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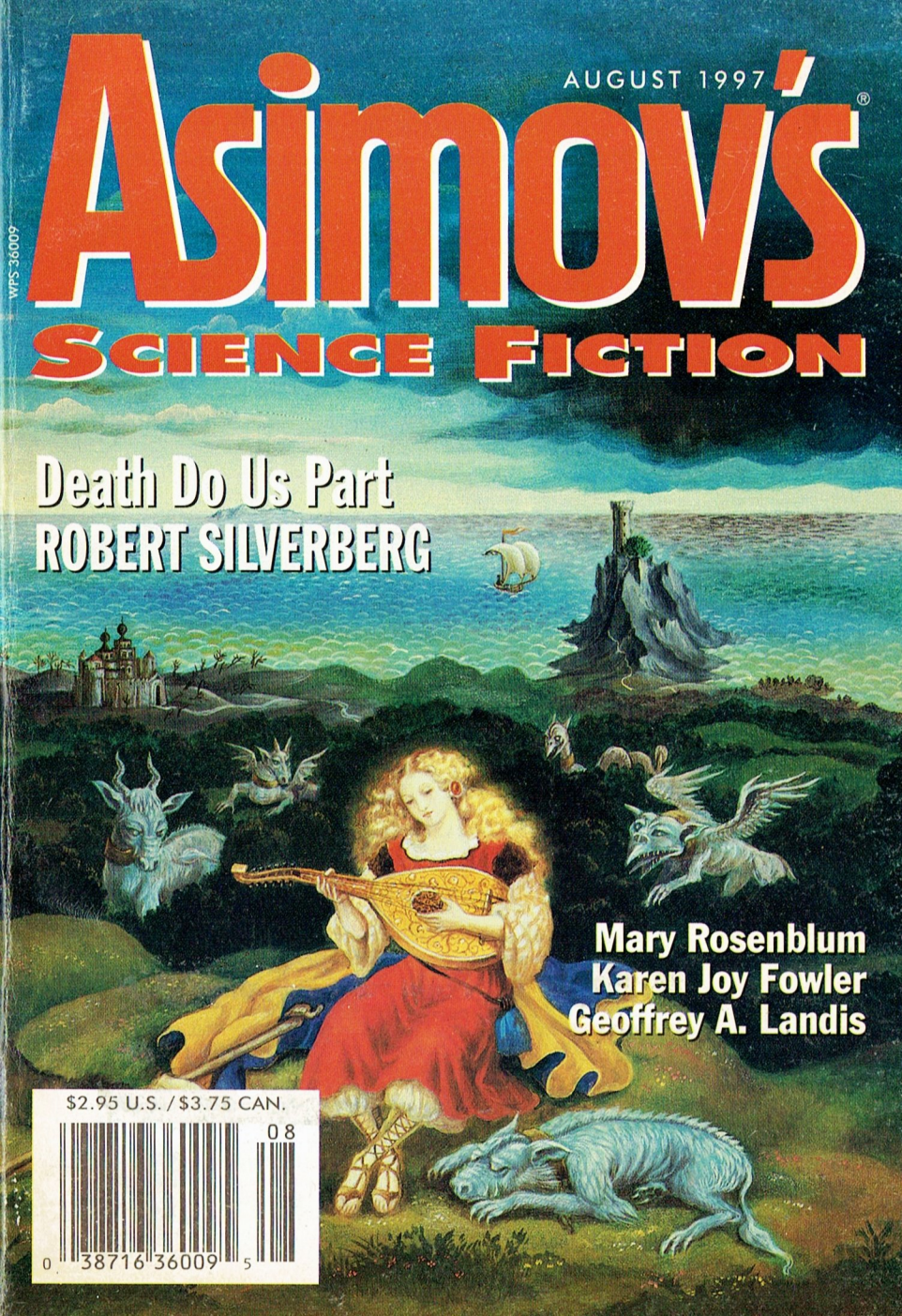

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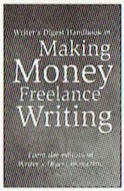


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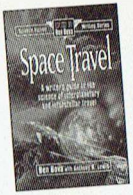


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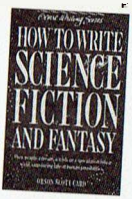


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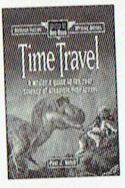


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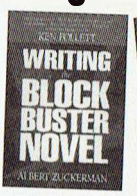


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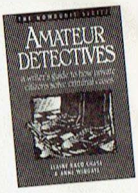


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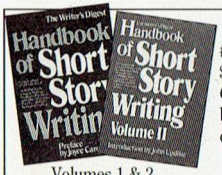


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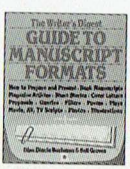


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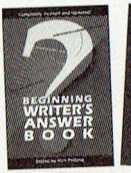


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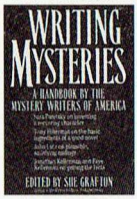


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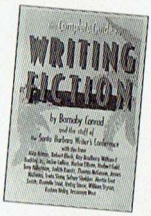


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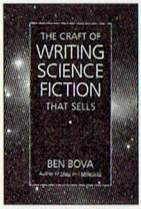


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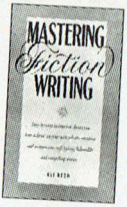


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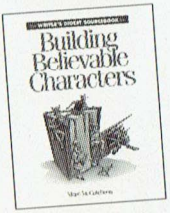


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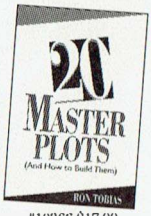


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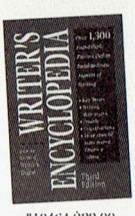


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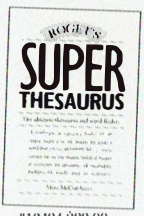


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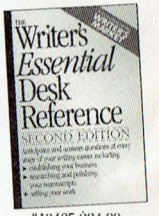


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# Asimov's
## SCIENCE FICTION

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## DEPARTMENTS





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# REFLECTIONS

by Robert Silverberg

## TARZAN AT THE EARTH'S CORE

Let's see, now. David Innes, the Emperor of Pellucidar, is languishing in a dark dungeon in the land of the Korsars, deep within the bowels of the Earth. Jason Gridley is organizing an expedition to rescue him; and Tarzan is persuaded to go along. Gridley builds a big zeppelin, which takes the rescuers through the hidden polar entrance to the inner world. Where Gridley and Tarzan have wondrous adventures among the three-toed reptilian snake-men called Horibs, and fend off the Sagoths and the Mahars, and Gridley falls in love with Jana, the Red Flower of Zoram. . . .

Well, that's the interior of the Earth as imagined by Edgar Rice Burroughs some seventy years ago. But the reality, as it's beginning to emerge from geophysics laboratories from the East Coast to the University of California, is even more fantastic than the creator of Tarzan could ever have imagined. There are no monsters at the Earth's core, no; but the whole place, it seems, is a solid lump of sizzling-hot iron the size of the moon *that spins freely within the planet,* whizzing around at a speed faster than that of the Earth's crust: virtually a planet within a planet.

Scientists had first predicted such an astonishing state of affairs about a dozen years ago. But it remained for Dr. Xiaodong Song and Dr. Paul G. Richards, two seismologists at Columbia University's Lamont-Doherty Earth Observatory at Palisades, New York, to come up with the actual evidence.

Song and Richards based their research on theoretical conclusions that had been put forth in 1995 by Dr. Gary A. Glatzmaier of the Los Alamos National Laboratory in New Mexico and Dr. Paul H. Roberts of UCLA, who used supercomputers to predict that the Earth's core was a single giant crystal of iron that moved independently within the Earth at relatively swift speeds. Drs. Glatzmaier and Roberts estimated that the inner mass was traveling so fast that it would rotate in a complete circle with respect to a point on Earth's surface every five hundred years.

By way of verifying the Glatzmaier-Roberts theory, Song and Richards examined the seismological records of thirty-eight major earthquakes and underground nuclear tests that had occurred between 1967 and 1995. Sonic echoes from such quakes and bomb blasts can be detected at seismic stations far across the world from the earthquake epicenter, providing

sonic maps of the Earth's interior analogous to the medical sonograms used to see inside the human body.

Song, who took his doctorate at Cal Tech in 1994, had used seismic records from the 1980s in his thesis, which dealt with sonic echoes from earthquakes in the Atlantic near Antarctica that were detected at a seismic station in Alaska and what they revealed about the structure of the Earth's core. Now, re-examining this information and comparing it to later findings, he and Richards were startled to see that shock waves were traveling through the core faster in the 1990s than they had in the previous decade. The most plausible explanation, unlikely though it was, was that the core had rotated relative to the surface of the Earth in the intervening time.

"I couldn't believe it when we started to get these results," Dr. Richards said. But further studies brought additional confirmation. Song and Richards estimated that the speed of the core's rotation is between 0.4 and 1.8 degrees per year—which would move any given point in the core forward relative to a point on the world's surface at a pace that would carry it completely around the world every four hundred years or so. Meanwhile, an independent group of researchers based at Harvard, with one member at the University of California at Berkeley, using somewhat different methods, came up with a similar result; but the Harvard team reported an even faster spin, nearly 3 degrees a year, which would cause a point in the core to overtake a point on the surface in about a century. "I think we're all amazed," said Dr. Raymond Jeanloz of Berkeley. "It's a breakthrough," said Dr. Glatzmaier of Los Alamos. "It's the beginning of a new field." And Dr. David Stevenson of Cal Tech noted, "We've never had information about motions near the center of the Earth. It's one of those things that we didn't expect to get."

The great mass of iron that is the Earth's core has been there since the planet's formation, sinking to the center of its own great weight. The outer part of the core is molten, at a temperature approaching 7000 degrees F; but the inner core, despite its high temperature, has been forced into solid form by the forces of pressure and density. Since its discovery about sixty years ago, this inner core has usually been regarded as a static, inert mass. No longer, though.

What is causing the core's independent rate of spin? One conjecture is that magnetic forces traveling through the molten iron that surrounds it are spinning the core around like a gigantic electric motor. Another possibility is that iron sinking toward the inner core—which gains about two inches in radius every century at the expense of the molten outer core—is creating tornado-like forces that serve, as Dr. Jeanloz puts it, "to kick the inner core forward." Or perhaps the inner core, insulated as it is by its low-friction envelope

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of liquid iron, is simply less resistant to the moon's tidal drag (which slows the rotation of the Earth) than the planet's surface.

The independent movements of the inner core are not only astonishing in themselves; they hold significance for the welfare of the beings that inhabit the Earth's skin. The electrical currents of the Earth's core help to shape the Earth's magnetic field, which shields us from solar winds and other dangerous energy storms.

Work now needs to be done to determine whether the core's rate of spin speeds up or slows down over time, or even if the rotational axis of the entire core is capable of changing direction. "If astronomers picked up something like this," said Dr. Adam Dziewonski, head of the Harvard team, "they would send a satellite. We need more seismic stations and better computers."

While the Earth's core whirls giddily beneath our feet, news from other corners of the scientific world provides us with additional reasons to feel edgy. A group of geologists headed by Dr. Charles P. Sonett of the University of Arizona has been studying the microscopic remains of tidal sediments in rock deposits from Utah, Alabama, Indiana, and Adelaide, Australia, and concludes that the Earth's rotation has been slowing down for at least the past nine hundred million years. Judging by the intervals between high tide and low tide revealed in these ancient sandstone formations, the day was just

eighteen hours and ten minutes long then—which is to say, the Earth was rotating much more briskly on its axis than it is now.

Scientists realized long ago that tidal forces exerted by the moon and the sun are gradually slowing the Earth's period of rotation. But this seems to be the first precise geological evidence of the extent of the slowing. Since the process is still going on, we can expect big trouble ahead. In just a few hundred million years, for example, we may have to cope with thirty-six-hour days, greatly expanding available leisure time and requiring extensive increases in Hollywood production capacity, new theme parks, further expansions of Major League baseball, etc., etc. The mind quails.

Of course, an even bigger problem awaits us long before that. The scoop on this comes from Dr. Priscilla Frisch, an astrophysicist affiliated with the University of Chicago, who told the American Astronomical Society recently that our entire solar system is heading toward a dense cloud of dust and gas a million times denser than the interstellar matter that surrounds us now. We are due to hit the thick of this patch in a mere fifty thousand years.

The cloud of crud that awaits us out there is part of what Dr. Frisch calls a "superbubble shell" expanding outward from a region of star formation known as the Scorpius-Centaurus Association. It's poking into our galaxy in the region between the spiral arms where we

happen to be, and the sun, zooming through space at a speed fast enough to cover three light-years every fifty thousand years, is heading for one of its densest parts. "The consequences," we are told by the reliable and trustworthy New York *Times*, "could be dire."

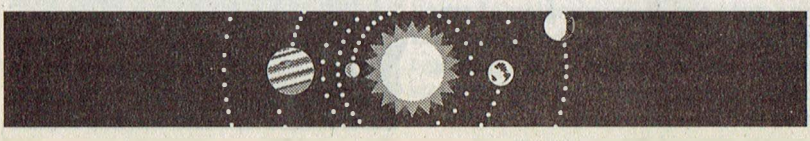
How dire? Nobody wants to be too specific just yet. All Dr. Frisch will say is, "There could be dramatic effects in the inner solar system." Her colleague Dr. Jeffrey L. Linsky of the University of Colorado at Boulder is even more cautious, admitting only that "there will be an encounter. We don't know exactly when or exactly how the Earth will be affected."

My guess is that it won't be a fun kind of encounter, even though a dense interstellar cloud is not exactly a solid mass. In our present surroundings, there's less than an atom of hydrogen per cubic centimeter to be found; thus the Scorpius-Centaurus thing, if it's a million times as dense, will provide only a million atoms of hydrogen per c.c. of space. Will that be nasty? Will it be like walking full-time through a Sahara sandstorm? Should we be stocking up on those nice Bedouin face-scarves right now? The New York *Times*, a cautious newspaper, says that there is "no cause for immediate alarm." But it's a good bet that a round-the-clock peppering with interstellar particles that will up the quantity and velocity of cosmic radiation in our vicinity will do curious things to our genetic plasm, create funny lights in the atmosphere, and, I suspect, cancel out the warming processes of the greenhouse effect in a really big way, sending us into deep freeze.

As Dr. Frisch puts it, "I can't imagine that a star passing in and out of dense interstellar cloud fragments would have a stable interplanetary environment. Without stability in the local stellar environment, I doubt there could be a stable planetary climate hospitable to life."

I'm a conservative guy. I *like* a stable interplanetary environment. I'm tempted to hunt up Jason Gridley and Tarzan and ask them if they want to take me along on their next expedition to Pellucidar, down there at the Earth's core, where presumably the effects of the lengthening day and the increasingly dusty interstellar spaces won't matter as much. But then I have Drs. Song and Richards, et al., to remind me of what's really down there.

The Earth's core spins . . . the day grows longer . . . the Scorpius-Centaurus superbubble lurks before us. And this science fiction writer suddenly feels queasy. Can it be that I'm getting too old for all this excitement? ●



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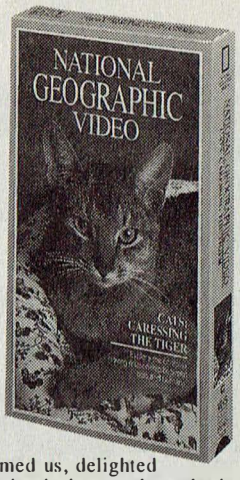


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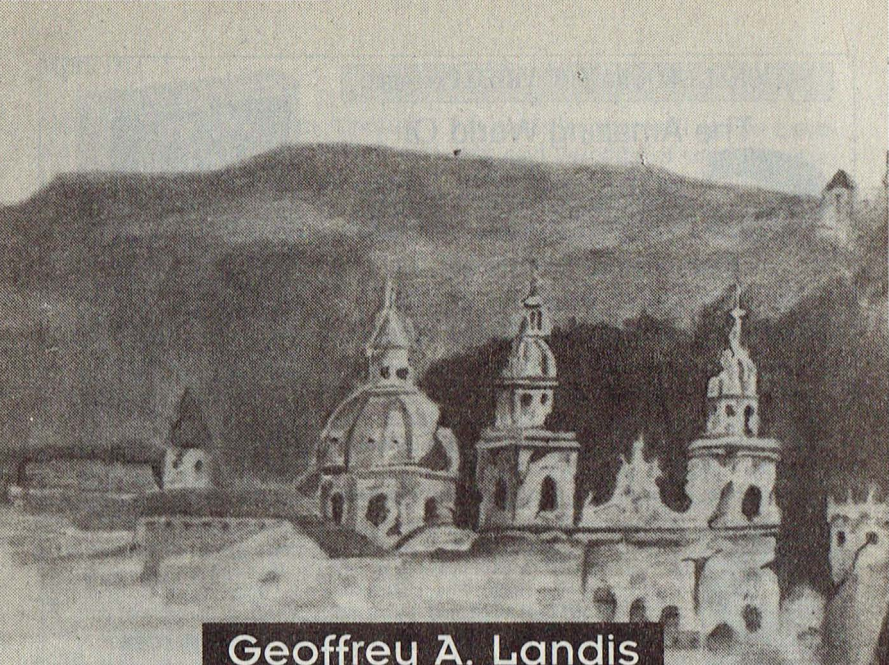

Geoffrey A. Landis

The horrors of war are heartbreakingly rendered in Geoffrey A. Landis's beautifully told tale of . . .

# WINTER FIRE

Illustration by Steve Cavallo

I am nothing and nobody; atoms that have learned to look at themselves; dirt that has learned to see the awe and the majesty of the universe. The day the hover-transports arrived in the refugee camps, huge windowless shells of titanium floating on electrostatic cushions, the day faceless men took the ragged little girl that was me away from the narrow, blasted valley that had once been Salzburg to begin a new life on another continent: that is the true beginning of my life. What came before then is almost irrelevant, a sequence of memories etched as with acid into my brain, but with no meaning to real life.

Sometimes I almost think that I can remember my parents. I remember them not by what was, but by the shape of the absence they left behind. I remember yearning for my mother's voice, singing to me softly in Japanese. I cannot remember her voice, or what songs she might have sung, but I remember so vividly the missing of it, the hole that she left behind.

My father I remember as the loss of something large and warm and infinitely strong, smelling of—of what? I don't remember. Again, it is the loss that remains in my memory, not the man. I remember remembering him as more solid than mountains, something eternal; but in the end he was not eternal, he was not even as strong as a very small war.

I lived in the city of music, in Salzburg, but I remember little from before the siege. I do remember cafés (seen from below, with huge tables and the legs of waiters and faces looming down to ask me if I would like a sweet). I'm sure my parents must have been there, but that I do not remember.

And I remember music. I had my little violin (although it seemed so large to me then), and music was not my second language but my first. I thought in music before ever I learned words. Even now, decades later, when I forget myself in mathematics I cease to think in words, but think directly in concepts clear and perfectly harmonic, so that a mathematical proof is no more than the inevitable majesty of a crescendo leading to a final, resolving chord.

I have long since forgotten anything I knew about the violin. I have not played since the day, when I was nine, I took from the rubble of our apartment the shattered cherry-wood scroll. I kept that meaningless piece of polished wood for years, slept with it clutched in my hand every night until, much later, it was taken away by a soldier intent on rape. Probably I would have let him, had he not been so ignorant as to think my one meager possession might be a weapon. Coitus is nothing more than the natural act of the animal. From songbirds to porpoises, any male animal will rape an available female when given a chance. The action is of no significance except, perhaps, as a chance to contemplate the impersonal majesty of the chain of life and the meaninglessness of any individual's will within it.

When I was finally taken away from the city of music, three years lat-

er and a century older, I owned nothing and wanted nothing. There was nothing of the city left. As the hoverjet took me away, just one more in a seemingly endless line of ragged survivors, only the mountains remained, hardly scarred by the bomb craters and the detritus that marked where the castle had stood, mountains looking down on humanity with the gaze of eternity.

My real parents, I have been told, were rousted out of our apartment with a tossed stick of dynamite, and shot as infidels as they ran through the door, on the very first night of the war. It was probably fanatics of the New Orthodox Resurgence that did it, in their first round of ethnic cleansing, although nobody seemed to know for sure.

In the beginning, despite the dissolution of Austria and the fall of the federation of free European states, despite the hate-talk spread by the disciples of Dragan Vukadinović, the violent cleansing of the Orthodox church, and the rising of the Pan-Slavic unity movement, all the events that covered the news-nets all through 2081, few people believed there would be a war, and those that did thought that it might last a few months. The dissolution of Austria and eastern Europe into a federation of free states was viewed by intellectuals of the time as a good thing, a recognition of the impending irrelevance of governments in the post-technological society with its burgeoning sky-cities and prospering free-trade zones. Everyone talked of civil war, but as a distant thing; it was an awful mythical monster of ancient times, one that had been thought dead, a thing that ate people's hearts and turned them into inhuman gargoyles of stone. It would not come here.

Salzburg had had a large population of Asians, once themselves refugees from the economic and political turmoil of the twenty-first century, but now prosperous citizens who had lived in the city for over a century. Nobody thought about religion in the Salzburg of that lost age; nobody cared that a person whose family once came from the Orient might be a Buddhist or a Hindu or a Confucian. My own family, as far as I know, had no religious feelings at all, but that made little difference to the fanatics. My mother, suspecting possible trouble that night, had sent me over to sleep with an old German couple who lived in a building next door. I don't remember whether I said good-bye.

Johann Achtenberg became my foster father, a stocky old man, bearded and forever smelling of cigar smoke. "We will stay," my foster father would often say, over and over. "It is *our* city; the barbarians cannot drive us out." Later in the siege, in a grimmer mood, he might add, "They can kill us, but they will never drive us out."

The next few months were full of turmoil, as the Orthodox Resurgence tried, and failed, to take Salzburg. They were still disorganized, more a mob than an army, still evolving toward the killing machine that they

would eventually become. Eventually they were driven out of the city, dynamiting buildings behind them, to join up with the Pan-Slavic army rolling in from the devastation of Graz. The roads in and out of the city were barricaded, and the siege began.

For that summer of 2082, the first summer of the siege, the life of the city hardly changed. I was ten years old. There was still electricity, and water, and stocks of food. The cafés stayed open, although coffee became hard to obtain, and impossibly expensive when it was available, and at times they had nothing to serve but water. I would watch the pretty girls, dressed in colorful Italian suede and wearing ornately carved Ladakhi jewelry, strolling down the streets in the evenings, stopping to chat with T-shirted boys, and I would wonder if I would ever grow up to be as elegant and poised as they. The shelling was still mostly far away, and everybody believed that the tide of world opinion would soon stop the war. The occasional shell that was targeted toward the city caused great commotion, people screaming and diving under tables even for a bird that hit many blocks away. Later, when civilians had become targets, we all learned to tell the caliber and the trajectory of a shell by the sound of the song it made as it fell.

After an explosion, there is silence for an instant, then a hubbub of crashing glass and debris as shattered walls collapse, and people gingerly touch each other, just to verify that they are alive. The dust would hang in the air for hours.

Toward September, when it became obvious that the world powers were stalemated, and would not intervene, the shelling of the city began in earnest. Tanks, even modern ones with electrostatic hover and thin coilguns instead of heavy cannons, could not maneuver into the narrow alleys of the old city and were stymied by the steep-sided mountain valleys. But the outer suburbs and the hilltops were invaded, crushed flat, and left abandoned.

I did not realize it at the time, for a child sees little, but with antiquated equipment and patched-together artillery, my besieged city clumsily and painfully fought back. For every fifty shells that came in, one was fired back at the attackers.

There was an international blockade against selling weapons to the Resurgence, but that seemed to make no difference. Their weapons may not have had the most modern of technology, but they were far better than ours. They had superconducting coilguns for artillery, weapons that fired aerodynamically-shaped slugs—we called them birds—that maneuvered on twisted arcs as they moved. The birds were small, barely larger than my hand, but the metastable atomic hydrogen that filled them held an incredible amount of explosive power.

Our defenders had to rely on ancient weapons, guns that ignited chemical explosives to propel metal shells. These were quickly disassembled

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and removed from their position after each shot, because the enemy's computers could backtrail the trajectory of our shells, which had only crude aeromaneuvering, to direct a deadly rain of birds at the guessed position. Since we were cut off from regular supply lines, each shell was precious. We were supplied by ammunition carried on mules whose trails would weave through the enemy's wooded territory by night and by shells carried one by one across dangerous territory in backpacks.

But still, miraculously, the city held. Over our heads, the continuous shower of steel eroded the skyline. Our beautiful castle Hohensalzburg was sandpapered to a hill of bare rock; the cathedral towers fell and the debris by slow degrees was pounded into gravel. Bells rang in sympathy with explosions until at last the bells were silenced. Slowly, erosion softened the profiles of buildings that once defined the city's horizon.

Even without looking for the craters, we learned to tell from looking at the trees which neighborhoods had had explosions in them. Near a blast, the city's trees had no leaves. They were all shaken off by the shock waves. But none of the trees lasted the winter anyway.

My foster father made a stove by pounding with a hammer on the fenders and door panels of a wrecked automobile, with a pipe made of copper from rooftops and innumerable soft-drink cans. Floorboards and furniture were broken to bits to make fuel for us to keep warm. All through the city, stovepipes suddenly bristled through exterior walls and through windows. The fiberglass sides of modern housing blocks, never designed for such crude heating, became decorated with black smoke trails like unreadable graffiti, and the city parks became weirdly empty lots crossed by winding sidewalks that meandered past the craters where the trees had been.

Johann's wife, my foster mother, a thin, quiet woman, died by being in the wrong building at the wrong time. She had been visiting a friend across the city to exchange chat and a pinch of hoarded tea. It might just as easily have been the building I was in where the bird decided to build its deadly nest. It took some of the solidity out of Johann. "Do not fall in love, little Leah," he told me, many months later, when our lives had returned to a fragile stability. "It hurts too much."

In addition to the nearly full-time job of bargaining for those necessities that could be bargained for, substituting or improvising those that could not, and hamstering away in basements and shelters any storable food that could be found, my foster father Johann had another job, or perhaps an obsession. I only learned this slowly. He would disappear, sometimes for days. One time I followed him as far as an entrance to the ancient catacombs beneath the bird-pecked ruins of the beautiful castle Hohensalzburg. When he disappeared into the darkness, I dared not follow.

