates, 1994  
400 pp., \$23.95

Here's another type of fantasy that's long been with us, disguised as mainstream. It's more of a pre-historical novel, and as such as much a work of imagination as of research, although the author's research has been considerable.

Llywelyn has done for her Irish hero what Rosemary Sutcliffe and Parke Godwin did for King Arthur: This is the what-really-might-have-happened version, stripped of supernaturalism, a necessarily speculative glimpse at what might have been the real man behind the myth. She reveals, in considerable detail and with noteworthy vividness, an Iron Age Ireland untouched by either Christianity or literacy, in which complicated tribal relationships are maintained by means of prestige and endless blood-feuds. Life is by no means as free and easy as that of the pulp-fiction barbarian. There are rules about what one may wear, eat, which door one walks through, property rights for nine different classes of marriage; so many that a professional class of lawyers is required to memorize them all. Llywelyn seems to have done her research meticulously. An extensive bibliography is provided.

Llywelyn's Finn is an unscrupulous and brave young man, given to making up stories about himself but fully capable of living up to his own reputation. He is the sort of barbarian who piles up both real and fabulous exploits until all Ireland knows his name. But neither he nor anyone in this book comes across with any depth.

The reason is purely technical. The author, an experienced novelist who presumably knows what she is doing, has chosen to let the point of view range widely, dipping into one character's head, then another, then another, often shifting several times within a few pages, or even a few lines. Her own voice breaks in too, to explain some custom or detail. When Finn loses his virginity, we get reportage from both partners, virtually simultaneously, which prevents us from sharing the experience of either, unless the two are assumed to be telepathic. The effect is like a movie in which the camera angles switch so often and so radically that we never forget that there is a camera. The story never settles on anybody, even Finn, long enough to build up emotional resonance. As a result, *Finn MacCool* merely reads well.

Rating: ☆☆

**Noted:**

*The Innkeeper's Song*  
By Peter Beagle  
Roc, 1993  
346 pp., \$20.00

The other answer to where all the literarily-ambitious fantasy writers have been hiding out is that they've been in plain sight, only not writing enough. As far back as 1960, in *A Fine and Private Place*, Beagle firmly established that he was a superior talent, unlikely to sell his soul for a pot of generic porridge. The problem is that, thirty-three years later, *The Innkeeper's Song* is only his fourth novel.

Make no mistake. It's a good one. The opening really sings, like the best parts of Le Guin's Earthsea books. The rest may take a little while to get going, but it is exciting, funny, sad, adventurous, sometimes sinister. It's got real emotions, real people, considerable invention. What more can you ask? It's a kind of fantasy we've seen before, of course, about the doings of wizards, and what sort of people become wizards and what happens

to them, but I think it'll find its way onto that special shelf next to *A Wizard of Earthsea* and *The Face in the Frost* and *The Phoenix in the Mirror*, and a very few others.

Interesting technical note: Beagle switches viewpoints a lot too, but in an organized fashion, once per chapter, as many characters narrate a series of central events in the first person. You never lose touch with any of them. It's like several stories at once, interwoven. It's a difficult technique to pull off, but rich. We get to see the central characters inside and out, thus gaining both objectivity and depth.

Rating: ★★★★★

*James Branch Cabell*  
and *Richmond-in-Virginia*  
By Edgar MacDonald  
University of Mississippi  
Press, 1993  
373 pp., No price listed.

Cabell, the author of *Jurgen*, remains one of America's greatest, although never (anymore) one of the more popular fantasists. He wrote philosophical satires pur-

porting to be romances, at their best when the author's sophisticated detachment slips and he achieves moments of great beauty and even sadness, a sense of regret that the ideal world of Romance couldn't actually exist with real people in it. He was vastly influential. Traces of him show up in writers as different as Fritz Leiber and Larry Niven. Now we have what will probably prove to be the definitive biography.

But MacDonald, a Southerner, has his own agenda, to "rescue" Cabell from the fantasists (who have been keeping his name alive) and show him as a Southern writer, in the context of a specific milieu. He does this admirably, providing numerous insights into the author's works for the benefit of those quaint Pre-Modernist critics such as myself who hold that an author's life and thought are relevant to the understanding of his fiction. But the "rescue" isn't going to work: unless you're really into Southern social history, you're going to come to this book, and to Cabell, because of the fantasies.

Rating: ★★★★★

## A Long Time Ago ...

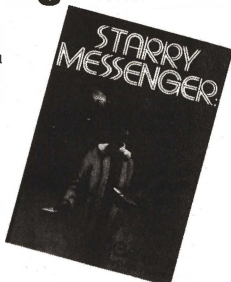
Before taking charge at *Aboriginal Science Fiction*, our editor, Charles C. Ryan, was the editor of *Galileo*, a science fiction magazine published in the mid-1970s. During his tenure there, he helped discover a number of new writers who have since gone on to win Nebula and/or Hugo awards, such as Connie Willis, John Kessel, Lewis Shiner, and more.

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# Dead Sea Squirrels



Picture this if you will. I find myself standing at a podium, View Graphs in hand, the hot stink of a sizzling overhead projector wafting over me, and I look out at an audience of several hundred entities. Who, or possibly what, looks back at me? I will list ten characteristics that randomly come to mind, and then let you make a guess as to exactly who or what I'm facing.

1. The audience is almost exclusively male.
2. A large percentage of those looking up at me are equipped with vision-correcting devices, which many are nervously prodding up the outer sheathings of their olfactory sensors.
3. Their lower appendage coverings do not adequately cover said appendages.
4. In many cases, the fur which covers their outer cranial regions appears to have been stylized by devices normally utilized in the whacking of front lawns and shrubbery.
5. Pouches attached to their thoracic coverings are lined with petroleum-based products, which in turn are stuffed to overflowing with tools used for writing, measuring, pointing, scratching, and checking room humidity (this last device is favored most by those monitoring the water content in the local environment to see if another medicinal capsule is required to relieve symptoms induced by terminal sinus infection).
6. Few natural fibers are used to cover their pale bodies. As a whole, the group prefers petroleum-based garments that are so severely wrinkled that it is obvious that the real world application of heat and steam to said garments is an alien concept. Color schemes run from dark brown to dark brown. A few of the obvious deviants wear decorative items tied around their necks. Most of these decorative

neck devices are liberally speckled with food residues obviously consumed at some long-forgotten feeding.

7. Both five-digit walking appendages are encased in something that the indigenous refer to as "wingtips".

8. Spread out on the tables before them are pads of thin sheaves of compressed dead foliage, writing implements (along with secondary and tertiary implements in case the primary implement goes down), and a huge variety of little plastic boxes crammed with twittering solid-state circuitry and glowing displays.

9. They speak in muffled grunts — in what appears to be a coded language full of acronyms and secret society-type references. Both the casual and not-so-casual observer would suspect this to be a cult-based language.

10. A disproportionate number of them have flakes of dead scalp matter which has drifted down to cover their upper torso regions. All are oblivious to this.

So, what am I facing? Is it a room full of the pointy-headed folk from the planet *Sliderul 12*? Perhaps these are the socially inept creatures from the *Wall Flower Nebula*. Or, could it even be the ever-arrogant, all-knowing, my-differential-equation's-larger-than-your-differential-equation, *Hi Eye Ques* from the *Don't Ask Me Questions, You Idiot*, black hole at the galactic center.

No.

Close, but not quite. What I'm facing is an audience of my own colleagues — Ph.D. science-types to which I'm about to give some acronym-filled, equation-riddled, watch-how-I-can-make-my-atoms-do-tricks-that-you-never-even-dreamed-of, type of lecture.

I apologize.

Stereotypes are not fair, not nice, probably down right rude. But, the world is full of them. We

all use them. We prejudice everyone and everything. We assume that when a shadowy figure, pointing a gun, comes at us from out of a dark alley that we are about to get robbed — not that this individual wants us to sign an NRA petition. And what comes to mind when you think about a scientist? Don't cheat.

What is the first image that materializes before you?

Pocket protector. Hair that hasn't seen a comb in a week. Someone who knows how to create breaches in the space-time continuum but can't manage to balance a checkbook. A person who can't get a date and, if it's a guy, he always has that little swatch of fuzz just below his nostrils that he can't ever manage to shave.

A lot of people think that way. A lot of scientists view themselves that way.

And I may be crazy, but it just may be true. I've just seen too many of these types.

So what?

Because I'm a nice guy, a concerned guy, a guy who looks out for my loyal readers, I'm going to help you. I've got a pretty good idea of who is reading this column. You're young, you're smart, you read science fiction, and you are into science.

May God have pity on you.

You're heading down the road to Ph.D.-dom. You are probably already manifesting many or all of the symptoms. Your pants are getting too short. You find yourself trying to figure out some way to strap your laptop to your belt. You're thinking of running for that ever-coveted position of recording secretary of the math club. And, of course, a dead giveaway is that the clock on your VCR not only is not blinking at 12:00, but that you can watch *NOVA* while simultaneous-

ly recording *Star Trek: The Next Generation*.

I will save you — at least those who are salvageable.

For those of you already too far gone, you have my sympathies. Perhaps you can give this column to your offspring before it's too late for them. That is, of course, if you've managed to figure out how to procreate while wearing a lab coat and astounding your partner by doing logarithms in your head.

I've thought about this a great deal, and I've figured out exactly when it is that this scientist-stereotype begins to take people over. It occurs during the ages of 18-26 — those years at the university when you're getting your official training for the world of science. Of course, if you're pursuing a Ph.D. in math, those years may encompass 18-31, and if you're working in theoretical physics, and need to get time on CERN before you can finish your thesis, those years will probably cover ages 18 to 4236. But take heart, young quark seekers, I understand that the Federal government is implementing a program that will let some theoretical physics types move straight from grad school into collecting social security.

I digress.

This is what I'm going to do for you.

I'm going to explain exactly how to go from B.S. through Ph.D. and enter into that glamorous world of smashing atoms, writing code, exposing yourself to carcinogenic substances, and begging the DOD for the bucks that will allow you to show them how you can vaporize someone 12 microseconds quicker than the competition, while at the same time, dressing in matching clothes, being seen in public with the opposite sex, not bringing textbooks on vacations, and never hearing obnoxious little 11-year-olds shouting "nerd", "brainiac," or the ever popular "geekicus brainiscuspindexter," as you walk through the mall with a bag full of floppies that you just picked up from Office Depot (I hate when that happens).

Here goes.

You've been accepted to some wondrous university — Stanford, Berkeley, MIT, Georgia, Cal Tech, or the University of Lower

Intestinal Pain. My first words of wisdom, my first little gem that will ease your tortured life and help transform you into something other than a myopic, data-drooling troll, is this: it doesn't make a hell of a lot of difference where you do your undergrad work. Once you get out of school, once you hold that Ph.D. in your grubby little hand, no one really cares.

It's not where you went.

It's what you did while you were there.

And I don't mean getting that 4.0. I went to UCLA from undergrad right through Ph.D. When it came to getting into grad school, they were rejecting people with 4.0s. Perfect undergrads were not good enough to get into graduate school. I didn't have a 4.0, but I got in. How did I do that? Dumb luck, actually — since there was no one to explain the facts of life to me as I'm so graciously about to explain to you.

So you hit campus, a freshman, direct and nonstop from some high school where you were God's gift to science. Your high school physics teacher claimed you were destined for the Nobel prize. Your math teacher swears to anyone who will listen that you are better equipped to teach his classes than he is. Your guidance counselor named her first-born after you.

Big deal.

You look around in that first semester Calculus or Chemistry class and everyone has the same story to tell — all were the best, all were destined for greatness. You're all the same, cut from the same nerdie cookie cutter. Spend the next four years sweating to get that 4.0 and all you'll have to show for it is eyestrain, zip for a social life, being as well rounded as a cube of granite, and having only a so-so chance of getting into the graduate program of your dreams.

So what can you do?

Is it all over before you start?

No.

I'm now going to tell you the most important rule one can follow in the world of science, the rule that will take you to the top of the techno heap, while at the same

time letting you express an informed opinion on Eastern European politics, know with full certainty that *Barney the Dinosaur* is actually the front puppet for a band of aliens who will only reveal themselves and their diabolical intentions once an entire generation of TV droolers is under their control, and that the best movie ever made is *Plan 9 From Outer Space*.

Be different.

That's it.

The university's job on the undergrad level is to spit out undergrads. That's it. And the spitting out of undergrads is maximized just as long as those undergrads follow the rules. Undergrads damn well will take Thermo 211 during the second semester of their sophomore year, and that 22 units of Electrical Engineering credits must include at least 4 units of Analog Circuits lab.

You must bend the rules, stopping only as you hear them creak and crack, making certain that you don't actually break them.

Your objectives in your undergrad life are to get into that desired grad school program, to actually learn something that you find stimulating, and to stay as far away from wingtips as possible. The rules to achieving these goals are:

1. Don't take notes in class, and for God's sake don't record lectures with one of those microcassette recorders. The recording of lectures places you on the turbo path toward lab-coated geekdom. Everything that the professor says in class is going to be in the textbook. You are not in class to copy down a textbook. You are in class to *think*. Remember this is no longer high school, where you had to just memorize a few formula and then regurgitate them back to get that 4.0. This was one of the hardest lessons for me and my fellow freshmen to learn (I actually didn't come to really understand this until the beginning of my junior year — while many never understood it). *Memorize nothing*. Know how to derive everything. Under-stand what the equations



A Dead Sea Squirrel



mean, not how to plug numbers into them. Enjoy the lecture.

2. Do all homework, but occasionally don't hand it in. A missing homework assignment will not make or break you, and not handing it in will help remind you that you are not taking the class to turn in homework, but to learn and understand something that you are hopefully finding damn interesting.

3. Take as many nontechnical classes as you can. Minor in medieval European History or learn to speak Latin. It's simply fun to learn something that doesn't count toward your degree. And for those of you with a mercenary streak, remember that during that interview for the big science job, the lunch conversation will inevitably turn to something other than acoustic phonons, baud rates, and lasing thresholds. You better have something to say.

4. Schedule your down time (translation — fun time) as diligently as your work time. A brain is a horrible thing to fry.

5. This is the last, and certainly most important rule. Remember that you want to differentiate yourself from the rest of the herd. You have to be more than just one more 4.0. And this is how you do it — *get a job working for a professor*. What you may not realize when you enter the university is that the professors are not there to teach you or any other undergrad. Very few universities (especially those with grad programs) reward their professors for being wonderful teachers. Professors are rewarded for publications and bringing in the money that is needed so they can do the research that will result in those publication-zappers.

That's what counts. Your first quarter in school, find out what research the professors are doing, pick one that sounds interesting to you, and then meet with that professor and beg him or her for a job. This is not a paying job. You are volunteering to become a *slave*. Remember that professors are desperate for money. They certainly aren't going to pay you when they are having trouble supporting

their own grad students. Also remember that you don't know a damn thing. All you had was that 4.0 in high school — and that means nothing to the professor you are begging for that job. Remember that every lab needs grunts, someone to do some soldering, to tighten bolts, to get something chopped in the machine shop, or to just pick debris up off the floor. That's what you're qualified to do.

Some professors won't give you the time of day — not wanting to get involved with some mere freshman. That's just fine, you wouldn't want to work for them anyway — there is no shortage of egomanias in the world of the University. But you *will* find someone who will accept your offer of slave labor and toss you into a lab. At that point you'll hardly ever see the professor. Even though you are his or her slave, in reality you are the slave of some graduate students. Your objective here is to do just what you're told, hang around as much as they'll tolerate you, and watch how they go about solving real lab problems.

You may be thinking that this sounds like one colossal pain in the butt — all this work with no pay. But you *are* getting paid. Every hour you put in will improve your chances of getting into that grad school of your dreams. Your main objective is to slave it up until they start letting you actually become involved in experiments. By the time you graduate you will be able to write one, or even several papers which will be published in some technical journal. This is the key — the real reason for subjecting yourself to slavery. That paper will be worth more than all the homework assignments in the world, and all the A's you can stuff into your resume. It shows that you can do research, can come up with something original, that you know how to solve a real problem, and not just something out of the back of a text book. It will also give you a real sense of satisfaction — knowing you will have really done something, and figured out something that no one has figured out before.

And it will get you into grad school. Remember what professors need — publications and the

money that it takes to support research. All those 4.0 applications are out there, but you'll have something better. You've already shown that you can *publish*. That above all else will get you into grad school. As a personal note, this is in fact how I wormed my way into grad school. I was not a stellar student. My first two undergrad years were tough. I furiously copied down every utterance that would come out of a professor's mouth, slaved over every homework set, memorized entire books, and in reality did not understand a damn thing. I worked like a dog for two years to maintain a 3.0. It was during the summer between sophomore and junior years that I experienced my epiphany. It became obvious to me that I wasn't going to get into grad school with the grades I was making, so I decided that I would simply kick back and enjoy my remaining two years in school before I had to face the big bad world and find a job. I stopped taking notes, and started listening to what the professors were saying. My new goal was to *understand* rather than get the *right answer*.

And what do you think happened?

That's right.

From that point on I got all A's. My goal was now to learn, and to enjoy what I was learning. Also at that time, in my junior year, I had taken a couple of solid-state physics courses which I had really enjoyed, and I volunteered for slave labor in the lab of the professor who had taught those courses. I had no motives other than to just see something new — to enjoy myself. Before I knew it, I was doing real experiments, and was taking grad-level classes without benefit of being a grad student. I just drifted into it. By the time I actually finished up the requirements for my B.S., I had also satisfied all the course work requirements for both the M.S. and Ph.D. I never even applied for grad school. I never took the GRE exam (equivalent to the SAT, but required to get into grad school). I just found myself working on my Ph.D. thesis, and the paperwork was done to officially put me in the Ph.D. program. That was that.



Your path might be different, in all likelihood will be very different. But remember first and foremost to be different, to stand out from the crowd, and that the university runs on publications and the money required to get the research done that leads to those publications.

And what about grad school? I told you that I would give you all the helpful hints needed to get that Ph.D. What about grad school itself? How do you get through that? There is a perception that undergrad and grad school are two different things. And for most people it is. Undergrad is taking classes, doing homework, and spending all your time working on that GPA, while Grad is learning how to do original research. That's a big mistake. Your goal should be to get into that research, into learning how to solve problems, as soon as someone will tolerate you being in their lab. Grad school should be nothing more than a continuation of what you'd been doing as an undergrad — learning, thinking, solving real-world problems, and enjoying what you're doing.

You'll get your Ph.D.

There is one more rule which I've not mentioned. It is a rule that I nearly violated. *Don't* kill the professor that you work with. Doing this is very bad. A dead thesis adviser does not have the power to issue Ph.D.s, and it is difficult to find another professor to take you on once you've killed one of their own kind. This near mishap occurred to me at about 2:00 one morning. Two other students and I were in the lab trying to get a piece of equipment to work — a 10,000-volt power supply that was attached to large electrical feed-throughs that ran into a vacuum chamber, in which they were attached to a filament — nothing more than a fancy light bulb. And this bulb would not light. Somewhere in our tangle of wires we had too much resistance, so not enough current was running through the filament to light it.

Our professor walked into the lab at 2:00 am. We were exhausted, not thinking too straight, and were standing there in a near zombie-like state at the realization that our professor was not only actually in the lab, but there at

2:00 in the morning (remember that a professor's job is not to do the actual work, but to take your work to government and industrial types so they will give him or her money, so in turn you can spend more sleepless nights in the lab trying to accomplish what your professor has promised to deliver). He instantly analyzed our problem, telling us that the electrical feedthroughs on our vacuum chamber were oxidized and that was the location of the unwanted resistance. He said that all we had to do was take some sandpaper to the feedthroughs and all our problems would be solved.

This is where I almost killed him.

I was at the far end of the room where all the electronics were stacked, having been fiddling with the 10,000 volt power supply. Naturally it was on. Also, naturally, the professor assumed it was off. Before any of us could as much as twitch, he'd walked up to the nearest feedthrough and tugged it off.

There was an explosion, eardrums popped, and I saw him standing there, holding that feedthrough, out of which came a foot-long, blue, writhing, smoldering bolt of lightning that was smashing into the side of our vacuum chamber.

A mere mortal would have dropped the feedthrough, and then either fainted or thrown up. But a professor is no mere mortal. He calmly popped the feedthrough back onto the vacuum chamber. Blue lightning and ear shattering explosions vanished. My professor calmly look up at me and asked, "Is the power supply turned on?"

I simply nodded, at the time not even thinking how incredibly stupid that question was, as the stink of ozone still floated through the air, and afterimages of blue lightning bolts filled my eyes.

He then turned and left the lab.

He never brought up that episode, nor did I. That was as close as I came to not getting my Ph.D. And for those of you who are curious, in fact, the problem was not with oxidized feedthroughs, but rather with the wiring inside

the vacuum chamber which was too small a gauge.

So there you go.



Another Dead Sea Squirrel!

Follow my simple rules and you will not only get your Ph.D., but hopefully escape the fate of a lab-coated, pocket-protected, hair-styled-by-weed-wacker, acronym-babbling nerd, that I know you don't want to become.

Wait a minute.

What about the title of this column, you may be asking? Well, I'll tell you. Years after school, once I was out in industry, a fellow engineer and I were sitting on a lab bench, discussing the Dead Sea Scrolls. I can no longer remember what we were specifically discussing, or even why we were talking about it. It was just one of those conversations that an at least partially well-rounded individual might have. Well, a colleague joined in on the conversation. He professed to have a great knowledge of the topic, had done extensive reading on it, knew all the details. I was surprised that he didn't pull out a View Graph and start giving us a lecture. The trouble was, we had absolutely no idea what he was rambling about. His conversation made absolutely no sense. But he seemed so confident, so full of authority, so professor-like, so I've-got-my-Ph.D.-and-damn-well-know-everything-about-everything, that we just sat and listened. It was a strictly Pavlovian response. It was only at the end of the conversation that we understood what had happened.

He had misunderstood what we had been discussing.

He thought he had overheard us say "Dead Sea Squirrels," rather than "Dead Sea Scrolls". I laughed so hard I almost died. Let this be an example to you. Carefully follow my rules in quest of Ph.D.-dom, or you may find yourself that all knowing scientist-type stereotype, able to pontificate on any topic, both real and imagined, explaining the impact on the modern world of a jug full of mummified squirrels found in a middle eastern cave.

You might even have the View Graphs to back it up. □

# Whose Millennium?

The year 1999, seven months,  
From the sky will come a great King of terror,  
To resuscitate the great King of Angoumois,  
Before, after, Mars will reign by good luck.

— Nostradamus



Get ready for some unforgettable parties during the run up to December 31, 1999. It won't just be the turn of a century that sets the champagne flowing, but a whole new millennium, when the great big digital clock of the common era is going to squeak, groan and finally click a new digit round the thousand-year slot. To all the planets and stars, rocks and trees, it will be just another day. But none of them love celebrating milestones at the drop of a metaphor. We humans do.

Of course, a few wise guys will point out that January 1, 2000 isn't the official start of Century Twenty-One, after all. Just as the numeral, 10, finishes a decade, the next century won't technically begin until the stroke of midnight, December 31, 2000. Most folks will ignore the puns, anyway, and celebrate a year early ... then switch sides just as soon as the hangovers wear off. (Who could pass up a chance to throw turn-of-millennium parties twice?)

On the other hand, some people take the upcoming transition more seriously. For instance, platoons of computer programmers are rushing to reformat software for banks and insurance companies whose commercial databases have "19\_\_" short-sightedly fixed in the year-date field. Then there are Hollywood screenwriters, who used to set every "near-future" drama in the year 1997. Anything occurring after 2000 was "far-out" sci-fi stuff.

The turn of the century will bring yet another phenomenon, at once sillier and far more serious. *Millennial fever*, when latter-day Jeremiahs seem sure to tell us that *The Day* is nigh. Soon, very soon, those voices will rise in pitch, announcing the impending end of the world.

Proclamations of doom are perennial flowers which have sprouted in the garden of human imagination since earliest times. Oracles appeared whenever turmoil caused nations and peoples to feel uncertain about the future. From ancient Sumer, to India, to Iceland, astrological portents used to

set off recurring waves of public hysteria.

*Ambiguity* is the prophet's major stock in trade. King Croesus bribed the Delphic Oracle for good news, so the priests told him what he wanted to hear. If he marched on Persia he would destroy a great empire. He marched, and the empire he destroyed was his own.

Some doom-prophecies proved devastatingly self-fulfilling. When Cortez attacked Tenochtitlan, the Aztecs were paralyzed by similarities between his arrival and the prophesied return of their god, Quetzcoatl. At Troy, Cassandra and Laocoon warned unavailingly against accepting gift horses, showing that all Jeremiahs aren't heeded.

We remember each of these foretellings because they came true. Those that fail are seldom written down.

Something in human nature seems fascinated by the end of all things. Is it simply an extension of the smaller death each of us faces? Or perhaps a streak of egotism is involved, for out of countless human generations, it would surely mark ours as unique to be the *last*. Folk myths about humanity's swan song range from the Vikings' awful, pessimistic Ragnarok, to universal bliss, and all shades between. Often these myths foresee dividing humankind into an elect who will experience rapture, and those doomed to eternal punishment for misdeeds in this world ... or for simply believing the wrong things.

"Messianism" focuses on an awaited deliverer, who will right wrongs, settle scores, and change the known cosmos more to the liking of those doing the waiting. For example, the Zoroastrians of Persia prophesied a "third savior," who would purify the land and resurrect the dead. North American Plains Indians, inspired by "ghost shirt" magic, believed certain signs augured invincibility to their forlorn cause of driving Europeans from the continent. During the mid-Nine-teenth Century, half of China was consumed by the Tai'Ping rebellion,

whose charismatic leader claimed to be the younger brother of Jesus.

Larger, more conservative religions also carry notions of divine, overpowering intervention. Buddhism awaits the bodhisattva, Maitreya, to herald paradise on Earth. In orthodox Islam a prophesied Mahdi is destined to usher a new age. The celebratory frenzy which accompanied Ayatollah Khomeini's return to Iran may have been amplified by the fact that it occurred almost exactly 14 centuries after the birth of the Prophet.

Christian millennialists have drawn inspiration from many sources, such as the promise in the gospels that Jesus would return "... before this generation shall have passed away ..." to complete his messianic task. By far, the most influential text is the *Book of Revelations*, which tells in florid, metaphorical detail about the rise and fall of characters such as the "Beast," and the "Whore of Babylon." In every generation, tracts have been published which analyzed that mysterious tome, line by line, showing how each obscure phrase and parable connected to events taking place in the author's own region and time. For example, during the approach to year 1800, a zealous flood of printed interpretations correlated the French Revolution and Napoleon's rise to verses of prophecy, proving point by point, to the writers' satisfaction, that Armageddon was nigh.

Alas, for those eagerly expecting Judgment Day, the rumblings heard echoing across the land came only from cannon.

In the run-up to year 1000 of the common era, thousands throughout Europe divested their farms, property, the clothes on their backs, expecting an imminent end. Other episodes occurred at uneven intervals, such as an acute panic in year 1260, but one could always count on a special surge at each turn of the hundreds column. Popes even proclaimed Roman jubilees to attract predictable waves

of concerned pilgrims whenever round numbers tolled along.

Our own era has seen tabloid oracles, TV evangelists and millennialist politicians, all weighing in to satisfy a seemingly inexhaustible human need for mystic hope, mixed liberally with terror. And, in fairness, religion has not been the sole font of apocalyptic scenarios. New-Age spiritualists have joined in, touting everything from Aquarianism and astrology to a fleet of UFOs, due to land just outside San Diego, Calif. Meanwhile, recent decades saw survivalists stocking private fortresses in eager dread of a coming end to civilization which, they were certain, would cull the virtuously prepared from the culpably weak.

Books such as Hal Lindsey's runaway best seller, *The Late, Great, Planet Earth*, revealed to millions the "obvious" identity of the Soviet Union as the Devil's final fortress, foretold in scripture. Ronald Reagan's Interior Secretary, James Watt, declared environmentalism moot for the simple reason that the Earth was scheduled to end soon anyway, so why bother saving trees? In retrospect, these pronouncements may seem quaint, what with the political entity called the USSR fading into historical dust along with Nineveh and Babylon. But one sees no retractions by Lindsey or others. Just as peddlers of "downside" stock market newsletters keep pushing ahead the date of the Crash that never comes, Armageddon merchants simply rearrange the details of their prophecies in order to keep up with each geopolitical turn, so that the latest bogey-man perfectly fits the bill.

Now, in fairness, many modern Christian theologians express disdain for this doomsday fetish. Nevertheless, it's certain to get worse soon. Will Japan or China replace Russia as the next arch-foe of Heaven's host? Will we soon hear political candidates accusing each other of being the Antichrist? One thing is certain — a single riveting symbol will come to dominate the years ahead — the sight of those eerie triple-zeros in the figure, 2000.

*"And when the thousand years are completed,  
Satan will be released from his prison ...*

*— The Book of Revelations*  
Early all millennialists share an interesting premise, that the entire

vast universe was fashioned by a creator with a penchant for brief experiments, foregone conclusions, petty vengeance, and mysterious riddles. During most of human history, this might have seemed a reasonable model of the world, since life appeared so capricious, so instantaneously and inexplicably revocable. To some extent, that age-old sense of helplessness and enigma remains. Only under a conceited gloss of modernity do we dare step forward and (without meaning any deliberate offense) attempt to pose a question or two.

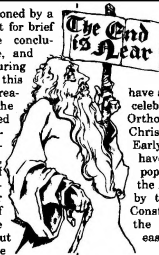
For instance, even granting the aforementioned godly premise, why would a creator of universes base His doomsday timetable on a *human* dating system? Might He not use ticks of an atomic clock, marking off radium halflives until — phht? Or, going by certain biblical passages, should we estimate how many sparrows or shooting stars have fallen since the Earth began?

For that matter, why count down in decimal? Why not base six, used by the Babylonian inventors of the calendar? Or binary notation? In the code native to computers, the year 1995 of the common era translates as 011111001010. It will be a much rounder 10000000000 on the date 2048 a.d., and a symmetrical, mysterious-looking 11111011111 in 2015. On the other hand, if prime numbers are His thing, then both 1997 and 1999 fit the bill in any notation.

Assuming the Omnipotent simply cannot resist round multiples of ten, and conveniently chose Earth's orbital period as the unit of measure, what date shall we figure He is counting from? To Hindus, a three billion year cycle of creation and destruction passes through multiple "Yugas," of which the present is but one of the more threadbare. The Mayans believed in cycles of 256 years, based on motions of the moon and planets, in which the most recent major shift occurred in 1954.

To certain Christian fundamentalists, the answer is plain. Obviously, the countdown began at the pivot point of the common era calendar, the birth of Jesus of Nazareth.

Unfortunately, that postulate presents problems. Regarding the actual date of nativity, biblical scholars disagree over a range of five years or



more. Nor is there good evidence that the month and day assigned

to Christmas under the Gregorian Calendar have anything to do with the celebrated event. (Eastern Orthodox commemorates Christmas weeks later.) Early church leaders may have meant to match the popular solstice festivals of the Mithraic Cult, followed by their patron, Emperor Constantine, thus making the conversion of pagans easier.

It gets worse. Suppose we reach the year 2005, and nothing has happened? Are we rid of millennialists until the next century rolls around? Not a chance! Doom-seers are well-practiced at the art of recalculation. In the Nineteenth Century, one mid-western preacher managed to hold onto his flock through six successive failures of the skies to open, until at last he was abandoned by all but the most fervent and forgiving.

Here is just one of the excuses we are bound to hear:

*"Of course, the countdown shouldn't date from the birth of Jesus. After all, the chief event of his life, the promise of redemption and resurrection, came at the end of his earthly span.*

If so — assuming the clock has been ticking from Calvary to Armageddon — we would seem in for a slight reprieve, and yet another wave of millennial fever set to strike some time in the mid-2030s. Again, the lack of any specific written record in Roman or Judean archives will let enthusiasts proclaim dates spread across five or six years, but at least the season won't be vague — sometime around Easter, or during the Passover holiday.

We've only begun to plumb the options available to millennial prophets. While some sects focus on two thousand Christmases, and others on as many Easters, there will certainly be those who consider such thinking small-scale and altogether too *New Testament*. After all, why should the Creator terminate His universe on the anniversary of some event which took place midway through its span? Why not start counting from its *origin*?

It so happens that another nice, round anniversary is coming up, which just fits the bill. Remember Archbishop Ussher of Armagh? He's the fellow who carefully logged every *begat* in the Bible, then declared that the creation of the world must have occurred at 9 o'clock in the morning, on October 25 of the year 4004 B.C.

Now, there has been a considerable amount of teasing directed at poor Ussher, since he made this sincere calculation back in 1654. His results don't jibe too well with the testimony of rocks, fossils, stars, or the scientists who study such things. Still, he has followers even today, folk who believe that all physical evidence for a vastly older Earth (four and a half billion year older) was planted to "test our faith." (One might ask, if the Lord went to so much effort to convince us the world is billions of years old, who are we to doubt it? But never mind.)

If Ussher fixated on time's origin, the famed founder of the Protestant Reformation, Martin Luther, had something to say about its end. Luther took into account that "... a day is as a thousand years to the Lord ..." (Psalms 90:4), and that genesis itself took six days. He then concluded that the Earth's duration would thus be 6,000 years from first light to the trumpet of doom. Further, this span would be symmetrically divided into three 2,000-year stretches, from Origin to the time of Abraham, from Abraham to Jesus, and a final two millennia rounding things off at Judgment Day. While this speculation drew little attention back in Luther's day, it is sure to appeal to modern millennialists, hoping for the good luck of witnessing the end in their own time.

Unfortunately, combining Luther's logic with Ussher's date (4004 b.c.) shows that we've just shaved four years off the countdown! Now the end comes in October 1996! No time for that final stab at the Winter Olympics then, or to pay off the car loan. Celestial trumpets would blow two weeks before the Democrats' last hope to retain the White House. (At least we now know we'll be spared the possible scenario of *President Quayle* making plaintive, placatory welcoming speeches for the Heavenly host from the Rose Garden.)

We may win a little more time on a technicality. Since there was no Year Zero in the common era calendar (One B.C. was followed immediately by One A.D.), the Ussher-

Luther deadline shifts to autumn 1997. Alas, still too short a reprieve to save those lovely turn-of-the-century parties we're all looking forward to.

Fortunately, old Bishop Ussher wasn't the only one counting off from Adam and Eve. The Jews have been at it much longer, and by the Hebrew Calendar it is only year number 5753, which seems special to no one but mathematicians.

What of Jewish millennialists, then? Back in the 1640s, followers of Sabbatai Zevi believed in him passionately, but neither that "false Messiah," nor Jacob Frank in the 1720s, brought any New Kingdom, only disappointment. Since then, most Jewish scholars have put less faith in vague riddles than in a growing maturity of human culture working gradually toward a "millennial age" — an attitude that baffles some Christian evangelists.

**I**s the coming plague of millennialism simply to be endured by the rest of us until it's over? As with UFO cults, there is no such thing as "disproof" to those who can always find convenient explanations for each failed prophecy. It is useless to cite scientific data to refute the supernatural.

All isn't hopeless. There *are* methods for dealing with doomsday cant. One way is to turn things around, and confront millennialists on their own turf. In the end, the entire question revolves around symbols.

In Judeo-Christian mythology, two chief metaphors are used to describe the relationship between the Creator and humankind. The first of these depicts a "shepherd-and-his-flock." The second describes a "father-and-his-children." For the most part, these parables are used interchangeably, but they *aren't* equivalent. Rather, to modern eyes they are polar opposites, as irreconcilable as the tiny, closed cosmos of Ussher and the vast universe of Galileo and Hubble.

A shepherd protects his flocks, guiding them to green pastures, as the psalms so poignantly portray. All the shepherd expects in return is unquestioning obedience ... and everything else the sheep possess. Lucky ones are merely shorn, but that reprieve is brief. None escapes its ultimate fate. None has any right to complain.

Everybody also knows about fathers. Sons and daughters are expected to obey, when tight disci-

pline is for a young child's own good. Nevertheless, with time, offspring learn to think for themselves. Even in patriarchal societies, a good father takes pride in the accomplishments of his children, even — especially — when they exceed his own. If there is a fore-ordained plan, it is for those children to become good mothers and fathers, in turn.

To the perennial, millennial oracles, with their message of looming, irresistible destruction, *here* is a head-on response. Ask them this. "Are we children of a Father, or a Shepherd's sheep? You can't have it both ways.

"You preach a tale of violent harvest," the challenge continues. "Of judgment without debate or appeal, fatal and permanent. A shepherd might so dispose of lambs, but what sane father does this to his offspring? Would you stand by, if a neighbor down the street commenced such a program on his flesh and blood?"

"Anyway, you choose an odd time to proclaim the adventure over, just when we've begun *picking up* creation's tools, learning, as apprentices do, the methods of a great Designer. Those techniques now lay before us, almost as if someone had placed blueprints to the Universe there in front of us, to be pored over by eager minds ... by those perhaps ready soon to leave childhood and begin adult work."

The latest crop of millennial prophets might be asked what do sheep owe the shepherd of a cramped pasture, a cheap, expendable world just 6,000 years old?

Personally, I prefer a universe countless billions of parsecs across, vast and old enough for a hundred million vivid, exciting creations. An evolving, growing, staggeringly fascinating cosmos. One truly worthy of respect. One that will endure, even if we do foolishly cause our own midget Armageddon.

Time will tell. We, humanity, may yet thrive, or fry, by dint of our own wisdom or folly. The macrocosm may be as secularists say, indifferent to our fate.

Or perhaps some great mind out there does see, does care. If so, that spirit may be more patient than doomsayers credit, with a design far subtler, yet more honest. None of us can know for sure, but I'll bet a truly creative Creator would be disappointed in an experiment which ended so trivially, or soon. □

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# Keep the Dream Alive

As the 25th anniversary of the moon landing approached in 1994, and the world looked back at the space program we once had, I spoke with a woman who is doing her best to keep us committed to a future that includes space exploration.

Marianne J. Dyson is a former NASA flight controller who worked in the front room of mission control at Johnson Space Center. She is now an



Marianne J. Dyson

aerospace consultant, writer and space activist who edits *Spacecase News*, a national pro-space lobby group newsletter.

A space station, missions to Mars, trips to the moon sold for their entertainment value, solar energy from space are all ideas she wants to see realized. And when the next exodus into space begins, "I see the science fiction community leading the way," she says. After all, they have been "writing about it, and testing theories in print" for years. She says "poems and fiction keep the dream alive, while we are working to make it a reality."

Dyson's poem "Last Rest Stop for Thirty Parsecs" appears in this issue.



Chuck Rothman

Dyson has published two dozen poems and been nominated for a Rhysling award. She is poetry editor for the semi-prozine *Mindsparks*. She also writes fiction and non-fiction stories for children that have appeared in *Odyssey* and *Child Life*, among others.

David Brin needs little introduction, having won the Hugo and Nebula awards. Who better to kick off a new feature in *Aboriginal*?

This marks his third appearance in



Jael

*Aboriginal*, with a short story and another essay on the earlier occasions.

David is currently living in California and working on his next book.

A woman who wants to change her past finds out there's a price for fond memories in "Revisions." It is written by Chuck Rothman, who gave us "Screams are not Enough" (*Abor.* 41 & 42) and "Natural High" (*Abor.* 37 & 38).

Rothman had a story in the premier issue of the new magazine *Realms of Fantasy* and a story in the anthology *The Ultimate Super Hero* packaged by Byron Preiss. His wife, poet/teacher Susan Noe Rothman, has written



David W. Hill

poems for *Aboriginal*, among others. Now the Rothmans are working on turning daughter Lisa, age nine, into a science fiction fan. "She has the right genes and atmosphere for it," says Chuck.

"Revisions" is illustrated by Jael, who just finished covers for two *Tor* anthologies edited by David Hartwell. Jael tells me she got married again after being single for 20 years. Her husband Greg is a Harley rider and a



Robert Pasternak

cop. They had a biker wedding in Daytona where the friend who introduced them dressed up like the Godfather and gave her away. Jael says she wants to treat marriage as if they are still girlfriend and boyfriend, but with dental benefits.

A man who wakes up one day to find he's been erased from the collective computer memory gets revenge in "A Bad Case of the Flu" by David W. Hill. Speaking of an identity change, Hill tells me he recently got out of the hotel industry, where he had worked for 15 years, the last six as an executive chef, by moving to New York with

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D. Lopes Heald



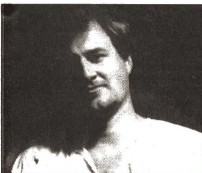
Charlene Brusso

wife and children. He is now an administrator in a management consulting firm, and spends more time writing. Hill has had a dozen stories published in the past year, in domestic publications like *Midnight Zoo* and *Terminal Fright*, and more exotic ones like *Science Fiction World* in the People's Republic of China and *Megalon* in Brazil.