When he returned, I asked him about it. He was strangely reluctant to

speak. When he did, he did not explain, but only said that he was working on the molecular still, and refused to say anything further, or to let me mention it to anyone else.

As a child, I spoke a hodgepodge of languages; the English of the foreigners, the French of the European Union, the Japanese that my parents had spoken at home, the book-German of the schools, and the Austrian German that was the dominant tongue of the culture I lived in. At home, we spoke mostly German, and in German, "Still" is a word which means quietude. Over the weeks and months that followed, the idea of a molecular still grew in my imagination into a wonderful thing, a place that is quiet even on the molecular level, far different from the booming sounds of war. In my imagination, knowing my foster father was a gentle man who wanted nothing but peace, I thought of it as a reverse secret weapon, something that would bring this wonderful stillness to the world. When he disappeared to the wonderful molecular still, each time I would wonder whether this would be the time that the still would be ready, and peace would come.

And the city held. "Salzburg is an idea, little Leah," my foster father Johann would tell me, "and all the birds in the world could never peck it away, for it lives in our minds and in our souls. Salzburg will stand for as long as any one of us lives. And, if we ever abandon the city, then Salzburg has fallen, even if the city itself still stands."

In the outside world, the world I knew nothing of, nations quarreled and were stalemated with indecision over what to do. Our city had been fragilely connected to the western half of Europe by precarious roads, with a series of tunnels through the Alps and long arcing bridges across narrow mountain valleys. In their terror that the chaos might spread westward, they dynamited the bridges, they collapsed the tunnels. Not nations, but individuals, did it. They cut us off from civilization, and left us to survive, or die, on our own.

Governments had become increasingly unimportant in the era following the opening of the resources of space by the free-trade zones of the new prosperity, but the trading consortia that now ruled America and the far east in the place of governments had gained their influence only by assiduously signing away the capacity to make war, and although the covenants that had secured their formation had eroded, that one prohibition still held. Only governments could help us, and the governments tried negotiation and diplomacy as Dragan Vukadinović made promises for the New Orthodox Resurgence and broke them.

High above, the owners of the sky-cities did the only thing that they could, which was to deny access to space to either side. This kept the war on the ground, but hurt us more than it hurt the armies surrounding us. They, after all, had no need for satellites to find out where *we* were.

To the east, the Pan-Slavic army and the New Orthodox Resurgence

were pounding against the rock of the Tenth Crusade; further south they were skirmishing over borders with the Islamic Federation. Occasionally the shelling would stop for a while, and it would be safe to bring hoarded solar panels out into the sunlight to charge our batteries—the electric grid had gone long ago, of course—and huddle around an antique solar-powered television set watching the distant negotiating teams talk about our fate. Everybody knew that the war would be over shortly; it was impossible that the world would not act.

The world did not act.

I remember taking batteries from wrecked cars to use a headlight, if one happened to survive unbroken, or a taillight, to allow us to stay up past sunset. There was a concoction of boiled leaves that we called "tea," although we had no milk or sugar to put in it. We would sit together, enjoying the miracle of light, sipping our "tea," perhaps reading, perhaps just sitting in silence.

With the destruction of the bridges, Salzburg had become two cities, connected only by narrow-beam microwave radio and the occasional foray by individuals walking across the dangerous series of beams stretched across the rubble of the Old Stone Bridge. The two Salzburgs were distinct in population, with mostly immigrant populations isolated in the modern buildings on the east side of the river, and the old Austrians on the west.

It is impossible to describe the Salzburg feeling, the aura of a sophisticated ancient city, wrapped in a glisteningly pure blanket of snow, under siege, faced with the daily onslaught of an unseen army that seemed to have an unlimited supply of coilguns and metastable hydrogen. We were never out of range. The Salzburg stride was relaxed only when protected by the cover of buildings or specially constructed barricades, breaking into a jagged sprint over a stretch of open ground, a cobbled forecourt of crossroads open to the rifles of snipers on distant hills firing hypersonic needles randomly into the city. From the deadly steel birds, there was no protection. They could fly in anywhere, with no warning. By the time you heard their high-pitched song, you were already dead, or, miraculously, still alive.

Not even the nights were still. It is an incredible sight to see a city cloaked in darkness suddenly illuminated with the blue dawn of a flare sent up from the hilltops, dimming the stars and suffusing coruscating light across the glittering snow. There is a curious, ominous interval of quiet: the buildings of the city dragged blinking out of their darkness and displayed in a fairy glow, naked before the invisible gunners on their distant hilltops. Within thirty seconds, the birds would begin to sing. They might land a good few blocks away, the echo of their demise ringing up and down the valley, or they might land in the street below, the explosion sending people diving under tables, windows caving in across the room.

TECHNOLOGY UPDATE

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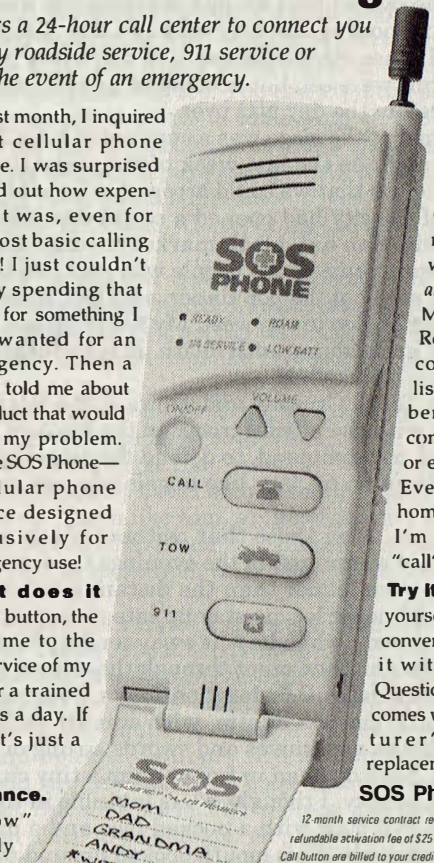


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They could, I believe, have destroyed the city at any time, but that did not serve their purposes. Salzburg was a prize. Whether the buildings were whole or in parts seemed irrelevant, but the city was not to be simply obliterated.

In April, as buds started to bloom from beneath the rubble, the city woke up, and we discovered that we had survived the winter. The diplomats proposed partitioning the city between the Slavs and the Germans—Asians and other ethnic groups, like me, being conveniently ignored—and the terms were set, but nothing came of it except a cease-fire that was violated before the day was over.

The second summer of the siege was a summer of hope. Every week we thought that this might be the last week of the siege; that peace might yet be declared on terms that we could accept, that would let us keep our city. The defense of the city had opened a corridor to the outside world, allowing in humanitarian aid, black-market goods, and refugees from other parts of the war. Some of the people who had fled before the siege returned, although many of the population who had survived the winter used the opportunity to flee to the west. My foster father, though, swore that he would stay in Salzburg until death. It is civilization, and if it is destroyed, nothing is worthwhile.

Christians of the Tenth Crusade and Turks of the Islamic Federation fought side by side with the official troops of the Mayor's Brigade, sharing ammunition but not command, to defend the city. High above, cities in the sky looked down on us, but, like angels who see everything, they did nothing.

Cafés opened again, even those that, without black-market connections, could only serve water, and in the evenings there were night-clubs, the music booming even louder than the distant gunfire. My foster father, of course, would never let me stay up late enough to find out what went on in these, but once, when he was away tending his molecular still, I waited for darkness and then crept through the streets to see.

One bar was entirely Islamic Federation Turks, wearing green turbans and uniforms of dark maroon denim, with spindly railgun-launchers slung across their backs and knives and swords strung on leather straps across their bodies. Each one had in front of him a tiny cup of dark coffee and a clear glass of whisky. I thought I was invisible in the doorway, but one of the Turks, a tall man with a pocked face and a dark moustache that drooped down the side of his mouth, looked up, and without smiling, said, "Hoy, little girl, I think that you are in the wrong place."

In the next club, mercenaries wearing cowboy hats, with black uniforms and fingerless leather gloves, had parked their guns against the walls before settling in to pound down whisky in a bar where the music was so loud that the beat reverberated across half the city. The one closest to the door had a shaven head, with a spiderweb tattooed up his neck,

and daggers and weird heraldic symbols tattooed across his arms. When he looked up at me, standing in the doorway, he smiled, and I realized that he had been watching me for some time, probably ever since I had appeared. His smile was far more frightening than the impassive face of the Turk. I ran all the way home.

In the daytime, the snap of a sniper's rifle might prompt an exchange of heavy machine-gun fire, a wild, rattling sound that echoed crazily from the hills. Small-arms fire would sound, tak, tak, tak, answered by the singing of small railguns, tee, tee. You can't tell the source of rifle fire in an urban environment; it seems to come from all around. All you can do is duck, and run. Later that summer, the first of the omniblasters showed up, firing a beam of pure energy with a silence so loud that tiny hairs all over my body would stand up in fright.

Cosmetics, baby milk, and whisky were the most prized commodities on the black market.

I had no idea what the war was about. Nobody was able to explain it in terms that an eleven-year-old could understand; few even bothered to try. All I knew was that evil people on hilltops were trying to destroy everything I loved, and good men like my foster father were trying to stop them.

I slowly learned that my foster father was, apparently, quite important to the defense. He never talked about what he did, but I overheard other men refer to him with terms like "vital" and "indispensable," and these words made me proud. At first I simply thought that they merely meant that the existence of men like him, proud of the city and vowing never to leave, were the core of what made the defense worthwhile. But later I realized that it must be more than this. There were thousands of men who loved the city.

Toward the end of the summer, the siege closed around the city again. The army of the Tenth Crusade arrived and took over the ridgetops just one valley to the west; the Pan-Slavic army and the Orthodox Resurgence held the ridges next to the city and the territory to the east. All that autumn the shells of the Tenth Crusade arced over our heads toward the Pan-Slavs, and beams of purple fire from pop-up robots with omniblasters would fire back. It was a good autumn; mostly only stray fire hit the civilians. But we were locked in place, and there was no way out.

There was no place to go outside; no place that was safe. The sky had become our enemy. My friends were books. I had loved storybooks when I had been younger, in the part of my childhood before the siege that even then I barely remembered. But Johann had no storybooks; his vast collection of books were all forbidding things, full of thick blocks of dense text and incomprehensible diagrams that were no picture of anything I could recognize. I taught myself algebra, with some help from Johann, and started working on calculus. It was easier when I realized that the

mathematics in the books was just an odd form of music, written in a strange language. Candles were precious, and so in order to keep on reading at night, Johann made an oil lamp for me, which would burn vegetable oil. This was nearly as precious as candles, but not so precious as my need to read.

A still, I had learned from my reading—and from the black market—was a device for making alcohol, or at least for separating alcohol from water. Did a molecular still make molecules?

"That's silly," Johann told me. "Everything is made of molecules. Your bed, the air you breathe, even you yourself, nothing but molecules."

In November, the zoo's last stubborn elephant died. The predators, the lions, the tigers, even the wolves, were already gone, felled by simple lack of meat. The zebras and antelopes had gone quickly, some from starvation-induced illness, some killed and butchered by poachers. The elephant, surprisingly, had been the last to go, a skeletal apparition stubbornly surviving on scraps of grass and bits of trash, protected against ravenous poachers by a continuous guard of armed watchmen. The watchmen proved unable, however, to guard against starvation. Some people claim that kangaroos and emus still survived, freed from their hutches by the shelling, and could be seen wandering free in the city late at night. Sometimes I wonder if they survive still, awkward birds and bounding marsupials, hiding in the foothills of the Austrian Alps, the last survivors of the siege of Salzburg.

It was a hard winter. We learned to conserve the slightest bit of heat, so as to stretch a few sticks of firewood out over a whole night. Typhus, dysentery, and pneumonia killed more than the shelling, which had resumed in force with the onset of winter. Just after New Year, a fever attacked me, and there was no medicine to be had at any price. Johann wrapped me in blankets and fed me hot water mixed with salt and a pinch of precious sugar. I shivered and burned, hallucinating strange things, now seeing kangaroos and emus outside my little room, now imagining myself on the surface of Mars, strangling in the thin air, and then instantly on Venus, choking in heat and darkness, and then floating in interstellar space, my body growing alternately larger than galaxies, then smaller than atoms, floating so far away from anything else that it would take eons for any signal from me to ever reach the world where I had been born.

Eventually the fever broke, and I was merely back in my room, shivering with cold, wrapped in sheets that were stinking with sweat, in a city slowly being pounded into rubble by distant soldiers whose faces I had never seen, fighting for an ideology that I could never understand.

It was after this, at my constant pleading, that Johann finally took me to see his molecular still. It was a dangerous walk across the city, illuminated by the glow of the Marionette Theater, set afire by incendiary

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bombs two days before. The still was hidden below the city, farther down even than the bomb shelters, in catacombs that had been carved out of rock over two thousand years ago. There were two men there, a man my foster father's age with a white moustache, and an even older Vietnamese-German man with one leg, who said nothing the whole time.

The older man looked at me and said in French, which perhaps he thought I wouldn't understand, "This is no place to bring a little one."

Johann replied in German. "She asks many questions." He shrugged, and said, "I wanted to show her."

The other said, still in French, "She couldn't understand." Right then I resolved that I would make myself understand, whatever it was that they thought I could not. The man looked at me critically, taking in, no doubt, my straight black hair and almond eyes. "She's not yours, anyway. What is she to you?"

"She is my daughter," Johann said.

The molecular still was nothing to look at. It was a room filled with curtains of black velvet, doubled back and forth, thousands and thousands of meters of blackness. "Here it is," Johann said. "Look well, little Leah, for in all the world, you will never see such another."

Somewhere there was a fan that pushed air past the curtains; I could feel it on my face, cool, damp air moving sluggishly past. The floor of the room was covered with white dust, glistening in the darkness. I reached down to touch it, and Johann reached out to still my hand. "Not to touch," he said.

"What is it?" I asked in wonder.

"Can't you smell it?"

And I could smell it, in fact, I had been nearly holding my breath to avoid smelling it. The smell was thick, pungent, almost choking. It made my eyes water. "Ammonia," I said.

Johann nodded, smiling. His eyes were bright. "Ammonium nitrate," he said.

I was silent most of the way back to the fortified basement we shared with two other families. There must have been bombs, for there were always the birds, but I do not recall them. At last, just before we came to the river, I asked, "Why?"

"Oh, my little Leah, think. We are cut off here. Do we have electrical generators to run coilguns like the barbarians that surround us? We do not. What can we do, how can we defend ourselves? The molecular still sorts molecules out of the air. Nitrogen, oxygen, water; this is all that is needed to make explosives, if only we can combine them correctly. My molecular still takes the nitrogen out of the air, makes out of it ammonium nitrate, which we use to fire our cannons, to hold the barbarians away from our city."

I thought about this. I knew about molecules by then, knew about ni-

trogen and oxygen, although not about explosives. Finally something occurred to me, and I asked, "But what about the energy? Where does the energy come from?"

Johann smiled, his face almost glowing with delight. "Ah, my little Leah, you know the right questions already. Yes, the energy. We have designed our still to work by using a series of reactions, each one using no more than a gnat's whisker of energy. Nevertheless, you are right, we must needs steal energy from somewhere. We draw the thermal energy of the air. But old man entropy, he cannot be cheated so easily. To do this we need a heat sink."

I didn't know then enough to follow his words, so I merely repeated his words dumbly: "A heat sink?"

He waved his arm, encompassing the river, flowing dark beneath a thin sheet of ice. "And what a heat sink! The barbarians know we are manufacturing arms; we fire the proof of that back at them every day, but they do not know where! And here it is, right before them, the motive power for the greatest arms factory of all of Austria, and they cannot see it."

Molecular still or not, the siege went on. The Pan-Slavics drove back the Tenth Crusade, and resumed their attack on the city. In February the armies entered the city twice, and twice the ragged defenders drove them back. In April, once more, the flowers bloomed, and once more, we had survived another winter.

It had been months since I had had a bath; there was no heat to waste on mere water, and in any case, there was no soap. Now, at last, we could wash, in water drawn directly from the Salzach, scrubbing and digging to get rid of the lice of winter.

We stood in line for hours waiting for a day's ration of macaroni, the humanitarian aid that had been air-dropped into the city, and hauled enormous drums across the city to replenish our stockpile of drinking water.

Summer rain fell, and we hoarded the water from rain gutters for later use. All that summer the smell of charred stone hung in the air. Bullet-riddled cars, glittering shards of glass, and fragments of concrete and cobblestone covered the streets. Stone heads and gargoyles from blasted buildings would look up at you from odd corners of the city.

Basements and tunnels under the city were filled out with mattresses and camp beds as makeshift living quarters for refugees, which became sweaty and smelly during summer, for all that they had been icy cold in winter. Above us, the ground would shake as the birds flew in, and plaster dust fell from the ceiling.

I was growing up. I had read about sex, and knew it was a natural part of the pattern of life, the urging of chromosomes to divide and conquer the world. I tried to imagine it with everybody I saw, from Johann to passing soldiers, but couldn't ever make my imagination actually believe

in it. There was enough sex going on around me—we were packed together tightly, and humans under stress copulate out of desperation, out of boredom, and out of pure instinct to survive. There was enough to see, but I couldn't apply anything of what I saw to myself.

I think, when I was very young, I had some belief that human beings were special, something more than just meat that thought. The siege, an unrelenting tutor, taught me otherwise. A woman I had been with on one day, cuddled in her lap and talking nonsense, the next day was out in the street, bisected by shrapnel, reduced to a lesson in anatomy. If there was a soul it was something intangible, something so fragile that it could not stand up to the gentlest kiss of steel.

People stayed alive by eating leaves, acorns, and, when the humanitarian aid from the sky failed, by grinding down the hard centers of corn cobs to make cakes with the powder.

There were developments in the war, although I did not know them. The Pan-Slavic Army, flying their standard of a two-headed dragon, turned against the triple cross of the New Orthodox Resurgence, and to the east thousands of square kilometers of pacified countryside turned in a day into flaming ruin, as the former allies savaged each other. We could see the smoke in the distance, a huge pillar of black rising kilometers into the sky.

It made no difference to the siege. On the hilltops, the Pan-Slavic Army drove off the New Orthodox Resurgence, and when they were done, the guns turned back on the city. By the autumn, the siege had not lifted, and we knew we would have to face another winter.

Far over our heads, through the ever-present smoke, we could see the lights of freedom, the glimmering of distant cities in the sky, remote from all of the trouble of Earth. "They have no culture," Johann said. "They have power, yes, but they have no souls, or they would be helping us. Aluminum and rock, what do they have? Life, and nothing else. When they have another thousand years, they will still not have a third of the reality of our city. Freedom, hah! Why don't they *help* us, eh?"

The winter was slow frozen starvation. One by one, the artillery pieces that defended our city failed, for we no longer had the machine shops to keep them in repair, nor the tools to make shells. One by one the vicious birds fired from distant hilltops found the homes of our guns and ripped them apart. By the middle of February, we were undefended.

And the birds continued to fall.

Sometimes I accompanied Johann to the molecular still. Over the long months of siege, they had modified it so that it now distilled from air and water not merely nitrate, but finished explosive ready for the guns, tons per hour. But what good was it now, when there were no guns left for it to feed? Of the eight men who had given it birth, only two still survived to tend it, old one-legged Nguyen, and Johann.

One day Nguyen stopped coming. The place he lived had been hit, or he had been struck in transit. There was no way I would ever find out.

There was nothing left of the city to defend, and almost nobody able to defend it. Even those who were willing were starved too weak to hold a weapon.

All through February, all through March, the shelling continued, despite the lack of return fire from the city. They must have known that the resistance was over. Perhaps, Johann said, they had forgotten that there was a city here at all, they were shelling the city now for no other reason than that it had become a habit. Perhaps they were shelling us as a punishment for having dared to defy them.

Through April, the shelling continued. There was no food, no heat, no clean water, no medicine to treat the wounded.

When Johann died, it took me four hours to remove the rubble from his body, pulling stones away as birds falling around me demolished a building standing a block to the east, one two blocks north. I was surprised at how light he was, little more than a feather pillow. There was no place to bury him; the graveyards were all full. I placed him back where he had lain, crossed his hands, and left him buried in the rubble of the basement where we had spent our lives entwined.

I moved to a new shelter, a tunnel cut out of the solid rock below the Mönchsberg, an artificial cavern where a hundred families huddled in the dark, waiting for an end to existence. It had once been a parking garage. The moisture from three hundred lungs condensed on the stone ceiling and dripped down on us.

At last, at the end of April, the shelling stopped. For a day there was quiet, and then the victorious army came in. There were no alleys to baffle their tanks now. They came dressed in plastic armor, faceless soldiers with railguns and omniblasters thrown casually across their backs; they came flying the awful standard of the Pan-Slavic Army, the two-headed dragon on a field of blue crosses. One of them must have been Dragan Vukadinović, Dragan the Cleanser, the Scorpion of Bratislava, but in their armor I could not know which one. With them were the diplomats, explaining to all who would listen that peace had been negotiated, the war was over, and our part of it was that we would agree to leave our city and move into camps to be resettled elsewhere.

Would the victors write the history, I wondered? What would they say, to justify their deeds? Or would they, too, be left behind by history, a minor faction in a minor event forgotten against the drama of a destiny working itself out far away?

It was a living tide of ragged humans that met them, dragging the crippled and wounded on improvised sledges. I found it hard to believe that there could be so many left. Nobody noticed a dirty twelve-year-old girl, small for her age, slip away. Or if they did notice, where could she go?

The molecular still was still running. The darkness, the smell of it, hidden beneath a ruined, deserted Salzburg, was a comfort to me. It alone had been steadfast. In the end, the humans who tended it had turned out to be too fragile, but it had run on, alone in the dark, producing explosives that nobody would ever use, filling the caverns and the dungeons beneath a castle that had once been the proud symbol of a proud city. Filling it by the ton, by the thousands of tons, perhaps even tens of thousands of tons.

I brought with me an alarm clock, and a battery, and I sat for a long time in the dark, remembering the city.

And in the darkness, I could not bring myself to become the angel of destruction, to call down the cleansing fire I had so dreamed of seeing brought upon my enemies. In order to survive, you must become tough, Johann had once told me; you must become hard. But I could not become hard enough. I could not become like *them*.

And so I destroyed the molecular still, and fed the pieces into the Salzach. For all its beauty and power, it was fragile, and when I had done, there was nothing left by which someone could reconstruct it, or even understand what it had been. I left the alarm clock and the battery, and ten thousand tons of explosives, behind me in the catacombs.

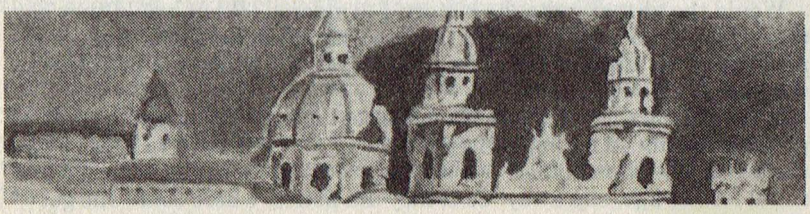
Perhaps they are there still.

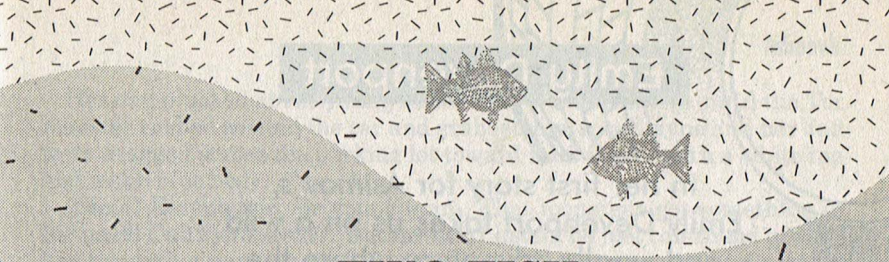
It was, I am told, the most beautiful, the most civilized, city in the world. The many people who told me that are all dead now, and I remember it only through the eyes of a child, looking up from below and understanding little.

Nothing of that little girl remains. Like my civilization, I have remade myself anew. I live in a world of peace, a world of mathematics and sky-cities, the opening of the new renaissance. But, like the first renaissance, this one was birthed in fire and war.

I will never tell this to anybody. To people who were not there, the story is only words, and they could never understand. And to those who *were* there, we who lived through the long siege of Salzburg and somehow came out alive, there is no need to speak.

In a very long lifetime, we could never forget. ●

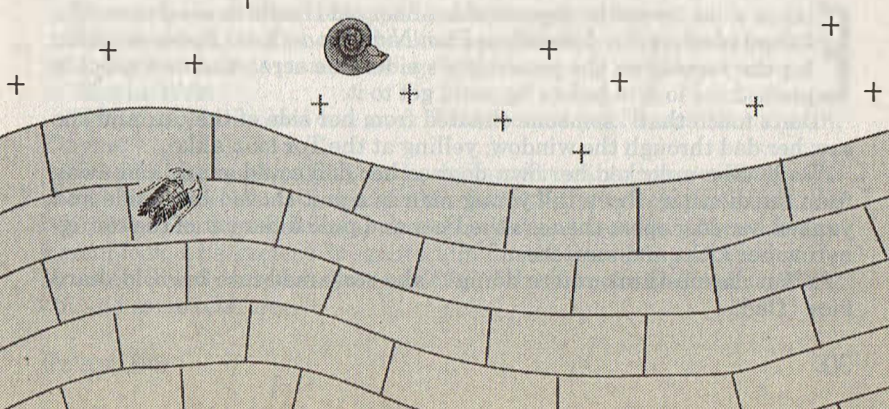




# TWO FISH

I have been studying a square of sedimentary rock
in which can be seen the fossilized remains
of two dainty prehistoric fish.
It must be interesting to be so delicate
in a time of giants.
The petrified bones are as fine as hairs;
I am speaking of creatures smaller than my fingers.
I imagine that the lives of these two fish
must have been filled with dim but constant terror—
the ancient whales may have been about,
or Elasmosaurus, the great sea serpent.
Still, my little ones seem to have died natural deaths.
Perhaps one of the flying reptiles threw them back.

—Steven Utley



Emily Devenport

In her first story for *Asimov's*, Emily Devenport takes us on a wild and woolly adventure where the fate of the Earth hinges on the outcome of . . .