"A Bad Case" is illustrated by Robert Pasternak, the proud papa of a brand new baby boy named Annachie, (an old Gaelic name pronounced Ann-ah-kee). He just finished illustrating a cover for a young adult fantasy by Carol Matas, being published by Bain and Cox, called *Of Two Minds* and he was gearing up for the 1994 WorldCon, which year took place in his hometown, Winnipeg, and at which he won the Aurora Award (The Canadian equivalent of a Hugo).

A war veteran is determined to punish a coldhearted scientist in "The Salute" by Charlene Brusso. This story marks Brusso's first professional sale, but she has had two stories published over the net in *CORE* magazine, an electronic journal. Brusso said she spent "Three successively depressing years trying to do physics during the Reagan era" then decided to pursue writing seriously and started attending a summer writers program at UMass Lowell. She is working on several SF and fantasy short stories and an SF novel.

"The Salute" is illustrated by David LeClerc, who recently had a show at Mingo Gallery in Beverly, Massachusetts. LeClerc says he has



David LeClerc



Robert Reed

been doing some photography, designing some furniture and working in colored pencil recently. He is also doing some pieces on Scotland, working from some photos of Scottish castles he took while traveling in Europe ten years ago.

"Little Miss Trashcan" is a cat story by Robert Reed. He says his brother's cat, who was found in a trashcan, and whose name means "trashcan," was the model for the story.

Reed, who also wrote "Aeries" (*Abor*. 6) and "Migration Patterns" (*Abor*. 39 & 40) has a new book out called *Beyond the Veil of Stars*, published by Tor. He says it got a very good review in *Publishers Weekly*, which calls it one of the best of the year. He's following that up with another book for Tor, no publication date yet.

"Little Miss Trashcan" is illustrated by Cortney Skinner, who is working on another cover for Baen Books, a collaboration with famed illustrator Newell Convers. Skinner says a leather jacket he painted for a friend, fantasy editor and motorcycle enthusiast Terri Windling, won two ribbons at Bookone. He says Joan Vinge saw the painting, and a week later he got Vinge's leather jacket in the mail. Cortney, I think you've started something.

"Justification" by Jerry J. Davis takes place in a world where bureaucrats get to decide if your life is worth continuing. Davis is the author of "The Penalties of Pirating" which was his first short story sale. He says he has a photocopy of that check framed and



Jerry J. Davis



Cortney Skinner

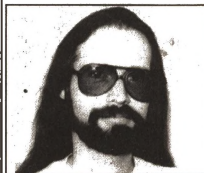
hanging on his wall. Davis is a "Custom Configuration Team Leader, Quality Control Technician," otherwise known as a technical writer, for a computer company. He lives in California with his wife, two daughters and a cat.

"Justification" is illustrated by Jon Foster, who tells me "everything's fine, nothing's changed," which means his comic book work is still occupying most of his time.

A burned-out singer discovers a doomed musical species in "Syrinx" by Terry McGarry. Author and poet McGarry ("Having Seen These Marvels," *Abor*. 35 & 36), "Imprinting," *Abor*. 14) was just getting ready to take a whitewater rafting and horse packing trip in the Colorado mountains when I spoke to her. She is working on a novel for which she is researching Hinduism, artificial intelligence and autism. And she had stories in *Amazing* in December and in two *Daw* anthologies, *Deals with the Devil* and *Witch Fantastic*.

"Syrinx" is illustrated by Clyde Duensing III, who was getting some paintings ready for DragonCon in Atlanta when I spoke to him. He says he is working on some fantasy-related paintings for the motorcycle magazine *Easy Rider*, some covers for Llewellyn Books, two of which are out on stands now, and "general hodgepodge."

"The Last Snicker" is the story of an ex-con who struggles against his rehabilitation. It is written by Sally Kobonowski, a former journalism teacher, public relations writer and human resource management professional who now writes fiction full time.



Clyde Duensing III





**Terry McGarry**

This is her first professional short story sale.

Kohonoski is a graduate of Clarion West and a member of the Cleveland SF Writers' Workshop. She has written a novel of the Maya called *Gods of Blood* and is now working on another Maya novel, and a novel set in the literary milieu of the next century.

"The Last Snicker" is illustrated by Carol Heyer, who had just finished illustrating a book called *Dinosaurs: Strange and Wonderful* for Boyds Mill Press. Her book *Gift of the Magi* based on the O. Henry story is came out in September 1994. She spent a half hour recently at the American Booksellers Convention in Los Angeles signing copies of the book, which is helping to launch the new publishing company Ideals Children's Books. She also did the cover of the digest-sized *Amazing Stories* magazine that was on newsstands in June 1994.

A woman scientist and a rapist are thrown together in the time travel story "Prisoners of Time" by Dan Lissman.

Lissman has written a novel called *In the Forest of the Tree of Life*. He is writing a contemporary fantasy novel based on Hopi Indian mythology and has several short stories he has recently completed. Lissman said he got his start as a writer submitting short humor pieces to *Playboy* and *National Lampoon* while he was still in high school. He works for the state of Ohio.

"Prisoners of Time" is illustrated by David LeClerc.

Music is a lighthouse beacon cut-



**Dan Lissman**

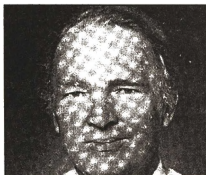
Aborigines



**Sally Kohonoski**

ting through space in "Play the Wind" by D. Lopes Heald. Denise Lopes Heald, who also wrote "Riffles" (*Abor.* 31 & 32), has her first novel out. *Mistwalker*, a love story/ecological drama, was published by DelRey and was reviewed in *Locus*. Bob Eggleton did the cover. Her next short story will be coming out in *Sword and Sorceress* No. 11.

"Play the Wind" is illustrated by Charles Lang, who has been teaching himself techniques of famous artists



**Richard K. Lyon**

lately. "I read articles about them or read about their working process, then I sit down and see if I can use the same mediums they are using and can get the same results they get." He says this copying of technique allows him to show his art students the ways that different artists work, to see what they might like doing. He also likes the versatility of being able to "hang three different paintings on the wall and have it look like three people did them."



**Larry Blamire**

Aboriginal Science Fiction -- Spring 1996



**Sarah Smith**

"The Chocolate Chip Cookie Conspiracy" is Richard K. Lyon's second appearance in *Aboriginal*, and our first sequel. His first story for us, "The Secret Identity Diet," won the Boomerang Award. This equally funny romp takes us on more adventures of Lightningman.

Richard is in the process of turning the stories into a novel with some strange connecting links.

Larry Blamire did the illustration. Larry is working on his script writing and enjoying his new home in Belmont, Mass.

The poem "Competitive Sex in Your Car" is by Sarah Smith, who has a Ph.D. in English from Harvard. Smith is the author of the novel *The Vanished Child* which was a *New York Times* Notable Book of the Year 1992 and was optioned by Hollywood. Negotiations with publishers are going on for the sequel *The Knowledge of Water*. She has also written *King of Space*, an interactive computer-based SF novel published by Eastgate Systems. Her latest short stories are appearing in *Future Boston*, edited by David Alexander Smith, *I Shudder Again*, edited by Michele Slung and this year's *Best New Horror*.

The poem "The Day Before" is written by Deborah Abshire Hobbs, who makes her home in Ft. Campbell, Kentucky, with her husband Kenneth Todd Hobbs. Her poems have recently appeared in *Echo*, a Texas magazine. She lists Anne Rice, Stephen King, and Clive Barker as some of her favorite writers, and is penning some short stories. □



**Deborah Abshire Hobbs**

# The Chocolate Chip Cookie Conspiracy (The Further Adventures of Lightningman)

By Richard K. Lyon  
Art by Larry Blamire

## Chapter 1

*"It is necessary to think about what one sees, no matter how unsettling the thoughts may prove."*

— Dr. K.K. Chang, *The Use of Zen Philosophy in Weight Loss*

**T**hey don't make car fenders the way they used to. I'd just finished locking up my bicycle in the underground lot at the New York branch of the Bureau of Export Control, where I work, and I was walking past my boss's new car — he loves that car more than life itself. Joe, the coffee wagon man, rang his bell just as a van unloaded its passengers, and they rushed him as if he were selling seats on the last lifeboat off the *Titanic*. I was in the way, and they knocked me sprawling onto the car.

The fender crumpled, and sheared off, clattering to the ground. I was standing there with the fender in my hands when Sam Hand came running up.

Focusing his eyes on me with singular intensity, my boss demanded, "Charles, where's the coffee wagon?"

I pointed and he disappeared, moving as fast as he could. Utterly baffled, I followed at a slower pace.

Normally, I make it a point to get to the coffee wagon after everyone else has come and gone. It's bad enough there are all these people in the world who can eat donuts plain or frosted or filled with jelly or wolf down coffee cakes or devour chocolate chip cookies or blueberry muffins and not gain an ounce, but, damn them, there's no reason on earth I should have to watch them do it! Of course, getting to the coffee wagon so late meant the coffee, in addition to being vile, was also stone cold.

This morning, though I was much earlier than usual, everyone else had already departed. There weren't any donuts left, but the empty tray was a mute reminder of all the marvelous goodies I had to deny myself.

I poured a cup of coffee, still hot for a change, and picked up one of the discarded wrappers. It was decorated with the picture of a man's face, his black beard long and unkempt, his right hand brandishing a scimitar, his eyes burning with some private vision. The red-gold letters above the face stated, "Jenghiz Khan Chocolate Chip Cookies," while the motto in black type underneath read "The Cookie That's Better Than Sex."

As I paid for the coffee, Joe commented, "You know, Mr. Kent, you're the first person to buy coffee this morning. Nobody's buying anything except those new cookies."

Had Sam been in such a hurry to buy a cookie that he'd ignored the damage to his beloved car? As the day wore on, mysteriously, Sam continued to do

things completely foreign to his nature. He's always been a hard-working slave driver; now, however, he just sat in his office. From time to time we'd hear the little thunks of paperclips hitting the wall.

My coworkers were also acting strange. Jerry, Janet, Alice, and Mark all felt a compulsion to always *look* as though they were working hard. They never actually got all that much done, but the appearance was always excellent. Now, Jerry was quite openly making paperclip chains, Janet was doing her hair, Alice her nails, and Mark was cutting out paper dolls.

When I asked Ben about an application to export computer chips to Israel, he replied in a clear confident voice, "It was a great mistake to let the Jews reestablish the nation of Israel because that confused Halley's Comet with the Star of Bethlehem."

Since my girlfriend Marge wasn't in the office, there wasn't anyone I could talk to about all this weirdness. At 5:30, as I walked down the dimly-lit stairway to the garage, I noticed Joe's coffee wagon standing unattended on the second floor. The cash box was open and overflowing with money and Joe was no place in sight.

From the darkness below I heard a click, a sound with an immense quiet authority — a gun being cocked. Someone whispered, "Yah, so listen Joe, we're not asking you. We're telling you: we've got to have them."

"Guys," Joe said in a pleading tone, "It's like I told you. I sold them all this morning. I don't have any and I can't get any more until tomorrow morning."

The reply sounded more like a vicious animal snarling than a threat made by human beings. Joe was, I knew, only a few seconds from death, but how could I save him? The Kevlar jogging outfit I was wearing under my suit wouldn't keep the thieves from blowing my head off or beating me to death. I needed some kind of weapon, but there wasn't anything — except the coffee wagon.

Grabbing one of the wagon's handles, I ran, pushing it toward the stairway. It was heavy, heavy enough to be a formidable weapon.

All of a sudden the coffee wagon lurched down the dark stairway and I lacked the foresight to let go.

While I struggled to hang on, angry shouting erupted. There was a pop like a balloon breaking and something that sounded like the world's angriest hornet buzzed past my head.

Dear God! They were shooting at me! With bullets whizzing past and ricocheting off the steel coffee urn, the only thing I could do was hold on to the jolting wagon for dear life. Suddenly I was drenched in cold coffee. I was wet and —

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## CRASH

With a horrendous jolt, the wagon and I hit the bottom of the stairwell. The wagon and urn went flying in one direction, and I jumped in the other, running a step or two before I fell.

As I struggled to regain my footing, a black form stepped out of the shadows and stood above me, something metallic glittering in its right hand. Rolling over on my back, I covered my face with my arms. As I did, the metallic object spit fire and my right arm felt as though it had been hit by a blacksmith's hammer. Blindly I kicked with both legs and hit something solid, something that gave with a meaty snap. A heavy metal object fell to the floor and an instant later, I heard the thud of a falling body.

After that everything was quiet, except for the very soft moaning of someone in pain, and the sound of liquid dripping.

Getting to my feet, I fumbled around for the emergency light switch. When I clicked it on the first thing I saw was Joe, huddled in a corner, trembling with fear. Despite his terror he seemed unhurt, which was more than could be said for the men who'd attacked him. One had apparently been hit by the ten gallon steel coffee urn. He might have some crushed ribs, and that freely bleeding head wound probably meant he'd hit his head very hard when he fell. The other was moaning and holding his left knee. Quite possibly my kick had broken it. When you weigh three hundred pounds and exercise in an eighty-pound jogging suit, you develop rather strong legs.

As I scooped up their guns I said, "Joe, call 911. Tell them to send the police and an ambulance for these thugs. They're going to need some medical attention."

"Mr. Kent," Joe objected, "you just saved my life and I don't want to sound ungrateful, but — look at them. They aren't thugs. They're cops."

With a sinking feeling, I saw that Joe was correct: I'd just laid out two of New York's Finest. For a moment I wondered if this was some disastrous misunderstanding. But Joe had said I'd saved his life. "So they're bad cops," I told Joe, "they're still —"

"Mr. Kent," he interrupted, "that's the point. I know them. I've known them both for a long time. They're good honest cops."

"They were trying to rob you!" I protested.

"No," Joe said, shaking his big head emphatically. "They didn't want my money. All they wanted was a couple of cookies. I'll see them tomorrow morning in the hospital, tell them they were clobbered by Lightningman, give them some cookies from tomorrow's delivery, and it'll be all right. I don't know what it is with these weird cookies but I wish I'd never heard of the damned things."

## Chapter 2

Normally, after a long day at the office Marge and I come back to our apartment and while I clean, vacuum, do laundry, and the other less-creative household chores, she prepares a magnificent 300-calorie supper for each of us. Marge's theory of dieting is that since you're in a hurry when you eat breakfast and lunch, there's no harm if what you eat is dull and unsatisfying. Supper is different. It's the family meal and should

be interesting, satisfying; something that provides a happy occasion.

To do this with 300 calories, Marge got us into the A&P's New Foods Test Program. Although nature offers a great host of different fruits and vegetables, the choice in most groceries is far more limited. For example, the American Indian ate more than three hundred different kinds of greens, but most stores only offer lettuce. The A&P thinks there's money to be made by offering more choices, and so they send people like Marge and me free samples. We, in turn, tell them what we think of all these exotic edibles.

Of course it would be nice if some of these strange fruits and vegetables tasted good, but I guess that's asking too much. Marge and I had a wonderful time laughing and joking about the Icelandic cloudberrries. They look like golden raspberries and you can't help imagining a fantastic rich taste.

Instead, it turns out that Icelandic cloudberrries really do taste like clouds: wet, mushy, and flavorless. Still, I loved eating them. A beautiful intelligent woman has chosen to share her life with me, and the meals she prepares are marvelous, no matter how they taste.

Tonight, however, Marge was away, visiting her mother in L.A., and my supper consisted of four ounces of cold-boiled chicken without the skin, black coffee, and an enormous number of raw carrot sticks.

As I chewed, I thought about all the strange behavior at the office. Quite abruptly I saw a very unpleasant explanation for it.

I've been in the Bureau of Export Control long enough to have done favors for people in other agencies, and now seemed a good time to call in a marker or two. I phoned the DEA office in Washington, D.C., and the Boston and New York regional offices. No one answered, which was a little odd. Even though it was late, DEA is not a 9 to 5 outfit and I thought a few people would still be working. I kept on dialing, trying the Chicago, Dallas, and Denver regional offices. I called the LA office and was told by a recording that no one was there. It wasn't even 5 o'clock in LA yet. I dialed again, this time using a Federal Agent priority code and got the same recording.

However, when I called the San Francisco office, Janet Vixen, Deputy Director for Northern California, appeared on my viewscreen. Putting down a long chain of paperclips, she smiled and said, "Charlie! Hi there! What can I do for you?"

"Has DEA analyzed these new Jenghiz Khan cookies," I asked her, "to see if there's anything in them besides chocolate chips?"

"You," she said, laughing, "aren't the first to ask that question, and the answer is that we have and there isn't. Those cookies don't have as much as a hundredth of a part per million of anything that isn't perfectly legal. They're just extraordinarily good cookies."

"Then why," I demanded, "are people so absolutely crazy to get them? Why is everyone in my office so relaxed?"

"Charles," she replied, "if you have to ask why people like the Jengies so much, you've been dieting too long. As for your second question ... well, yes, people in law enforcement are a lot more laid back than they used to be ... but that's because of Lightningman."

"What does Lightningman have to do with it?" I asked.

"Remember those Brazilian financiers? They came within an ace of plunging the world into chaos, and the FBI and CIA didn't have a clue that anything was going down. Ordinarily something like that makes people uptight, but this time people knew Lightningman nailed the Brazilians. With a guy from another planet defending our world, the rest of us can relax just a little."

"I don't believe in aliens," I replied. "I think Lightningman is really some ordinary guy — like me. He —"

I stopped. She was laughing so hard I couldn't hear myself. "Charlie," she said when she regained her composure, "you're fat! If Lightningman — Oops, that's my other line!"

Her face faded from the viewscreen. I was sure that what she told me about the chemical analysis of the Jenghiz Khan cookies was true. On the other hand, Janet is a tough, ambitious, hard-driving woman, and a total workaholic. What was she doing making paperclip chains?

I telephoned the FBI, ATF, Treasury, and Justice departments, the IRS, Secret Service, FTC and FCC offices. Nobody answered.

There wasn't even anyone answering the phone at CIA headquarters in Langley, Virginia.

What was I going to do?

What could I do?

Exercise helps me think. Putting aside my fears, I got into my jogging suit and topcoat, mounted my bicycle, and headed for Central Park.

Once there, I took off the by now uncomfortably warm coat, removed a parabolic receiver from the bicycle saddle bag and mounted it on the handle bar. Crime in the streets of New York wouldn't be such a problem if the cops could use these things, but the Supreme Court held that the use of eavesdropping equipment violates a mugger's right to privacy. Even systems like mine in which a digital AI system filters the sound, allowing nothing but victims' screams to be overheard, are illegal.

Unfurling my cape, I began my nightly patrol. Before long the AI system started squeaking the strangely garbled noise of a digitally-filtered scream. The directional indicator showed the source to be a little ahead of me and to the left. I accelerated, zooming through the night, my cape flapping furiously behind, and the cries became clearer. Soon, I could hear it with my ears. I topped a rise and the attacker and his victim were below me.

As I sped downhill toward the mugger, thunder rolled and he glanced up.

Yelping, he turned to flee, but before he'd gone more than a step or two, I was upon him. Tackling someone while riding a bicycle was a trick I'd spent some time learning, though it's not really that hard. When I hit someone at high speed and they go down with all my weight on top of them, they almost never have any fight left.

This man was different. Though I crushed him into the grass, he still struggled, grabbing for something in his sleeve. To my astonishment, he pulled out not a knife, but a glowing green crystal. I slammed his clenched hand down hard on a rock, and the crystal smashed, its fragments flying in all directions.

Staring at the broken crystal, the mugger muttered, "I was robbed," and went limp. I pulled his arms behind him and took a length of fully-annealed dead-soft copper rod from my backpack. By now, the mugger's victim, a slender Oriental woman in her middle years, was getting to her feet. Since she looked like money, she was probably Japanese.

I slapped the mugger's ears and shouted at her in Japanese, "Go get the police!"

That exhausted my knowledge of the language, but was sufficient: she departed. Of course, the mugger, with his face pressed firmly into the ground, couldn't see her leave. As soon as she was out of earshot, I again shouted, "Go get the police!" this time in English.

This bit of fakery might or might not work, but the fully-annealed copper rod was a sure winner. Since I've always had rather strong hands, twisting the rod around the mugger's wrists was well within my limits. Untwisting the work-hardened copper enough to free the mugger would be far beyond any human strength. When the cops collect my muggers they have to hacksaw the copper cuffs off them.

I was about to put a second rod around the mugger's ankles, but heard police sirens and instead, I rushed to my fallen bicycle and sped away.

The rest of the night was just exercise, but oh what glorious exercise! I'd saved another human being from a horribly degrading experience! No matter what might happen to me later, nothing could change the fact that there'd been nights like this, nights when I paid for all my failures by doing something right!

I peddled furiously through the darkness 'til my muscles screamed with total exhaustion.

Redonning my topcoat, I peddled back to my apartment building. In the basement behind the furnace, there's a dark corner that had thirty years worth of undisturbed cobwebs when I discovered it. That's where I hide my bicycle and other Lightningman stuff. As batcaves go, it's not much, but I'm financing this whole bit on a civil-service salary.

When I entered the apartment I saw the closet door standing open. To my pleasant surprise, Marge's coat was in it. She was back a day early.

The bedroom door was shut and I wondered if I should wake her to say welcome home. While I was trying to decide, the door opened. Smiling in warm invitation and wearing an incredibly sexy white silk negligee, a magnificent advertisement of all she had to give a man, Marge came toward me. In all of history, there had never before been a woman so beautiful and desirable. Not Cleopatra, for whom Mark Antony lost an empire. Not Helen, for whom the topless towers of Ilium burnt.

"I need," Marge said, "my welcome-home kiss."

For one ecstatic moment I took her in my arms and kissed her, then she slipped away from me. "Good night, Charles," she said, stepping back into the bedroom, shut the door behind her with great finality.

Marge knows how frustrating I find this — she claims it's helping me. Diets fail because the Dieter spends his time thinking about all the food he can't eat and becomes frustrated. Marge sees to it that I have a lot of frustration that's got nothing to do with food. It's only fair that she should be more beautiful

than Cleopatra or Helen: neither Mark Antony nor Paris had to do anything as irksome as dieting.

To clear my mind, I turned on the TV. After an extremely long commercial for Dunkin' Donuts, CBS's News at Midnight came on.

The anchorwoman announced, "It was another bad night for muggers in Central Park and here with the story from Columbia Presbyterian Hospital is Eyewitness News reporter John Sanford."

Sanford was standing beside a man in a hospital bed. Since the man was in a bodycast, it seemed unnecessary for his left hand to be handcuffed to the headboard. That is, however, standard police procedure.

"Now, Mr. Barker, you admit, don't you, that you assaulted a Japanese woman, a Mrs. Nakamura, in Central Park a few hours ago?"

"Yeah, sure," he snarled, "but it wasn't fair. I mean this Lightningman's more superhuman than Superman. That's how I got my (electronic bleep) ribs smashed!"

Nodding noncommittally Sanford asked, "Now as we understand, Lightningman ordered Mrs. Nakamura to get the police."

"Yeah. That's right."

"Did he speak English or Japanese?" Sanford asked.

"English!" Barker snapped. "I don't speak no (electronic bleep) Japanese!"

"That's interesting," Sanford replied, turning toward the camera, "because, Ladies and Gentlemen of our viewing audience, Mrs. Nakamura does not speak a single word of English. She says that Lightningman spoke to her in Japanese." Returning to Barker, Sanford continued, "Did you hear what Lightningman said with your ears, or did his words just appear in your head?"

"Well, I guess they did kinda appear. I mean my ears were funny and I couldn't hear anything, then there were these words, loud and clear, but that's not the important thing — I gotta warn people! Don't buy no kryptonite from No Nose Nelson! It don't do (double bleep) to Lightningman!"

Sanford continued blandly, "For most of our viewers, the big news is the revelation of another of Lightningman's amazing powers: the ability to project his thoughts so that people with no common language can understand him!"

John Sanford's earnest face faded, to be replaced by the anchorwoman's cheerful countenance. "Later in this program," she said, "we'll hear from exobiology experts at Harvard and Stanford universities as to the implication of this newly revealed power of Lightningman. Does his ability to project thoughts also mean that he can read minds? We'll also hear arguments from lawyers for the ACLU and the Justice Department as to whether the use of such mental powers violates a defendant's civil rights."

Unfortunately, the distinguished professors of exobiology had to wait for a long series of commercials: Dunkin' Donuts, Famous Amos Chocolate Chip Cookies, Baskin Robbin's Ice Cream, Mars Candy Bars, Carvel Ice Cream, and Hershey's Chocolate. I switched channels several times. The other channels were running commercials too, all for things I mustn't eat.

Back on CBS, the professors were arguing about the Pope's latest encyclical regarding

Lightningman's superhuman powers. From what I could gather, His Holiness believed that Lightningman's invulnerability and other powers were predicted by Church doctrine. Since Adam and Eve fell from grace here on Earth, a being from another planet should be untainted by Original Sin and would be expected to have powers corresponding to that state of grace. Although the learned professors rejected this as unscientific, they disagreed about — well, they never really made that clear. Part of it was whether Lightningman came from another habitable planet in this solar system or from interstellar space in a faster-than-light ship.

During the next avalanche of commercials for cookies, cakes, candies and ice creams, I noticed that only the makers of Jenghiz Khan cookies weren't advertising. Checking the *TV Guide*, I found listings for half-hour infomercials on Mars bars and Dunkin' Donuts. There's only one reason to advertise that much: shrinking market share. Joe, the coffee wagon guy, wasn't the only one who'd dropped all other products in favor of Jenghiz Khan cookies.

People were acting as if the Jenghiz Khan claim that the cookie was "better than sex" were literally true. Maybe it was. The implications of that were very unpleasant.

I didn't dare wait any longer. Sitting down at my PC, I began modeming my way into various federal databases, digging out information on the company that made these strangely popular cookies. Tyrant Cookies, Inc. turned out to be a complex, well-constructed maze of holding companies. However, I know the tricks used to hide who owns what, and after an hour's effort I discovered that the owner of Tyrant Cookies was none other than John Lucchesi, the Godfather of New York City. I'd met him once, three years ago, a business deal that involved Export Control in a minor way. Smiling, but with eyes as cold as an executioner's, he had explained that he liked to do business on a friendly basis. Meaning that he would be reasonable, and that he insisted I should also be reasonable. Lucchesi never threatened the people he had reputedly killed. He'd simply told them they were being unreasonable.

If Lucchesi found out what I was doing now, he'd regard it as very unreasonable.

I was in way over my head. I knew it and I was afraid. It's one thing to take on muggers and Brazilian financiers, mere amateurs at crime. Lucchesi was something entirely different. Once, I'd imagined the bullies who made my childhood miserable to be horrendously powerful monsters. Lucchesi was a monster in reality ... and that meant I had to go on.

Giving in to bullies is a very bad habit, one I did not dare start again.

I continued digging through the data banks, accumulating facts that didn't always seem to fit together. The answer that finally came to me was hideously logical: Lucchesi's cookie might really be all he claimed it to be.

And more, much more.

To explore this grim possibility, I'd need expert technical help. While I didn't know anyone with the expertise required, my cousin Seymour the stockbroker knew everybody and had their phone numbers on file.

When I phoned, Seymour promptly said something obscene about it being two a.m.

"Seymour," I said, "I need the name and home phone number of the chief chemist of the Mars Corporation."

Seymour objected, "But their stock is in the toilet and about to be flushed. They can't handle the competition from Tyrant Cookies."

"Seymour, something's happening and," I paused significantly, "I can't talk about it."

Nothing makes Seymour more eager to please than the opportunity to do a little insider trading. He immediately punched a few buttons on his PC and gave me the home phone number of Bernard Lamb, Ph.D., Senior Product Development Scientist, of Mars Inc.

Before dialing the number, I turned to the computer and tapped in the code for the Federal Automobile Data Register and my Federal Agent Access number. Dr. Bernard Lamb, I learned, owned one eight-year-old car.

Lucchini had to have some scientist somewhere working for him secretly and that scientist's qualifications would be very much like Dr. Lamb's.

Since, however, anyone on the mob's payroll can afford a new car, Dr. Lamb was probably an honest man. Feeling reasonably safe, I punched in Lamb's number.

Unlike my cousin Seymour, Dr. Lamb was a sound sleeper, and when he finally did answer the phone, his eyes didn't focus at all well.

"Dr. Lamb," I stated, "I'm Federal Agent Charles Kent, Bureau of Export Control. I'm very sorry to disturb you at such a late hour, but this is a matter of great urgency, and —"

"What," he interrupted, "could be so damned urgent it can't wait 'til morning?"

"Jenghiz Khan Chocolate Chip Cookies," I replied and his face changed immediately. I now had his undivided attention. "I understand that your company routinely performs detailed chemical analyses of your competitors' products. Have you analyzed the Khan cookies?"

"Have we analyzed the bloody cookies that are putting us out of bloody business?" he responded angrily. "Only down to ten bloody parts per billion and there's nothing bloody there! Every test shows that the damned things are inferior cookies and they're still destroying our whole bloody product line!"

I pressed him, "If the Khan cookies had an ingredient that was present at only a few parts per billion, could it escape your notice?"

He replied slowly, "I don't think so. It's difficult to measure concentrations below ten ppb, but if anything were there, I'd expect to see it."

I persisted, "What if the ingredient were a new chemical compound, something not presently known to science?"

"Be fair, man!" Lamb protested. "There's no way anyone could spot something like that unless they knew what to look for."

"Then," I continued, "when John Lucchesi started manufacturing these cookies, he could be sure there was virtually no way you'd be able to detect a few parts per billion of an unknown secret ingredient?"

"When who?" the scientist demanded.

"John Lucchesi," I replied. "He's the owner of Tyrant Cookies."

Lamb stared at me, all traces of sleep swept away. "I see. What compound would you like us to test the Khan cookies for?"

"3-ethyl fentanyl," I told him.

Lamb's eyes widened. "Dear God, that would do it!" After a moment, he continued, "Agent Kent, we'll run the analysis as soon as possible. In fact, you can call in the morning for the results."

After thanking Lamb, I hung up and started worrying. If my suspicions were correct, would anyone believe me? Most people regard mad scientists and diabolic plots as clichés of pulp fiction.

History, however, provides a few examples of the real thing. Back in the sixties in California there had been someone who was never

caught, never identified. This person's work, however, proved him or her to be a world class pharmacologist and a brilliant synthetic organic chemist. The starting point of this unknown scientist's work was a commonly used anesthetic called fentanyl. Dentists nearly always use fentanyl for root canal surgery. Like all effective painkillers, it's addictive, but the human body metabolizes it quite rapidly. Consequently, the highs it produces are very short-lived and the use of fentanyl as a recreational drug has never been much of a problem.

What this unknown chemist did was to produce a material previously unknown to science, 3-methyl fentanyl. One might think that making 3-methyl fentanyl would just be a matter of sticking a methyl group on fentanyl, but the 3 position on fentanyl is crowded, and you can't just put things there. You have to start with the methyl group where you want it, and build the rest of the molecule around it. That kind of synthetic organic chemistry is far from easy; no one would do it if they didn't have a strong hunch about the result. It's a safe guess that the unknown chemist knew, or at least strongly suspected, that blocking the 3 position in fentanyl with a methyl group would greatly decrease the human body's ability to metabolize it, and hence, increase its potency.

He — or she — was right. 3-methyl fentanyl is more potent than heroin by a factor of a thousand. Instead of arresting junkies with 3% heroin the police in California found themselves seizing junk that had all the kick of street heroin, but was 99.997% pure sugar and only 30 parts per million something else.

They never found the individual responsible for this deadly new plague. He or she was content to make one batch with a street value of hundreds of millions, and disappear. Since pure 3-methyl fentanyl is as poisonous as nerve gas, that one batch



had to have been produced in a fully-equipped first class laboratory, but that was never found either.

After it was all over, there was some speculation in the technical journals: quantum mechanical molecular modeling calculations suggested that blocking the 3 position in fentanyl with an ethyl group would be twice as effective as blocking it with a methyl group. That meant that while 3-methyl fentanyl was a thousand times as potent as heroin, 3-ethyl fentanyl would be a thousand squared — a million times — more potent. Assuming, of course, that it would be possible to make 3-ethyl fentanyl. Most scientists had agreed that the synthesis of 3-ethyl fentanyl would be impossible, and all this had seemed to be merely idle scientific speculation.

Now, however, a very sinister game was underway: did Lucchesi have the original sixties chemist — or someone of equal talent? Given that a mistake was likely to be fatal, was I making any false assumptions? For example, I'd cheerfully believed there wasn't much chance Lucchesi would have a tap on Dr. Lamb's phone, but could —

OH DEAR LORD!

What had I been thinking? Nobody taps a phone! Nowadays telephone communications flow in a torrent from one microwave tower to the next and bad guys use super computers to listen to them all and bounce out the one in which people say key words. Speaking with Dr. Lamb, I'd used the words John Lucchesi, Tyrant Cookies Inc., and 3-ethyl fentanyl. An AI system wouldn't need much intelligence to flag our conversation.

If so, I'd certainly triggered an alarm!

The temptation to panic was great, but I controlled myself. No matter how advanced it was, the AI system wouldn't wake people in the middle of the night to say that an important message had been intercepted. Too many false alarms. The recorded intercepts must be checked periodically. Almost certainly there would be a few hours to escape. Stepping to Marge's door, I knocked politely, saying, "Darling, we have a bit of a problem."

### Chapter 3

Seymour was not pleased to have house guests. To pacify him, I had to promise inside information on a major event that would influence stock prices.

During breakfast (for me, black coffee, no sugar, 100 ccs of orange juice, and one hard-boiled egg with peppers but no salt) Marge and Seymour quarreled. We were watching television and he couldn't see what she thought was so funny. As far as he was concerned, the experts were doing an excellent job analyzing Lightningman's powers, performing the same kind of thoughtful, careful, research he did when recommending stocks. Marge agreed, and laughed again, which only made him more annoyed.

The laughter stopped abruptly as the TV picture changed, showing our apartment, the door smashed, the walls riddled with bullet holes. In voiceover, Paula Jensen said, "Despite the efforts of Lightningman, Blue Streak, and the police, crime remains a problem in our city. At 4 this morning a group of men smashed their way into the apartment of Mr. Charles Kent and Miss Marge Rhoads and sprayed everything in sight with machine-gun bullets. The lack of bloodstains suggests that the couple

was absent when this occurred. Police speculate that —"

Seymour snapped the TV off and demanded to know what was going on.

For a long moment I could not take my eyes off the TV to focus on my cousin. I'd underestimated John Lucchesi: his thugs had arrived at the apartment scant minutes after we left. Marge and I had escaped by sheer luck.

Turning toward my cousin I said, "Marge and I will be leaving now, and Seymour, I'd suggest that you not have a second cup of coffee. Security in your office building is good, so go there and stay. Send out for your meals and use the couch in your office for the next few nights."

"Yah, sure," he agreed, "but you haven't answered my question. What's happening?"

"It's part of a new diet," I told him. "You do a lot of cold sweating."

### Chapter 4

Although NYNEX made call forwarding standard a couple of years ago in New York, most people don't realize that if you feed it some money, even a pay phone will call forward.

After I'd call forwarded a pay phone to Bernard Lamb's number at work, Marge and I got on the subway, rode a few stops, forwarded a second pay phone to the first, and got back on the subway. When we had four phones in the daisy chain, I felt it was reasonably safe to call Dr. Lamb.

He answered on the first ring and the instant he saw my face, he shouted, "THANK GOD YOU'RE ALIVE!"

"Please, Dr. Lamb," Marge said with quiet authority, "this is not a good time for you to be overexerted."

I added, "Dr. Lamb, we need to know the results of your analysis: were you able to determine if the Jenghiz Khan Chocolate Chip cookies contain 3-ethyl fentanyl?"

"But," Lamb protested, "you're fugitives! How can you —" He paused, took a deep breath, and continued, "Our analysis showed that the Khan cookies contain 2 to 3 parts per billion 3-ethyl fentanyl."

"Then, I'd suggest that you tell the DEA that John Lucchesi is distributing an illegal drug."

Lamb replied in a voice that dripped misery, "I wish that it were that easy. After the analysis, I contacted the company lawyers. They say 3-ethyl fentanyl isn't illegal. The list of illegal substances only includes known compounds, and 3-ethyl fentanyl isn't."

"But that's a technicality," I objected. "Once the DEA has the facts, it'll make 3-ethyl fentanyl illegal."

"No," Lamb replied unhappily. "It'd do that only if it believed me. You see, we've been keeping careful track of Tyrant Cookie's distribution of sales. Normally, you start a new sweet with children, but the market Tyrant targeted first was federal workers, especially the DEA. They sold them enough cookies to stone an army. They've also had huge sales to the military, police departments, even Congress — if we tell them that Khan cookies are addictive, they won't believe us. Addicts never believe they're addicted."

"But," Marge protested, "you have absolute scientific proof! You can go to the news media and make a stink that will force them to act!"

"No, I don't," he contradicted flatly. "What I have is 95% confidence that something in the Khan cookies matches the theoretical properties of 3-ethyl fentanyl. Without a pure sample of 3-ethyl, that's the best I can do, and it's not nearly good enough. Under their new ethics guidelines, the media won't publish a story that ruins a large business without 'clear and convincing evidence.'"

"Then why not," I suggested, "give the story to an unethical journalist?"

"We did!" Lamb exclaimed, "and it was a disaster! We realized that we needed a journalist who was unethical, but credible. There's really only one person who fits that description: Joan Rivera, TV's Queen of Sleaze. We contacted her producer and told him everything. He became excited, so excited that he phoned Ms. Rivera even though she'd left orders that she was not to be disturbed. A capital mistake. She was in bed with a man."

"But," Marge objected, "for someone like Ms. Rivera, that's a minor embarrassment."

"The man," Lamb replied unhappily, "was John Lucchesi."

After a long uncomfortable silence, I said "That could mean you're going to be attacked. Are you taking suitable precautions?"

"Yes. The executive offices of Mars are in our principal factory and we're making the whole place into a fortress. If you want to come here, you'd be more than welcome."

"But, wars aren't won by sitting behind your battlements. Somebody has to do something about Lucchesi," Marge said.

"Yes," Lamb agreed, "and we're taking steps to get in touch with Lightningman. By noon today there'll be a new Mars sign near Central Park with a message hidden inside in letters of sheet lead. With his X-ray vision he can't miss it!"

Dr. Lamb looked at us as if he'd come up with a brilliant solution and expected us to praise him. Instead I hung up and Marge and I left hurriedly. Only after we'd gone some distance did we find a coffee shop and sit down to talk.

One of the few good things about disaster is that it makes it really easy to diet. The coffee shop had a huge selection of fancy donuts, all of which now looked to me as if they were made out of wax.

In a booth in the back, Marge and I sipped our black sugarless coffee in glum silence. The more I thought about our situation, the worse it seemed. If we went to the office, we'd probably find Lucchesi's thugs waiting to kill us. That pretty well ended our careers. Likewise, if we went to our apartment or our bank or used our credit cards, or ...

Dear God, our only hope of surviving was to abandon all our possessions, our friends and relatives, and flee the country. If we were careful to be totally inconspicuous that might save our lives.

Or it might not. So far Lucchesi's organization had shown itself to be remarkably efficient.

Taking a long sip of hot black coffee I put my fears behind me and said, "Marge, with your help, I think I can steal that sample of pure 3-ethyl fentanyl! Dr. Lamb needs."

"Charles! NO!" Marge protested. "You'd be committing suicide!"

"We don't really have any other choice, do we?" I replied.

There was an awkward silence. Finally Marge reached a decision and said, "Charles, I don't want you going into danger with a fatalistic attitude. I want you to run scared. I want you to know you've got something to live for, so I'm changing the rules. If we come out of this burglary alive, we can have sex immediately!"

For one long awestruck moment I couldn't do anything except stare at her. "In that case, Darling, this is going to be the best planned robbery in the history of crime."

## Chapter 5

Twelve hours later I was in Hoboken, standing outside a barbed-wire fence and looking down at the darkened Tyrant Cookie factory. Marge and I hadn't dared to search databanks for anything directly relating to the factory. Lucchesi was too alert to that sort of thing. For facts about the factory itself, we had to depend on gossip from the real estate agent who handled the sale to Tyrant Cookies. He told us that it had originally been owned by High Explosives Research Inc., and had been built to their design specifications.