# THE LONG RIDE

Elayne woke up on the driver's side of her old Honda to see a man who looked just like Tor Johnson in *Plan Nine From Outer Space* reaching for the handle on the passenger's side. She screamed and quickly pushed the lock in before he could get to it.

"Don't touch that!" someone shouted from her side of the car, and she saw her dad through the window, yelling at the Tor look-alike.

"Dad!" She unlocked her own door so her dad could get in and away from the monster. But a tall young man in a suit shoved him aside and yanked her door open, then grabbed her and pulled her out of the car, ignoring her kicks and scratches.

"What do you think you're doing?" she screamed into his cold, hard face. "Dad!"

Her dad plucked at the young man's sleeve, ineffectually, until the Tor monster rushed around the car and grabbed him too. Elayne and her dad were dragged across the parking lot toward a '62 Chevy with a white top and a sky-blue body.

"Stop!" Elayne told the young man. "That monster's got something in his head! Can't you see it?" But he didn't listen; he just continued to drag her through a parking lot full of sixties cars that were in surprisingly good condition (except for some big, chunky models from the fifties that looked kind of dusty and used) toward the sky-blue Chevy that was like something out of George Jetson's wet dreams. He pulled the back door open and tossed her in.

The monster pushed her dad into the front seat; but it was funny, her dad got behind the steering wheel and started the car up. She gaped at him in horror, realizing that he had something inside his head too, something that was forcing him to drive where he didn't want to go.

Elayne sat very still and tried to figure things out. They were leaving the parking lot now, and it occurred to her she didn't know where she was. She had gone to Target for something; it should have been the Target parking lot. But the street was too narrow and the buildings were big and chunky, like in the old part of Phoenix when she was growing up.

"Dad," she said, "what's happening?"

"Don't fight them," he said, his voice hardly sounding like his own. "They'll hurt you."

The monster laughed, a strangled sound.

"Knock it off," said the young man. "No one has to get hurt."

Elayne tore her eyes away from the monster long enough to study the young man. She decided that he didn't have something inside his head, and wondered why he was helping the monster, if that was the case. He was studying her, too.

"My name's Terry Cole," he said. "What's yours?"

"Don't you know?"

"No, I don't know. Why would *I* know?"

"You're the ones who kidnapped us. You ought to know."

He glanced at her dad, then back at her. "You sure don't look much like your dad—what was your name again?"

"Elayne West."

"Elayne." He looked her over. "How come you dress like a man, Elayne?"

"What?" She was wearing her Lee's Easy Fit jeans that were supposed to look feminine. And she had on her favorite flannel shirt, all soft and broken-in. Her blond hair was French-braided; it was her attractive-but-casual look. She decided to ignore him for the moment and look at the monster. She shivered as she wondered if the thing in his head could get out and come *after* her.

He turned around and grinned at her, as if he had read her mind. "We'll stop for something to eat," he said.

"Ross—" said her dad, warningly.

"Kal!" snapped the monster. "Now! My cravings!"

Her dad sighed and pulled the car into the parking lot of a liquor store with signs that read "CIGARETTES! CANDY! MAGAZINES!" in the window.

"Watch her," Elayne's dad, who was now Kal, told Terry. The young man nodded, lazily. Kal and Ross got out of the car, sparing Elayne one glance over their shoulders, and went into the store.

Now's my chance, Elayne thought to herself. If I'm going to get away, it has to be now. She sneaked a look at Terry out of the corner of her eyes, then turned to look at him openly when she noticed that he was staring at her. She had seen the look plenty of times in her life. She knew that she was beautiful.

Terry was rather handsome himself, with slicked-back brown hair and dark brown eyes. His mouth was cynical, hard in a way that made her think *gangster*. Only he wasn't old enough to be totally corrupted. He was maybe twenty-five.

He smiled at her with white teeth. She thought she saw the tip of his tongue slide over the sharp edges. "You're thinking of running," he said. "Don't try it. Don't make me deck you."

He turned to a woman who was suddenly sitting between them, an attractive brunette in a sleeveless dress. "You too," he said. "Just sit tight."

Elayne blinked at the woman. Had she been in the car all along? She looked out of place in an odd sort of way. Her hair was short and curled around her face, sort of a Marilyn Monroe style. Well, that look was coming back, wasn't it?

The woman looked at Elayne, her eyes full of terror. She felt the same way Elayne did, that was obvious. Elayne looked back, trying to judge whether the woman would be tough enough to make a break with her. The two of them might be able to overcome Terry, if they could just work together.

Another car pulled in next to theirs on Terry's side. Elayne glanced at it just as the boys inside looked back at her. She caught the eye of a big young man with long, greased-back hair and a white T-shirt, and a better idea occurred to her.

As she stared at the kid, she let her face go soft and dreamy, then wet her lips, giving the gesture an erotic little flick at the end. His mouth dropped open.

"Stop that, you little maniac!" said Terry. She looked at him and let all of the terror she felt for him creep into her face. Then she looked back at the kid, imploringly.

"I said, knock it off." Terry's voice was threatening but almost amused.

Keeping her eyes on the kid's, Elayne yanked open her door and grabbed the brunette's arm, hauling the woman out of the car with all of her strength. Terry reached for the woman, but she kicked at him with tiny, sharp heels and skittered out onto the pavement after Elayne.

"Leave us alone!" Elayne shouted at Terry. "You can't tell us what to do!"

"Yeah, go to hell!" said the brunette, catching on. The two of them edged around the front of the car, where the boys would be able to see them.

Terry climbed out of his side, deliberately ignoring the five boys who were climbing out of the other car behind him. "Get back inside," he told the women.

"No," said Elayne.

He shook his head. "They can find you anywhere, you know. You can't get away for long."

"That's what *you* say," said Elayne.

"You in trouble, baby?" asked the kid, who was as big as Terry but a little less certain of himself.

"Yes!" screamed Elayne. "For God's sake, help us!" And she made a dash across the parking lot, pulling the brunette behind her. She could see Terry starting to follow out of the corner of her eye, and the kid just behind him. Then she lost sight of them as she and the brunette started across the street toward some fields and some neat little houses.

"Hey, you—!" she could hear the kid yelling, and then "Goddammit!" from Terry and the sound of men punching each other. She didn't look back. She and the brunette ran as hard and fast as they could, into the fields and out of sight.

"What *are* they?" asked the brunette as she and Elayne rushed through tidy little gardens. "What do they want with us?"

"They're monsters," panted Elayne. "And I don't know what they want. Maybe they want to put things inside our heads like they've got."

They stopped for a moment to rest behind some rose bushes. They were out of sight of the road, now. Elayne looked out across cultivated fields, toward freedom.

"We've got to keep moving," she said. "We've got to stay as far away from them as possible. We'll rest for a moment more, then we have to cross those fields. Can you run in those shoes?"

"I can do *anything* in these shoes," said the brunette, almost laughing as she looked at her four-inch heels.

"Good. Just one more minute to catch our breath, and then run like hell."

"You sure are good at giving orders," Terry said, just behind her, and Elayne jumped a foot. He was standing there with Ross and Kal on either

side, a few steps behind him, their faces expressionless. Elayne shook her head in horror and backed away toward the fields.

"Stop running," said Terry. "You're really starting to piss me off."

"No!" said Elayne. "They've got things inside their heads! They're monsters!"

She turned and ran into the fields, Terry following close behind, but the brunette just stood there with tears running down her face. She didn't even look at Ross and Kal, and they didn't look at her. She watched Terry catch up to Elayne and pull her down. Then, her head cocked slightly to one side, the brunette faded away into nothingness.

"Goddammit!" Terry was laughing as he pulled Elayne off her feet and spun her to the ground. "You're gonna make me wreck my good suit."

Elayne immediately tried to scramble away, but he swept her right up off the ground and carried her away like a groom with his new bride.

"You can't do this," screamed Elayne. "I'm too heavy!"

"My granddad bent iron bars with his bare hands in the circus," Terry said. "My dad was a boxer. I would be too, if I didn't like my pretty mug so much."

He marched back across the field with her, back to where Kal and Ross were standing without the brunette.

"Where is she?" demanded Elayne. "What did you do to her?"

"She was a glitch," said Kal. "From nineteen fifty-seven."

"She wasn't a glitch," said Elayne, crying now. "You *did* something."

Terry grinned at her as he stuffed her back into the Chevy.

"Let's see if you've got anything valuable," said Terry, still grinning and now sitting much closer to Elayne. Kal was driving again, and Ross was sitting in front of her, so that she had to look at the back of his head while he gobbled candy bar after candy bar. She was vaguely embarrassed to be pawed with her dad in the car; yet at the same time it *wasn't* her dad, she knew that, too.

Terry was searching her for jewelry. He found her Mickey Mouse watch on her right wrist and laughed. "Aren't you a little old for this?" He skillfully slipped it off.

"Hey!" Elayne lit up like a Christmas tree. *"You give that back!"* She lunged across the car after him, glaring into his laughing face, her hand locked around his wrist. He seemed astonished that she would fight back, and delighted.

"There you go, giving orders again," he said.

"Give it to me! Goddammit, I'll give you my wedding ring if—" she felt for the ring and stopped dead. It wasn't there. In fact, she wasn't even quite sure what it had looked like. Worse than that, she couldn't remember what her *husband* looked like, or his name, or where they lived. She

# ANALOG AND ASIMOV'S SCIENCE FICTION MAGAZINES

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PLEASE MAKE CHECKS PAYABLE TO DELL MAGAZINES.

fell back into her seat and was confronted again with the back of Ross's head. What if she had something inside her *own* head now, something making her forget?

Terry put his arm around her, allowing his hand to rest on her breast, casually. "Lose your ring?" he asked. "Well, it wasn't me. But I'll keep this watch."

"No, you won't," she said, and wrenched it away, surprising him. Since he would have to take his hand off her breast to get it back, he let her have it.

"How old are you, sweetheart?" he asked. His fingertips touched her nipple.

"Thirty-three." She kept her eyes fastened on Ross's head. The longer she had to be near him, the more convinced she was that the thing inside his head would crawl out and jump on her, the moment she wasn't looking.

"You're quite an armful," Terry was saying. "How much do you weigh?"

"One hundred forty-five."

"Hmmm. Most women would lie about their weight."

"Why should I lie?" She thought the skin on Ross's skull was starting to wrinkle in a weird way. She blinked to make sure.

"What are your measurements?" Terry asked.

"37–25–37."

"Yeah, that sounds about right. I sure would like to see you in a dress. And stockings. Hey, sweetheart, look here." He took her chin in his hand and forced her to look at him. "Look inside my coat," he whispered. She did, just so he would let her go back to her vigil sooner. His coat was parted enough to let her see a gun in a shoulder holster under his left arm.

"No one's going to touch you, baby," he said. "Not while I'm here."

"You promise?" she said.

"I promise."

It was night before they stopped at a motel. Elayne had dozed against Terry's shoulder. "Separate rooms, Kal," she heard him say.

"Of course," said Kal, his voice diminishing as he walked away toward the office.

Ross was still eating candy bars, only now he was making little, contented cooing noises while he did it. Elayne shivered. Kal came back out of the office and tossed a key to Terry, who caught it deftly.

"Come on, sweetheart," he said, and pulled Elayne out of the car.

She looked back at Ross and Kal while Terry unlocked the door and pushed her into the room. Once inside, she went to the window and peeked out through the curtains. Kal and Ross were still sitting in the front seat, fussing with something on the seat between them. She thought her dad—Kal—was starting to look an awful lot like Ross. Both

of them bald, and huge, with bruises under their eyes and mouths like gashes in their faces. Maybe the thing in his head was changing him physically, too.

"Lock the door!" she told Terry.

"I already have," he said, from somewhere behind her.

"They're just sitting there. What are they doing?"

"I don't know."

Elayne turned and found him standing by the double bed. His jacket was off and he was inspecting his gun. A money belt was fastened around his waist.

"You don't know," she snapped. "And yet here you are!"

He showed her his teeth again. "They paid me ten grand. That's why *I'm* here. That's why you're here, too."

Elayne looked out the curtains again. Ross and Kal were gone. She backed away from the window and sat down on the bed. He pulled his jacket out from under her, frowning, and tossed it onto a chair.

"What if they come in here while we're asleep?" she asked. "What if they try to put something in our heads?"

He reholstered his gun, then took the whole affair off and set it on the bedside table, setting his money belt right behind it. "I don't know where you get that stuff," he said, and put his arms around her. "They want you to find something for them. And they're not coming in here. I'll shoot them if they do, and they damn well know it."

"Find something?" she said, as he put his mouth on her neck. "Find *what*?"

"You'll find out," he murmured. "You're beautiful. Come here."

Elayne let him unbutton her shirt, wondering why she didn't feel like resisting. He exposed her black bra and seemed pleased with it. "Sexy," he said, and unbuttoned her pants. "Black underwear, too. I like your taste in lingerie, anyway."

Elayne remembered that her husband had always liked her underwear, too, though she still couldn't remember who he was. It was significant, because she didn't wear bikinis or hipsters. She always wore the underwear that went up to her waist and down to her thighs, the kind men usually said they hated because it was like their mother's. But Elayne wore that kind because she hated visible panty line.

Terry loved it. He left her in her bra and panties, taking his own clothes off piece by piece. She noticed that he was wearing one of those old-fashioned undershirts without the sleeves, like Mafia men wore in the movies. While they were relaxing and playing cards.

When he was naked, he stood before her for a moment, proudly, showing off his lean, muscled body. "You like the way I'm hung, baby?" he asked softly.

"Yes," she said, and wondered if it was time to feel guilty yet. She was

married; she ought to be thinking of her husband and feeling bad. But her mind couldn't grasp his image at all, it just wasn't there.

Terry took her in his arms and pressed her down on the bed. His body felt warm and smooth, good against hers. He worked one of her bra straps off her shoulder and nudged it down over her nipple, taking his time.

"Yeah," he murmured into her skin, "I really like your underwear."

"It's a Bali bra," she said inanely, and wondered why she thought he would care that Bali made the perfect bra for big girls like her, sturdy underwire things that supported her in comfort without gouging deep grooves in her shoulders. Meanwhile, he bit and sucked on her nipple.

"Sweetheart," he said. He unhooked the bra and pulled it off slowly, enjoying himself. She enjoyed it too. "God," he said, "You look just like one of those Playboy models." He pulled her panties off, then arranged her on the bed and sat back to enjoy the view.

"How old did you say you were?" he asked.

"Thirty-three."

"You ever been all the way with a boy?"

"With a *boy?*"

He laughed. "If you want to stick to that thirty-three story, that's your business. Are you a virgin?"

"Of course not!"

"Okay. Have it your way."

He crouched over her and gently pushed his penis against the opening of her vagina. It was odd, but her body seemed to resist the entry, just like when she was—

"Ready?" he asked. "Here goes."

He thrust all the way inside her and she screamed, clawing handfuls of the bedspread as the pain ripped through her. She lay gasping in astonishment while he kissed her face and made comforting noises.

"You asked for it, sweetheart. You had to act like you knew what you were doing."

"I did know!" she gasped. "I *did* know!"

"All right, all right. Don't cry. We'll go slow." He started to move inside her again, obviously trying to be gentle, but still hurting her. She gritted her teeth and held onto the bedspread. After a few minutes, the pain started to diminish and it felt more like it was supposed to.

"That's right, baby," he said. "Here we go now."

The pain was gone. Now it was all pleasure. She let go of the bedspread and put her arms around him, thinking that nature had a way of making these things work out.

But if nature was so goddammed smart, how come it invented the hymen?

"Elayne!" he said, and they climaxed together.

* * *

Elayne didn't remember falling asleep. She woke up with a terrible headache in a bright motel room, alone.

"Terry?" she said, and winced at the sound of her own voice. He didn't answer. She looked at the bedside table. His gun was gone too.

And so were her clothes. The only thing she had left was the Mickey Mouse watch, which was still around her wrist. Mickey's hands said ten o'clock.

Elayne crept to the window and peeked out. The Chevy was gone, but she thought she saw someone standing just beyond the window. Someone dressed just like Kal or Ross in the weird jumpsuit they both wore. That was funny, she hadn't noticed how they were dressed yesterday, but now she remembered.

The motel room was funny, too. Old-fashioned. She remembered staying in motels like this one when she was a kid, the ones with the prints of cowboys and Indians on the walls. This place was obviously a cheap one; it didn't even have a TV set. But it was very neat and clean, and the sixties-style furniture looked brand new, as if it had been in a warehouse somewhere for thirty years.

Elayne sat down on the bed, and the door burst open. Terry came in with some packages and shut the door behind him, grinning at her.

"You even look good in bright light," he said. "I've got something nice for you."

"What happened to my clothes?" she demanded.

"I didn't like them. I got you something new."

He set the packages down on the bed and opened them one by one. Out came a long-sleeved, knee-length dress, black undergarments, a garter belt, stockings, and pumps.

"I got some toiletries for you too," he said. "Come on, get dressed. I want to see how you look."

Elayne looked at the bra. It was like the kind her mother used to wear, the kind she had loved to play dress-up in when she was a girl. She had stuffed scarves into the cups and pretended to have breasts. It was sturdy, covered with black lace, and was boned on the side. Unfortunately, it had seamed cups, but they were lined with a soft material that would keep the seams from putting welts in Elayne's skin.

The underwear was part of the set, really very much like the pair she had worn the day before, only made out of heavier material. She pulled the lingerie on while he watched, avidly.

"Perfect fit," she said as she adjusted a bra strap. "How did you know what size to get?"

"You told me your measurements yesterday," he said. "Now try on the garter belt."

"Why didn't you get pantyhose?"

"What?"

"You know, hose with panties attached. You've seen them on TV, right?"

"Never heard of them."

"Well, let's see if I can figure this out." She fastened the garter belt and struggled to fasten the hose. They only went halfway up her thighs, which felt weird. "Is this how they're supposed to look?" she asked him.

"Yes," he said, his voice thick. "You'd better put on that dress before I jump you."

She did. It was almost a perfect fit, though a little snug for her tastes. The scooped neckline almost touched her cleavage.

"Green is your color," he said. He sat in the chair and leaned his elbows on his knees, giving her a close inspection. His coat fell open and she saw the gun.

"Did you get toothpaste?" she asked him.

"Yeah. In the bag." He pointed at a small paper bag on the bed.

Elayne carried the toiletries into the bathroom. There was a toothbrush, a small tube of Crest, complexion soap with a girl who looked like Grace Kelly on the package, some Ban roll-on deodorant, and a hair brush.

She confronted her bleary face in the mirror and began to wash up. The cold water and soap felt good on her skin. She took off the dress and gave herself a more thorough washing before applying the deodorant and brushing her teeth. It wasn't until after she had rinsed her mouth and started to get dressed again that she noticed what was different.

Her face and neck were too smooth. She had nice skin, sure, but like most women, she knew where every single character line was. And they weren't there. She looked maybe—twenty? It was hard to say. That was why Terry had thought she was a virgin.

Elayne zipped up her dress and brushed her hair out. She found a little tube of Brylcream next to Terry's stuff, and worked a little bit of it into her hair to give the front and sides some height. She fastened her hair with the rubber band at the base of her neck and worked a little more Brylcream through her ponytail to make it look neater.

"There," she told her reflection. "Now the hair matches the dress."

Elayne went to the bathroom window and looked out. The back of the motel looked out on desolate fields, untended stretches of land that weren't even used for grazing. She wondered if she could get out the small window and disappear into those fields.

Terry opened the bathroom door. "Come on, sweetheart. Time to go."

Terry drove Elayne to a drugstore for breakfast without Ross and Kal. In fact, the monsters were nowhere in sight, and she didn't ask about them. If he had decided to leave them behind, she didn't want to say anything that might change his mind.

The drugstore counter was a wonderful place, with shiny chrome trim and big, fat stools. It looked like something you would find in a small town, a place untouched by the onslaught of fast food and franchise coffee shops. Elayne managed to eat some sweet rolls and drink orange juice. Terry put away a breakfast of pancakes, bacon, scrambled eggs, and coffee. He pulled a pack of cigarettes out of his jacket pocket and lit one.

"You smoke?" asked Elayne.

"Sure. From time to time. Bother you?"

"Don't they make you sick?" she said, frowning.

"Do I look sick?"

"Not now. But some day you'll have lung cancer or emphysema—"

"Says who?"

"The surgeon general."

He looked at her through narrowed eyes, but he wasn't defensive the way most smokers were. He seemed to enjoy the argument.

"Didn't you ever learn to smoke?" he asked, and blew a ring in her general direction.

"No."

"What was the matter? Were you afraid it might stunt your growth?" He let his eyes travel up and down her body.

"Very funny. They make you *sick,* that's all. Hardly anyone smokes anymore."

But just about everyone in the drugstore seemed to be doing it, so she felt silly for saying that. "I only smoke a few a week," Terry was saying. "I don't have a habit."

"Okay." She didn't want to argue about it anymore.

Afterward, they got into the car and just drove. Elayne was relieved when Terry didn't drive back to the motel, but her good feelings were short-lived. Before long, a feeling began to creep up the back of her neck. She kept turning to look in the back seat. It was always empty.

Terry drove on without speaking, and Elayne was afraid to break the silence. She was afraid she might slip and ask about Kal and Ross. Her headache had come back, and her anxiety seemed to grow with every mile they traveled, as if they were going to their doom, driving to the end of the world. She wanted to fasten her seat belt, but the car had apparently never been fitted with one. If they had a crash, she would probably go right through the windshield.

Elayne couldn't stand it. She looked behind her again, at the empty seat. She tried to sit with her back to the passenger's door, but that was no good either. She slipped down on the seat until her head was against the cushion, and thought she heard a scratching on the other side.

It was the thing from Ross's head! She *knew* it! It was crawling on the floor in the back, waiting to claw its way up and seize the base of her

skull. She listened intently, and was sure she heard scratching. She had to look again. She sat up, took a deep breath, and turned around.

Kal and Ross were sitting in the back seat, looking right at her with their bruised eyes.

Elayne screamed and pushed away from the seat, hurting her back on the dashboard as she tried to scramble as far away from them as possible. The car was swerving and Terry was yelling, then jamming on his brakes as Elayne clawed at her door handle, crying, "I can't stand it anymore!"

He managed to bring the car to a stop just as she tumbled out into the barren fields. She scrambled onto her feet and ran, stumbling on the high-heeled pumps and falling several times. Terry stopped the engine and ran after her, catching up to her within a hundred feet. But she broke away from him twice and stumbled on.

"Don't!" he shouted. "Stop fighting! Calm down!"

"They were back there," she sobbed. "They were invisible."

"They've been there the whole time." Terry grabbed her by the shoulders and held her tight. "They were in the diner with us, for Chrissakes! Calm down!"

"No. I'm not getting in the car with them!" She looked over his shoulder and saw Kal and Ross approaching. Ross had swollen horribly since the day before, and Kal was carrying a small black box in his hands. "It's in the box!" She tried to wrench away from him again. "The thing for my head!"

"Elayne, stop, don't make me—"

He punched her hard, in the jaw, and the lights instantly went out.

Elayne woke up in the front seat, her head pillowed on Terry's jacket, against his thigh. He was still driving. From the back seat she could hear grinding noises, and realized, with horror, that Ross was eating again.

"Terry," she whispered. "Did they put something in my head?"

He put his hand on her forehead and smoothed her hair away, either to warn her or comfort her, she didn't know which.

"No," he said. "There was nothing but wires in that box, sweetheart. I made them show me."

She sighed, and hoped that he was telling the truth. Her jaw hurt. It was probably bruised.

"Dad?" she called.

There was no answer from the back seat.

"I know you're there, Kal. Answer me."

"Yes, child?" came his voice. Her dad had never called her *child.*

"Why am I younger now?"

"I don't know," he said. "Another glitch, I suppose."

"Like the brunette?"

"Yes."

"She was from nineteen fifty-seven," Ross put in, between bites.

Elayne turned onto her back, so she could see the top of the seat. Terry continued to stroke her brow.

"What year is it?" she asked.

They didn't answer.

"Terry—"

"Nineteen sixty-two."

"Nineteen sixty-two," she called to the back seat. "I should be *three,* not twenty!"

"Don't try to figure the physics out," advised Kal. "They have nothing to do with logic, I assure you. At least, not any logic *you* would understand."

"Thanks a lot."

"Not that you're not intelligent," he added, as if suddenly remembering his role as her dad.

Ross continued to grind his food, grunting happily.

"So now what?" she asked.

"Now you'll take us someplace we need to go."

"Where?"

"Frankly," he sighed, "we don't know. You'll have to be our compass, child."

"How?"

"We'll keep track of your misery," he said, then hushed Ross as he began to giggle.

They stopped for the night at another motel. Terry took Elayne's clothes and then went off to get her some aspirin and ice for her jaw. He came back with a nightgown, too.

"I thought you shouldn't have to sit around naked," he said. "Much as I would like you to."

"Thank you." She slipped the thin, cotton gown over her head. His eyes told her that it revealed more than it hid, but it made her feel better.

"Terry," she said. "If you shot them, do you think they would die?"

"Sure," he said. He was taking off his jacket, his money belt, and his gun. When he got down to his shirt, he said. "Maybe."

"You *know* there's something wrong with them."

"Yeah, so? What am I supposed to do about it?" He tossed his shirt onto a chair and sat down on the edge of the bed.

"Kill them." She sat facing him, cross-legged, her nipples pressing against the cotton. She knew that he knew she was trying to manipulate him, but she also knew that he liked it.

"I beat up that greaser and his friends for you," he said. "What have you ever done for *me?*"

"Aren't you scared of them?"

"Not the way you are. They just make me a little sick." He pulled his undershirt off and kicked off his shoes. "They paid me fair and square. Why should I kill them?"

"They have something in their *heads!*" she insisted.

He shook his head. "You keep saying that. What are you talking about? You think that the Creepers from that Vincent Price movie crawled up their spines and sank into their spinal cords?"

The mental image made Elayne shiver.

"They're going to do something bad—to the world," she said.

He laughed at her. "I was only kidding about monsters from space. What makes you think I'm one of those movie heroes? I've done a few bank jobs in my time, and lately I find it pretty easy to sell grass for a living. How do you think I met Kal and Ross?"

"You wouldn't be able to pull off bank jobs in nineteen ninety-two," she said. "They have video cameras."

Terry lay back on the bed with his arms behind his head and smiled at her. "Nineteen ninety-two," he said. "When women dress like men and wear Mickey Mouse watches."