To a salesman, the sale didn't make much sense. A building designed for explosives work has a lot of expensive special features which a cookie factory wouldn't need. For example, the advanced security system was much more elaborate than a cookie factory would require.

Of course, that was probably why Lucchesi had chosen the building. Drug dealers like to buy high quality security systems. The DEA knows this and keeps an eye on the sales of security systems. One of the few ways the Godfather could get what he needed without attracting unwelcome attention would be to buy a building with an advanced security system already in place.

If that security system was similar to the one the explosives company had installed in its West Coast facility, the empty parking lot would be the first line of defense, watched by an artificial intelligence system with visible-light TV cameras, thermal infrared cameras, and a Doppler radar system.

Formidable as that was, the second line of defense against nighttime intruders was even stronger: darkness. Except for the room in which the guards stayed, every room in the factory would be completely lightless and have both conventional alarms and ultrasensitive visible, UV, and IR light detectors. Even the faintest light should trigger the latter, but trying to work blind would set off the former.

*Oh, please, Dear, Lord, let me survive this night. And send that thunderstorm the weather bureau said was coming. I'm ready for it. Prepared. I've got thumbtacks and a hacksaw blade in my right sleeve pocket, and in my left, a file, a piece of gallium metal, and a lightstick wrapped in black cloth. I'm standing here with a skate board strapped to my back and my cape on backwards, held to my chest by a pair of velcro strips, and I can't do anything. Not until it rains and Dear, God, I'm sick of waiting.*

Maybe my grandmother was wrong about God's listening only to reborn Christians, because my face

was suddenly wet. The downpour was intense, exactly what I needed. I ran out of the bushes and to the top of the driveway that led to the factory's enormous parking lot. On this moonless night in the pouring rain, I hoped my black cape against the black asphalt surface would be enough to make me invisible to the visible-light cameras.

In order to escape the notice of the thermal IR detectors, too, I had to move rapidly. One moment I was running, the next I'd dropped flat on my back onto the skateboard, and was speeding down the steeply-sloped driveway, gathering velocity with every second. The entrance to the parking lot was barred by an automatic gate.

I went shooting under it, and continued to accelerate across the parking lot.

The weakness of thermal IR is its response time: to compensate for an inherently low signal-to-noise ratio, thermal IR cameras have to spend several seconds on each image. If I kept my balance, and didn't let anything stop or slow me, then I should be invisible to the IR cameras.

The velocity which blinded the thermal IRs would, however, make me conspicuous in the extreme to the Doppler radar.

In Doppler radar the part of the return signal that has the same frequency as the transmitted signal is discarded, and only the part that is frequency shifted is analyzed. That means the system only sees moving objects. If the object has parts that also move, it sees a complex pattern of velocities. A man walking gives one pattern, crawling quite another. An AI system can recognize hundreds of patterns.

I was gambling that I could trick the AI system into misclassifying me. With my cape flapping wildly and my arms and legs motionless, my velocity pattern was nothing like that of a man, walking, running or crawling. Surely, the AI system wouldn't have the velocity pattern of a man lying flat on a skateboard while wrapped in a flapping cape in its library. Lacking an accurate match, it would, I hoped, be forced to put me into the category my pattern most resembled — a newspaper being swept across the parking lot by the wind.

As I sped though the night towards the great black bulk of the Godfather's deadly factory, failure was all too easy to imagine. At any moment the alarm would sound, the factory doors would pop open, disgorging thugs with machine guns, and I'd —

I had to think about what I was doing! I was approaching the factory at high speed! If I ran into it, the noise would bring the guards. Since the TV and IR cameras were mounted on the roof, there was a blind spot — a strip about a meter wide around the base of the building that I had to reach. Stopping, or even slowing, outside that blind spot could be fatal.

Praying my timing would be good, I hit the ground as hard as I could with my right heel. The off-center drag spun me sideways and the skateboard slipped out from under me as I started to roll. Even wearing Kevlar, it hurt, but an instant later I was up and running as fast as I could.

Rounding the corner of the building, I paused, took a deep breath, strapped the skate board on my back, took off my cape and thumbtacked it to the wall. Had the wall been made of concrete instead of styrofoam, this would have been impossible. This building, however, had been designed for explosives

research and was built on a large concrete slab with a steel girder framework. While the inner walls were cinder block and quite strong, the outer walls were moduler's styrofoam. That way the inner rooms could be used as offices, the outer rooms as laboratories, and in the event of an explosion, the blast would go outward. In fact, even if you were in the area of the explosion, with the styrofoam, you had a pretty fair chance of surviving being thrown through a wall.

According to the real estate agent, John Lucchesi had not been happy about his building's having walls you could cut with a penknife and he'd ordered a set of bars set in the building's concrete slab, at least a meter from its edge.

I crawled under my cape and, in total darkness, I took out the hacksaw blade and forced it through the foam. Applying my eye to the small hole I'd just made, I was rewarded with blackness. Good! Now I began cutting in earnest.

Cutting a hole in the foam big enough for me to slip through took only a few minutes. Moving very carefully, I wiggled forward. Outside, thunder rolled in distant crashes, but I saw no hint of accompanying lightning flashes.

Neither did the alarm system.

After I was through, I put the piece of styrofoam back in the hole and was inside John Lucchesi's stronghold with no one the wiser. Or so I hoped.

I had to gamble on the one obvious weakness of the security system: its need for maintenance. Rooms develop light leaks. The large ones are easy to find and fix, the small ones difficult or impossible. Unless Lucchesi's maintenance people were extraordinarily conscientious, they wouldn't bother with the small ones. Instead, they'd turn down the sensitivity knob and settle for a system that was not quite infallible.

After putting on my night goggles I took out the cloth-wrapped lightstick and bent it to break the inner glass vial and mix the chemiluminescent reagents. Despite having my goggles at maximum sensitivity, I couldn't see anything. Slowly, carefully, I removed layers of the cloth wrapping until I could see the lightstick, though everything else remained a dark blur.

Mouth dry, hands sweating, and heart racing, I murmured an earnest prayer and peeled back another layer of cloth.

There! Now I could see ... sort of. With my goggles set at maximum integration time, they produced one picture every ten seconds: a crisp sharp image if I kept my head perfectly still, a blur otherwise.

Looking out at the room, I saw the bars, but as soon as I started moving, everything blurred and I had to shut my eyes. Finding one of the bars, I took out my file and scratched it. Soft aluminum, which for my purposes was better than good.

After rubbing the file on a piece of gallium metal, I scratched a set of bars near their tops and bottoms to break the outer surface of aluminum oxide. Aluminum has a tremendous affinity for gallium, and soaks it up like mad even though gallium atoms don't fit into the aluminum crystal structure. Consequently, a few minutes after exposing aluminum to gallium, it becomes extremely brittle.

As I worked on the bars I forced myself to ignore the overwhelming aroma of a factory full of freshly-



baked chocolate chip cookies ... and other odors ...  
Urine? Vomit? Disinfectant?

What kind of factory was this?

When I finished scratching the bars, I held my head still long enough to get a look and saw chains with manacles hanging from the bars. In the center of the room there was a charcoal brazier for heating pokers, and the walls held pincers and other medieval horrors.

The manacle chains were also aluminum, and scratching them with my file seemed a good idea.

I had just finished when I heard approaching footsteps. Had I triggered an alarm? There'd been no blaring sirens or clanging bells, but that meant nothing. Lucchesi was likely to prefer a silent alarm system.

There was no way to know, and nothing I could do — except hide.

I slipped back through the hole in the styrofoam wall, and pulled the cut-out piece into place after me.

What I heard next was a woman screaming, her desperate cries all too audible through the styrofoam. What was I supposed to do? Attempt a foolhardy rescue?

I was unarmed and those judo and karate courses I planned to take next month weren't going to do me any good tonight.

Unfortunately, there is no way I can remain idle while people are tortured. Being bullied so often throughout my life has filled me with too many strong emotions. I had to do something.

Pulling my cape off the wall, I tied it around my neck and swung it over my chest. That done, I was ready. Very scared, but ready.

The skateboard was still on my back. Lying down on it, I bent my knees, and pushed off from the building as hard as I could.

Coming to a stop a few meters away, I sprang up, swirled my cape around, and charged, running for all I was worth.

The thunderous smash I made couldn't have been louder if the styrofoam wall had been made of stone. For an instant, I glimpsed Lucchesi and his thugs, and three men and a woman in manacles. They were all staring in open mouthed disbelief and —  
CRASH!

I slammed into the bars with a horrendous impact and for a moment I thought I'd just amputated both my arms. As aluminum bars flew in all directions, a rat-faced little man leveled a pistol at me and fired!

His gun was a small caliber machine pistol, and the steady stream of slugs bounced off my chest, spraying in all directions.

My bruised arms hurt too much to even lift: the damned gallium hadn't weakened those bars nearly as much as I expected. I couldn't even pretend to fight, but if I stopped my headlong rush, Lucchesi's men would blast me to fragments with their guns. There didn't seem to be any limit to the machine pistol's supply of bullets and — Of course!

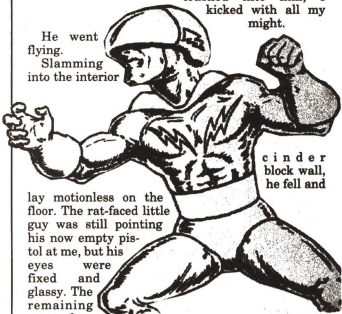
I lifted my chest, which was protected by a 1.5 cm. titanium plate positioned under the Kevlar suit, and suddenly the machine pistol's slugs were reflected directly back at my foes. Struck by spent bullets, three of them turned, taking to their heels, but a fourth man, a scar-faced giant, continued to raise his sawed-off shotgun!

BLAM!

Chocolate Chip Cookie ...

Both barrels struck me in the chest, and I pitched over backwards, falling on my skateboard. I rolled across the floor toward the scar-faced giant who stared down at me in total incomprehension. As I crashed into him, I kicked with all my might.

He went flying.  
Slamming into the interior



cinder  
block wall,  
he fell and

lay motionless on the floor. The rat-faced little guy was still pointing his now empty pistol at me, but his eyes were fixed and glassy. The remaining man, however, held a magnum 45 pointed directly at my face. As soon as his finger twitched, most of my head would vanish.

For one long moment he and I stood there frozen, then slowly, very slowly, he crumpled, knees buckling, arms drooping, his gun turning toward the floor. His trigger finger squeezed and nothing happened. Apparently the safety was still on. Blood streamed from holes in his forehead, right eye, and neck. The bullets I'd reflected had killed him before he could release the safety.

Something roused Rat Face from his trance. Whirling around, he fled through the door where Lucchesi and his other hoods had disappeared.

I'd won! In just a few moments I'd put the Godfather and his minions to flight.

Turning toward the four captives, I saw that they had not been harmed. Stepping over to the woman, I got my first look at her face. I was astonished to find it was Joan Rivera. Dr. Lamb had told Ms. Rivera what Lucchesi was up to. Given the choice of being loyal to her lover or boosting her TV show's ratings, she had betrayed him. She must have come here tonight with a camera crew, set off the alarm and been promptly captured.

One of the chained men screamed, "Hurry, Lightningman! When Lucchesi gets to the control room, he'll flood this place with that damned drug! Maybe it won't hurt you, but for us it's worse than nerve gas!"

"I know," I lied in a quiet authoritative voice, and, though my arms still ached like fury, I grabbed Ms. Rivera's manacle chains and heaved. They snapped with pleasantly surprising ease. One by one, I freed the three men, turning my back on Ms. Rivera in the process.

Unfortunately, that was a mistake. She ran not out the hole in the wall by which I'd come, but out the door. While the woman hardly deserved her first

rescue, much less a second, I trotted after her. For no sensible reason, the three men followed me instead of escaping. One of them even snatched up a camcorder and began to tape. These guys, it seemed, were loyal to Ms. Rivera to the point of total stupidity.

The door opened onto a short hallway. Ms. Rivera was nowhere in sight. Rushing down the hallway I plunged onto the factory floor. An uncertain light came from somewhere, revealing huge dark forms, machines that must be the giant mixers, conveyor belt ovens, and packaging systems that made Lucchesi's monstrous cookies. Right now, though, they were a maze in which that wretched Ms. Rivera had managed to lose herself. With Lucchesi about to poison us, how could the woman be so appallingly stupid as to get herself lost?

Abruptly I heard her screaming, "OPEN, DAMN YOU!" with a lot of obscenities thrown in. Rounding the corner of a giant wrapping machine, I saw her struggling with a loading dock door. "God, she's smart!" one of the men behind me exclaimed. I glanced at him and he continued, "You see, Sir, Mr. Lightningman, she knew you couldn't fly while carrying all of us, so she's headed for our van. All you have to do now is smash that door open before Lucchesi can spray the 3-ethyl and we're home free!"

I'd been wrong to think Ms. Rivera appallingly stupid. Her belief in Lightningman had turned an otherwise intelligent woman into a catastrophically stupid one. The door this man spoke of with such serene confidence, was made of steel and looked as if several strong men could work on it all day with sledge hammers without much result. The door frame was firmly attached to the grid of aluminum bars, and there was no going around it. I could scratch some of the bars with gallium, but they wouldn't be weak enough to break until maybe ten minutes after Lucchesi killed us all.

Everyone looked at me expectantly, but what was I supposed to do with an electrically controlled steel door?

Electrically controlled!

Yes, that might work ... I found my beeper and stabbed its button. Marge had gone to the electric power substation and wired a stud rectifier into the line feeding Lucchesi's factory. On my signal she activated it, converting all the power going into the factory from AC to DC.

I'd naively expected that this would blow some fuses. Instead, the electric motors on the cookie dough mixing machines sprang to action, with the empty and off-balance mixers threatening to tear themselves apart as the motors burned out. The conveyor belts on ovens were in equally furious motion, the packing and wrapping machines began to throw things in all directions, while the fluorescent lights on the ceiling flashed and exploded as their transformers burned out. Thick black smoke poured from burned out motors and transformers and here and there small yellow fires flickered.

Something short-circuited on the loading dock door, causing sparks to fly. For a horrible moment I thought that I'd just managed to make our problem worse. The next instant, the servo motor that unlocked the door and the one that raised it both sprang to life. In a triumph of perverse fate, the door attempted to rise while the bolts were still in place,

jamming the lock, making it impossible to raise the door. I could see the machinery grinding in this futile conflict and I knew that in seconds both servo motors would burn out and our only hope of escape would be lost.

Grabbing the door with both hands, I pushed hard. The bolts snapped and the door, still crackling with electricity, rose. Although the black rubber gloves I wore protected me from shock, they were wet. For absolutely no good reason, Ms. Rivera touched my gloved hand while I was still pushing the door.

She crumpled to the floor. Cursing under my breath, I picked her up and staggered outside, where she soon began to revive. Two of her assistants leapt into the van, while the third began to film Ms. Rivera and me.

Without the slightest warning, the factory exploded into an inferno. It was as if someone had thrown gasoline onto smoldering charcoal, and that was probably close to the truth. Fentanyl compounds, I later learned, are insoluble in water, but highly soluble in light hydrocarbons. That meant Lucchesi's supply of fentanyl had been dissolved in something very much like gasoline. To spray us with 3-ethyl fentanyl, Lucchesi would have had to attach the building's sprinkler system to the 3-ethyl fentanyl tank. In a single act of blind anger, the Godfather had destroyed himself, his factory, and all his better-than-sex cookies.

I'd won! Not the way I'd planned to, but Marge and I were safe! The world was safe!

This would, however, wind up being a very expensive victory if Lightningman were exposed as nothing but fat bald me. Ms. Rivera's eyes were beginning to focus. Hurrying the last few steps to the van, I put her into the front passenger seat. Turning toward the man in the driver's seat, I said, "The poison is spreading. Leave quickly, and warn the fire department not to try to fight this fire."

Joan Rivera stared at me. "You're — you're ... bleeding!" Her eyes were fixed on my upper right arm, at the pocket where I'd put the lightstick. Green glowing liquid seeped out, running down my arm to drip on the pavement.

"Say nothing of this," I told her solemnly. "If my foes knew I could be hurt, they would be encouraged to try harder."

Whirling about, I hurried away in the heavy rain. When I'd gone far enough so that only the lightning insignia on my cape would be visible, I took the cape off and held it as high as I could and skate boarded down the parking lot.

Marge was waiting for me in Seymour's car at the rear entrance. The smile on her face showed that she remembered her promise.

## Chapter 6

**B**ack at the apartment, we found that most of the machine gun damage to the furniture was minor. The only thing that was absolutely ruined was the couch, which, since I was finished sleeping on it, was fine with me.

There was nothing to delay us from consummating our love, and I felt a special urgency to get on with it. The adrenaline high that had carried me through the battle was fading and I needed to do what I was going to do before exhaustion overtook me.

Marge, unfortunately, didn't see things that way. She insisted on inspecting me for bullet wounds. Not surprisingly, I had a lot of them. Not a single puncture wound though, just a collection of the nasty red welts you get when Kevlar stops bullets. The smallest welts were undoubtedly from the small caliber machine pistol, and the big twin bruises on my chest had to be from the shotgun blast. For no sensible reason, Marge wanted to worry about all the welts I'd gotten, but tonight was not the time to think about anything like that. Tomorrow I could think about what had happened. Tomorrow I could afford to let fear make me into a basket case, but not tonight. Tonight, I had to keep going until I was no longer a fat bald virgin.

Marge also fretted about my arms and whether or not I'd pulled the muscles. As I saw it, my arms weren't going to fall off tonight, so I could worry about them tomorrow. Finally, she began to appreciate the urgency of my viewpoint, and told me to get into our bed. Oh blessed phrase, *our bed*. She went into the bathroom to put on the outfit she'd been saving for this occasion.

OH! Sweet agony! Never had waiting been so painful or so enjoyable!

When she came out, Marge was a vision in white silk lace. She's often said that she's only mildly pretty and that my insistence that she's a great beauty only shows how prejudiced I am. Of course, she's totally wrong, and never had she been more lovely than tonight. Letting the white negligee fall in silken ripples to her feet, she stood before me nude and said, "Charles, put your eyes back in their sockets." Before I could reply, she slipped under the bed covers and was lying beside me.

I tried to raise my arms to embrace her, but couldn't. To my utter horror, the other parts of my body weren't responding either. I could understand my arms failing after what I'd been through, but why was I suddenly impotent? I hadn't been shot there — not even a little bit.

Vaguely, I wondered if I'd always been impotent and not known it. If so, the thought drifted through my fatigued brain, I'd have to find a doctor to treat the problem. That was my last thought before sleep took me.

In the middle of the night I woke to find my arms and other body parts in good working order. Marge was marvelously cooperative, and never has a man been happier than I.

In the small hours of the morning I woke again. Marge responded even more wonderfully and we slept again.

This process of making love, then sleeping a few hours continued all day. Only when evening approached had we finally gotten enough sleep and sex so that eating made any sense.

Here again Marge was magnificent! I cleaned house while she cooked! Vichyssoise, shrimp cocktail, filet mignon, lobster with melted butter, chocolate mousse, sparkling champagne in never empty glasses, and all of these culinary wonders without violating our diet.

This miracle was possible because we hadn't eaten all day and could blow our 900 calories on a single meal ... and, of course, the portions were a little small: 100 cc's of Vichyssoise, two medium shrimp with a large amount of cocktail sauce, 60 grams of

Chocolate Chip Cookie ...

filet mignon, 40 grams lobster with 2 grams of melted butter, 300 cc of chocolate mousse made from a zero calorie mix with skimmed milk, one 250-cc bottle of champagne, and a very large bottle of club soda to fill our glasses every time they got half empty.

Except for the mousse (which I made), everything was delicious. It was also satisfying, thanks to the huge helpings of Brussels sprouts, string beans and broccoli. We'd take a small slow bite of one of the goodies, enjoying the taste to the fullest, then wolf down some veggies, then another thoroughly savored bite, and gobble down more vegetables. This was Marge's idea, and when you think about it, it's incredibly sensible. The sense of taste saturates quite rapidly, so that nearly all the pleasure you get in eating is in the first one or two bites. Since you can't really enjoy the later mouthfuls, the thing to do is to make the first bite something you like.

We'd finished desert and were starting on our second cups of lovely steaming hot black coffee, when Marge screamed and turned on the TV. Immediately we saw Arthur Jennings handsome face and heard him say, "... concludes our coverage of this latest chapter in the Lightningman saga, but stay tuned. Immediately following this program, Ms. Joan Rivera's Lightningman special will air. She has promised some truly sensational news about this mysterious being from another planet."

"In other news," co-anchor Jane Newly continued, "Harlem's Blue Streak ran down another purse snatcher — that's his tenth — and New York Mayor Behula Goldstein thanked the Mars Corporation for voluntarily removing the billboards they'd erected at Central Park, thus ending what Ms. Goldstein called 'the visual pollution of our wonderful park.' Since, however, seven other billboards are now being erected, it would seem the problem is far from solved."

Switching to NBC, we heard the same message, but this time were promised an in-depth analysis of whatever Ms. Rivera was going to reveal on "another network." ABC, FOX, CNN, and PBS were all making similar promises of instant wisdom.

It was obvious that none of them had the slightest notion what Ms. Rivera was going to say.

If she saw through my hoax, she'd realize that exposing Lightningman would be the greatest story of her career. Not merely would she destroy my life, she also would cause enormous embarrassment for the FBI and the whole law enforcement establishment. Under the circumstances, it wouldn't be realistic to expect Ms. Rivera to be grateful to me for saving her life.

Defeating John Lucchesi would easily become a very Pyrrhic victory.

The expression on Marge's face showed that she shared my thought. "Whatever happens," she said, hugging me, "We'll face it together."

She kissed me, softly and tenderly. We kissed again, this time with a hint of renewed passion, and I gradually realized that Ms. Rivera was one of those things-I-can-worry-about-later. Unfortunately, just as Marge and I were approaching the critical stage, Ms. Rivera's stupid show came on. Marge immediately sat bolt upright, and there wasn't any question of turning on the VCR and watching Ms. Rivera later.

Although the black dress the Sleaze Queen was wearing seemed modest at first glance, a second look

left one with the suspicion that more than half of it was actually body paint. There was nothing ambiguous about the expression on her face: she was happier than the cat that swallowed all the canaries in the pet store.

"If," she began, "you've watched any television today you've already heard a small part, a very small part, of the incredible story we'll be presenting tonight. Astonishing as it may seem, the facts are beyond dispute: the gangster John Lucchesi launched a diabolical plot to literally conquer the entire world and he would have succeeded, but for the heroic actions of one man! LIGHTNINGMAN! Tonight you will see incredible tape footage of this amazing champion of justice in action! Every astounding event in Lightningman's sensational battle with the master criminal John Lucchesi has been recorded on tape and we're going to show it all! A story far more bizarre than fiction, with an unbelievable climax! Lightningman's destruction of Lucchesi's factory of death! Literally pulling down lightning out of the sky!"

Sitting beside me, Marge whispered, "I think we can relax. It doesn't sound as though she's going to dump on you."

On screen, Ms. Rivera continued, "Some of the tape we'll be showing was shot by the three brave men who accompanied me on this dangerous adventure, George Softar, Ivan Smarnov, and Henry Silver-stone." The camera panned back and to the left to show three men standing behind Ms. Rivera. "The rest of the tapes we'll be showing, were shot by security cameras inside Lucchesi's factory. The output from these cameras was transmitted to VCRs in Lucchesi's home, and hence survived the fire which destroyed the factory — but I'm getting ahead of myself. For me, these momentous events began with a phone call from Dr. Bernard Lamb, the chief scientist of the Mars Candy Corporation." As Dr. Lamb's picture appeared on the monitor behind her, Ms. Rivera gave a swift summary of Lamb's suspicion that the Jenghiz Khan cookies might contain 3-ethyl fantanyl, a suspicion which could not be proved without a sample of the pure material.

"I realized," she said, "that what I would have to do to get proof would be dangerous — the East River is full of men whose only crime was annoying John Lucchesi — but I also realized that if I didn't act, no one else would."

Whatever Ms. Rivera's merits as a broadcast journalist, she wasn't much of a burglar. In the tape she showed, she and her men simply drove up to the factory, blissfully unaware that their approach had triggered the radar, IR, and visible camera alarms. Before they could even start breaking in, the guards came out, captured them and took them to the torture chamber.

The door was opened from the inside. Smiling evilly, John Lucchesi looked out. "What," Ms. Rivera screamed, "are you doing here?"

"Why, my dear," Lucchesi replied, his smile getting wider, "I've been expecting you. I knew you'd want to make a videotape inside my factory and that's what we're going to do tonight, though not quite the way you planned. You're going to star in a very special kind of tape."

As Ms. Rivera screamed and struggled helplessly, she was hauled into the chamber and chained to the

bars. Grabbing her blouse with one great paw-like hand, Lucchesi tore it off. Since she wasn't wearing a bra, this left her bare-chested.

"Hey, wait," I objected, "that woman was fully dressed when I got there."

"Of course, Dear," Marge said, "but you wouldn't expect someone like Ms. Rivera to pass up an opportunity to expose herself on network TV, would you?"

Meanwhile Ms. Rivera was being menaced with a red-hot poker, even though none of the pokers had actually been more than lukewarm. "You can't do this to me!" she screamed. "I'm pregnant!"

"Since I don't think it's mine," Lucchesi asked, "why should I care?"

Glaring at the Godfather, Joan Rivera snapped, "Because it's the child of someone powerful, someone you have good reason to fear!"

"I already," Lucchesi replied blandly, "have most of the United States in my pocket. Soon I'll have the world. Who on earth could I possibly fear?"

"Someone," Ms. Rivera declared, her bare breasts shaking with passion, "not of this world! LIGHTNINGMAN!"

At this absurdity Marge burst into laughter and I joined her. Clearly when Ms. Rivera spun a fantasy, she pulled out all the stops.

On TV, Lucchesi was saying, "I'm afraid, sweetie, that not even Lightningman can do you any good. If he even enters the parking lot he'll trigger an alarm, and you'll be dead long before he gets here."

The Godfather's face went into freeze-frame, and, in voiceover, Ms. Rivera narrated, "What the late Mr. Lucchesi said about the quality of his factory's alarm system was quite true." The TV screen reconfigured itself into four rectangles. The left two rectangles were dark, the upper right showed Joan Rivera's face, and the lower right was a blank white expanse with a small black square at its center.

"Lucchesi's factory," the Sleaze Queen continued, "was equipped with a set of Doppler radar cameras that could instantly detect anything that moved. At the moment Lucchesi was boasting about the alarms, this is what the radar was showing. The black square at the center is the factory and, as you can see, there's nothing moving outside the factory."

The upper left rectangle went from dark to showing a picture much like that in the lower right. "This," Queen Joan explained, "is what the thermal infrared cameras saw. There was nothing there."

Finally the screen changed to show a field of white. "The visible light cameras" Ms. Rivera explained, "feed their pictures to an AI system that subtracts anything odd and, as you can see, there wasn't anything left."

Smiling broadly out of the upper right rectangle Joan Rivera continued, "A tenth of a second, later, however, another set of pictures showed a rather different situation." The screen flickered once showing a small dot just a little distance from the factory. "Now who," Joan asked, with enormous pride and happiness, "who do you suppose that could be?"

The image was replaced by John Lucchesi's frozen face and she continued in voiceover, "The Godfather is about to find out."

Lucchesi's face unfroze into an unpleasant smile for one terrible moment. The next instant klaxons were yammering, and someone was shouting, "Boss, this guy just appeared in the parking lot, like he

beamed down or something. He's right outside and, OH GOD, HE'S CHARGING!"

The view shifted to a blank wall. "WATCH THIS!" Joan shouted exultantly in voiceover, "WATCH THIS SOLID STONE WALL AND THESE TEMPERED STEEL BARS, WHEN LIGHTNINGMAN HITS THEM! THIS WILL BE LIKE A FREIGHT TRAIN GOING THROUGH A PLATE GLASS WINDOW!"

There I was, at one frame a second, smashing through the wall with fragments of styrofoam flying in all directions. When I hit the bars and they snapped like twigs, Queen Joan went into ecstasy.

I couldn't help sharing that excitement. Fat, middle-aged, bald Charles Kent in the eyes of the world was Superman! Me! The kid all the bullies picked on! It was magnificently wonderful, except Lucchesi's thugs were ... firing at me. It was a lot worse than I'd realized. I was very lucky to be alive.

As far as Ms. Rivera was concerned, however, this was another display of Lightningman's amazing invulnerability.

As they shot me, she joyfully switched from one camera angle to another, proclaiming, "If any criminals are watching, THIS is why you shouldn't shoot at Lightningman! Those bullets *really do bounce off* and they're *not* harmless when they're coming back at you!"

In agonizingly slow motion, the giant thug raised his sawed-off shotgun and pointed it at me while she commented, "Now watch closely and you'll see something totally fantastic!" As he fired, someone's head momentarily blocked the camera's view of me. An instant later, I was gone. What had happened, of course, was that I'd fallen down and, thanks to the skateboard on my back, slid across the floor out of the camera's field of view.

"There," Ms. Rivera declared triumphantly, "You all saw it! Lightningman became invisible! Now watch what happens when his invisible fist hits this man!"

The thug who'd blasted me with the sawed-off went flying through the air.

Ms. Rivera continued her enthusiastic narration, screaming as I snapped her chains, yelling "Hallelujah" when the electrical disaster destroyed the factory and I carried her to the van. Actually, the destruction of the factory was pretty spectacular.

She managed to turn my goodbye into something out of *Casablanca*. To my surprise, however, she did not show film of green blood flowing from my arm. Apparently the Queen of Sleaze was, in her own warped way, an honorable person.

The show was followed by the usual instant analysis by a series of guests. The first of these was General Ruth Ikeda. After exchanging the usual pleasantries, Arthur Jennings asked, "General, now that Lightningman has literally saved our country from enslavement by a diabolical drug lord, what are your comments? In view of the astounding powers he's displayed, can there be any doubt that he's from another planet?"

Giving the newsmen a teacher-to-dumb-student smile, the general replied, "Mr. Jennings, perhaps, in the haste of arranging this interview, no one told you that I'm Chief of the United States Corps of Engineers. Quite frankly, I'm annoyed at your trying to make a hero out of a man who made a mess that

## Boomerang Award Winners

There were some close calls by our readers in choosing the Boomerang Award winners for 1993.

For best story, it was a tie between "Natural High," by Chuck Rothman, and "Rest Cure" by Alexander Jablovok. Others finishing close to the top spot included "Dear Froggy," by Patricia Anthony, "Newport's World" by Doug Franklin, "Shell Shock" by David Howard, and "Doll House" by Edward James O'Connell, III.

It was also a tie for the best art, with Allison Fiona Hershey's art for Brooks Peck's "In Love with Multi-woman," and Alan Gutierrez's art for Doug Franklin's "If I Should Die" sharing first-place honors.

Others finishing close behind included Peggy Ranson's art for Derek Godat's "From the Beach," and "A Real Treasure," the cover of our Summer 1993 issue by Carl Lundgren and Clyde Duensing III.

And, again there was a tie in picking the best poem, with "The Dead Start Waving" by William John Watkins, and "Poem From The Stars" by Wendy Rathbone sharing first-place honors. Our congratulations to the winners!

my people have to clean up. When this Lightningman was through, the Lucchesi factory was a burned-out ruin that still contained massive quantities of a chemical far more toxic than nerve gas. We're covering it with concrete as fast as we can, but the runoff's already reached the Hoboken river, making it unfit to drink."

Jennings asked tentatively, "Hasn't the water in the Hoboken river been unfit to drink for decades?"

"That," she snapped, "is quite beside the point."

"Well, thank you, General Ikeda," Jennings said smoothly, "but I'm afraid that's all the time we have for this segment. Our next guest is Professor Thomas Hill, Dean of the Harvard Law School and senior counsel to the ACLU."

When the bearded professor's face appeared on the monitor, Jennings asked, "Professor Hill, in the past the ACLU has been critical of some of Lightningman's actions. Now that he's saved the entire United States from a horrible fate, have you changed your mind?"

"Certainly not!" the professor replied, "The ACLU has always fought to protect the American people from illegal searches and seizures, and what Lightningman did in this case was particularly inexcusable. He *broke* into Mr. Lucchesi's cookie factory without a warrant! Furthermore, there weren't even any grounds on which a warrant could have been issued, because the cookies were perfectly legal."

"But those cookies contained 3-ethyl fentanyl, an extremely addictive drug," Jennings objected.

"Irrelevant!" the Professor declared. "To be illegal, a chemical has to be known. As long as John Lucchesi kept the existence of this 3-ethyl whatever

a secret, it was perfectly legal. The LAW was a suit of armor completely protecting Mr. Luchesi, and by attacking him this ... this Lightningman broke the law!

"Excuse me, Professor," Jennings asked gently, "but isn't it a bit much to ask a visitor from another planet to understand such subtle points of law? I mean, here he is, flying patrol out over New Jersey, and his X-ray eyes spot a man about to torture a woman with a red-hot poker. What was he supposed to do? Ignore it? Let Luchesi carry out his plot to reduce everyone in the country to drug slaves?"

"Yes, because that would have been infinitely preferable to abandoning the RULE OF LAW!" the Professor declared. "By his example, Lightningman invites others to imitate his lawlessness! The Blue Streak in Harlem never reads alleged purse snatchers their rights. The LA Impaler, the Chicago Bat —"

"Well, thank you, Professor Hill," Jennings interrupted smoothly, "I wish we had more time to discuss these fascinating legal questions, but we've other guests I can't keep waiting." The camera panned back to reveal a group of people. Rapidly, Jennings introduced them: Vice President Brown, Speaker of the House Carson, Senators Bergan, Keaton, and Fox, and Charles McCarthy, Chief Scientist, U.S. Army.

Senator Bergan began the discussion, commenting, "While Professor Hill put things rather strongly, I have to say that I agree with his basic point. Whatever the situational justifications for his actions, the fact remains that this Lightningman simply has not been law abiding."

"Yes," House Speaker Carson agreed, "and it's not just in this instance. His whole history is one of failure to respect our laws. When he came to this planet, he entered the United States illegally. Granted, he was an infant at the time, but still his spaceship should have been programmed to set down at JFK or Dulles and go through customs and passport control."

"Yes," Bergan agreed, "and there's also the matter of that illegal adoption. His foster parents had no right to find a baby and pretend that it was the orphaned son of a dead relative. Tomorrow morning on the floor of the Senate, I'm going to introduce a resolution calling on the FBI to begin a massive search of all birth records. Somewhere in this nation there's an illegal alien from space and I want him found."

"I think," Senator Fox objected, "it would be a lot more cost effective to have the FBI do a background search on the staff of the *New York Times*. Lightningman's obviously a New Yorker and the *Times* is the only paper in town that you could call a great metropolitan newspaper."

"That," Bergan agreed, "is a good idea. We should also have the U. S. Geological Survey check Antarctica for a large underground structure. They should be able to find the Fortress of Solitude fairly easily."

"Now, wait," Vice President Brown objected. "What good is finding him going to do? It's an absolute disgrace, but the sad fact is the United States Army doesn't have a single bit of kryptonite. Not one scrap. They sell the stuff openly on the

streets of New York City, and still our military don't have any."

Jennings face showed that he found this conversation more than a little surreal. Several of the highest elected officials in the country were cheerfully assuming the entire Superman legend to be fact. Apparently hoping that he would have something sane to say, Jennings turned toward the army scientist.

With absolute seriousness, Army Chief Scientist McCarthy told the others, "Please, Vice President Brown, what you say is true, but it's not that simple. Remember what kryptonite is. Thorite is the ore from which we get the element thorium, uranite the ore for uranium and so on, so logically kryptonite has to be the ore for the element krypton. Since that's not a mineral native to the U.S., we couldn't legally stockpile it under the Strategic Minerals Act. We do, however, have abundant supplies of the pure element krypton, and we even have some in throwable canisters."

That was too much for Jennings. "Dr. McCarthy," he protested, "if I recall my college chemistry, krypton is a gas. Those 'throwable canisters,' are they weapons? Is the Army planning to use gas against Lightningman?"

"We follow orders," the scientist replied.

"But, Good Lord, man!" Jennings protested, "Lightningman saved the whole world from a terrible fate! You can't use a hideous weapon like GAS on him!"

Although Jennings had been addressing the scientist, Vice President Brown answered. Turning her head toward him in a furious gesture, her long blonde hair flying, her green eyes cold as ice, she told him in frigid tones, "John Luchesi may not have marketed his cookies to CBS, but he sent a lot of them to Capital Hill. How do you think it feels to be quitting a four-cookie-a-day habit cold turkey because some damned superhero offed your supplier?"

Jennings's face suddenly filled with understanding. He had invited a group of powerful people to be his guests on air, not realizing that they were all in withdrawal from a powerful drug. While they'd been no more irrational than one might expect under the circumstances, still they'd made public fools of themselves. Jennings was the man who'd given them this opportunity to commit political suicide, and, when they saw things more clearly, they weren't going to be grateful to him.

As he began the hopeless task of putting a good face on the mess, Marge ran out of patience and changed to NBC where Ann Roker was interviewing Senator Gleason and Congressman Carney. The Senator was saying, "We need to get the Justice Society to use their influence to restrain Lightningman."

The Congressman, a rather lean man who probably didn't eat cookies, looked uncomfortable as he told the Senator, "I'm afraid, Sir, there isn't actually, in strict point of fact, that is, any Justice Society."

"Well, the Justice League then, or whatever the superheroes call their organization," the Senator replied impatiently.

"Ah, Sir," the Congressman replied reluctantly, "I was not aware of anyone, other than Lightningman, whom you could call a superhero."

"Nonsense," the Senator snapped, "To begin with, there's the Blue Streak. Thanks to his exposure to heavy water, he is the fastest man alive."

"Ah, Sir, what I had heard was that Blue Streak was just a Harlem kid who was into running and decided that catching purse snatchers would be a good way to train for the Olympics. He denies using heavy water, and, as far as I know, there isn't any evidence that it enhances athletic performance."

"Nonsense," the Senator declared, "I have it on good authority that the Olympic committee is planning to test the hydrogen isotope ratio of all the contestants, and in addition to Blue Streak, there's the LA Impaler and the Chicago Spinebreaker."

"But," Congressman Carney objected, "those guys are hardly heroes and they don't have any supernatural powers. All they have is a bad attitude toward drug dealers."

Before the Senator could reply, Marge switched to ABC, where the Secretary of the Interior was explaining his plans to search for a huge cave full of bats out on Long Island.

On PBS, several reporters, all of them obvious cookie eaters, were pressing John Saber, Director of the CIA, to admit that the CIA had a secret group of "metahumans".

On Fox, however, Janet Baker Carr was interviewing the Chief of Police of the LAPD, James Gordon Edgar, whose appointment to be director of the FBI had been announced that morning. Ms. Carr was saying, "But how can you promise that under your direction the FBI will track down Lightningman? As head of the LAPD, you didn't have any luck catching the Impaler."

Forcing himself to smile, white teeth in sharp contrast to his ebony countenance, James Edgar said, "That's not really a fair comparison. Police work always depends on the public's cooperation, and where the Impaler was concerned, we got the opposite. People didn't just support the Impaler, they put sharpened posts in their lawns for him to use."

"Didn't drug use fall off a lot?" she asked.

"That," he told her angrily, "is beside the point. The point is that this Lightningman has broken the law and, secret identity or not, the FBI will find him."

"Damn!" Marge exclaimed, "Daddy sounds as if he means what he's saying!"

While I did a double take, she turned toward me. "Don't you remember," she said quickly, "I told you that my mother had remarried and that it was an interracial marriage. You said that was fine and it didn't have anything to do with us."

"But," I protested, "your stepfather is an incredibly powerful man, and he's prejudiced against fat people!"

"Yes," she agreed, "that's another reason why you have to lose weight rapidly. He knows we're living together, but he doesn't know how much you weigh."

"But Darling," I asked, uneasily, "how will this affect our wedding? I mean we did agree that once we started having sex, we'd get married. Do we —"

"No, Charles," Marge said firmly. "We can't get married now, or for some time to come. Remember when I moved in, the deal was that we wouldn't have sex until you lost seventy pounds and that after that we'd get married and have sex if you maintained a schedule for losing more weight."

"BUT YOU SAID YOU WERE DROPPING ALL THAT!" I screamed in horror.

"No," she replied gently. "I said I was changing it a little. When you get down to two hundred ninety, we can have another night. After that it'll be one night for every ten pounds until you reach your target weight and we can get married."

At first I couldn't believe Marge meant what she was saying, but I soon found otherwise. While her stepfather had the reputation for being an extraordinarily intractable man, Marge clearly had him beat. Since it was still my week on the couch, she kissed me good night, shut the bedroom door behind her, and that was that.