"You believe me, then?"

"Sure," he said. "And thanks for reminding me about the watch. Hand it over."

Elayne put her hand over the watch, leaning away from him. "Why? Why do you have to have it?"

He made a grab for her hand, but she pulled away and seized the hem of her gown first, pulling it up over her head. She was kneeling on the bed with her legs apart, her breasts practically in his face, the gown tangled around her wrists. "Please, Terry, don't take the watch. My dad gave it to me when I was sixteen, *please* don't take it."

He put his hands on her breasts and cupped them, sliding his thumbs over her nipples. "Say *please* again," he said.

"Please!"

His hands slid down her waist and over her hips. "I like the way you argue, Elayne," he said, and slipped two fingers between her legs, up inside her. There was no pain this time. She tossed the gown away and leaned over him, put her mouth on his nipples and began to suck. He groaned. "Put your hand *there*—yeah. Oh yeah, baby, that's right. Say *please* again."

"Please, Terry, *please*—"

"All right, sweetheart. All right."

In the morning, he had a new suit for himself and a new dress for her, a blue one this time with a vee neckline, but otherwise the same as the other dress. "It's your style," he said, and grinned as she put it on.

But she could hardly talk. Her throat felt dry, and she couldn't eat breakfast, though he tried to tempt her, and Kal and Ross had disappeared again.

This time, when they appeared in the back seat of the Chevy, she wasn't surprised. Ross was now nearly twice as big as Kal; his jumpsuit was strained to its limit. Elayne put her mouth next to Terry's ear and said, "You've got to kill them."

He shook his head. "I thought about it, but—it's that little black box. It *does* things—"

"What's that?" shrilled Ross.

"Love talk," said Terry.

Elayne tried once again to get comfortable with her back to the monsters, but she couldn't. Finally she sank down on the seat with her head in Terry's lap again. She couldn't get it out of her mind that the things in their heads wanted into her skull, too.

For a long time, the drive passed in silence.

"You know what's really sad about your delusion, Elayne?" Kal's voice finally came from the back seat. "It's that, in a way, your fears are *true*. There *is* something inside our heads, and that something is our brains. Our *alien* brains. You can't accept that we're not Human, and yet you know precisely where we are the most in-Human. Inside our heads."

"So you *admit* that you're not human," she said wearily. She glanced up at Terry to see what he thought about that, but he had on his poker face.

"Yes, I admit it. Our little black box has been able to fool most people, even our good friend Mr. Cole. But not *you*, not enough, because *you're* a glitch. You're not in synch with nineteen sixty-two; at least not yet. How are you feeling?"

Elayne tried to answer, but couldn't.

"Good. We're getting close."

"Close to what?" asked Terry.

"You'll see!" sang Ross.

They drove for another hour or so. Terry stopped for a red light and looked down at Elayne. "You're the most beautiful woman I've ever been with," he told her. She started to smile at him, but Ross's titter from the back seat made her wince.

"How sweet!" said Ross, his tone perching hideously between malice and genuine sentimentality. Elayne turned her face toward Terry's leg and began to cry. She cried until her entire body shook with distress.

"We're close!" Kal told Ross, delightedly, and the wet sound of huge bodies colliding warned Elayne that something was going on in the back seat that she didn't want to know about.

Finally she just lay there, too exhausted even to shake anymore, her eyes dry and red. She felt the way the rat does when it's trapped in the cage with the snake, and knows it can't get out.

"Oh! Oh, Kal!" Ross was squeaking, and the car bumped and slowed as it pulled off the road and onto dirt. Terry put a hand on her head to keep it from hitting the wheel. The car came to a stop, and she heard the back door opening; the sound of heavy feet on rocks, crunching away from the car, and more, "Oh, oh!s" from Ross.

"You better look at this, sweetheart," said Terry. "Come on. Take a look."

Elayne sat up and looked. After a moment she said, "Let's get out. I have to talk to them."

"If you say so." Terry opened his door and went around to her side, opening hers too. He helped her out, and the two of them walked over to Kal and Ross, who turned to look at them, triumph burning in the black pits of their eyes.

"Look at it!" gloated Ross. "Your doom."

Elayne ignored him, addressing Kal instead. "It's a *ship,* isn't it?"

"Our ship," said Kal, a little more sympathetically than Ross. "There are all sorts of wonderful, useful things inside."

"How did you lose it?"

"Well," he scratched his chin and glanced at Ross, his eyes sparkling, "It's like this. We're an invasion, as you may have guessed. We've traveled a long way and—perhaps you've heard about this in science class—we couldn't exceed the speed of light, or even approach it, so we had to warp space instead."

"A long, long way!" said Ross, emphatically.

"Yes, and it's all very tricky," said Kal. "It's easy to make, you know, *mistakes* when you're trying to get back into normal space and orbit a planet; because, you see, when you warp space, you warp *time* too."

"I'm following you so far," said Elayne, glancing at the deadly, monstrous ship behind them, which was so full of useful things. Like more of the black boxes?

"We meant to arrive in nineteen sixty-two," said Kal. "And we *did.* But we *also* arrived in nineteen ninety-four."

"Oops!" said Ross.

Terry nudged Elayne. "I thought you said nineteen ninety-two."

"I've lost two years," she whispered back, then said, "Does that mean there are two just like you running around in my time?"

"Yes!" beamed Kal.

"And how did I get here?"

"Everything got all jumbled up," said Ross, in an excited rush. "People got knocked out of their regular time lines and we had to recalibrate *everything.* But we must have missed you and your stupid little car. *You* were the anomaly, and when we tried to re-phase ourselves, your presence in this time knocked us away from our ship! We could find *you,* but not the damned ship!"

"But that's okay," said Kal. "Because you helped us find it again. Now you and Terry can go off and have a few days of fun together before the end. Before we make everything over the way *we* want it."

Elayne took a step toward him. "You idiots! What do you think is going to happen when you catch up with yourselves in nineteen ninety-four?"

He took a step back, his face stubborn. "We won't. We're going to change things so drastically, the time line will simply split. You know, like the branch of a tree."

"I'm going to have *babies,*" gushed Ross. "thousands of them!"

"You're *female?*" asked Elayne.

Ross gave her a dimpled smile.

"We're populators," said Kal, gazing at Ross with adoration.

"And *you're* has-beens!" snapped Ross.

"And *you're* going to get a punch in the nose!" Elayne advanced on Ross, who skipped back screaming, "No! No, you'll kill us both!"

"Don't touch her!" Kal wrung his hands. "It's true, you'll both die! Horribly!"

Elayne stopped, wondering if it might be worth her life to save nineteen sixty-two. "Just by *touching* her?" she asked.

"This planet hates us," said Kal. "That's why we have to change it. And ourselves! We're synched into this time and place very precariously, we can only touch nineteen sixty-two things!"

"That's why we had Terry get rid of your clothes," said Ross, gloating again. "So you couldn't throw something at us and kill us. You'll die horribly if you touch us! All inside out! And that ain't hay!"

"Now buzz off," said Kal. "We've got work to do."

Terry put an arm around her and started to steer her away. "We've got a few days together, Elayne. Let's make the best of them."

"Wait." She looked into his cynical face, hoping to draw strength from it. "I have to say one last thing."

"Oh, *now* what?" said Ross, who had already started up the ramp.

"Kal, I thought you were my father."

Kal gave her another one of those horrid, sympathetic looks. "Yes, child," he said. "It was the one thing the box did right."

"My dad gave me something when I was a little girl, and now I want to give it back."

"What?" he said, and took a step back when he saw her tugging up the sleeve of her dress and unfastening the Mickey Mouse watch from around her wrist. "I thought you got rid of everything!" he screamed at Terry.

Terry shrugged. "She was stubborn. You said so yourself."

"Stop!" Kal threw his hands up, but Elayne would not be stopped. She tossed the watch at him, almost casually. He tried to dodge out of the way, and the tip of the wristband brushed his arm.

The effect was immediate and awful. The space that Kal and the watch had shared became distorted, twisting like a whirlpool with Kal inside it.

Ross made a sickening sound, then began to scream like a siren. She started to run up the ramp, but the whirlpool reached out and snagged her too, twisting her into the vortex, snapping bone and tearing flesh as it went. The ship followed, making its own metallic shrieks while Elayne and Terry just stood there and gaped.

The vortex ground up ship and flesh and Mickey Mouse watch like a cosmic garbage disposal, then ate itself as well, disappearing in a flash of light and wind that sent the two humans tumbling to the ground.

Elayne blinked grit out of her eyes when the wind died. No trace remained of the ship or the monsters who had warped time in it. The smell of flowers drifted past her on a breeze, and damned if the birds didn't start singing!

"Well, sweetheart, you got what you wanted." Terry put his arms around her and kissed her ear. "You got away from the monsters. But you're not about to get away from me."

Elayne looked at him and almost smiled, but then cocked her ear at the sound of voices. "Do you hear that?" she asked.

"What? You mean the birds?" He nibbled her neck.

"No. Voices. Music, traffic—*everything*."

"No." He leaned back and looked at her. She seemed very fragile, now. Almost insubstantial.

"My own time is calling," she said. "Maybe Ross and Kal died in nineteen ninety-four, too!"

"And maybe not." He reached out and put a hand right through her.

"Goodbye, Terry," she said. "And remember, keep watching the skies!"

"You too," he said, and watched her fade away.

Terry Cole got up and dusted the dirt from his good trousers. He looked around him, and was happy to see the sky-blue Chevy still parked there. The cash was still solid in his money belt, too. That made him smile. He put his hands in his pockets and strolled over to the car, half-hoping that he would hear Elayne's voice calling him back. But she was really gone.

He would miss her bossiness. He would miss her fantastic body even more. Maybe he wouldn't get himself killed in the next twenty years, and he could track her down. Beat her future husband to the punch.

He got into the car and reached for his cigarettes. He took one out of the package and hesitated, almost seeming to hear her voice again, warning him about lung cancer.

Thirty years was a long time. Twenty didn't sound much better. But Elayne would be a full-grown woman in about fifteen. . . .

Terry Cole threw the cigarettes out the window and drove his new Chevy off into the sunny morning, whistling happily as he went. ●

# HOW TO MAKE LOVE TO A SHARK

Not the fish kind.
A remodeled
human-type
with reinforced
microfilament transmitter/receiver
sharp-edged bio-alloy
solar-charged
fin.
The kind
that sits on chairs backward.
The kind
that shreds your wallpaper just turning around
and flashes a razor grin at you.
The kind
you don't want to mess with.
*This* kind
of shark.

If you *do* want to mess around with a shark—

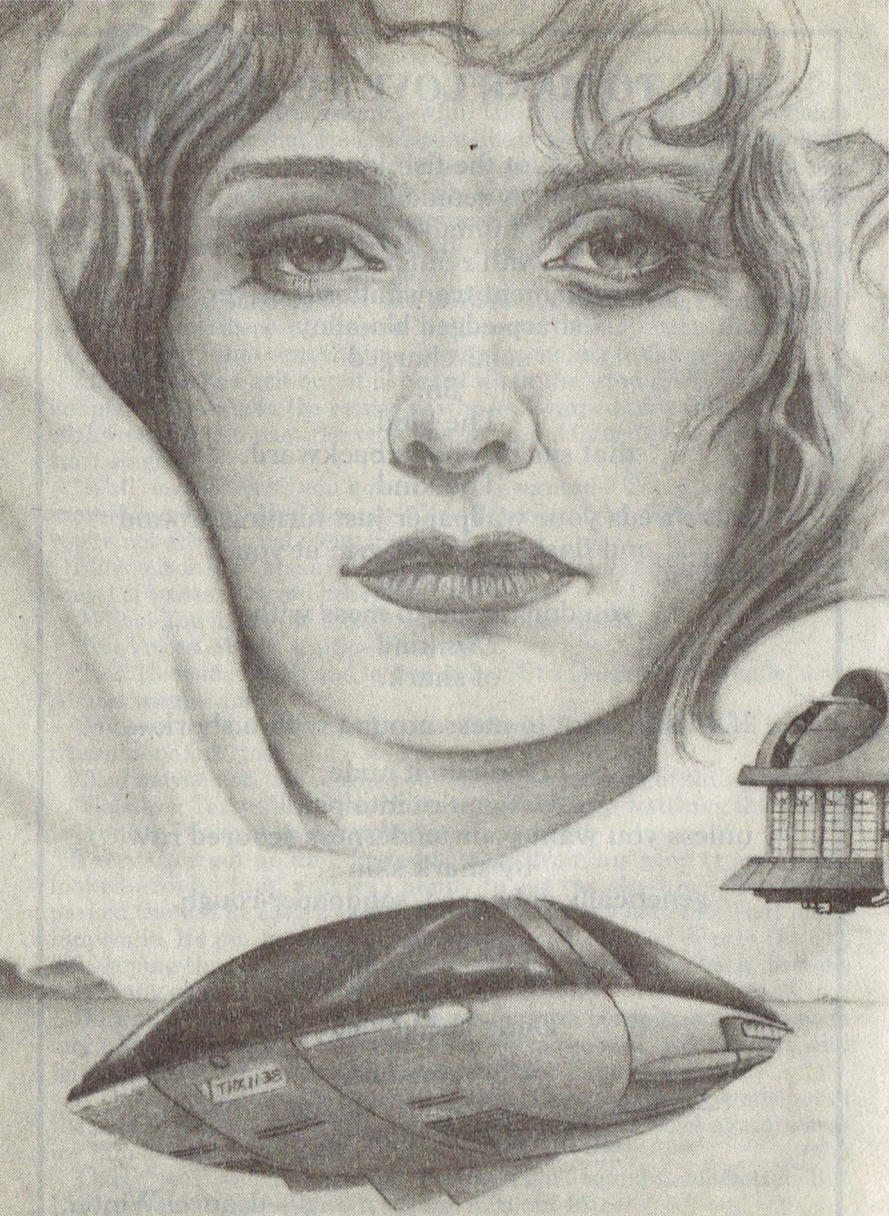
Don't do it nude
unless you're into pain
unless you want your tenderness scoured raw
by shark skin
genetically enhanced, sandpaper-rough.

Don't french kiss
if you like your tongue.

Don't shed blood.

And remember
—unless you want your bed cut in two—
*we* always get to be on top.

—Laurel Winter



"Death Do Us Part" First appeared on Omni Internet December 1996.

Robert Silverberg

Master science fiction writer Robert Silverberg presents us with a bittersweet April/September romance and the true meaning of till . . .

# DEATH DO US PART

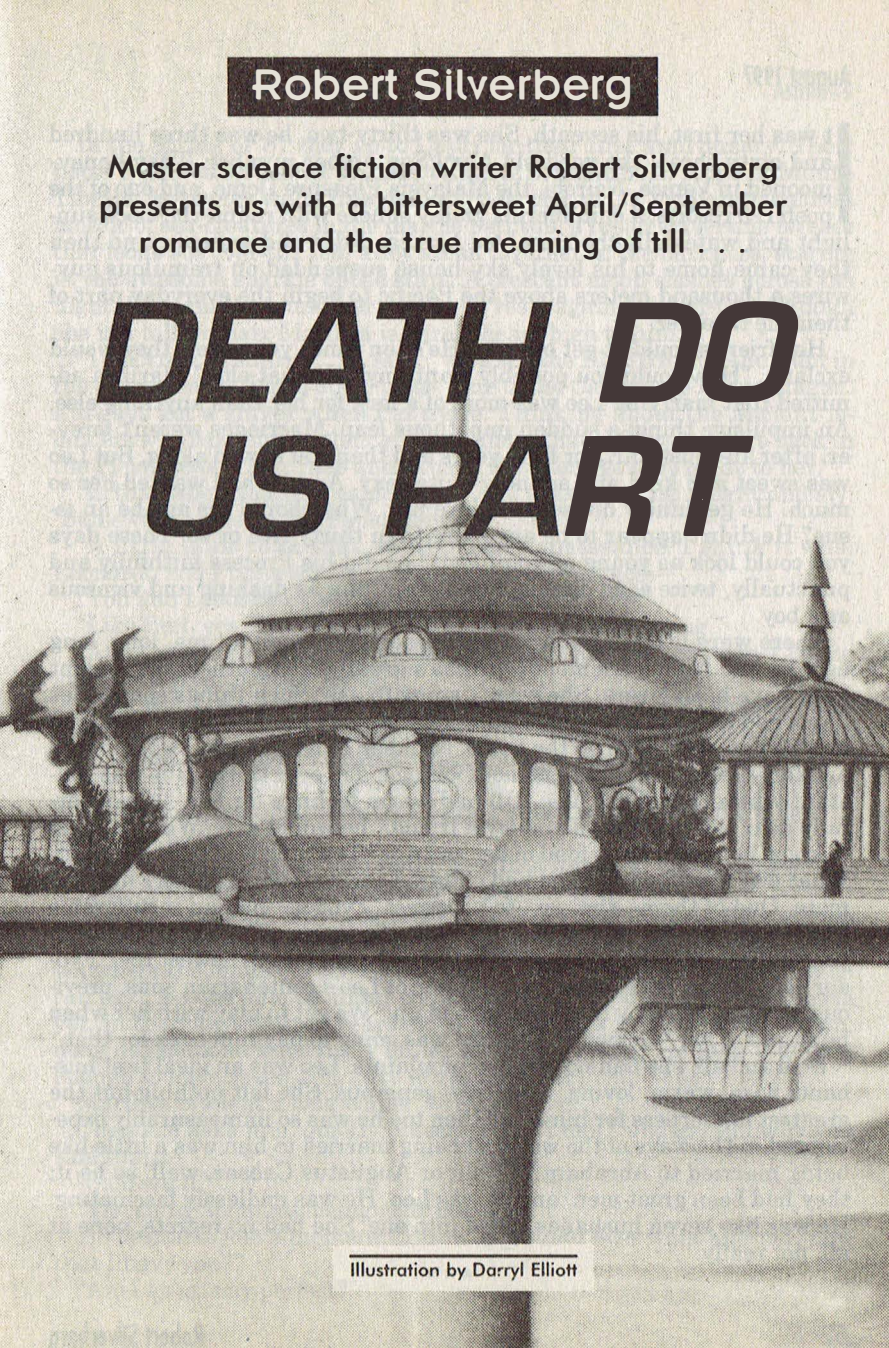


Illustration by Darryl Elliott

It was her first, his seventh. She was thirty-two, he was three hundred and sixty-three: the good old April/September number. They honeymooned in Venice, Nairobi, the Malaysia Pleasure Dome, and one of the posh L-5 resorts, a shimmering glassy sphere with round-the-clock sunlight and waterfalls that tumbled like cascades of diamonds, and then they came home to his lovely sky-house suspended on tremulous guy-wires a thousand meters above the Pacific to begin the everyday part of their life together.

Her friends couldn't get over it. "He's ten times your age!" they would exclaim. "How could you possibly want anybody that old?" Marilisa admitted that marrying Leo was more of a lark for her than anything else. An impulsive thing; a sudden impetuous leap. Marriages weren't forever, after all—just thirty or forty years and then you moved along. But Leo was sweet and kind and actually quite sexy. And he had wanted her so much. He genuinely did seem to love her. Why should his age be an issue? He didn't appear to be any older than thirty-five or so. These days you could look as young as you liked. Leo did his Process faithfully and punctually, twice each decade, and it kept him as dashing and vigorous as a boy.

There were little drawbacks, of course. Once upon a time, long, long ago, he had been a friend of Marilisa's great-grandmother: they might even have been lovers. She wasn't going to ask. Such things sometimes happened and you simply had to work your way around them. And then also he had an ex-wife on the scene, Number Three, Katrin, two hundred and forty-seven years old and not looking a day over thirty. She was constantly hovering about. Leo still had warm feelings for her. "A wonderfully dear woman, a good and loyal friend," he would say. "When you get to know her you'll be as fond of her as I am." That one was hard, all right. What was almost as bad, he had children three times Marilisa's age and more. One of them—the next-to-youngest, Fyodor—had an insufferable and presumptuous way of winking and sniggering at her, that hundred-year-old son of a bitch. "I want you to meet our father's newest toy," Fyodor said of her, once, when yet another of Leo's centenarian sons, previously unsuspected by Marilisa, turned up. "We get to play with her when he's tired of her." Someday Marilisa was going to pay him back for that.

Still and all, she had no serious complaints. Leo was an ideal first husband: wise, warm, loving, attentive, generous. She felt nothing but the greatest tenderness for him. And then too he was so immeasurably experienced in the ways of the world. If being married to him was a little like being married to Abraham Lincoln or Augustus Caesar, well, so be it: they had been great men, and so was Leo. He was endlessly fascinating. He was like seven husbands rolled into one. She had no regrets, none at all, not really.

* * *

In the spring of '87 they go to Capri for their first anniversary. Their hotel is a reconstructed Roman villa on the southern slope of Monte Tiberio: alabaster walls frescoed in black and red, a brilliantly colored mosaic of sea-creatures in the marble bathtub, a broad travertine terrace that looks out over the sea. They stand together in the darkness, staring at the awesome sparkle of the stars. A crescent moon slashes across the night. His arm is around her; her head rests against his breast. Though she is a tall woman, Marilisa is barely heart-high to him.

"Tomorrow at sunrise," he says, "we'll see the Blue Grotto. And then in the afternoon we'll hike down below here to the Cave of the Mater Magna. I always get a shiver when I'm there. Thinking about the ancient islanders who worshipped their goddess under that cliff, somewhere back in the Pleistocene. Their rites and rituals, the offerings they made to her."

"Is that when you first came here?" she asks, keeping it light and sly. "Somewhere back in the Pleistocene?"

"A little later than that, really. The Renaissance, I think it was. Leonardo and I traveled down together from Florence—"

"You and Leonardo, you were just like that."

"Like that, yes. But not like *that,* if you take my meaning."

"And Cosimo de' Medici. Another one from the good old days. Cosimo gave such great parties, right?"

"That was Lorenzo," he says. "Lorenzo the Magnificent, Cosimo's grandson. Much more fun than the old man. You would have adored him."

"I almost think you're serious when you talk like that."

"I'm always serious. Even when I'm not." His arm tightens around her. He leans forward and down, and buries a kiss in her thick dark hair. "I love you," he whispers.

"I love you," she says. "You're the best first husband a girl could want."

"You're the finest last wife a man could ever desire."

The words skewer her. Last wife? Is he expecting to die in the next ten or twenty or thirty years? He is old—ancient—but nobody has any idea yet where the limits of Process lie. Five hundred years? A thousand? Who can say? No one able to afford the treatments has died a natural death yet, in the four hundred years since Process was invented. Why, then, does he speak so knowingly of her as his last wife? He may live long enough to have seven, ten, fifty wives after her.

Marilisa is silent a long while.

Then she asks him, quietly, uncertainly, "I don't understand why you said that."

"Said what?"

"The thing about my being your last wife."

He hesitates just a moment. "But why would I ever want another, now that I have you?"

"Am I so utterly perfect?"

"I love you."

"You loved Tedesca and Thane and Iąvilda too," she says. "And Miaule and Katrin." She is counting on her fingers in the darkness. One wife missing from the list. "And—Syantha. See, I know all their names. You must have loved them but the marriages ended anyway. They have to end. No matter how much you love a person, you can't keep a marriage going forever."

"How do you know that?"

"I just do. Everybody knows it."

"I would like this marriage never to end," he tells her. "I'd like it to go on and on and on. To continue to the end of time. Is that all right? Is such a sentiment permissible, do you think?"

"What a romantic you are, Leo!"

"What else can I be but romantic, tonight? This place; the spring night; the moon, the stars, the sea; the fragrance of the flowers in the air. Our anniversary. I love you. Nothing will ever end for us. Nothing."

"Can that really be so?" she asks.

"Of course. Forever and ever, as it is this moment."

She thinks from time to time of the men she will marry after she and Leo have gone their separate ways. For she knows that she will. Perhaps she'll stay with Leo for ten years, perhaps for fifty; but ultimately, despite all his assurances to the contrary, one or the other of them will want to move on. No one stays married forever. Fifteen, twenty years, that's the usual. Sixty or seventy, tops.

She'll marry a great athlete next, she decides. And then a philosopher; and then a political leader; and then stay single for a few decades, just to clear her palate, so to speak, an intermezzo in her life, and when she wearies of that she'll find someone entirely different, a simple rugged man who likes to hunt, to work in the fields with his hands, and then a yachtsman with whom she'll sail the world, and then maybe when she's about three hundred she'll marry a boy, an innocent of eighteen or nineteen who hasn't even had his first Prep yet, and then—then—

A childish game. It always brings her to tears, eventually. The unknown husbands that wait for her in the misty future are vague, chilly phantoms, fantasies, frightening, inimical. They are like swords that will inevitably fall between her and Leo, and she hates them for that.

The thought of having the same husband for all the vast expanse of time that is the rest of her life, is a little disturbing—it gives her a sense of walls closing in, and closing and closing and closing—but the thought of leaving Leo is even worse. Or of his leaving her. Maybe she isn't truly in love with him, at any rate not as she imagines love at its deepest to be, but she is happy with him. She wants to stay with him. She can't really envision parting from him and moving on to someone else.

But of course she knows that she will. Everybody does, in the fullness of time.

Everybody.

Leo is a sand-painter. Sand-painting is his fifteenth or twentieth career. He has been an architect, an archaeologist, a space-habitats developer, a professional gambler, an astronomer, and a number of other disparate and dazzling things. He reinvents himself every decade or two. That's as necessary to him as Process itself. Making money is never an issue, since he lives on the compounding interest of investments set aside centuries ago. But the fresh challenge—ah, yes, always the fresh challenge—!

Marilisa hasn't entered on any career path yet. It's much too soon. She is, after all, still in her first life, too young for Process, merely in the Prep stage yet. Just a child, really. She has dabbled in ceramics, written some poetry, composed a little music. Lately she has begun to think about studying economics or perhaps Spanish literature. No doubt her actual choice of a path to follow will be very far from any of these. But there's time to decide. Oh, is there ever time!

Just after the turn of the year she and Leo go to Antibes to attend the unveiling of Leo's newest work, commissioned by Lucien Nicolas, a French industrialist. Leo and Lucien Nicolas were schoolmates, eons ago. At the airport they embrace warmly, almost endlessly, like brothers long separated. They even look a little alike, two full-faced square-jawed dark-haired men with wide-flanged noses and strong, prominent lips.

"My wife Marilisa," Leo says finally.

"How marvelous," says Lucien Nicolas. "How superb." He kisses the tips of his fingers to her.

Nicolas lives in a lofty villa overlooking the Mediterranean, surrounded by a lush garden in which the red spikes of aloes and the yellow blooms of acacias stand out dazzlingly against a palisade of towering palms. The weather, this January day, is mild and pleasant, with a light drizzle falling. The industrialist has invited a splendid international roster of guests to attend the unveiling of the painting; diplomats and jurists, poets and playwrights, dancers and opera singers, physicists and astronauts and mentalists and sculptors and seers. Leo introduces Marilisa to them all. In the antechamber to the agate dining hall she listens, bemused, to the swirl of conversations in half a dozen languages. The talk ranges across continents, decades, generations. It seems to her that she hears from a distance the names of several of Leo's former wives invoked—Syantha, Tedesca, Katrin?—but possibly she is mistaken.

Dinner is an overindulgent feast of delicacies. Squat animated servitors bring the food on glistening covered trays of some exotic metal that shimmers diffractively. After every third course a cool ray of blue light

descends from a ceiling aperture and a secondary red radiance rises from the floor: they meet in the vicinity of the great slab of black diamond that is the table, and a faint whiff of burning carbon trickles into the air, and then the diners are hungry all over again, ready for the next delight.

The meal is a symphony of flavors and textures. The balance is perfect between sweet and tart, warm and cool, spicy and bland. A pink meat is followed by a white one, and then by fruit, then cheese, and meat again, a different kind, and finer cheeses. A dozen wines or more are served. An occasional course is still alive, moving slowly about its plate; Marilisa takes her cue from Leo, conquers any squeamishness, traps and consumes her little wriggling victims with pleasure. Now and then the underlying dish is meant to be eaten along with its contents, as she discovers by lagging just a moment behind the other guests and imitating their behavior.

After dinner comes the unveiling of the painting, in the atrium below the dining-hall. The guests gather along the balcony of the dining-hall and the atrium roof is retracted.

Leo's paintings are huge rectangular constructions made of fine sparkling sand of many colors, laid out within a high border of molten copper. The surfaces of each work are two-dimensional, but the cloudy hint of a third dimension is always visible, and even that is only the tip of an underlying multidimensional manifold that vanishes at mysterious angles into the fabric of the piece. Down in those churning sandy depths lie wells of color with their roots embedded in the hidden mechanisms that control the piece. These wells constantly contribute streams of minute glittering particles to the patterns at the surface, in accordance with the changing signals from below. There is unending alteration; none of Leo's pieces is ever the same two hours running.

A ripple of astonishment breaks forth as the painting is revealed, and then a rising burst of applause. The pattern is one of interlaced spirals in gentle pastels, curvilinear traceries in pink and blue and pale green, with thin black circles surrounding them and frail white lines radiating outward in groups of three to the vivid turquoise borders of the sand. Leo's friends swarm around him to congratulate him. They even congratulate Marilisa. "He is a master—an absolute master!" She basks in his triumph.

Later in the evening she returns to the balcony to see if she can detect the first changes in the pattern. The changes, usually, are minute and subtle ones, requiring a discriminating eye, but even in her short while with Leo she has learned to discern the tiniest of alterations.

This time, though, no expertise is required. In little more than an hour the lovely surface has been significantly transformed. A thick, jagged black line has abruptly sprung into being, descending like a dark scar from upper right to lower left. Marilisa has never seen such a thing hap-

pen before. It is like a wound in the painting: a mutilation. It draws a little involuntary cry of shock from her.

Others gather. "What does it mean?" they ask. "What is he saying?"

From someone in African tribal dress, someone who nevertheless is plainly not African, comes an interpretation: "We see the foretelling of schism, the evocation of a transformation of the era. The dark line moves in brutal strokes through the center of our stability-point. There, do you see, the pink lines and the blue? And then it drops down into the unknown dominion beyond the painting's eastern border, the realm of the mythic, the grand apocalyptic."

Leo is summoned. He is calm. But Leo is always calm. He shrugs away the urgent questions: the painting, he says, is its own meaning, not subject to literal analysis. It is what it is, nothing more. A stochastic formula governs the changes in his works. All is random. The jagged black line is simply a jagged black line.

Music comes from another room. New servitors appear, creatures with three metal legs and one telescoping arm, offering brandies and liqueurs. The guests murmur and laugh. "A master," they tell Marilisa once again. "An absolute master!"

She likes to ask him about the far-away past—the quaint and remote twenty-third century, the brusque and dynamic twenty-fourth. He is like some great heroic statue rising up out of the mists of time, embodying in himself first-hand knowledge of eras that are mere legends to her.

"Tell me how people dressed, back then," she begs him. "What sorts of things they said, the games they played, where they liked to go on their holidays. And the buildings, the architecture: how did things look? Make me feel what it was like: the sounds, the smells, the whole flavor of the long-ago times."

He laughs. "It gets pretty jumbled, you know. The longer you live, the more muddled-up your mind becomes."

"Oh, I don't believe that at all! I think you remember every bit of it. Tell me about your father and mother."

"My father and my mother—" He pronounces the words musingly, as though they are newly minted concepts for him. "My father—he was tall, even taller than I am—a mathematician, he was, or maybe a composer, something abstruse like that—"

"And his eyes? What kind of eyes did he have?"

"His eyes—I don't know, his eyes were unusual, but I can't tell you how—an odd color, or very penetrating, maybe—there was something about his eyes—" His voice trails off.

"And your mother?"

"My mother. Yes." He is staring into the past and it seems as if he sees nothing but haze and smoke there. "My mother. I just don't know what

to tell you. She's dead, you realize. A long time, now. Hundreds of years. They both died before Process. It was all such a long time ago, Marilisa."

His discomfort is only too apparent.

"All right," she says. "We don't have to talk about them. But tell me about the clothing, at least. What you wore when you were a young man. Whether people liked darker colors then. Or the food, the favorite dishes. Anything. The shape of ordinary things. How they were different."

Obligingly he tries to bring the distant past to life for her. Images come through, though, however blurry, however indistinct. The strangeness, the alien textures of the long ago. Whoever said the past is another country was right; and Leo is a native of that country. He speaks of obsolete vehicles, styles, ideas, flavors. She works hard at comprehending his words, she eagerly snatches concrete meanings from his clusters of hazy impressions. Somehow the past seems as important to her as the future, or even more so. The past is where Leo has lived so very much of his life. His gigantic past stretches before her like an endless pathless plain. She needs to learn her way across it; she needs to find her bearings, the points of her compass, or she will be lost.

It is time for Leo to undergo Process once more. He goes every five years and remains at the clinic for eleven days. She would like to accompany him, but guests are not allowed, not even spouses. The procedures are difficult and delicate. The patients are in a vulnerable state while undergoing treatment.

So off he goes without her to be made young again. Elegant homeostatic techniques of automatic bioenergetic correction will extend his exemption from sagging flesh and spreading waistline and blurry eyesight and graying hair and hardening arteries for another term.

Marilisa has no idea what Process is actually like. She imagines him sitting patiently upright day after day in some bizarre womb-like tank, his body entirely covered in a thick mass of some sort of warm, quivering purplish gel, only his head protruding, while the age-poisons are extracted from him by an elaborate array of intricate pipettes and tubes, and the glorious fluids of new youthfulness are pumped into him. But of course she is only imagining. For all she knows, the whole thing is done with a single injection, like the Prep that she undergoes every couple of years to keep her in good trim until she is old enough for Process.

While Leo is away, his son Fyodor pays her an uninvited visit. Fyodor is the child of Miaule, the fifth wife. The marriage to Miaule was Leo's briefest one, only eight years. Marilisa has never asked why. She knows nothing substantial about Leo's previous marriages and prefers to keep it that way.

"Your father's not here," she says immediately, when she finds Fyodor's flitter docked to the harbor of their sky-house.

"I'm not here to visit him. I'm here to see you." He is a compact, blockily built man with a low center of gravity, nothing at all in appearance like his rangy father. His sly sidewise smile is insinuating, possessive, maddening. "We don't know each other as well as we should, Marilisa. You're my stepmother, after all."

"What does that have to do with anything? You have half a dozen stepmothers." Was that true? Could the wives before Miaule be regarded as his stepmothers, strictly speaking?

"You're the newest one. The most mysterious one."

"There's nothing mysterious about me at all. I'm terribly uninteresting."

"Not to my father, apparently." A vicious sparkle enters Fyodor's eyes. "Are you and he going to have children?"

The suggestion startles her. She and Leo have never talked about that; she has never so much as given it a thought.

Angrily she says, "I don't think that that's any of your—"

"He'll want to. He always does."

"Then we will. Twenty years from now, maybe. Or fifty. Whenever it seems appropriate. Right now we're quite content just with each other." He has found an entirely new level on which to unsettle her, and Marilisa is infuriated even more with him for that. She turns away from him. "If you'll excuse me, Fyodor, I have things to—"

"Wait." His hand darts out, encircles her wrist, seizes it a little too tightly, then relaxes to a gentler, almost affectionate grip. "You shouldn't be alone at a time like this. Come stay with me for a few days while he's at the clinic."

She glowers at him. "Don't be absurd."

"I'm simply being hospitable, mother."

"I'm sure he'd be very amused to hear that."

"He's always found what I do highly amusing. Come. Pack your things and let's go. Don't you think you owe yourself a little amusement too?"

Not bothering to conceal her anger and loathing, Marilisa says, "What exactly are you up to, Fyodor? Are you looking for vengeance? Trying to get even with him for something?"

"Vengeance? Vengeance?" Fyodor seems genuinely puzzled. "Why would I want that? I mean, after all, what is he to me?"

"Your father, for one thing."

"Well, yes. I'll grant you that much. But what of it? All of that happened such a long time ago." He laughs. He sounds almost jolly. "You're such an old-fashioned kind of girl, Marilisa!"

A couple of hours after she succeeds in getting rid of Fyodor, she has another unexpected and unwanted visitor: Katrin. At least Katrin has the grace to call while she is still over Nevada to say that she would like

to drop in. Marilisa is afraid to refuse. She knows that Leo wants some sort of relationship to develop between them. Quite likely he has instigated this very visit. If she turns Katrin away, Leo will find out, and he will be hurt. The last thing Marilisa would want to do is to hurt Leo.

It is impossible for her to get used to Katrin's beauty: that sublime agelessness, which looks so unreal precisely because it is real. She genuinely seems to be only thirty, golden-haired and shining in the first dewy bloom of youth. Katrin was Leo's wife for forty years. Estil and Liss, the two children they had together, are almost two hundred years old. The immensity of Katrin's history with Leo looms over her like some great monolithic slab.

"I talked to Leo this morning at the clinic," Katrin announces. "He's doing very well."

"You talked to him? But I thought that nobody was allowed—"

"Oh, my dear, I've taken forty turns through that place! I know everybody there only too well. When I call, they put me right through. Leo sends his warmest love."

"Thank you."

"He loves you terribly, you know. Perhaps more than is really good for him. You're the great love of his life, Marilisa."

Marilisa feels a surge of irritation, and allows it to reach the surface. "Oh, Katrin, be serious with me! How could I ever believe something like that?" And what does she mean, Perhaps more than is really good for him?

"You should believe it. You must, in fact. I've had many long talks with him about you. He adores you. He'd do anything for you. It's never been like this for him before. I have absolute proof of that. Not with me, not with Tedesca, not with Thane, not with—"

She recites the whole rest of the list. Syantha, Miaule, Iavilda, while Marilisa ticks each one off in her mind. They could do it together in a kind of choral speaking, the litany of wives' names, but Marilisa remains grimly silent. She is weary of that list of names. She hates the idea that Katrin talks with Leo about her; she hates the idea that Katrin still talks with Leo at all. But she must accept it, apparently. Katrin bustles about the house, admiring this, exclaiming rapturously over that. To celebrate Leo's imminent return she has brought a gift, a tiny artifact, a greenish little bronze sculpture recovered from the sea off Greece, so encrusted by marine growths that it is hard to make out what it represents. A figurine of some sort, an archer, perhaps, holding a bow that has lost its string. Leo is a collector of small antiquities. Tiny fragments of the past are arrayed in elegant cases in every room of their house. Marilisa offers proper appreciation. "Leo will love it," she tells Katrin. "It's perfect for him."

"Yes. I know."

Yes. You do.

Marilisa offers drinks. They nibble at sweet dainty cakes and chat. Two pretty, young, well-to-do women idling away a pleasant afternoon, but one is two hundred years older than the other. For Marilisa it is like playing hostess to Cleopatra, or Helen of Troy.

Inevitably the conversation keeps circling back to Leo.

"The kindest man I've ever known," says Katrin. "If he has a fault, I think, it's that he's too kind. Time and again, he's let himself endure great pain for the sake of avoiding being unkind to some other person. He's utterly incapable of disappointing other people, of letting anyone down in any way, of hurting anyone, regardless of the distress to himself, the damage, the pain. I'm speaking of emotional pain, of course."

Marilisa doesn't want to hear Katrin talk about Leo's faults, or his virtues, or anything else. But she is a dutiful wife; she sees the visit through to its end, and embraces Katrin with something indistinguishable from warmth, and stands by the port watching Katrin's flitter undock and go zipping off into the northern sky. Then, only then, she permits herself to cry. The conversation, following so soon upon Fyodor's visit, has unnerved her. She sifts through it, seeking clues to the hidden truths that everyone but she seems to know. Leo's alleged vast love for her. Leo's unwillingness to injure others, heedless of the costs to himself. He loves you terribly, you know. Perhaps more than is really good for him. And suddenly she has the answer. Leo does love her, yes. Leo always loves his wives. But the marriage was fundamentally a mistake; she is much too young for him, callow, unformed; what he really needs is a woman like Katrin, ancient behind her beauty and infinitely, diabolically wise. The reality, she sees, is that he has grown bored already with his new young wife, he is in fact unhappy in the marriage, but he is far too kindhearted to break the truth to her, and so he inverts it, he talks of a marriage that will endure forever and ever. And confides in Katrin, unburdening himself of his misery to her.

If any of this is true, Marilisa thinks, then I should leave him. I can't ask him to suffer on and on indefinitely with a wife who can't give him what he needs.

She wonders what effect all this crying has had on her face, and activates a mirror in front of her. Her eyes are red and puffy, yes. But what's this? A line, in the corner of her eye? The beginning of age-wrinkles? These doubts and conflicts are suddenly aging her: can it be? And this? A gray hair? She tugs it out and stares at it; but as she holds it at one angle or another it seems just as dark as all the rest. Illusions. An overactive imagination, nothing more. Damn Katrin! Damn her!

Even so, she goes for a quick gerontological exam two days before Leo is due to come home from the clinic. It is still six months until the scheduled date of her next Prep injection, but perhaps a few signs of age are

beginning to crop up prematurely. Prep will arrest the onset of aging but it won't halt it altogether, the way Process will do; and it is occasionally the case, so she has heard, for people in the immediate pre-Process age group to sprout a few lines on their faces, a few gray hairs, while they are waiting to receive the full treatment that will render them ageless forever.

The doctor is unwilling to accelerate her Prep schedule, but he does confirm that a few little changes are cropping up, and sends her downstairs for some fast cosmetic repairs. "It won't get any worse, will it?" she asks him, and he laughs and assures her that everything can be fixed, everything, all evidence that she is in fact closer now to her fortieth birthday than she is to her thirtieth swiftly and painlessly and confidentially eradicated. But she hates the idea that she is actually aging, ever so slightly, while all about her are people much older than she—her husband, his many former wives, his swarm of children—whose appearance is frozen forever in perfect unassailable youthfulness. If only she could start Process now and be done with it! But she is still too young. Her somatotype report is unanswerable; the treatment will not only be ineffective at this stage in her cellular development, it might actually be injurious. She will have to wait. And wait and wait and wait.

Then Leo comes back, refreshed, invigorated, revitalized. Marilisa's been around people fresh from Process many times before—her parents, her grandparents, her great-grandparents—and knows what to expect; but even so she finds it hard to keep up with him. He's exhaustingly cheerful, almost frighteningly ardent, full of high talk and ambitious plans. He shows her the schematics for six new paintings, a decade's worth of work conceived all at once. He proposes that they give a party for three hundred people. He suggests that they take a grand tour for their next anniversary—it will be their fifth—to see the wonders of the world, the Pyramids, the Taj Mahal, the floor of the Mindanao Trench. Or a tour of the moon—the asteroid belt—

"Stop!" she cries, feeling breathless. "You're going too fast!"

"A weekend in Paris, at least," he says.

"Paris. All right. Paris."

They will leave next week. Just before they go, she has lunch with a friend from her single days, Loisa, a pre-Process woman like herself who is married to Ted, who is also pre-Process by just a few years. Loisa has had affairs with a couple of older men, men in their nineties and early hundreds, so perhaps she understands the other side of things as well.

"I don't understand why he married me," Marilisa says. "I must seem like a child to him. He's forgotten more things than I've ever known, and he still knows plenty. What can he possibly see in me?"

"You give him back his youth," Loisa says. "That's what all of them want. They're like vampires, sucking the vitality out of the young."

"That's nonsense and you know it. Process gives him back his youth. He doesn't need a young wife to do that for him. I can provide him with the illusion of being young, maybe, but Process gives him the real thing."

"Process jazzes them up, and then they need confirmation that it's genuine. Which only someone like you can give. They don't want to go to bed with some old hag a thousand years old. She may look gorgeous on the outside but she's corroded within, full of a million memories, loaded with all the hate and poison and vindictiveness that you store up over a life that long, and he can feel it all ticking away inside her and he doesn't want it. Whereas you—all fresh and new—"

"No. No. It isn't like that at all. The older women are the interesting ones. We just seem empty."

"All right. If that's what you want to believe."

"And yet he wants me. He tells me he loves me. He tells one of his old ex-wives that I'm the great love of his life. I don't understand it."

"Well, neither do I," says Loisa, and they leave it at that.

In the bathroom mirror, after lunch, Marilisa finds new lines in her forehead, new wisps of gray at her temples. She has them taken care of before Paris. Paris is no city to look old in.

In Paris they visit the Louvre and take the boat ride along the Seine and eat at little Latin Quarter bistros and buy ancient objets d'art in the galleries of St.-Germain-des-Pres. She has never been to Paris before, though of course he has, so often that he has lost count. It is very beautiful but strikes her as somehow fossilized, a museum exhibit rather than a living city, despite all the life she sees going on around her, the animated discussions in the cafés, the bustling restaurants, the crowds in the Metro. Nothing must have changed here in five hundred years. It is all static—frozen—lifeless. As though the entire place has been through Process.

Leo seems to sense her gathering restlessness, and she sees a darkening in his own mood in response. On the third day, in front of one of the rows of ancient bookstalls along the river, he says, "It's me, isn't it?"

"What is?"

"The reason why you're so glum. It can't be the city, so it has to be me. Us. Do you want to leave, Marilisa?"

"Leave Paris? So soon?"

"Leave me, I mean. Perhaps the whole thing has been just a big mistake. I don't want to hold you against your will. If you've started to feel that I'm too old for you, that what you really need is a much younger man, I wouldn't for a moment stand in your way."

Is this how it happens? Is this how his marriages end, with him sadly, lovingly, putting words in your mouth?

"No," she says. "I love you, Leo. Younger men don't interest me. The thought of leaving you has never crossed my mind."

"I'll survive, you know, if you tell me that you want out."

"I don't want out."

"I wish I felt completely sure of that."

She is getting annoyed with him, now. "I wish you did too. You're being silly, Leo. Leaving you is the last thing in the world I want to do. And Paris is the last place in the world where I would want my marriage to break up. I love you. I want to be your wife forever and ever."

"Well, then." He smiles and draws her to him; they embrace; they kiss. She hears a patter of light applause. People are watching them. People have been listening to them and are pleased at the outcome of their negotiations. Paris! Ah, Paris!

When they return home, though, he is called away almost immediately to Barcelona to repair one of his paintings, which has developed some technical problem and is undergoing rapid disagreeable metamorphosis. The work will take three or four days; and Marilisa, unwilling to put herself through the fatigue of a second European trip so soon, tells him to go without her. That seems to be some sort of cue for Fyodor to show up, scarcely hours after Leo's departure. How does he know so unerringly when to find her alone?

His pretense is that he has brought an artifact for Leo's collection, an ugly little idol, squat and frog-faced, covered with lumps of brown oxidation. She takes it from him brusquely and sets it on a randomly chosen shelf, and says, mechanically, "Thank you very much. Leo will be pleased. I'll tell him you were here."

"Such charm. Such hospitality."

"I'm being as polite as I can. I didn't invite you."

"Come on, Marilisa. Let's get going."

"Going? Where? What for?"

"We can have plenty of fun together and you damned well know it. Aren't you tired of being such a loyal little wife? Politely sliding through the motions of your preposterous little marriage with your incredibly ancient husband?"

His eyes are shining strangely. His face is flushed.

She says softly, "You're crazy, aren't you?"

"Oh, no, not crazy at all. Not as nice as my father, maybe, but perfectly sane. I see you rusting away here like one of the artifacts in his collection and I want to give you a little excitement in your life before it's too late. A touch of the wild side, do you know what I mean, Marilisa? Places and things he can't show you, that he can't even imagine. He's old. He doesn't know anything about the world we live in today. Jesus, why do I have to spell it out for you? Just drop everything and come away with me. You

won't regret it." He leans forward, smiling into her face, utterly sure of himself, plainly confident now that his blunt unceasing campaign of bald invitation will at last be crowned with success.

His audacity astounds her. But she is mystified, too.

"Before it's too late, you said. Too late for what?"

"You know."

"Do I?"

Fyodor seems exasperated by what he takes to be her wilful obtuseness. His mouth opens and closes like a shutting trap; a muscle quivers in his cheek; something seems to be cracking within him, some carefully guarded bastion of self-control. He stares at her in a new way—angrily? Contemptuously?—and says, "Before it's too late for anybody to want you. Before you get old and saggy and shriveled. Before you get so withered and ancient-looking that nobody would touch you."

Surely he is out of his mind. Surely. "Nobody has to get that way any more, Fyodor."

"Not if they undergo Process, no. But you—you, Marilisa—" He smiles sadly, shakes his head, turns his hands palms upward in a gesture of hopeless regret.

She peers at him, bewildered. "What can you possibly be talking about?"

For the first time in her memory Fyodor's cool cocky aplomb vanishes. He blinks and gapes. "So you still haven't found out. He actually did keep you in the dark all this time. You're a null, Marilisa! A short-timer! Process won't work for you! The one-in-ten-thousand shot, that's you, the inherent somatic unreceptivity. Christ, what a bastard he is, to hide it from you like this! You've got eighty, maybe ninety years and that's it. Getting older and older, wrinkled and bent and ugly, and then you'll die, the way everybody in the world used to. So you don't have forever and a day to get your fun, like the rest of us. You have to grab it right now, fast, while you're still young. He made us all swear never to say a word to you, that he was going to be the one to tell you the truth in his own good time, but why should I give a damn about that? We aren't children. You have a right to know what you really are. Fuck him, is what I say. Fuck him!" Fyodor's face is crimson now. His eyes are rigid and eerily bright with a weird fervor. "You think I'm making this up? Why would I make up something like this?"

It is like being in an earthquake. The floor seems to heave. She has never been so close to the presence of pure evil before. With the tightest control she can manage she says, "You'd make it up because you're a lying miserable bastard, Fyodor, full of hatred and anger and pus. And if you think— But I don't need to listen to you any more. Just get out of here!"

"It's true. Everybody knows it, the whole family! Ask Katrin! She's the one I heard it from first. Christ, ask Leo! Ask Leo!"

"Out," she says, flicking her hand at him as though he is vermin. "Now. Get the hell out. Out."

She promises herself that she will say nothing to Leo about the monstrous fantastic tale that has come pouring out of his horrid son, or even about his clumsy, idiotic attempt at seduction—it's all too shameful, too disgusting, too repulsive, and she wants to spare him the knowledge of Fyodor's various perfidies—but of course it all comes blurting from her within an hour after Leo is back from Barcelona. Fyodor is intolerable, she says. Fyodor's behavior has been too bizarre and outrageous to conceal. Fyodor has come here unasked and spewed a torrent of cruel fantastic nonsense in a grotesque attempt at bludgeoning her into bed.

Leo says gravely, "What kind of nonsense?" and she tells him in a quick unpunctuated burst and watches his smooth taut face collapse into weary jowls, watches him seem to age a thousand years in the course of half a minute. He stands there looking at her, aghast; and then she understands that it has to be true, every terrible word of what Fyodor has said. She is one of those, the miserable statistical few of whom everybody has heard, but only at second or third hand. The treatments will not work on her. She will grow old and then she will die. They have tested her and they know the truth, but the whole bunch of them have conspired to keep it from her: the doctors at the clinic, Leo's sons and daughters and wives, her own family, everyone. All of it Leo's doing. Using his influence all over the place, his enormous accrued power, to shelter her in her ignorance.

"You knew from the start?" she asks, finally. "All along?"

"Almost. I knew very early. The clinic called me and told me, not long after we got engaged."

"My God. Why did you marry me, then?"

"Because I loved you."

"Because you loved me."

"Yes. Yes. Yes. Yes."

"I wish I knew what that meant," she says. "If you loved me, how could you hide a thing like this from me? How could you let me build my life around a lie?"

Leo says, after a moment, "I wanted you to have the good years, untainted by what would come later. There was time for you to discover the truth later. But for now—while you were still young the clothes, the jewelry, the traveling, all the joy of being beautiful and young—why ruin it for you? Why darken it with the knowledge of what would be coming?"

"So you made everybody go along with the lie? The people at the clinic. Even my own family, for God's sake!"

"Yes."

"And all the Prep treatments I've been taking—just a stupid, pointless charade, right? Accomplishing nothing. Leading nowhere."

"Yes. Yes."

She begins to tremble. She understands the true depths of his compassion now, and she is appalled. He has married her out of charity. No man her own age would have wanted her, because the developing signs of bodily deterioration in the years just ahead would surely horrify him; but Leo is beyond all that, he is willing to overlook her unfortunate little somatic defect and give her a few decades of happiness before she has to die. And then he will proceed with the rest of his life, the hundreds or thousands of years yet to come, serene in the knowledge of having allowed the tragically doomed Marilisa the happy illusion of having been a member of the ageless elite for a little while. It is stunning. It is horrifying. There is no way that she can bear it.