I lay there on the bullet-riddled couch, trying to sort things out. I'd saved the world and for that, the great and powerful wanted my blood. That wasn't important as long as my secret identity was intact. The couch's springs had a tendency to poke through the bullet holes, but that, too, was unimportant. What mattered was that if I was going to keep my sanity, I needed to lose ten pounds in a week or less. What could I do that would give me that much exercise?

*"Success in dieting, like success in life, can be disappointing because having achieved a goal, one quickly finds that it is necessary to set a new, and higher, goal."*

— Dr. K.K. Chang, *The Use of Zen Philosophy in Weight.* □

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# Prisoners of Time

By Dan Lissman

Art by David LeClerc

Maria Scofield had gone through this interview process with murderers, thieves, and muggers more times than she cared to remember, and none of them bothered her like the man seated across from her now. Charles Jackson looked normal enough, forty-one, with thinning, salt-and-pepper hair, actually a bit bland and easy to dismiss. It was difficult to remember that he was responsible for a series of brutal rapes that had terrorized the city less than two years ago. The table between them felt much more like a defense than ever before.

She wasn't all that happy about using humans so soon in the Sundance Project, but Bethany Research Institute was demanding hard data. The computer models were no longer enough to justify the expenditures. With the PETA lawsuit successfully blocking the use of animal subjects, the convicts were the only way to keep the funding alive.

Jackson was dressed in prison-issue coveralls, one ankle resting on the other knee, his chair tipped back and his thumbs hooked in his pockets. He smoked a cigarette, and, as Maria arranged her papers, he leaned forward and stubbed it out in the cheap plastic ashtray sitting there.

"Good morning, Mr. Jackson," Maria said, trying not to look at him. "I assume they've explained as much of Project Sundance to you as to all the others?"

"They didn't tell me shit," he said. "Just some sort of scientific experiment that counted toward time on my sentence."

"Right. Sundance is mainly concerned with the development of new energy sources, but, in the process, we've discovered certain applications that were, to put it mildly, surprising."

"When enough energy is focused through the Sundance Device at the right frequency, we've been able to move objects forward in time. Up to this point, we've concentrated mostly on inanimate objects, but we've finally reached the stage where living subjects need to be investigated."

"You invented a time machine?" Jackson asked, settling both elbows on the table and staring at her. His eyes were focused on a spot slightly below her throat.

"For all practical purposes, yes," she said, standing and moving behind the chair. She felt better with that extra piece of furniture between them.

"And you're going to send me into the future?"

"That's the idea."

"How far?"

"We're set up in stages," she said. "If we go with you, the first session would move you up a week, possibly two, if the other volunteers who've already gone through come out unharmed."

"Sounds good," he said. "How long did the others get?"

"The first was twenty-four hours, and the second was seventy-two hours. Subject Number Two's coming through tonight. His condition will determine how we proceed."

"So, I go through a week, that's a week off my sentence, right?"

"Right."

"Great," he said, sitting back. "Sign me up."

"Don't you want to consider this first?" Maria asked. "There's a possibility this could result in irreparable damage, even death, for all we know. Are you prepared for that?"

"Just one more question," Jackson said. "How far do you plan to eventually go?"

"Due to energy considerations, we think thirty years is the upper limit. If everything goes as planned, we'd be sending someone through for that amount in about two years."

"Right," Jackson said. "Sign me up."

Paul Clerry was in his office when she got back, going over the med reports on the first subject. The room was filled with books and papers and computer equipment, and Clerry, looking like the standard mad scientist with his lab coat bunched around his neck as he hunched over his reports, was idly twirling a gold pen.

Beside him, a monitor showed the short black man who'd been sent forward twenty-four hours, emerging a day later with no sensation of passing time. The vidcam scanned every bit of his body, but Clerry was too busy going through the test results to notice. He didn't look up until Maria dropped heavily into the chair across from his desk.

"How'd Jackson check out?" he asked, glancing up.

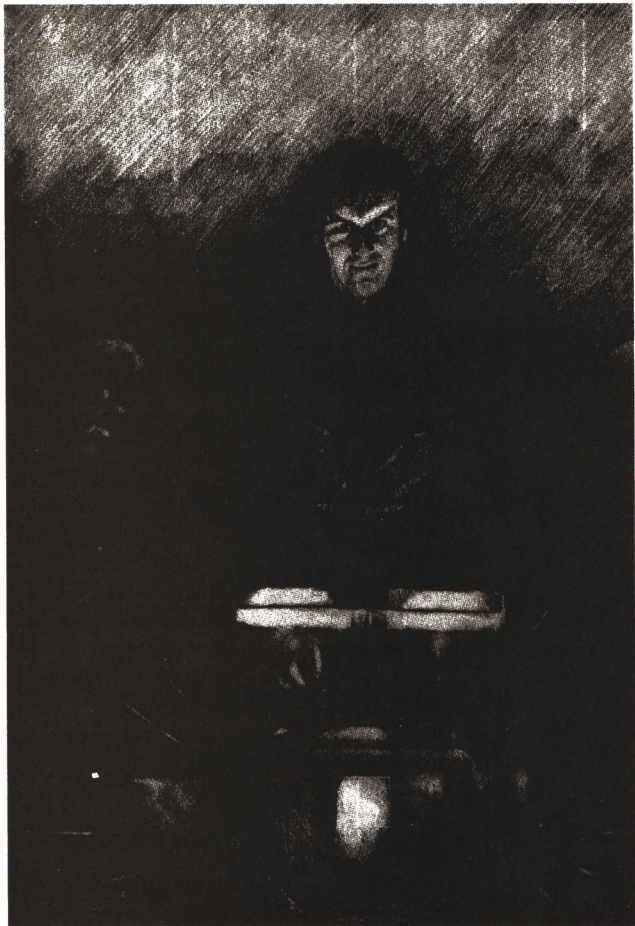
"He's interested," she answered. "Are you sure you want to use him?"

"Why not? He fits the parameters, he's in relatively good health, and his mental processes are fine."

"The man kidnapped a woman from a Dairy Mart, beat the living hell out of her, raped her, and left her for dead! And that was only the first! What the hell's so fine about his mental processes?"

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"What's with you?" Clerry asked, setting down the pen. "You didn't have a problem with Lee or Malvern."

"I don't know. There's just something about him that makes me hinky."

"And the other two don't? Lee walked up to the man he thought was screwing his girlfriend and blew the guy's face off with a shotgun. Malvern robbed a liquor store and nearly beat the clerk to death. That doesn't make you 'hinky'?"

"Not like Jackson."

"Why? Because of the rape?"

"Yeah," she said, slowly nodding. "I'm pretty sure that's it."

"Maria," Clerry said, pushing his report aside, "is there something we should be talking about here?"

"What? You mean, have I ever been raped? No. That's not it."

"A relative or close friend? Something like that?"

"No," she said, shaking her head. "Amazingly enough for this incredibly violent world we live in, I don't know a single person who's been attacked or raped. There's just something about the fact that I'm a sex offender that does it to me."

She leaned forward, fiddling with the edges of the report he'd discarded. "This'll probably sound strange, but, with the others, I can almost understand why they did the things they did. I mean, I don't agree with their actions, but I can sense why they did them. I'm aware of logic at work behind their thinking. It's a skewed logic, but at least it's a logic system of some sort."

"And with Jackson?"

"None of it makes sense. I can't imagine him working from anything other than a primal level that I can't understand, and that scares me."

Clerry looked over at the monitor, seeming to notice Lee for the first time. "Well, we didn't get a big response to our calls for volunteers. The damned disclosures were forced to do scared a lot of people off. Lee looks good so far, and if Malvern checks out the same, Jackson goes through for a week."

"Start setting it up so we'll be ready after we get Malvern's results," he said, looking back to Maria.

The Sundance Device looked like a giant insect with antennae sticking out at odd angles. It was originally designed to tap into plentiful energy sources in another dimensional plane. Somewhere in another part of the building, another team was still working on that.

A window had been set in the access panel that doubled as a door, more for the researchers' convenience than anyone or anything that might be inside. Behind that panel was a small, stark chamber, big enough to hold the couch the subject would be strapped into.

As she entered the last of the data into the computer, Maria tried not to look at that waiting couch. It reminded her too much of who would be in there.

Lee was fine, waiting for his next trip, and Malvern had come through with flying colors. Both spoke of an instantaneous transition, no sensation of time passing at all. Both men wanted to whittle down as much of their sentences as possible in that couch.

Finally finished, she sat back and let the computer double check her work while she waited for Jackson. On schedule, two guards came in, a manacled Jackson between them. Seeing him standing for the first time, Maria was surprised at how short he was. She couldn't imagine him being able to force himself on any woman.

At the machine, one guard stood back, his hand resting lightly on the butt of his gun, while the other undid Jackson's manacles. When he was free, Jackson rubbed his wrists as he looked around the room. He nodded at the Sundance Device.

"That it?" he asked.

"That's it," she said. "I'm afraid I'm going to have to ask you to disrobe."

Jackson raised one eyebrow, the beginning of a smirk on his face. Maria felt a flush growing on her own face, rising from her neck. She hated herself at that moment, hated that he could get that kind of reaction out of her.

"Can we ask these boys to wait outside?" he asked. "I'm a little shy."

"I don't have time for bullshit," she said. "Strip."

With a knowing glance at the nearest guard, he pulled off his jumpsuit and underwear. When he was naked, she led him to the machine, trying not to look at him.

She wasn't successful at that. She had to look, never having seen a rapist's penis before. It bothered her that it looked so normal.

Clerry came in as Jackson climbed into the compartment, settling into the soft recliner with a grin. Now more aware than ever of his nudity, Maria tried to hide her discomfort with brisk efficiency. She strapped him in, avoiding looking at his crotch the whole time, and backed out to seal the compartment.

"See you in a week," Jackson said, winking at her.

Clerry pulled Maria aside after the regular staff meeting. Things were going well, and she couldn't understand why he was so agitated. All their results were positive. Lee had been through twice, each time for longer periods, and so had Malvern and Jackson. The fact that none of them was harmed by the experience was having an effect on the prison population, too. Other volunteers were starting to come forward.

"What's the problem?" she asked as they settled into chairs in his office.

"It's Hatchison in the front office," Clerry said, his shoulders slumped. "He's beginning to wonder if our research is going to come up with any tangible results."

"What's his idea of tangible results?"

"They've spent a lot of money on us, and he's afraid they aren't going to get a return on their investment."

"What about terminal patients?" she demanded. "I'd say being able to shoot people through to a time when they can look forward to a cure for whatever they've got is a damned good investment. Doesn't he understand that?"

Clerry snorted. "He's a numbers man," he said. "He understands bottom lines. I've come up with an idea that should help us, though."

He leaned forward, drawing Maria into his conspiracy with his fervor. "We're getting a renewed interest from the prison population. In a few weeks, after we do the tests, we should have a good field of volunteers to explore every aspect of this phenomena. That's if we keep our funding."

"So, what do you want to do?"

"Move ahead to the long-term projects. Send Lee, Malvern, and Jackson through for twenty, twenty-five, and thirty years respectively."

"What?" Maria said, jumping up. "What good would that possibly do?"

"If we go with the long-term, I think Hatchison will agree to continue funding to protect the Institute's investment. What choice would he have? He can't very well shut us down and dismantle the equipment while those three are still out there. In the meantime, we'd be able to keep working with the new volunteers."

"Paul, you've finally gone over the edge. We can't do that. It would be immoral and unethical, not to mention that all three, especially Jackson, would have completed their prison sentences. No parole, just back on the street, ready to go."

"I'm willing to take that risk," Clerry said, drawing himself up straight in his chair. "That's far down the road."

When Maria didn't answer, he quietly said, "It's Jackson, isn't it? It's the thought of him going free that bothers you so much."

"Not just Jackson," she said. "All of them. All violent men who shouldn't be put out on the street like that."

"Violent men you can understand. Except for Jackson. You can't fathom his need to deal with women like that, can you?"

"What if I can't?" she said, coming back over to sit in the chair again.

"I'm going ahead with this," Clerry said, standing so he towered over her. "When I do, I'd like you by my side. You've been with me from the first, and you know I need you there at the end."

Maria looked around, trying to suck some sort of moral support from the silent books lining the walls. There wasn't any to spare.

"All right, dammit," she said. "You know I'm with you, Paul. I always have been."

**M**aria watched them help Jackson out of the chamber and transfer him to the waiting gurney. She was now far too old to do such things herself.

## Last Rest Stop for Thirty Parsecs

By Marianne J. Dyson

*She slid down the steps of her Nomad  
ignored by the coachman  
trying to ignite the primitive atmosphere.  
Didn't he know those souvenir lighters never worked?  
She daintily suck-popped her way to the restrooms,  
wondering which alien-shape was most like her own.  
She chose the one with four limbs and no triangle,  
though what limbs had to do with resting your sacks  
was beyond her.  
Inside she found a hitchhiker and a bum,  
small-brained fur-headed things,  
drinking from cylinders of foaming spray,  
blowing gray clouds over their heads,  
and bellowing over the speed and strength of their flow  
— as if it mattered how it went down the drain.  
They turned and screamed as she approached,  
as well they should, caught in the act  
of violating the room's posted purpose.  
She couldn't help it that her sacks,  
sensitive to the intense sonal fluctuations,  
exploded across them.  
At least they had the courtesy  
to dissolve quickly.  
She flushed those rude visitors,  
containers, butts, and all, cleanly away.  
Relieved, she rested a time, absorbing the cool  
night air and the simple dance of tiny lifeforms  
orbiting the ornamental globe.  
Ever the conscientious guest,  
before boarding her Nomad for the stars,  
she posted a sign at the restroom door:  
Warning: Wet Floor, Watch Your Step!*

As Clerry predicted, putting the three original subjects through long-term did tie the Institute's hands. If they shut the project down, dismantled the Sundance Device, they'd be responsible for those three deaths when the inmates came through decades in the future. That saved the project but not Clerry.

He'd been hounded by the popular press as well as the scientific community, and Bethany successfully brought charges against him for endangering the prisoners' lives. Amazingly, even though she was an active participant in the whole thing, Maria came through untouched. Clerry had died in some anonymous prison cell more than ten years ago, while Maria went on to head the project he'd loved enough to sacrifice all his ideals to keep alive.

And now it was all over. Jackson was through, the last one, finally at the end of a thirty-year trip.

She crossed to him slowly, her joints aching, an increasingly common sensation. He looked the same as he had thirty years ago, his hair still the salt and pepper gray. The smirk was still there, too.

Maria was old, and she hadn't aged well. Too many late nights, too much work and too little relaxation, they'd all taken their toll on her. Her body, once so full of promise and energy, was now old and spent, and she had nothing to show for it but this man lying before her.

"Mr. Jackson," she said, her voice sounding hoarse and rough to her.

"Scotfield," Jackson said. "How you doing? Did I make it?"

"You made it," she said. "The full thirty years."

"And I've completed my prison sentence?"

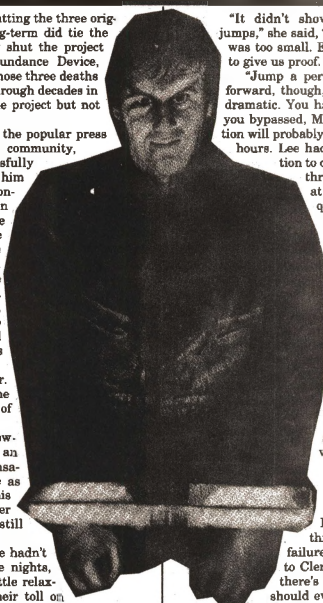
"All of it," she said. "You're a free man, just like Lee and Malvern ahead of you. You may go anywhere, do anything you wish, in the time you have left."

"In the time I have left?" he asked as they started to roll him away.

Maria stopped them from moving the gurney. She looked down at him and smiled.

"There were complications we never foresaw," she said. "Do you know about the Law of Conservation of Energy?"

"What complications?" Jackson asked. "How much time do I have left?"



"It didn't show up in the short-term jumps," she said, "because the time involved was too small. Even a year wasn't enough to give us proof.

"Jump a person two or three decades forward, though, and the results are very dramatic. You have to pay for those years you bypassed, Mr. Jackson. The deterioration will probably start in about twenty-four hours. Lee had twenty years' accumulation to deal with. He lasted almost three weeks. Malvern came in at twenty-five, and he didn't quite go two weeks. We estimate one to one-and-a-half weeks for you."

"You goddamned bitch!" Jackson screamed. "You fucked me over! You took away my whole life. You're no better than me."

"You're right, Charles," she said, lightly touching his arm. "I am no better than you. What I did to you, whether it was intentional or not, is probably just as horrible as what you did to those women years ago."

"My life ended when Dr. Clerry made his decision to send the three of you through. Since that time, I've been a caretaker to this monument to scientific failure. It was important enough to Clerry to risk everything, but there's absolutely no reason we should ever need to travel into the future, besides in the conventional way."

"You're crazy, bitch!" Jackson hissed. "Just as crazy as you, Charles. Want to know something? Being able to tell you this and knowing what's going to happen to you gives me a strange pleasure that's hard to describe. It must have something to do with the control over someone else. I don't know."

"What I do know is that I finally understand you, Charles. I understand why you could do what you did to those women so long ago. I don't approve, mind you, but I understand. Thank you, Charles."

She gestured to the techs, and they wheeled the gurney off, Jackson still ranting and screaming at her. She ignored him. Her work was done now, and she could go home, contemplate the wasted life that was Charles Jackson, compare it with her own wasted life, and savor the difference. □

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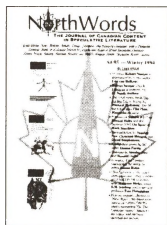
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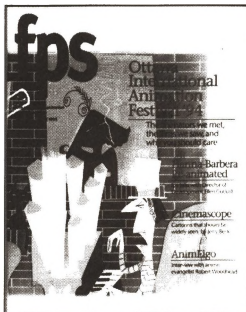
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To the editor,

I originally bought *Aboriginal SF* through a fund-raising project for my granddaughter. Our library doesn't carry a lot of science fiction — at least not the kind that I like. I didn't know what I was getting, but the title was fascinating, and there were no other magazines on the list that interested me.

It was a great choice. A whole magazine filled with true short stories (a genre I enjoy) of top quality writing and science fiction (not fantasy) that was often thought-provoking. At first I thought that I'd wait for subscription time for Shara's school again, but I changed my mind. I don't want to miss any issues. Besides, maybe her school will have a different fund raiser, and where would I be?

Thanks,  
Sharon Kaplan  
Minneapolis, MN

Aboriginal,

Sorry to hear things are not going well for *Aboriginal* and Charles. Please give him my best wishes ... I know where he's at.

As for the magazine, it would be a great loss if it failed. It really is the best

thing that's happened to science fiction in the last fifty years — yes, I've been reading *SF* that long!

I'm not wealthy, and mostly I don't miss it — but at times like this I wish I had a potfull.

If money will help, let me know who to make the check out to, and I'll send a few bucks.

Sincerely  
Larry Cuthbert  
Victoria, BC  
Canada

To whom it may concern,

We just wanted to do what we can to help out with the publication of *Aboriginal SF*. We found the magazine so impressive that, when we heard it was facing financial difficulties, we had to help out.

It is so delightful to find a science fiction magazine which is so seriously devoted to quality that it does not base its selection of stories on the demands of the *SF* market. The editors seem willing to publish selections from lesser known, or even unknown, writers who have not, as yet, begun writing solely for the sake of money, cranking out the same material,

rehashed.

We recognize the results of *Aboriginal's* editorial philosophy, which does not target the mass of *SF* readership, inevitably tend towards financial difficulties. We hope our contribution helps to offset those difficulties.

(Every little bit helps — Ed.)

Sincerely,

Jan B. Berends and Cati Coe  
Hastings-on Hudson, NY

Hi,

I'm delighted to see that the quality hasn't suffered because of your financial woes. The interior color art was very appealing, but I'm mainly a word person, and the stories are as good as ever. I've read "The Recyclers" five times now — it's amazing how Anthony J Howard has put so much in so few words. I also especially liked "The Lady or the Tigress," (by Jayge Carr) since I'm the only person I know who actually admires and respects cockroaches. But I still haven't forgiven Patricia Anthony for writing "Born to Be Free." I've been thinking for years of working up something about the 1960s types (like me) when they hit their 70s and 80s, and there she goes and does it. I'm delighted that Robert Metzger will have a story in the next issue. I enjoy his column, but I've missed his fiction.