"Marilisa—"

He reaches for her, but she turns away. Runs. Flees.

It was three years before he found her. She was living in London, then, a little flat in the Bayswater Road, and in just those three years her face had changed so much, the little erosions of the transition between youth and middle age, that it was impossible for him entirely to conceal his instant reaction. He, of course, had not changed in the slightest way. He stood in the doorway, practically filling it, trying to plaster some sort of façade over his all-too-visible dismay, trying to show her the familiar Leo smile, trying to make the old Leo-like warmth glow in his eyes. Then after a moment he extended his arms toward her. She stayed where she was.

"You shouldn't have tracked me down," she says.

"I love you," he tells her. "Come home with me."

"It wouldn't be right. It wouldn't be fair to you. My getting old, and you always so young."

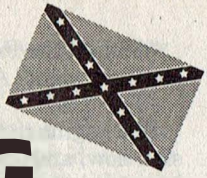
"To hell with that. I want you back, Marilisa. I love you and I always will."

"You love me?" she says. "Even though—?"

"Even though. For better, for worse."

She knows the rest of the passage—for richer for poorer, in sickness and in health—and where it goes from there. But there is nothing more she can say. She wants to smile gently and thank him for all his kindness and close the door, but instead she stands there and stands there and stands there, neither inviting him in nor shutting him out, with a roaring sound in her ears as all the million years of mortal history rise up around her like mountains. ●

Karen Joy Fowler



# STANDING ROOM ONLY

**It's been seven years since we last published a story by the brilliant author Karen Joy Fowler ("Liserl," July 1990), and we are delighted to welcome her back to our pages. Ms. Fowler has written a highly regarded short story collection, *Artificial Things* (Bantam 1986), and two novels (which were put out by Holt)—*Sarah Canary*, a New York *Times* 1991 notable book, and *The Sweetheart Season*. The latter novel is a story "packed with history, baseball, and useful housekeeping tips." Published last fall, it was also listed as a 1996 New York *Times* notable book. The author is at work on a new novel, but we hope she will continue to find time for her remarkable short fiction as well.**

On Good Friday 1865, Washington, DC, was crowded with tourists and revelers. Even Willard's, which claimed to be the largest hotel in the country, with room for 1200 guests, had been booked to capacity. Its lobbies and sitting rooms were hot with bodies. Gaslight hissed from golden chandeliers, spilled over the doormen's uniforms of black and maroon. Many ofthe revelers were women. In 1865, women were admired for their stoutness and went anywhere they could fit their hoop skirts. The women at Willard's wore garishly colored dresses with enormous skirts and resembled great inverted tulips. The men were in swallowtail coats.

Outside it was almost spring. The forsythia bloomed, dusting the city with yellow. Weeds leapt up in the public parks; the roads melted to mud. Pigs roamed like dogs about the city, and dead cats by the dozens floated in the sewers and perfumed the rooms of the White House itself.

The Metropolitan Hotel contained an especially rowdy group of celebrants from Baltimore, who passed the night of April 13 toasting everything under the sun. They resurrected on the morning of the 14th, pale and spent, surrounded by broken glass and sporting bruises they couldn't remember getting.

It was the last day of Lent. The war was officially over, except for Joseph Johnston's Confederate army and some action out west. The citizens of Washington, DC, still began each morning reading the daily

death list. If anything, this task had taken on an added urgency. To lose someone you loved now, with the rest of the city madly, if grimly, celebrating, would be unendurable.

The guests in Mary Surratt's boarding house began the day with a breakfast of steak, eggs and ham, oysters, grits and whiskey. Mary's seventeen-year old daughter, Anna, was in love with John Wilkes Booth. She had a picture of him hidden in the sitting room, behind a lithograph entitled "Morning, Noon, and Night." She helped her mother clear the table and she noticed with a sharp and unreasonable disapproval that one of the two new boarders, one of the men who only last night had been given a room, was staring at her mother.

Mary Surratt was neither a pretty women, nor a clever one, nor was she young. Anna was too much of a romantic, too star- and stage-struck, to approve. It was one thing to lie awake at night in her attic bedroom, thinking of JW. It was another to imagine her mother playing any part in such feelings.

Anna's brother John once told her that five years ago a woman named Henrietta Irving had tried to stab Booth with a knife. Failing, she'd thrust the blade into her own chest instead. He seemed to be under the impression that this story would bring Anna to her senses. It had, as anyone could have predicted, the opposite effect. Anna had also heard rumors that Booth kept a woman in a house of prostitution near the White House. And once she had seen a piece of paper on which Booth had been composing a poem. You could make out the final version:

*Now in this hour that we part,*
*I will ask to be forgotten never*
*But, in thy pure and guileless heart,*
*Consider me thy friend dear Eva.*

Anna would sit in the parlor while her mother dozed and pretend she was the first of these women, and if she tired of that, she would sometimes dare to pretend she was the second, but most often she liked to imagine herself the third.

Flirtations were common and serious, and the women in Washington worked hard at them. A war in the distance always provides a rich context of desperation, while at the same time granting women a bit of extra freedom. They might quite enjoy it, if the price they paid were anything but their sons.

The new men had hardly touched their food, cutting away the fatty parts of the meat and leaving them in a glistening greasy wasteful pile. They'd finished the whiskey, but made faces while they drank. Anna had resented the compliment of their eyes and, paradoxically, now resented the insult of their plates. Her mother set a good table.

In fact, Anna did not like them and hoped they would not be staying. She had often seen men outside the Surratt boarding house lately, men who busied themselves in unpersuasive activities when she passed them.

She connected these new men to those, and she was perspicacious enough to blame their boarder Louis Wiechman for the lot of them, without ever knowing the extent to which she was right. She had lived for the past year in a Confederate household in the heart of Washington. Everyone around her had secrets. She had grown quite used to this.

Wiechman was a permanent guest at the Surratt boarding house. He was a fat, friendly man who worked in the office of the Commissary General of Prisons and shared John Surratt's bedroom. Secrets were what Wiechman traded in. He provided John, who was a courier for the Confederacy, with substance for his covert messages south. But then Wiechman had also, on a whim, sometime in March, told the clerks in the office that a Secesh plot was being hatched against the president in the very house where he roomed.

It created more interest than he had anticipated. He was called into the office of Captain McDavitt and interviewed at length. As a result, the Surratt boarding house was under surveillance from March through April, although it is an odd fact that no records of the surveillance or the interview could be found later.

Anna would surely have enjoyed knowing this. She liked attention as much as most young girls. And this was the backdrop of a romance. Instead, all she could see was that something was up and that her pious, simple mother was part of it.

The new guest, the one who talked the most, spoke with a strange lisp and Anna didn't like this either. She stepped smoothly between the men to pick up their plates. She used the excuse of a letter from her brother to go out directly after breakfast. "Mama," she said. "I'll just take John's letter to poor Miss Ward."

Just as her brother enjoyed discouraging her own romantic inclinations, she made it her business to discourage the affections of Miss Ward with regard to him. Calling on Miss Ward with the letter would look like a kindness, but it would make the point that Miss Ward had not gotten a letter herself.

Besides, Booth was in town. If Anna was outside, she might see him again.

The thirteenth had been beautiful, but the weather on the fourteenth was equal parts mud and wind. The wind blew bits of Anna's hair loose and tangled them up with the fringe of her shawl. Around the Treasury Building she stopped to watch a carriage sunk in the mud all the way up to the axle. The horses, a matched pair of blacks, were rescued first. Then planks were laid across the top of the mud for the occupants. They debarked, a man and a woman, the woman unfashionably thin and laughing giddily as with every unsteady step her hoop swung and unbalanced her, first this way and then that. She clutched the man's arm and screamed when a pig burrowed past her, then laughed again at even

higher pitch. The man stumbled into the mire when she grabbed him, and this made her laugh, too. The man's clothing was very fine, although now quite speckled with mud. A crowd gathered to watch the woman—the attention made her helpless with laughter.

The war had ended, Anna thought, and everyone had gone simultaneously mad. She was not the only one to think so. It was the subject of newspaper editorials, of barroom speeches. "The city is disorderly with men who are celebrating too hilariously," the president's day guard, William Crook, had written just yesterday. The sun came out, but only in a perfunctory, pale fashion.

Her visit to Miss Ward was spoiled by the fact that John had sent a letter there as well. Miss Ward obviously enjoyed telling Anna so. She was very near-sighted and she held the letter right up to her eyes to read it. John had recently fled to Canada. With the war over, there was every reason to expect he would come home, even if neither letter said so.

There was more news, and Miss Ward preened while she delivered it. "Bessie Hale is being taken to Spain. Much against her will," Miss Ward said. Bessie was the daughter of ex-senator John P. Hale. Her father hoped that a change of scenery would help pretty Miss Bessie conquer her infatuation for John Wilkes Booth. Miss Ward, whom no one including Anna's brother thought was pretty, was laughing at her. "Mr. Hale does not want an actor in the family," Miss Ward said, and Anna regretted the generous impulse that had sent her all the way across town on such a gloomy day.

"Wilkes Booth is back in Washington," Miss Ward finished, and Anna was at least able to say that she knew this, he had called on them only yesterday. She left the Wards with the barest of good-byes.

Louis Wiechman passed her on the street, stopping for a courteous greeting, although they had just seen each other at breakfast. It was now about ten A.M. Wiechman was on his way to church. Among the many secrets he knew was Anna's. "I saw John Wilkes Booth in the barbershop this morning," he told her. "With a crowd watching his every move."

Anna raised her head. "Mr. Booth is a famous thespian. Naturally people admire him."

She flattered herself that she knew JW a little better than these idolaters did. The last time her brother had brought Booth home, he'd followed Anna out to the kitchen. She'd had her back to the door, washing the plates. Suddenly she could feel that he was there. How could she have known that? The back of her neck grew hot, and when she turned, sure enough, there he was, leaning against the doorjamb, studying his nails.

"Do you believe our fates are already written?" Booth asked her. He stepped into the kitchen. "I had my palm read once by a gypsy. She said I would come to a bad end. She said it was the worst palm she had ever seen." He held his hand out for her to take. "She said she wished she hadn't

even seen it," he whispered, and then he drew back quickly as her mother entered, before she could bend over the hand herself, reassure him with a different reading, before she could even touch him.

"JW isn't satisfied with acting," her brother had told her once. "He yearns for greatness on the stage of history," and if her mother hadn't interrupted, if Anna had had two seconds to herself with him, this is the reading she would have done. She would have promised him greatness.

"Mr. Booth was on his way to Ford's Theatre to pick up his mail," Wiechman said with a wink. It was an ambiguous wink. It might have meant only that Wiechman remembered what a first love was like. It might have suggested he knew the use she would make of such information.

Two regiments were returning to Washington from Virginia. They were out of step and out of breath, covered with dust. Anna drew a handkerchief from her sleeve and waved it at them. Other women were doing the same. A crowd gathered. A vendor came through the crowd, selling oysters. A man in a tight-fitting coat stopped him. He had a disreputable look—a bad haircut with long sideburns. He pulled a handful of coins from one pocket and stared at them stupidly. He was drunk. The vendor had to reach into his hand and pick out what he was owed.

"Filthy place!" the man next to the drunk man said. "I really can't bear the smell. I can't eat. Don't expect me to sleep in that flea-infested hotel another night." He left abruptly, colliding with Anna's arm, forcing her to take a step or two. "Excuse me," he said without stopping, and there was nothing penitent or apologetic in his tone. He didn't even seem to see her.

Since he had forced her to start, Anna continued to walk. She didn't even know she was going to Ford's Theatre until she turned onto Eleventh Street. It was a bad idea, but she couldn't seem to help herself. She began to walk faster.

"No tickets, Miss," James R. Ford told her, before she could open her mouth. She was not the only one there. A small crowd of people stood at the theater door. "Absolutely sold out. It's because the President and General Grant will be attending."

James Ford held an American flag in his arms. He raised it. "I'm just decorating the President's box." It was the last night of a lackluster run. He would never have guessed they would sell every seat. He thought Anna's face showed disappointment. He was happy, himself, and it made him kind. "They're rehearsing inside," he told her. "For General Grant! You just go on in for a peek."

He opened the doors and she entered. Three women and a man came with her. Anna had never seen any of the others before, but supposed they were friends of Mr. Ford's. They forced themselves through the doors beside her and then sat next to her in the straight-backed cane chairs just back from the stage.

Laura Keene herself stood in the wings awaiting her entrance. The

curtain was pulled back, so that Anna could see her. Her cheeks were round with rouge.

The stage was not deep. Mrs. Mountchessington stood on it with her daughter, Augusta, and Asa Trenchard.

"All I crave is affection," Augusta was saying. She shimmered with insincerity.

Anna repeated the lines to herself. She imagined herself as an actress, married to JW, courted by him daily before an audience of a thousand, in a hundred different towns. They would play the love scenes over and over again, each one as true as the last. She would hardly know where her real and imaginary lives diverged. She didn't suppose there was much money to be made, but even to pretend to be rich seemed like happiness to her.

Augusta was willing to be poor, if she was loved. "Now I've no fortune," Asa said to her in response, "but I'm biling over with affections, which I'm ready to pour out all over you, like apple sass, over roast pork."

The women exited. He was alone on the stage. Anna could see Laura Keene mouthing his line, just as he spoke it. The woman seated next to her surprised her by whispering it aloud as well.

"Well, I guess I know enough to turn you inside out, old gal, you sockdologizing old man-trap," the three of them said. Anna turned to her seatmate who stared back. Her accent, Anna thought, had been English. "Don't you love theater?" she asked Anna in a whisper. Then her face changed. She was looking at something above Anna's head.

Anna looked, too. Now she understood the woman's expression. John Wilkes Booth was standing in the presidential box, staring down on the actor. Anna rose. Her seatmate caught her arm. She was considerably older than Anna, but not enough so that Anna could entirely dismiss her possible impact on Booth.

"Do you know him?" the woman asked.

"He's a friend of my brother's." Anna had no intention of introducing them. She tried to edge away, but the woman still held her.

"My name is Cassie Streichman."

"Anna Surratt."

There was a quick, sideways movement in the woman's eyes. "Are you related to Mary Surratt?"

"She's my mother." Anna began to feel just a bit of concern. So many people interested in her dull, sad mother. Anna tried to shake loose, and found, to her surprise, that she couldn't. The woman would not let go.

"I've heard of the boarding house," Mrs. Streichman said. It was a courtesy to think of her as a married woman. It was more of a courtesy than she deserved.

Anna looked up at the box again. Booth was already gone. "Let me go," she told Mrs. Streichman, so loudly that Laura Keene herself heard. So forcefully that Mrs. Streichman finally did so.

Anna left the theater. The streets were crowded and she could not see Booth anywhere. Instead, as she stood on the bricks, looking left and then right, Mrs. Streichman caught up with her. "Are you going home? Might we walk along?"

"No. I have errands," Anna said. She walked quickly away. She was cross now, because she had hoped to stay and look for Booth, who must still be close by, but Mrs. Streichman had made her too uneasy. She looked back once. Mrs. Streichman stood in the little circle of her friends, talking animatedly. She gestured with her hands like an Italian. Anna saw Booth nowhere.

She went back along the streets to St. Patrick's Church, in search of her mother. It was noon and the air was warm in spite of the colorless sun. Inside the church, her mother knelt in the pew and prayed noisily. Anna slipped in beside her.

"This is the moment," her mother whispered. She reached out and took Anna's hand, gripped it tightly enough to hurt. Her mother's eyes brightened with tears. "This is the moment they nailed him to the cross," she said. There was purple cloth over the crucifix. The pallid sunlight flowed into the church through colored glass.

Across town a group of men had gathered in the Kirkwood bar and were entertaining themselves by buying drinks for George Atzerodt. Atzerodt was one of Booth's co-conspirators. His assignment for the day, given to him by Booth, was to kidnap the Vice President. He was already so drunk he couldn't stand. "Would you say that the Vice President is a brave man?" he asked and they laughed at him. He didn't mind being laughed at. It struck him a bit funny himself. "He wouldn't carry a firearm, would he? I mean, why would he?" Atzerodt said. "Are there ever soldiers with him? That nigger who watches him eat. Is he there all the time?"

"Have another drink," they told him, laughing. "On us," and you couldn't get insulted at that.

Anna and her mother returned to the boarding house. Mary Surratt had rented a carriage and was going into the country. "Mr. Wiechman will drive me," she told her daughter. A Mr. Nothey owed her money they desperately needed; Mary Surratt was going to collect it.

But just as she was leaving, Booth appeared. He took her mother's arm, drew her to the parlor. Anna felt her heart stop and then start again, faster. "Mary, I must talk to you," he said to her mother, whispering, intimate. "Mary." He didn't look at Anna at all and didn't speak again until she left the room. She would have stayed outside the door to hear whatever she could, but Louis Wiechman had had the same idea. They exchanged one cross look, and then each left the hallway. Anna went up the stairs to her bedroom.

She knew the moment Booth went. She liked to feel that this was because they had a connection, something unexplainable, something preor-

dained, but in fact she could hear the door. He went without asking to see her. She moved to the small window to watch him leave. He did not stop to glance up. He mounted a black horse, tipped his hat to her mother.

Her mother boarded a hired carriage, leaning on Mr. Wiechman's hand. She held a parcel under her arm. Anna had never seen it before. It was flat and round and wrapped in newspaper. Anna thought it was a gift from Booth. It made her envious.

Later at her mother's trial, Anna would hear that the package had contained a set of field glasses. A man named Lloyd would testify that Mary Surratt had delivered them to him and had also given him instructions from Booth regarding guns. It was the single most damaging evidence against her. At her brother's trial, Lloyd would recant everything but the field glasses. He was, he now said, too drunk at the time to remember what Mrs. Surratt had told him. He had never remembered. The prosecution had compelled his earlier testimony through threats. This revision would come two years after Mary Surratt had been hanged.

Anna stood at the window a long time, pretending that Booth might return with just such a present for her.

John Wilkes Booth passed George Atzerodt on the street at five P.M. Booth was on horseback. He told Atzerodt he had changed his mind about the kidnapping. He now wanted the Vice President killed. At 10:15 or thereabouts. "I've learned that Johnson is a very brave man," Atzerodt told him.

"And you are not," Booth agreed. "But you're in too deep to back out now." He rode away. Booth was carrying in his pocket a letter to the editor of *The National Intelligencer*. In it, he recounted the reasons for Lincoln's death. He had signed his own name, but also that of George Atzerodt.

The men who worked with Atzerodt once said he was a man you could insult and he would take no offense. It was the kindest thing they could think of to say. Three men from the Kirkwood bar appeared and took Atzerodt by the arms. "Let's find another bar," they suggested. "We have hours and hours yet before the night is over. Eat, drink. Be merry."

At six P.M. John Wilkes Booth gave the letter to John Matthews, an actor, asking him to deliver it the next day. "I'll be out of town or I would deliver it myself," he explained. A group of Confederate officers marched down Pennsylvania Avenue where John Wilkes Booth could see them. They were unaccompanied; they were turning themselves in. It was the submissiveness of it that struck Booth hardest. "A man can meet his fate or make it," he told Matthews. "A man can rise to the occasion or fall beneath it."

At sunset, a man called Peanut John lit the big glass globe at the entrance to Ford's Theatre. Inside, the presidential box had been decorated with borrowed flags and bunting. The door into the box had been forced some weeks ago in an unrelated incident and could no longer be locked.

It was early evening when Mary Surratt returned home. Her financial

affairs were still unsettled; Mr. Nothey had not even shown up at their meeting. She kissed her daughter. "If Mr. Nothey will not pay us what he owes," she said, "I can't think what we will do next. I can't see a way ahead for us. Your brother must come home." She went into the kitchen to oversee the preparations for dinner.

Anna went in to help. Since the afternoon, since the moment Booth had not spoken to her, she had been overcome with unhappiness. It had not lessened a bit in the last hours; she now doubted it ever would. She cut the roast into slices. It bled beneath her knife and she thought of Henrietta Irving's white skin and the red heart beating underneath. She could understand Henrietta Irving perfectly. All I crave is affection, she said to herself, and the honest truth of the sentiment softened her into tears. Perhaps she could survive the rest of her life, if she played it this way, scene by scene. She held the knife up, watching the blood slide down the blade, and this was dramatic and fit her Shakespearean mood.

She felt a chill and when she turned around one of the new boarders was leaning against the doorjamb, watching her mother. "We're not ready yet," she told him crossly. He'd given her a start. He vanished back into the parlor.

Once again, the new guests hardly ate. Louis Wiechman finished his food with many elegant compliments. His testimony in court would damage Mary Surratt almost as much as Lloyd's. He would say that she seemed uneasy that night, unsettled, although none of the other boarders saw this. After dinner, Mary Surratt went through the house, turning off the kerosene lights one by one.

Anna took a glass of wine and went to sleep immediately. She dreamed deeply, but her heartbreak woke her again only an hour or so later. It stabbed at her lightly from the inside when she breathed. She could see John Wilkes Booth as clearly as if he were in the room with her. "I am the most famous man in America," he said. He held out his hand, beckoned to her.

Downstairs she heard the front door open and close. She rose and looked out the window, just as she had done that afternoon. Many people, far too many people were on the street. They were all walking in the same direction. One of them was George Atzerodt. Hours before he had abandoned his knife, but he too would die, along with Mary Surratt. He had gone too far to back out. He walked with his hands over the shoulders of two dark-haired men. One of them looked up. He was of a race Anna had never seen before. The new boarders joined the crowd. Anna could see them when they passed out from under the porch overhang.

Something big was happening. Something big enough to overwhelm her own hurt feelings. Anna dressed slowly and then quickly and more quickly. I live, she thought, in the most wondrous of times. Here was the proof. She was still unhappy, but she was also excited. She moved quietly past her mother's door.

The flow of people took her down several blocks. She was taking her last walk again, only backward, like a ribbon uncoiling. She went past St. Patrick's Church, down Eleventh Street. The crowd ended at Ford's Theatre and thickened there. Anna was jostled. To her left, she recognized the woman from the carriage, the laughing woman, though she wasn't laughing now. Someone stepped on Anna's hoop skirt and she heard it snap. Someone struck her in the back of the head with an elbow. "Be quiet!" someone admonished someone else. "We'll miss it." Someone took hold of her arm. It was so crowded, she couldn't even turn to see, but she heard the voice of Cassie Streichman.

"I had tickets and everything," Mrs. Streichman said angrily. "Do you believe that? I can't even get to the door. It's almost ten o'clock and I had tickets."

"Can my group please stay together?" a woman toward the front asked. "Let's not lose anyone," and then she spoke again in a language Anna did not know.

"It didn't seem a good show," Anna said to Mrs. Streichman. "A comedy and not very funny."

Mrs. Streichman twisted into the space next to her. "That was just a rehearsal. The reviews are incredible. And you wouldn't believe the waiting list. Years. Centuries! I'll never have tickets again." She took a deep, calming breath. "At least *you're* here, dear. That's something I couldn't have expected. That makes it very real. And," she pressed Anna's arm, "if it helps in any way, you must tell yourself later there's nothing you could have done to make it come out differently. Everything that will happen has already happened. It won't be changed."

"Will I get what I want?" Anna asked her. She could not keep the brightness of hope from her voice. Clearly, she was part of something enormous. Something memorable. How many people could say that?

"I don't know what you want," Mrs. Streichman answered. She had an uneasy look. "I didn't get what *I* wanted," she added. "Even though I had tickets. Good God! People getting what they want! That's not the history of the world, is it?"

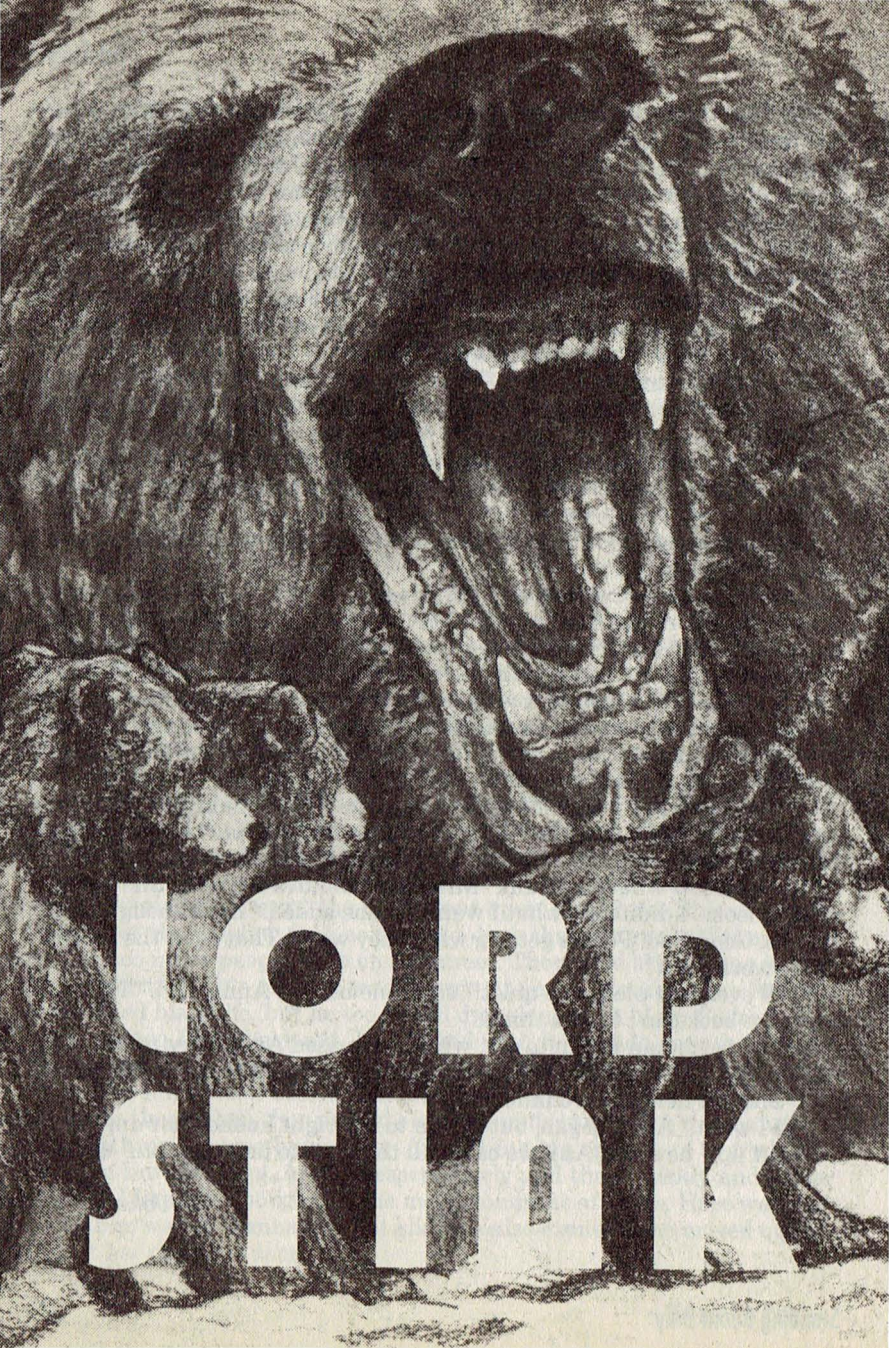
"Will everyone please be quiet!" someone behind Anna said. "Those of us in the back can't hear a thing."

Mrs. Streichman began to cry, which surprised Anna very much. "I'm such a sap," Mrs. Streichman said apologetically. "Things really get to me." She put her arm around Anna.

"All I want," Anna began, but a man to her right hushed her angrily.

"Shut up!" he said. "As if we came all this way to listen to *you*." ●

*—for John Kessel*


LORD
STICK

Judith Berman

Illustration by Laurie Harden

Judith Berman has spent extended periods of time in Idaho, Vermont, British Columbia, and Alaska, and since 1979 she has lived in Philadelphia. The author received a Ph.D. in anthropology from the University of Pennsylvania in 1991, and attended Clarion in 1994. Currently she is employed as a guest curator at a Pennsylvania museum. "Lord Stink" is set in her "Mountain Land" universe, which is based on the mythology and traditional culture of the Native Americans of the north Pacific coast. The story (which is her first tale for *Asimov's*) was "inspired by the widespread Bear Husband myth, but it does not follow the myth very carefully."

Only when the shadow of Feather Mountain reached her high grassy ledge did Winter realize how late the day had grown. For the last time, she emptied the little basket she wore strung around her neck into the bigger one at her feet. With care she picked up the bigger basket, now brimming with berries, and scrambled sweating along the narrow trail that led down through otherwise impenetrable thickets of scrubby spruce and blueberry. She had come farther than she meant to. Four-Legs used this trail; while yanking her hair from the prickly clutches of a spruce, she nearly stepped into a day-old pile of grizzly droppings.

The other Sandspit Town women had already gathered at the steep meadow where they had left the pack baskets. Winter poured her blueberries into the emptiest one. As she tipped her basket, her hair fell forward, and stuck to her sweaty cheek. She brushed it back impatiently.

"Pick them, don't paint your face with them," said old Aunt Wren.

Winter looked at her sticky purple hand and laughed. Then she glanced up and saw her older cousin Thrush, and stopped laughing. Thrush gave her a pretty smile. Thrush was immaculate, as always: glossy black hair falling straight down her back without a snarl or straying lock, cedar-bark cape and skirt spotless. No sweat or dirt or blueberry juice on that perfect face. Her fingers were barely stained. Winter didn't know how she managed it. Thrush had spent the entire day picking berries, too; she was, after all, a king's daughter and she had to set a proper example.

"You wandered off," Thrush said.

"I didn't mean to," Winter said quickly, as if she were one of Thrush's attendants, bound to wait on her every second.

"You should be more careful," Thrush said. "There are Four-Legs around. Rumble told me one broke into Father's salmon trap last night."

Familiar anger scalded Winter and she looked away. Her brother was one of Thrush's hapless suitors. She did not ask if Thrush had begged Rumble to kill the grizzly, as she had done last year with the king of Round Bay's unfortunate nephew. Four-Legs had acute hearing and were always alert for hunting expeditions against them. Winter did not want to endanger Rumble any more than Thrush might already have done.

It was time to return to the king's fish camp. Attendants and slaves heaved the pack baskets onto their backs, adjusting the burden straps across their foreheads. Another of Winter's cousins lowered her baby's cradleboard from a tree. And then they all headed down the mountain, single file along the animal trail, chattering and gossiping. To avoid talking any more with Thrush, Winter stayed behind her, watching the walk that managed to be both prim and seductive. Slender ankles, brown, bare, delicate feet; too much to hope for that Thrush would tread on a sharp rock.

Thrush must have been daydreaming, because Winter clearly saw why the line ahead of them snaked to the left and then curved back. Thrush, though, kept walking straight along the trail. There was an instant in which Winter thought about warning her but, out of spite, did not. And so Thrush walked into it, stepping with her delicate foot right smack into a soft wet pile of blueberry-seeded bear shit.

"Aaahhh," Thrush whimpered. She pulled her foot out, smeared to the ankle with the stinking stuff, and hopped on one leg. A wail burst from her: "The filthy bear!"

The line of women stopped. Every one of them fell silent and turned to stare at Thrush in horror, ragged slaves, commoners, copper-bedecked nobles. Thrush seemed oblivious to everything but her soiled foot. She tried to wipe the shit on a clump of grass, but there was so much of it, on top of her foot, on her heel, thick between her toes. "It's disgusting!" she was moaning. "Oh, it stinks! The filthy bear!"

Then old Aunt Wren rushed from behind Winter. "That's enough!"

She grabbed Thrush by the arm, and hustled her down the trail. No one treated Thrush that way—not Thrush, favored daughter of their king, Thrush, who never did *anything* wrong. "I have to clean it off!" Thrush wailed, as she stumbled along, dragged by Wren. Dirt and leaves stuck to the shit.

But Aunt Wren would not let her stop. Guilt-stricken, Winter ran down the trail after them, and the rest of the women followed. They passed from the blueberry meadow into deep, mossy forest, and the trail grew muddy, pocked with crisscrossing moose prints. She heard a rustle from a tall thicket of devil's-club, then a crackle; and suddenly a huge shaggy shape crashed onto the trail, directly in front of Thrush, as high at the

shoulders as she was. It was not a moose. Thrush screamed in raw terror. Aunt Wren threw herself in front of Thrush, but with a bloody sweep of its claws the grizzly sent her flying. Then it grabbed Thrush, and bared its fangs at her, drooling and growling.

In that terrible instant, Winter realized for the first time just how much she hated Thrush, how much she wanted the grizzly to rip Thrush to pieces. At the same time, Thrush had never seemed more precious and vulnerable. She found herself flailing at a huge, hairy leg, shrieking, "Stop it! Stop it! Stop it!" The grizzly swung at her back-handed, smashing her against a tree. By the time she recovered, the grizzly had already left the trail, and was crashing through the devil's-club, moving with incredible speed. In the blink of an eye it was out of sight, and Thrush was gone, too, her screams fading rapidly into silence.

Half stunned, shaking uncontrollably, Winter knelt beside Aunt Wren. Blood poured from deep gouges in the old woman's shoulder and arm. "Run, you idiots!" Wren gasped, struggling up on one elbow. "Hurry and tell her father what happened!"

Winter raced ahead of the other women. She knew this was her fault. She should have known how her cousin would react: when they were little girls, Thrush had once gone into screeching hysterics after stepping on a slug.

She ran down through the immense cedars and hemlocks, across the grassy alder bottomlands, toward the camp on the shore of Oyster Bay. She found the king with her older brother by the river mouth. She could barely sob out the story to them. Rumble, in the midst of repairs to the king's salmon trap, dropped all his tools and sprang to his feet in horror. "Thrush? Gone? Which way?"

"Not you!" the king said with such hoarse fury that Rumble took a step backward in confusion. His hand shook on his staff. "This is for her *brothers!*"

Winter did not know until that moment that her uncle disliked Rumble's attentions to his daughter. Not that she wanted Thrush as a sister-in-law, but the king's rejection hurt.

"Go find Counselor," the king ordered, and Rumble turned to obey, bewildered.

Men soon came running from camp, from the beach, from their fishing stations along the river. "We'll use dogs," Counselor said in his deep, confident voice. He had already armed himself with his slate-tipped spear and his long copper dagger. Thrush's oldest brother was the bravest and most skillful hunter in Sandspit Town. He had killed grizzlies before, single-handed. The mere sight of him should have made Winter feel better, but it didn't. "I'll take ten armed men, and Orphan will take ten, and we'll soon pick up the trail."

"I'll start on the east side of the ridge and sweep westward," said Orphan, the second brother. "You start on the west side. We'll find her." Like Counselor, he was careful not to mention the grizzly by name or even, now, by respectful title.

The two brothers organized the men and dogs quickly. Everything began to seem horribly unreal to Winter: Thrush's mother sobbing and wailing, the noise of men shouting back and forth, dogs barking with the excitement, children running under everyone's feet. She felt as if she were a ghost among a crowd of the living, seeing everything, knowing everything, but unable to speak. She knew, for instance, that the men would not find Thrush's trail. She knew that the bad things had only started to happen. She knew, with awful, gut-wrenching certainty, that she would never see Counselor or Orphan or any of the men again. It was all her fault.

"And where do you think you're going?" spoke the king's voice in her ear.

She turned to look. The king was not speaking to her, or to Rumble, who stood beside him now. He addressed his words to his youngest son, a boy Winter's age, who stood among the hunters, a black-spotted dog lying at his feet. Otter whittled on a stick with a mussel-shell knife, but carried no weapons.

"I'm going to help find Thrush."

"You are not going," said the king.

That tone of voice would have been enough for anyone else, but Otter chose to argue. "My dog can help," he said. "I can find her."

"They have plenty of dogs!" said the king.

"Dirty is smarter than any of them."

The king turned on his son with the same harsh fury he had shown Rumble earlier. "You are no warrior, boy! You are staying here!"

The parties of men and dogs jogged off. Otter took a step after them, yearning. Rumble turned and walked blindly into the river, and stood there, staring at the half-repaired fishtrap, hands clenched at his sides.

"If *I* were still a warrior, I would go myself and bring her back," said the king, and then his hand trembled violently on his staff, and his crippled leg gave way. Otter dropped stick and knife to steady him.

The stick rolled to Winter's feet. Otter had carved the tip into an exquisite eagle's head. Dirty picked up the stick in his mouth, and, tail wagging, turned round and carried it to his master.

The grizzly galloped three-legged through the steep forest, one huge paw crushing Thrush against its enormous chest, so that her face was pressed into its coarse fur and she was forced to breathe its rank and oily stench. The pain where the enormous claws had ripped her back was worse than anything she had ever felt in her life. The blood soaked into

her clothing, so that the fabric stuck to her as it dried; when the bear shifted its paw, the scabs would rip loose, and the blood would start to flow all over again.

The grizzly ran upward, into the last light of day, until the high mountain grass turned to loose, rattling scree. But when Thrush expected it to cross the pass and descend into the wild valley beyond, the Four-Legs kept heading upward, until only hard stone lay beneath its claws, and gulfs of air hung below them on either side. Already they had passed out of the human realm; the summit of Feather Mountain did not soar so high toward heaven. A river of blue ice flowed down to meet them, and the grizzly ran alongside it, untiring, climbing another, higher peak.

The eastern wall of the world had turned from purple to inky black before the Four-Legs began to descend once more. Without warning, it stopped and loosened its grip. Thrush slid until her feet touched grassy earth. Before the rest of her could follow, the grizzly seized her shoulder and hauled her up again. Claws tore her flesh anew and she nearly fainted.

They stood in a clearing in a dense forest. Overhead, stars blazed in a black and moonless sky, so brightly that faint patterns of starlight silvered the grass at her feet. In front of her loomed an enormous old house of carved posts and weathered cedar planks. A hearth fire glowed orange through cracks in the wall.

Those thin rays of firelight revealed a strange figure, small and hunched, sitting by the door. As the grizzly shoved her forward, Thrush saw the head swivel in her direction. Before she could even guess what crouched there in the darkness, a voice boomed, so deep and powerful it shook the earth beneath her feet, "Lord Stink! Lord Stink! Lord Stink! Lord Stink!"

Four times, the number of power. Another rush of fear poured over her. The grizzly shoved her roughly forward again. Thrush stumbled, and flung out her hands for balance, expecting to meet the immense carved post through which the door of the house had been tunneled. Instead, her hands touched moving flesh.

"Hhwaaa!" said the deep voice, and the hot wet flesh twitched away from her. Thrush screamed at the same time, and utterly terrified, jumped backward into the hairy belly of the Four-Legs. It snarled in anger and flung her through the low door. She landed sprawling on the earthen floor by the hearth, amidst a litter of soiled mats, dirty spoons, splintered bones, and ashes.

Now, on all sides of them, a chorus of hollow, booming voices trumpeted in unison, "Lord Stink! Lord Stink! Lord Stink! Lord Stink!" The firelight showed Thrush that the house frame was supported not by carved wooden beams, but instead by living bears who greeted her captor with these shouts.

A crowd of men and women, all larger, hairier and far more muscular than any humans Thrush had ever seen, gathered around her and her captor. And then that grizzly turned to face her, rising to its full height on two legs, and put paws to snout . . .

Grizzly flesh, grizzly shape, peeled off and sagged like clothing. A massive man with powerful muscles stood there. He was dark, hairy and utterly naked. The only thing that seemed unchanged were his huge, hairy, bull-grizzly's balls. His reddish member looked incongruously human in front of them.

"Here she is," he said. His voice was deep, powerful, and full of rage.

The crowd of men and women pressed toward Thrush. One of the women kicked her, and shouted, "I suppose you think you're better? I suppose your shit doesn't stink?" When Thrush didn't say anything, the woman grabbed Thrush's arm with an immensely strong hand and hauled her to her feet. "Answer me, girl! Who are you to pass judgment on the shit of Lord Stink?"

Thrush knew they were going to maul her to death. Or, worse: they might make her into their slave. Then the mauling would go on forever, a little bit every day, and the terror and the shame would last until the day she died.

Up to that point she had felt so dispirited and terrorized she had ceased thinking. But the thought of becoming a slave brought forth another emotion. She was a *king's* daughter. Her mother's lineage was as ancient and as proud. So these people *were* Four-Legs. So they did belong to the First People, the ones with spirit masks, the ones who could turn form and essence inside out, the immortals. They were terrible housekeepers. The house reeked of sour and stale grizzly smell and of rotting fish. Thrush tried to stand very straight among the splintered bones. She did not look up at her towering captors. That would have been undignified.

"Well," she said, and suddenly she was shaking with rage and despair that the grizzlies *dared* do this to her, a king's daughter. "I myself only pass nuggets of pure copper." Amazingly, her voice sounded cold and nearly calm. "So of course when I stepped in your mess I thought it horribly coarse and nasty. And why did you do it in the middle of the trail? Don't you have any manners?"

The grizzlies fell silent. Thrush waited for the final explosion, and her bloody and painful death.

The explosion never came. After a long moment, Lord Stink said, slowly, "Copper? You pass copper? You don't shit?"

"Oh, no," she said, in her coldest, angriest, primmest voice. "I never make a *mess*."

"Well, maybe," Stink said, "I suppose. . . . But you shouldn't say I'm disgusting."

You *are* disgusting, Thrush thought, ugly, violent and disgusting.

"You're beautiful," said Stink, suddenly, in an entirely new voice. "I'm going to marry you."

Thrush's heart seemed to stop beating. This was not what she wanted. She wanted to go home to her mother and father, where everything would be right again.

But what choice did she have? He had abducted her. She was lucky he wanted to *marry* her. Stink was disgusting and uncouth, but he was a king of the First People, and she would be his queen. It was at least the position she deserved.

He had made his public announcement; now all that remained was to consummate it. He took her to the rear of the house, to his lightless, fetid bedroom. With one hand he pushed her down on all fours; with his other hand he yanked up her skirt, and thrust himself in. It hurt, especially at first. He growled, drooling onto her neck, and suddenly his strong teeth sank into the muscle where her neck met her shoulder. Pain erupted like pure white fire. After everything that had happened that day, she could only moan and whimper. Princes from a dozen towns had courted her, with song and compliments and tears, and this lout of a grizzly *bit* her and *slobbered* on her. The pain kept on, and on, as he grunted and growled and drooled and panted. She kept telling herself that it was better than being a slave or dead.

He finished with a great heave and a grunt, and his teeth released her neck. She collapsed onto the bedding with another involuntary moan. Something, probably his seed and her blood mixed together, began to dribble out of her. King's daughter as she was, she managed not to cry.

In the morning he was hungry. "Cook me some salmon."

Because of her wounds and his marital exertions, she could barely walk, but she obeyed him. A wife obeyed her husband.

The woman who had interrogated her last night handed her two square wooden water buckets without a word. Thrush was not sure how to leave the house, but as she approached the mouth-door, it yawned for her, pink tongue lolling between discolored fangs. She stepped onto the soft, scummy surface of the tongue with distaste. The grizzly woman followed Thrush to the door, and watched with suspicion, lifting her nose to sniff the breezes.

Thrush filled the buckets in the clear, swift stream that flowed along the far side of the clearing. She did not notice the old human woman until she had nearly reached the door again. That was when the grizzly backed through the doorway to make room for her to enter, and the mouth-door closed for a moment.

The old woman sat to the left of the door to the spirit house. She was white-haired, bony, frail, and hunched, and leathery flaps of breasts

hung to her lap. From those bare breasts and the ragged skirt, Thrush judged the hideous old hag to be a slave, and so would not have looked at the woman any further, if the other had not addressed her first.

"Don't eat his salmon," the old woman whispered urgently. "Don't eat it. I ate his father's salmon, so I could never go home."

A slave would not have spoken to her. Thrush deigned to turn her head, look down. An involuntary shiver ran through her. The hag sat with her knees drawn up in front of her, arms resting around her knees. Up close, Thrush could see that the rotten skirt failed to cover what was necessary. Through the holes Thrush saw the column of reddish, wrinkled flesh that descended from the old woman's crotch and rooted itself deep in the ground.

"Don't eat anything you haven't caught or picked yourself," the old woman said.

Thrush fled inside. There she filled a wooden cooking box with water, heated the stones in the hearthfire, tonged red-hot stones into the box. Enveloped in a cloud of steam, she dropped in large chunks of fresh salmon, probably, she thought, stolen yesterday from her father's fish trap. Why should she listen to the old woman? It looked like salmon, smelled like salmon.

When it was cooked she lifted the box lid and ladled the salmon into a dish, and went to call her husband. He lay in the bedding on the floor of his room, hands behind his head. When she crawled in, he looked at her, a look that was soft and hot at the same time, and he laid his hand on her knee. She wanted to jerk away, but she did not. A proper wife would not.

She ducked her head. "It's ready."

He ate noisily, slurping from the side of his spoon. Watching him, Thrush thought again of that wrinkled column of flesh that rooted the old woman to the ground, and found she had no appetite at all.

The smoke-filled beams of sunlight that now fell through the roof vent showed her the inside of the immense house. The floor was dirt and all at one level, unlike her father's tiered cedar-floored winter house at Sandspit Town. And unlike that well-appointed house, only one room had been partitioned off. That was Stink's, at the back. A brown bear slept in front of the low circular door of the room.

Along the walls elsewhere lay piles of bedding and stacks of immense wooden storage boxes that reached to the rafters. Most of the boxes were old, blackened with years of woodsmoke. All had animal faces, some sleeping, some awake, eyes glowing with power.

Her husband wanted more salmon, and she brought it to him. Then he wanted a dipperful of water. Thrush drank, too; it was the water she had carried from the stream. When he was done, he snapped his fingers, and the grizzly in back of the house scrabbled to its feet and loped over to him. He stripped off the tunic he had put on that morning, revealing his

powerful, muscular body again. Then he picked up the grizzly by the ears, shook it until it hung limp like clothing, and dressed himself in it. The door to the house lolled open. He bounded through it in a single leap and was gone.

Thrush found she smelled all over of her new husband's rank and musky sweat. After breakfast, she bathed in the stream, carefully because of her wounds. Two of Stink's sisters kept watch from the grassy bank—the one who had first questioned her, whom she learned was named Growl, and a smaller, younger, fiercer grizzly woman named Nose.

Back at the house, she couldn't stand it, finally, and asked her sisters-in-law, "Do you have a comb?" The state of their hair left this open to doubt.

"A comb?" Growl asked, suspiciously. "A comb? What for?"

"My hair," Thrush said.

Both women stared at her. "Oh," Growl said, at last.

Growl began to rummage through the animal boxes. She pulled a large frog out of the first one, its eyes unblinking, white throat pulsing. In the second she found a great armful of carved bracelets of a metal Thrush had never seen before, much yellower than copper. A third held a robe of white wool that smoked clouds of chill, damp fog. Growl immediately shoved the robe back in the box, but veils of fog floated away, drifting through the house. As she searched, one of the boxes, wolf-faced, nipped at Growl's foot. Growl kicked at it and snarled a word. The admonition snapped in Thrush's ears like the sound of stone breaking stone.

The comb Growl finally handed her was carved of ivory and exquisitely inlaid with abalone. As Thrush pulled it through her hair, she felt the first stirrings of pleasure since arriving in the grizzly house. A queen deserved such a comb. Too bad the rest of the house was so foully dirty.

"Don't you have any slaves?" she asked Growl.

"Sometimes." Growl gnawed at a flea bite on her shoulder, and then shook herself like a dog. "Brother had a feast last winter, though, and we ate them all."

A chill ran down Thrush's spine. She struggled to maintain her composure. "Who cleans for you, then?"

"Cleans?" Growl asked. "Cleans what?"

"The dishes. The house. Clothing. For instance."

Growl gnawed at her shoulder again, bored with the subject. "Go ahead, if you want."

Thrush felt as if she had been slapped in the face. They expected her, the king's wife, to sweep the floor and scrub the dirty dishes? She sat all morning staring at the filthy hearth, with its mounds of dirty bowls and spoons, the buzzing flies, the piles of bones and discarded salmon skin

black with swarming ants. Fury and disgust vied for the upper hand. All the grizzly people departed the house except for her and Growl, who seemed to be the designated wife-watcher. Growl curled up on a filthy mat and did nothing but scratch herself occasionally, and doze, eyes half-open.

At last Thrush could stand it no longer. I'll just pick up the salmon bones, she thought. It's not right for them to sit there, and it'll help keep the ants out. She limped over to the hearth and, slowly and awkwardly, collected all the bones and bits of rotting salmon skin. She carried the remains out to the stream and spilled them in the water, the proper way to treat the remains of the Bright Ones. Growl woke long enough to come to the door to keep an eye on her.

When Thrush returned inside, she couldn't help but start on the dirty dishes. It was utterly disgraceful, the wife of a king of the First People washing spoons. But if *she* didn't do it, it clearly wouldn't get done. These grizzlies didn't care what kind of filth they wallowed in. And *she* couldn't live like this.

By late afternoon she had washed every dirty box and bowl in the house. She had shaken out the mats and furs in her new bedroom, discovering multitudes of fleas, and she had cleaned the furs with old and pungent urine from a long-unemptied chamber pot. By that time she had grown light-headed from hunger and was feeling very sorry for herself. The claw wounds from yesterday were becoming more and more stiff and painful with every minute. Thrush made one final trip outside to break off spruce branches for a broom, and then stopped, staring down at the clear, sweet water of the rushing stream. Sunlight flashed in the water, once, twice, a flick of the tail, a leap through the air: the Bright Ones, salmon, emblem of hope.

All of a sudden a series of intensely sharp images descended on Thrush: Rumble, earnest and lovelorn; her tall, strong older brothers, bronze-skinned, black-haired; intense, clever young Otter whittling at a trap stick, his adoring dog at his feet; silly little cousin Winter; her mother, regal and lovely in her painted hat and raven's-tail robe. And last of all, her father the king, leaning heavily on his staff, frowning at her. He would be proud, she told herself, to learn that she was married to a king of the First People.

She wanted them all so badly. She would never see them again, and they would never know what happened to her. She was beyond the mortal realm. Her father would hire wizards to search for her, but who was sufficiently wise and powerful to find his way to the country of the First People?

Thrush tried without success to blink away her tears, and turned toward the house again. She had been trying not to notice the old woman all day. Now she could not help but look, because the old woman shifted position on the ground, and the wrinkled root of flesh stretched and

heaved like a living organ. Thrush averted her eyes once more and walked as swiftly as she could toward the door.

Toward evening the inhabitants of the house began to return, bringing firewood, baskets full of berries, fish. Soon boxes were boiling away by the fire and the delicious smell of poaching salmon filled the air.

Thrush's stomach rumbled painfully. Growl sniffed at her shoulder. "Aren't you going to eat something?"

Thrush managed not to flinch from that damp nose. "I'm not hungry."

Nose thrust a bowl of hot, steaming salmon at Thrush. "Fucking is hard work," she said. She grinned coarsely. "You'd better eat to keep your strength up. Brother will want to fuck when he comes home."

Thrush shook her head, but her stomach rumbled again. The two kept staring at her. Nose set down the salmon in front of Thrush.

"What a wonder," said Growl, at last. "She doesn't shit, and she doesn't eat, either."

"She doesn't need to shit if she doesn't eat," said Nose. "Maybe she isn't eating because we'll find out she was lying, hmm? We'll find out her shit stinks just like everyone else's."

Thrush sat by the fire, nauseated by hunger, dreading her husband's arrival. The house's residents began to move from the hearthside to the beds around the walls of the house. As Growl pawed and nosed at her own bed furs, rearranging them, Thrush was shocked to see a long-armed man grab her from behind, sink his teeth into her neck, and begin humping her buttocks. Growl, however, snarled, and clouted him so hard he fell backward onto an ancient, smoke-blackened raven box. He crawled back toward her, and squatted, warily, while she finished with the furs.

Then Growl looked up, and for a moment their eyes met. The man took a step forward so he could sniff at her crotch. She clouted him again, only this time she pushed him down on the furs beneath her. He grabbed at her, and, snarling and roaring and biting, they rolled and crashed together into the wall of the house. Boxes tumbled and fell to the floor. For a moment all Thrush could see were flailing limbs, and then they came up again on all fours, stark naked. The man wrapped his arms around Growl from behind. She snatched at his huge hard prick and pulled it between her legs, jamming it all the way inside of her. The two of them rocked and writhed. More boxes tipped and crashed. One of them spilled eagle down across the floor like an avalanche of snow. Thrush finally managed to avert her eyes, and then noticed, to her shame, that despite the din, no one else was paying the slightest attention.