Nikki Patrick  
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# Play the Wind

## By D. Lopes Heald

### Art by Charles Lang

All the music ever imagined blew out of the Music Master's Station. Which is why I — Erin "Moon Man" Mooney — was blowing in. With dribble drive banging my ears, I stared at the passenger lounge view screen and nearly forgot all my worries — including a band that clung like static and a gut-eeep ache of apprehension.

The M! A musician's dream, and the ultimate chance to zero on stage. *The Music Master*.

Focused on a nightmarish conglomeration of superstructure, load docks, permanent anchorage and transient moorings, our view screen detailed the station's raw underside. But within that ball of tempered plastics and hi-bred metal was a world apart, *life at the top*.

Riding in from near space on *The Screamin' Semen*, a standard drive bucket with class "A" steering ratings and "C" accommodations, the band and I fit right in with the other passengers — mostly break-even musicians and middle-class tourists, celebrating, jostling and jockeying for station view. Only Mayerbeth, the fifth of our band and the best stringer I'd ever heard, exhibited any reserve.

I watched her a moment. My people were brilliant. But how much longer did I want to hold things together? Was I getting too familiar, too one-tracked, ruled-in by the others? Maybe. Maybe it was time to divide. But we weren't just a band. We were mononuclear. We worked. We merged. We played like one soul. That didn't happen because we hated each other.

The view screen shimmered, focus shifting. Captain Semen's image blotted out station view.

"Bye-bye, lovers." Snake skinny, the woman smiled around a strobe flasher in her front tooth, and her kinky hair danced on its own. "It's been a juice." Semen's eyes glowed white against black paste circles. "Wait for the chime, stick your BHs to a lovin' pad, and we'll squirt you out by section. Have a blazer." Her voice descended to a growl. "Party time at *The M!*"

Cheers rocked the lounge, drinks sloshed. Someone slapped my back so hard my vision dimmed. The view screen reverted to station pan. Catching my breath, I bellowed. My body swayed. My heart raced. I danced a circle to the lung thumping chinka music that filled the passenger lounge as Pete, my bass tubeman, scanned *The M's* broadcasts.

*Almost there!*

The station's image swelled, revealing more detail with every breath. Tubes and gantries reared in all directions, abristle with flowbeam arrays.

"Can you believe it?" Flower, my punchboard and seco-synth player, slipped an arm through mine and giggled.

"*The M.*" Clamped against her other side, Pogo rolled his eyes, and a smile split his face.

I sighed. *The M's* flowbeams, the most powerful in the known universe, blew out every imaginable type, kind or arrangement of music ever composed — instan-

aneous viral tones and particle shoals back to single bamboo pipe pieces, including music too alien for human minds to comprehend or too old for modern readers to interpret. Right alongside, the station played puke sick music and plain horrible noise that some called music. *It all played.*

"Look at the junk." Pogo's voice quavered.

Squatter ships — derelicts and rotting scows cobbled together, never going anywhere, never wanting to — surrounded the station. They housed the trying-to-be's, had-beens, might-be's and never-ever-could-be's, awaiting a chance to inflate their music right out of the universe.

"It's crowded." I reached past Flower to slap Pogo's shoulder. "But we have reservations."

Flower laughed. On view, glint streamers waved from *The M's* turrets. Tracer beams streaked velvet space with dancing colored light. Link pods glowed and winked.

Pete switched from hard drive to a soul deep instrumental, and the music flowed over us.

"Moron." Mayerbeth punched Pete. Was she crying?

"What you want, Babe?" He switched to an upbeat, playing comfortable dive rhythms. "How's this?"

Someone cheered. Pete left it there. Someone bought a round of drinks. Everyone smiled, even Mayerbeth, though she still looked sad. I couldn't worry now. I grabbed a purple-haired tourist and danced her around the lounge.

"You the Moon Man?"

I nodded. She giggled, giving me a hug that threatened to break my back. I was flush, hot — topping the wind beam charts — and everyone wanted to dance with the Moon Man.

"You Little Miss Sunshine?" We both laughed.

"Been to the M'n'M before, M. M.?"

"Yeah."

I didn't elaborate. Last time, I'd played a beggar's work gig, followed orders, did my job and run before expenses put me under. This trip, my schedule read main clubs all the way. I'd been invited to *The M.*

A shoulder hit mine. A drink splashed. "Gods without! Look at that!"

The drunk stumbled back as his curse cut through music and partying, his panic unignorable. I followed his gaze locked on the view screen, and my gut dropped out, shriveled up, almost killed me before anything else could.

A siren shriled. Lights dimmed. My dance partner pulled free. I hit the deck, clinging to the carpet.

Emergency energy fields froze me in place. Mayerbeth molded herself against my left side. Flower claimed the other. Pogo's bulk dropped beside her, Pete's against Mayerbeth. There I lay, at the heart of everything again, protected.

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Meteorite showers on Men-ie or bombardment at Rowbox, the arrangement never varied. Damn it. I could take care of myself.

But with my head cranked over, I faced the view screen as a miasmic whirlpool of disturbed space blotted out The M. We were all in fate's hands this time. *A ship was blowing in from ether. A big one, on our track.*

"Whoa, folks!" Alarms wailed over The M broadcast. "Grab a wall. Got a blow coming station side, quadrant 4!" Sirens blared. The combined panic from station and ship clawed my gut. *The Screamin' Semen* lurched. Lights failed. But the damn view screen continued to glow.

Mayerbeth panted against my shoulder. Pogo whimpered. A tourist screamed, out-wailing the sirens.

"It's a BIG, BIG one!" The M announcer's voice scalded upward, then dropped to bass. *"Phantom Time."*

Pogo groaned. My gut churned. Every other musician of my generation had composed at least one song about the ships that blew into known space from ether on a free lead without a channel, running pure stone-blind and insane.

A tourist sobbed. *The Screamin' Semen* did a blues wail, trying to phase out of the other ship's way.

We were too close to station. Space twisted and writhed. The M announcer tabbed into the ether wave and let the rush of vacuum and void howl through his beam.

"Be all right," I lied to Mayerbeth.

"Here it comes, kiddos!"

Screaming static filled the lounge. Space took a flop. Pete, among others, puked. Flower squealed.

The ship rode up. An horrendous *uhumppff* stuttered my heart. The deck warped beneath us like a piece of jelly plastic, pinged out flat — And that was it.

My lungs spasmed. I blink-blinked. We should be bittices blowing in a solar wind.

I focused on a monster ship. Its derelict image filled the view screen. The M's lights glinting past its nose. Not a dead ship. Someone had coaxed it in or the Music Master would be nothing but old echoes. The view screen blanked.

"Hang on folks. We're stuck ass to gut with this monster. But station's comin' to get us." Captain Semen sucked an audible breath. "We're fine. Fine."

But that skiggy-bobbed woman's voice quavered. Death had brushed us closer than hiny rash.

"Just one of those little Mconveniences." Flower snuffed a line from a D. Tom Basker tune, both girls currywes fans. I hugged her as the carpet deactivated, all of us trembling.

"Mconveniences kill," Mayer choked. "But nobody ether cares." The Oleo'hi Cowpokers.

I hugged harder. Basker's song told The M story best. Anywhere in the universe, power up a windscope, and The M picked you up, helped you out and *sucked you in*. The M existed to draw people back.

In the War of De-Ikl-5, Mitch and Milly Zack lost three sons aboard a whatt charger that ethered and never reemerged. Masters of a supply station in a corner of nowhere, they conned the owner — a senile wart who sucked dribble drive before it became popular — into buying a flow beamer to advertise the station's neutral zone status.

They got that first beamer by agreeing to play the owner's songs between commercial transmissions. But while dribble flowed to his home on Lendmacher's,

stranger beams rafted performances by Kickin' Everett the Tubeman — the Zack boys' favorite — plus a string of other thrust musicians to the deep spacers. If anything could tell a missing charger which direction home lay, it was the tubemen's wail.

Kickin' Everett became rich and famous. Mitch and Milly, the Music Masters, bought the station and lived a legend the last fifty years. The boys hadn't arrived yet, but The M kept calling, scanning ships that came from everywhere to party, checking crews for missing children, mothers, fathers — If you lost someone, the Music Masters would send out your message, power up the search.

I wondered what had lured *our* phantom into station.

"Be just fine." Mayerbeth hugged back, and I squelched a shudder. *Mconveniences* couldn't stop us now.

**Y**ou'd think against the arrival of that monstrous phantom, my coming onto The M would be non-news. But we docked before Station released information on the ether ship, and every reporter within tabbing range zeroed on us. "Anyone die?" "What's it look like?" "They say *The Screamin' Semen's* molecularly bonded to the phantom. She breaking up?"

I gave them what I could. Mayerbeth clung to my side, and I just wanted to ride out the shakes in peace. But even on The M, such a *big* phantom meant a *big* story.

I signaled security, and the guards hustled us into a private boarding lounge. Shouting cut off behind us, and I sucked a deep breath. But the lights flashed. A whistle shrilled. The lounge's off-boarding lens spun open.

Our guards shoved us against a wall. And a medical carrier floated into the lounge. Through crowding emergency personnel, I glimpsed a young man's heart-shaped face, his bloodshot alien eyes utterly bewildered.

*The phantom's crew.* I waited for the next carrier. There weren't anymore, not even bodyseals. That one man had flown a behemoth out of nowhere.

**M**ore unchanneled ether arrivals occurred at The M than at any other point in known space — eighteen up to now — homing on the station's flowbeams. *Why* they came varied.

Half the ships arrived dead, the others dying, all of them ghosts out of other time. Only whatt-charged supercarriers cross ether space's nightmare with any certainty, wending a maze of unknown dimension and unfathomable state along established beacon channels. Ships forced out of channel were lost.

Of the eight previous phantom ships that arrived at The M carrying *live* personnel, two crews wanted to listen to the music. One wanted to party. Four couldn't remember why they'd come. And the other hadn't made it home, but at least made it somewhere.

As the biggest, most alien of the ether riders yet, Phantom Number Nineteen stayed news, which didn't hurt our music. Flower turned out an opus of our experience aboard *The Screamin' Semen* which we arranged for the last half of our new show.

My skin prickled as I launched into my vocal of Phantom Number 19 for the first time before a live

audience, my every neuron keyed on the overflow crowd, everyone honed in, feeding on the band's energy, on me. Stage lights glittered. The crowd hushed.

I shivered and broke into a wail.

Sweat dripping in my eyes, heart hysterical, my legs shaking, I belted out the ending. The crowd blew their bubbles, went insane, thumped tables, danced in the aisles, tried to stomp the station down.

We answered two stage calls before getting off. I'd never orgasmed so high.

After that, we weren't just hot, but quark-fried sizzling, and Phantom Number 19 played ninety of a hundred M beams that first week. Gods, it felt good.

Ten days later, we were beamed out and falling down. So we grabbed our first off time since arrival and celebrated success with an awesome banquet. Afterwards, Mayerbeth ended up alone with me in my apartment.

The last few months she'd acted distant, wary, and it surprised me that I talked her into this nightcap. I fixed her a virgin white lady, holding onto it as she took it, staring into her eyes — a mistake.

"Are you happy?" She didn't look away.

"Yeah." I settled beside her on the form couch. It puffed against the small of my spine, and caressed my neck. "Who wouldn't be? We're making phenomenal music, and everyone is hearing it."

"A dream come true?" She turned, staring at me.

"Sure." I sipped my drink.

"So what now?"

I shrugged. "More, I guess."

"For how long?"

"Until it sounds flat." Had to be honest.

"Tomorrow? Next year?"

"I don't know. After this beamer we'll be credit fluffed for life. What does it matter when we break up?"

"When doesn't matter. If it does."

"What?" She knew better than to talk permanent to me. Life wasn't permanent. I leaned away, full, fat and ready to be content. Why did she have to start this now? "You expect me to follow you all into the grave?"

"No." She sipped her own drink. "I just don't want us to break up. Explore our own careers, fine. But we're family. I want us to stay family."

"What are you talking about?" I stared at her.

"I've been offered a permanent M slot, my own salon."

"You?"

"Surprised? Hurt your ego?"

"No." It hurt something. "Band or not, you're the best stringer there is. Just, why no hint before now?" I

tried not to whine, but felt betrayed, near panic. What if I lost the band?

"I knew about this before we left Chag, but I haven't decided if I'll take it," she said.

"You asking my approval?"

"No. Your opinion."

"I don't know." I felt like an ass, and was one. "What do you want? Freedom, your own music, image? To keep moving, changing with us, without? I can't answer for you." "It would be a lot easier if you could."

She shook her head and smiled. I leaned across to kiss her, fighting an urge to tell her to forget the job. But that meant committing to the band for as long as it wanted to be a band. She answered my kiss.

Later — much later — while she dressed, she stopped suddenly. "Is there a you and me, Erin?" I choked. "Had to be sure."

She finished dressing, pecked me on the cheek. Was there a me and her, her and me, an us? My room lens sealed behind her. Something in her expression knotted my chest. I grabbed clothes. If she could ask me, I could ask her.

But my messenger shrilled. I answered the shrill, then went after her anyway. The Music Master wanted us.

I didn't know whether to weep or sing praises. The only thing bigger than headlining The M was meeting Mitch and Milly Zack in person. Entering their big, glittering office I couldn't see things fast enough, and Mayerbeth gripped my hand so hard it hurt.

A black oval desk filled the center of the office. A black bar protruded from its front and each end of its work surface. A small round credenza sat to one side, the arrangement representing a dotted half note. Handwritten scores covered the office's translucent walls.

To one side of the big desk, a thin young man sat in a form chair. Smiling, Mitch Zack rose from a chair with a treble clef back. "Moon Man."

"Yes, Sir."

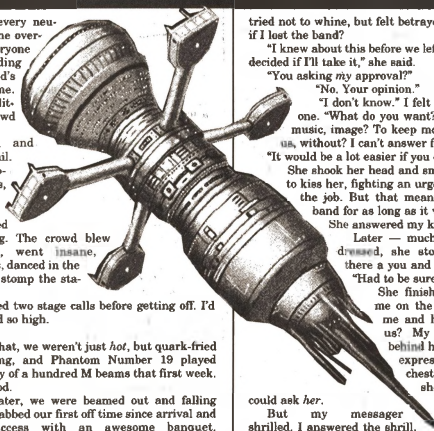
I gripped the Music Master's hand and beamed. Mitch looked exactly like the million-odd images I'd viewed of him — cheery, unimposing, an idealized grandpa.

"Mayerbeth." He freed my hand and took hers. "Thank you for coming on short notice." Wrinkles creased Zack's forehead. I sensed our visit wasn't social. He waved us toward the two forms to the right of his desk. "Have you told him about our offer, Mayer?"

"Yes." She folded her hands and stared at Mitch.

"I have a similar proposition to make to you, Mr. Mooney." Stardamn. "Don't panic." He sat, making calming motions. "We're offering each member of your band the same deal. You can all stay right here for as long as you wish — apart, collaborating, whatever."

"Or?"



"No or." Mitch shrugged. "We respect your music. You play here as long as you wish. But we need a favor and aren't above proper motivation."

I glanced at the younger man, wondering about his part in this. My height, but thinner, he wore his blond hair cropped close, sans style. A standard ship's suit added little to his appearance. But then sad alien eyes turned on me, and my stomach dropped out. *The navigator of phantom number nineteen*. Cleaned up, rested, he no longer looked bewildered — more like possessed.

"A favor?" I kept my voice level. "What could I do for the Music Masters that I wasn't already?"

"I think you recognize my other guest."

I glanced at Mayerbeth. Her expression hovered somewhere between stunned and captivated. Damn her. Jealousy gripped my vitals.

"Captain Rue ..." Mitch inclined his head toward the navigator. "... has a special request. He wants Milly — she physically runs The M, you know — to shut us down, every beam and particle, for thirty seconds." *Shut down The M?*

"Why?" I looked from Mitch to the navigator. "What does that have to do with us?"

Rue's attention switched from Mayerbeth to me, his gaze hard and chill.

"I followed a song across a lifetime and a void." His eyes flicked back to Mayerbeth, their expression softening. Suppressed emotion roughened his voice. "The ether took my sister a hundred thousand years ago by your calendar. But I heard her singing — I thought. It was you." He meant Mayer. "I hope it was also her. I followed that song through insanity and still hear it, but fainter."

I glanced at Mitch. Rue had every right to be crazed. But what was he talking about? Mitch cleared his throat.

"Captain Rue needs a moment of silence from The M in order to lock onto this signal — if it exists. And if he hears it, he wants to send an answer ahead of him into the ether." Mitch closed his eyes. "He wants you, Moon Man, to compose the message. He wants Mayerbeth to sing it."

The phantom navigator exhibited no vocal pitch at all, but his ear worked. He chose comp-generated tones and notes, and I sweated through twenty scores beneath his scary gaze before he finally nodded.

"We'll try it," he said.

"But what does it mean?"

"That I'm coming to help her."

I stared at him, jealous, worn thin by the effort of collaboration. "You'll never reach her." He flinched, and I wished I'd stayed quiet.

"It's enough she knows I'm trying."

Insane. She *couldn't* be alive, let alone listening. But reason didn't matter to him any more, only hope. He'd lost something too dear to give up. I forced a breath against the knot in my chest.

Mayer sang what I wrote. But the message didn't work until Rue held her hand and stared into her eyes while she sang. I wondered what he listened with then — ears or heart, imagination or pure blind desire. He scared me sick.

Dwarfed by alien technology, Mayer, myself, Milly and Mitch stood at the navigator's shoulder on the bridge of the phantom. At the beginning of third shift of Day 1 of Pitre's Month, the year 23.2314 NV, The M fell silent for the first time in fifty years. And out of the silence, rose a high, thin note, eerily beautiful, like the wail of a broken heart. Rue's jaw clenched. It was *her*.

"Now," he said.

I keyed our recording of the four solitary notes that Mayerbeth had sung through — to the alien's own sense of perfection — twenty times at different rhythms and pitches to comprise his message. It would play continuously from his ship and The M now until he found his sister.

The Station blazed back to life.

Mayer's chin dripped tears. The navigator blinked up. I wanted to hide. He was leaving, and my gut said she'd leave with him. Gods someone needed to —

Boots clattered. "Ya ready, Rudy?"

*Captain Semen*. She didn't look any lovelier. But flushed and stinking of beer, mouth glowing from the inside out, she smiled, making you want to like her.

"Your ship secure?" Rue sounded amused.

"Cri—" Semen pushed past. "Wouldn't blow out with you, you bastard, if she weren't permanently secure. It's into the ether or starve." She laughed. "Hell, it'll be an experience, heh?" She plopped in Rue's lap.

Instead of shucking her in a dump, he wrinkled his nose, patted her head and shifted to see around her friz of hair. His eyes rested on Mayerbeth, full of wishes. But he just nodded. She nodded back and took my arm. Heart thumping the back of my throat, I led her away.

Phantom Number Nineteen passed back into ether, taking *The Screamin' Semen* and her crew with her. So Rue didn't leave alone. I was glad — partly because I don't know what Mayerbeth might have done otherwise.

The band dissolved anyway. Mayer and the others accepted contracts to play The M indefinitely. I locked myself in my apartment and wrote *The Navigator*. Then I signed with the Zacks too, because the band and I were family, and having met Mitch and Milly and Captain Rue, no way in hell would I chance losing anyone.

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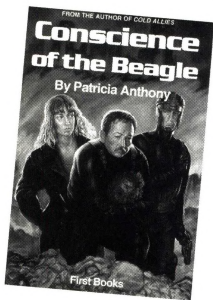
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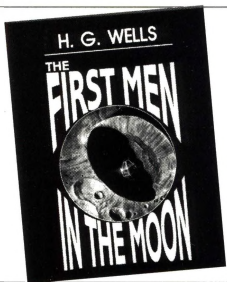
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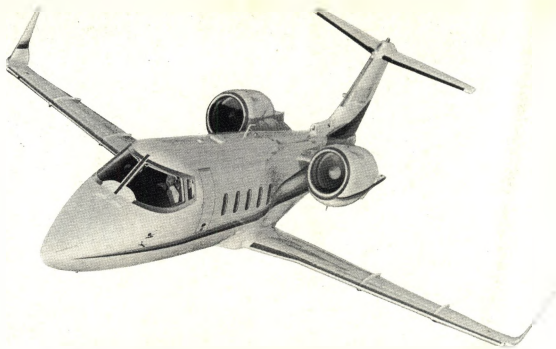
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