Stink arrived shortly thereafter, heralded by the shouts of the houseposts. Once again he did not bother to dress himself after shedding his grizzly mask.

Thrush preceded him docilely into the bedroom, where events went much as they had the night before. The inflamed gouges on her back and

the bites on her neck and shoulders throbbed so intensely it took her mind off the other things. When he was done, he flopped down half on top of her, and she gasped and whimpered involuntarily. That made him nose at her back, sniffing, and then he began to lick the wounds with a coarse, warm tongue. She held herself rigid, filled with disgust, until he finished, and then she lay there, unable to sleep. What she could not get out of her head was the memory of Growl, naked, sweat-slicked, ecstatic with passion, pushing herself along her husband's prick as though it were the very last moment of her life.

Thrush awoke in the morning, starving, with a picture of her father's fish trap in her head. It couldn't be that hard to make, she thought. She had never made one, but she could twine baskets so fine they held water, and what was a fish trap but a big, loosely woven basket weighted down on a stream bottom?

She asked Growl for a hatchet.

"A hatchet?" Growl said. "A hatchet? What do you want that for?"

"I want to cut cedar withes for a salmon trap."

As on the previous day, Growl stared at her for a long moment before saying, "Oh."

Growl rummaged through the boxes again, pulling out a kelp bottle full of angrily buzzing wasps, an exquisitely painted spruce-root hat, and a single enormous tail feather, white like an eagle's but four times as large. The hatchet she finally handed to Thrush was made of polished deep-green jadeite, and hafted with pale maple wood carved all around with eyes.

Thrush, attended by Growl and Nose, spent the morning cutting cedar withes and picking and eating large quantities of berries. She worked that afternoon and the next day on the salmon trap, a small one. The fish basket, with its narrow, inverted mouth, was simple to make. The hard part proved to be building the little stone dam that blocked off the stream so that the salmon would be funneled into the basket. She would have been embarrassed for Rumble or any of her brothers to see it, but the grizzly people did not seem to care that she was attempting man's work, and doing it badly to boot.

When the trap was finally in place, she sat on the rocky bank, eating berries, watching for a flash of silver in the stream. That was when she felt the first movement in her bowels since arriving at the bear house. She turned and looked behind her. Growl and Nose lay at the top of the bank amongst the tall grass, dozing.

Thrush crept quietly up to the clearing, glancing behind her all the while to see if they woke. She had nearly reached the trail that led behind the bear house into the woods, when she heard a voice behind her:

"Wait! You'll need these!"

She started, and turned. The old woman by the doorway held out her hand.

"Here! Take them! Hurry!"

Thrush took a few steps back. In the old woman's hand sat four hard, greenish lumps—nuggets of pure copper. "How—" Thrush began.

"Take them, you idiot girl!"

Thrush reached for the nuggets. At that moment, Growl appeared on the other side of the clearing, crawling sleepily on all fours. Thrush quickly grabbed the nuggets and hid her hand in a fold of her skirt.

Turning away, she marched across the clearing into the forest behind the house. She found a good spot at the foot of a gigantic hemlock, amidst the litter of deer fern, fallen branches and ancient, rotting trunks. She glanced back: Growl was approaching quickly, and now Nose had appeared as well. Quickly Thrush pulled up her skirt and squatted down, hidden behind a tall clump of ferns. She dropped the nuggets between her legs.

She really did have to go, but she held it in. After a moment she stood again and rearranged her clothing, and started to cover up the nuggets. Heavy footsteps crunched in the litter behind her and she looked up to see her giant, long-armed sisters-in-law.

"Wait!" said Nose, coarsely, grabbing Thrush's arm. "Let's see just what does come out of your pure little asshole!"

Growl dropped onto her hands, face low to the ground, and snuffled all around where Thrush had been squatting. She soon found the little pile of copper nuggets, and nosed the sticks and needles aside, sniffed at the nuggets, licked them with a long, pink tongue.

"Well, look at this," she said, picking them up and holding them out to her sister. "It's real copper."

Nose sniffed them, licked them twice, then grabbed Thrush and yanked up her skirt, forcing Thrush to bend over at the waist. She was terrifyingly strong. She sniffed at Thrush's vagina, and, using her long-nailed hands to part the buttocks, snuffled at Thrush's anus. She was so close Thrush could feel her hot breath on the little hairs there. Then Nose licked Thrush, a coarse, warm, wet tongue between her buttocks. Thrush jumped into the air at the loathsome touch, and then stood there, trembling, humiliated, hating the sisters, hating all the grizzlies, only the greatest effort of will between her and abject tears.

"Oh, she's such a sweet little thing," said Nose. "Only pure copper falls out of her asshole. But she smells like a man's been with her."

"Of course she smells like a man's been with her," said Growl. "Brother fucks her all night long."

"What a perfect little beauty," said Nose. "It's too bad she doesn't like our food."

* * *

After that the grizzlies did not keep such a close watch on her. No one followed her the next time she slipped behind the house, and she was careful to cover everything very thoroughly. They did not, however, let her wander freely. Growl or Nose always appeared if she stayed away too long.

Her trap caught a modest number of salmon. Thrush asked Growl for a knife so she could slice the fish thin enough to dry. Growl, suspicious as always, rummaged through her animal boxes to find a knife of polished black slate. While cleaning and drying the salmon Thrush began to feel a slight hope that she might somehow get home. Then, one brilliantly clear day, she embarked on a berrying expedition up the side of the tall and glacier-clad mountain to the north of the bear house. Growl and Nose came along, though they didn't do much berry-picking. Thrush climbed high above the timberline and gazed out westward, at range after jagged blue range. Nothing looked familiar, not even the farthest, bluest, faintest peak.

The king died in Sandspit Town in winter, three and a half years after Thrush disappeared. He had aged rapidly after his two eldest sons died searching for her.

In that time any number of search parties had gone out and, if they had not been scattered or destroyed by the Four-Legs, had returned without finding clues to Thrush's whereabouts. The king had, of course, consulted wizards near and far. The wizards claimed the Four-Legs had abducted Thrush, and not killed her, but none could tell the king where in the east the bear house lay, in forest or meadow, beyond how many mountains. "Not even wizards can travel easily to the other world," they would say, "The First People show themselves when *they* are willing, and even then, they show themselves in their various guises. Even a wizard might not always know what he saw."

And they would say, "If a brave young man purified himself, bathed and scoured himself with hemlock branches until he had scrubbed off his human scent, perhaps he might take the Four-Legs unawares. Perhaps he might find his way to the spirit house. But these things don't happen often."

The king died from a sudden pain in his chest. He lay in state in Storm House for eight days, attired in his cloud robe and abalone-inlaid crown, surrounded by all the treasures of the house: carved and painted chests, painted hats, copper bracelets and plaques, feast dishes, brightly figured robes and tunics of mountain-goat wool, the masks of the First People used in the winter rites. On the eighth day they burnt his body behind the ice-covered house, with most of the town in attendance. Rumble presided. With his hair cropped short and his face painted black in mourning, he looked as grim and implacable as if he were setting off to war.

Otter should have been there, too, as the king's only surviving son, but he had taken the wizards' advice to heart. If indeed he still lived, he was somewhere in the eastern mountains, purifying himself, searching for power, searching for Thrush. It had fallen instead to the queen's brothers to build the funeral pyre and deliver the speeches of praise. The brothers did not look happy; Rumble, inheriting his uncle's place, was supposed to marry the queen, but so far he had been silent.

Winter had been feeling ill through the long days and nights of the king's wake. As she and her mother headed back to her father's house, a wave of dizziness overwhelmed her. She had to lean against the painted front of Frog House, panting little puffs of fog, while the line of massive, snow-laden houses along the frozen shore wavered and rippled like water. Away from the fire, the air was bitterly cold. Her head felt like a hollow cave of ice, and her heartbeat throbbed inside it, echoing. Something shoved from her gut through her lungs and into her head, until it shattered the ice that was the roof of her skull. She spun upward into vast and empty blackness. Later, her mother told her that she had crumpled as though clubbed on the head.

She lost half a month in the sickness, and when she finally came back to herself, she had a hard time staying there. After a few days of this, her mother brought a wizard to examine her. It was the old woman wizard, Diver, from Snag House. "So you have dreams?" Diver asked, squatting beside Winter's pallet.

"They're not dreams," Winter whispered. Talking exhausted her, and the waking world still seemed fragmentary and insubstantial. "I travel."

"And where do you travel?"

"I don't know," Winter whispered. "Here and there. Flying. I'm a petrel."

Diver nodded. "Are you just traveling, or are you looking for something?"

"Thrush," Winter said. "I'm looking for Thrush."

As the days passed, the world began to seem more real to her again, but the ice had long melted and the herring had spawned before she was strong enough to go outside. The first time, she walked only as far as the seaside platform in front of her house. The bay enclosed by Sand Spit was still as a pond, perfectly mirroring the row of plank houses and the forest and the misty grey sky. Woodsmoke drifted through the trees. She could see Rumble standing by the door of Storm House, a tiny figure beneath its tall painted façade. He was speaking with one of the north-side house lords. Rumble had grown colder and harder-edged every time his uncle had forbidden him to search for Thrush, and sent him instead on a raid or a sea-hunting expedition. Now that he was king it was even worse. She sometimes felt he didn't recognize her.

After a while, Diver happened by, and sat down beside her. For a long

time neither of them said anything. "You were traveling again last night," Diver said, finally.

"Yes," Winter said. "I know she's there, somewhere in the mountains east of Oyster Bay. But I never see the trail to the bear house. I fly and I fly, and I don't see anything."

"If you flew less far and less often," Diver said, "you would get well sooner."

"I can't help it," Winter said. "I have to find Thrush. It's my fault. I saw she was going to step in it, and I didn't say anything."

Diver sighed. "It wasn't your fault, child. You didn't insult the Four-Legs, did you? Thrush brought it on herself."

"If I'd warned her, it wouldn't have happened. I have to make up for it."

"I didn't know you loved Thrush so much," Diver said.

Winter began to cry. Diver stroked her hair soothingly. "You've ridden the air, and you're going to be a seer. I suppose that you have as good a chance as anyone of finding her. But you have to give yourself time. You have to get well. And you have to learn what it means to be a seer."

Winter gulped down air, trying to stop her tears. Her lungs still hurt when she took too deep a breath. "What is there to learn? I know how to fly. I know what I see beneath me!"

"The First People aren't like us," Diver said. "Their country isn't like ours. They have more than one form. They exchange forms the way you and I change clothes. To find the path to their country, a seer has to understand the essence, the whole nature, and not just one form or another. Not just how they show themselves to us."

Thrush had worried that the grizzlies would change their minds and tear her to pieces when she started her first period among them. Woman's blood sometimes sent Four-Legs into frenzies of rage. But she never had to face that problem.

She had been abducted by Stink in the month of blueberries; four months later, when the maple leaves had dropped and the dog salmon ran in the stream, she had already grown as big as she had ever seen any pregnant woman. She could not imagine how she would last another five months.

Before the dog salmon had finished running, and Thrush had dried and smoked the last of the fish from her salmon trap, she gave birth. In the early morning dark the pains started; she sweated and labored and bled, and by dawn it was over. Not one spirit child: four. Four little bear cubs snuffling at her sweaty belly and mewling for her teats. Their eyes had not even opened yet. Three boys and a girl, Growl informed her, though Thrush had no idea how she could tell.

"Why are they born dressed in their spirit masks?" Thrush asked her sister-in-law.

"They're babies," said Growl, tying off a little umbilical cord. She gave the struggling cub a lick or two to calm it down, her face softer than Thrush had ever seen it. The cub nosed her hand and mewed. "They can't master their bear shape until they come to know themselves."

Growl returned the cub to the bed next to Thrush, and pulled another one toward her. The cub she had released nosed blindly along Thrush's belly, crying. Thrush reached out a tentative hand, touched the still-damp forehead of the cub with a finger. The cub was soft and warm, nearly hairless, with big ears, blind eyes, huge paws. It began to suck on her finger.

"Oh, here, baby," Thrush said, pulling the cub toward her swollen breasts.

It was hard feeding them all. She could manage two at once, but she could never let them have as much as they wanted, or the second pair would have none. When they were born, they were so small she could hold each in one hand, but they grew as fast out of her womb as they had inside it. By the fourth day they were as large as a newborn human baby and as thickly furred as Lord Stink in his grizzly shape. The sisters gave her a charm to keep her milk from running out, a kelp bottle of oil to rub on her breasts, but *she* could never get enough to eat, either. She was eating enough for four nursing mothers. She knew her little supply of salmon would not last until spring.

The first snows arrived. The bear people began to drowse away more and more of each day. Thrush herself spent more time in bed, next to her snoring husband, cubs nestled between them and around them, while the snow piled up in the clearing outside. It was almost peaceful, as long as their children slept, until she thought of her dwindling food supply, and the old woman sitting outside in the snow, and how as soon as she weaned her babies her husband would start his insistent attentions all over again.

She knew that if she was ever going to leave, it would have to be soon. Humans didn't belong in this realm. Sooner or later, no matter what she ate, she would begin to change, too, gain strange spirit powers like the old woman's, strange deformities and mutations.

Her children grew. Their appetite grew. They clawed her as she nursed them, and their teeth sank into her breasts until she bled. Sometimes she thought the fate she had faced her first night in the bear house was at last coming true: mauled and eaten by grizzlies. Except that these grizzlies were her beloved children. She loved their milky, damp, furry smell. She knew each one by its face, the way it cocked its ears, the look in its eyes. She called them by the names her husband had given them: Claw, Tongue, Hungry, Black.

One snowy night, after her husband licked clean the latest gouges on her belly, he spoke to her unexpectedly. He almost never spoke to her. "You don't like me, do you?"

It was a strange thing for a grizzly to say. Thrush didn't know how to respond. "I'm your wife," she said, at last.

"But you don't like me. You don't like me fucking you."

Thrush took a deep breath. "Well," she said, "it isn't very nice for me."

"Because I'm disgusting," her husband said. "Because I have no manners."

Again Thrush felt completely at a loss. What she had meant was that he did not caress her and whisper loving words to her. He did not match his actions to her needs. The thought of pleasuring *her* had never even crossed his mind. She knew that if she were one of his kind she would have been as selfish and wild as he, as coarsely passionate and demanding.

"You act like a grizzly," she said. "I'm not a grizzly."

"You're so beautiful," he said. "I wish . . ." And then he fell silent again. A long while later he began to snore.

Thrush found she wanted to cry.

In the early morning, when she went out to relieve herself, the old woman spoke to her. "It's time for you to go, if you're going. This is when they sleep the soundest."

"I don't know how to get home," Thrush said.

"Follow the stream down to the sea," said the old woman. "That's not the hard part, not while they're sleeping. Take the things you got from Growl, your comb, the hatchet, your knife and the bottle of oil. Each time your husband catches up with you, throw one of these behind you."

"Why are you helping me?" asked Thrush.

The old woman sighed, and looked across the snowy clearing. "Once I was like you," she said. "No, that's not true. You're an ordinary girl. I had a trace of wizardry in me when I came here. I saw and understood far more about these people than you. I was of two minds about leaving. But I didn't understand enough until it was too late, and I never gained enough power to free myself. Now, as for your children," she went on, briskly, "I'd advise leaving them here. They're almost grown enough to be weaned."

Thrush started to panic at the mere thought. "I can't leave them. Oh, no, I can't leave them behind."

"It's up to you," said the old woman. "Well, go on, then. Go and wake them up and get going."

"Now?"

"While your husband and all his kin are asleep, you idiot girl! Get going!"

By early summer, Winter felt strong enough to travel to the fish camp at Oyster Bay. It was always strange returning to the beachside campsite, where every year the grass grew as luxuriantly as if no one had lived

there for generations. It was stranger still returning with Rumble as their harsh and distant king. During the day Winter kept herself too busy to think or feel, cutting salmon into strips, feeding fires, moving ladders of half-dried salmon higher in the smokehouse to make room for the fresh strips. Every night, she sent out her spirit into the eastern mountains, searching for the bear house.

One day, as she carried a mat-load of fresh salmon to the smokehouse, a dog nosed her hand. She looked down, and saw a familiar black-spotted face. "Well, look at you, Dirty," she said, her heart suddenly in her throat. "Where's your master?"

"Right here," said Otter.

Her wizard's vision showed her the lonely power he had found in the high mountains, the power of the other world. Her eyes showed her a tall, lean and purposeful young man, dressed in plain clothing, who eyed her with uncertainty. She might almost have taken him for a stranger.

"You're back," she said, finally.

"I've been traveling."

The familiar guilt rose in Winter. "Looking for Thrush," she said. "I guess you haven't found her."

"I'm growing closer!"

"And has anyone informed you that your father died while you were gone?"

He glanced away. "Yes," he said. "Rumble just told me."

Winter's hand reached toward his shoulder, as if she wanted to comfort him. She pulled the hand back sharply, and folded both arms tight against herself.

Then Otter looked at her again. "He said you almost died last winter, too. I'm glad you didn't." Those words robbed her spite of all its strength.

Otter spent only a week at the fish camp, and most of that he spent with Winter. On the evening of his departure, Winter walked with him and black-spotted Dirty to the end of the rocky point that guarded Oyster Bay. When they reached the very tip, and stood gazing toward the shadowed mountains of the east, he gave her an ivory carving, a petrel in flight, strung as a necklace on a fine white deerskin cord. He slipped it over her head, and as she looked down at it, admiring the line of the petrel's wings, he touched her cheek and bent to kiss her. The kiss was a long one, and she melted into his arms, wanting to tug him down into the beachgrass and ride, skin against skin, sweat mingling with sweat, until they dissolved together into an ecstatic moment of heat and light.

But her wizard's vision showed her that he had already turned from her, toward the mountains, toward the memory of his lost sister. There was nothing to be done about it.

She returned with him to his canoe. A snap of his fingers, and Dirty jumped aboard. He heaved the canoe down into the rising tide. One more

shove and a leap, and he was waterborne. She watched him paddle into the dusk until canoe and wake were no more than a speck on the glassy seas. Storm clouds were moving in from the southeast, but he would reach camp before they broke.

She lay down that night in the bedroom she shared with her cousins, thinking of Otter, and suddenly, after all these years, scalding hatred for Thrush boiled over again. Thrush still dominated and twisted their lives: Rumble grim and unreachable, unable to marry or love; Otter an obsessed wanderer; and she, no less obsessed, but shut in by her guilt, only her petrel's vision letting her fly high over sea and land. She and Otter might have had a chance to break away from Thrush, but that moment was already gone.

And then she realized how much she was angry at Otter, too, for his selfishness, for finding it so easy to leave everyone and everything. And Otter's search was not even rightfully his. *She* was the one who had to atone.

The storm broke at midnight. Rain poured down on the roof of the camp house. Winter sent out her spirit as she did every night, but this time the petrel flew first along the shore, toward Otter's solitary campsite, where she found him curled uncomfortably beneath his overturned canoe, and only then did the hurt and anger toss her eastward, into the storm, toward the high mountains. She flew past peak after peak, climbing toward the edge of the world. Never had she flown so far or so fast. Lightning forked from cloud to high summit, illuminating the eastern wall of the world, and there, at the edge of mountain and sky, she saw the spirit house at last. Its inhabitants were dark, wild beings whose souls welled up from the unknowable country beyond the world. In their house the bears kept the rage of the storm, the hurtfulness of love, the ecstatic heat of passion, the randomness of pain and death. They had taken Thrush because she had no respect for them or theirs, and they had hidden from Winter because she had wanted to believe they did not exist.

That night, Rumble had a dream. Winter did not hear about it until the very early morning, when she was awakened by a commotion outside the camp house. She crawled outside into chilly darkness. In the light of many torches she could see perhaps twenty of Sandspit Town's most seasoned warriors, armed with spear and club and knife, performing the last few small tasks before departure: tightening straps, adjusting clothing, tying back their hair.

"What is this?" she asked Rumble, who stood at the edge of the group. Though it was still dark, she could see that he had painted his face black, the color of war and mourning. He looked cold, edgy, eager to be gone.

"I know where to go now," said Rumble. "I had a dream last night that showed me the way."

Rumble was not a full-fledged seer, as Winter might someday become, but he did sometimes have true dreams. They had helped him well during the war with Spruce Town. Dread filled Winter, though she could see nothing to suggest an immediate cause. "Don't go," she found herself saying.

Rumble looked at her with contempt. "And leave her there?" he said. "Is that what you'd like?"

"No," Winter said, "that's not it. I just . . ."

Rumble brushed past her and called to his warriors. They gathered in a loose line, and headed out of camp.

Winter watched them go. She *knew* something was wrong. She had returned inside the camp house when she realized she was no longer afraid of what might happen to Rumble, but of what he might do. In the dark, she groped for an extra robe against the cold of the mountain passes, and then she set out after her brother at a dead run.

Thrush hurried her children through the snow, climbing down from the high country. At first her children thought it was a game, and ran alongside her happily, but then they grew sleepy again, and wanted to turn homeward. She drove them on. They were not old enough yet for human speech or human form, but she knew they still had more strength and endurance than she. Even though she was so much stronger than when she'd first come here. . . .

She gave them a snack of dried salmon at midday, and nursed each one for a few minutes. They grew very drowsy, but she still would not let them sleep. She was hoisting her pack onto her back again when she heard Stink's distant roar. A strange mixture of fear and regret surged through her at the sound, and then she was running through the snow again. The cubs loped after her, afraid of being left alone.

Running was useless, of course. Stink could race across the land faster than a bird could fly, and he didn't even need the footprints in the snow to track them because he could smell his own children. In a few minutes she heard a crash on the hillside above her, and she twisted to see a huge dark shape bounding through the trees. He was almost upon her, roaring and snarling, when she remembered the old woman's instructions. From her pack she pulled the first thing that came to hand, the bone comb, and threw it at Stink.

An impenetrable thicket of thorns sprouted from the snow and rose in a wall that ended high over her head. From the far side she could hear Stink's baffled roars of rage, the futile crash of his body against the wall. She paused for a moment, gasping for breath, and then plunged onward.

As they descended, the forest grew taller and gloomier, until huge hemlocks and firs arched hundreds of feet over her head. Soon they left the snow behind, and the going was muddy, but much easier.

It was not long before she heard Stink behind them again. This time she had the hatchet ready, and when he had come into sight, almost upon her, she hurled it to the ground. The head fell into the mud and all of a sudden she was looking down into a deep, stony gorge cleaving the mountainside. The stream she had been following was a silver trickle at the bottom of it. On the far side, beneath the towering forest, the tiny figure of Stink reared on two legs, snarling ferociously.

They ran. Later on that terrible day he caught up with them again, and she threw the stone knife; it turned into an immense, glacier-topped mountain, with sheer unscaleable cliffs. That, too, stopped him for only an hour or two. When she heard the sounds of pursuit behind her once more, she felt a wave of despair. "I'm sorry, babies," she said. "I think he's going to kill me. I'm sorry. I should have stayed with him, for your sakes."

He bounded into sight. Thrush poured out the entire bottle of oil, and the smell of seaweed and cold salt spray rose up from a vast arm of the ocean that now lay between them, so wide the mists hid its far shore. As she turned away, she saw the familiar shape of Feather Mountain rising to the west, and, in the distance, the forested point of land that guarded Oyster Bay.

Winter climbed Feather Mountain as fast as she could go, running up the trail until every breath tore her lungs and a stitch cramped her side, walking only until she had recovered enough to run again. The animal trails wound up to the first snowfield. Beyond that, the snows stretched upward into the low-hanging clouds, white dissolving seamlessly into grey, only the tracks of Rumble's party across the snow giving dimension and direction to the world. When she reached the top of the pass, a thousand feet above Oyster Bay, Winter could see nothing but cloud and snow and rock. She sent the petrel soaring into the air, flying ahead of her body, into the valley beyond.

Her wizard's vision showed her that a vast new fjord now lay on the far side of the mountain. Struggling up the mountainside from the steep shore of that fjord was an exhausted, grim-faced woman and four balky, complaining, weary children.

That woman was the goal of two onrushing forces. One, a dangerous, powerful, wild being, raced along the shore of the fjord from the east. He wore the form of an enormous grizzly, but his essence was that of a man. Or perhaps it was that he wore the form of a man, but his heart was that of a grizzly. He seemed to shimmer as he galloped, between these selves and still others, and through it all she could see something else, bright, dark and wild, the true soul of an immortal.

From the westward end of the long, steep shore came Rumble and his men. They did not have the wild spirit power, but they had dogs, spears, and knives.

Winter ran down through the mists and the stony cliffs and drifts of old snow, down through the high meadows, down into the tangled forest, toward the woman and the point where everything would happen. She knew this was her chance to atone for everything. But her body could not fly as fast as her spirit, nor see as clearly.

She had to cross thickets, rockfalls, ravines full of snow, and each time she seemed to turn the wrong direction, take the longest way around. Agonizing pain lanced through her side, and her breath came in enormous, useless gasps. In the distance now she could hear men's shouts, and then many dogs barking viciously. At last she burst out of the forest onto a long, rocky meadow. Below her she saw the woman driving four bear cubs ahead of her. They proceeded at hardly more than a stumbling walk now.

Winter ran toward them with all the speed she had left in her. She had almost reached the closest bear cub when the huge grizzly burst out of the woods, roaring at the woman, rearing up on its hind legs. The woman cowered back. Dogs barked furiously, racing toward the bear. The foremost dog leapt snarling at the grizzly's flank. With a swipe of its paw, the grizzly disemboweled the dog and sent it flying. The men and their dogs surrounded the bear. It reared up again with three spears sticking from it, bloody now, foaming at the mouth, and then it charged the men. And suddenly Rumble jumped in front of the grizzly, screaming in battle frenzy, spear in hand.

Rumble struck at the bear, and the dogs charged again, and for a few moments the scene was incomprehensible chaos with the woman and the cubs caught in the middle of it. The woman was screaming. Then one of the cubs bolted in a panic, pursued by barking dogs and warriors with spears, and Winter realized Rumble's men were killing the cubs as well as the grown bear. The cub ran helter-skelter across the hill, dragging a spear from its shoulder, crying piteously. Winter flung herself over the cub, tackling it. It clawed at her in fierce panic. "Don't!" she screamed at the men. The dogs growled and tore at her, trying to get at the wounded cub, and one of the men seized her arm, trying to yank her off. "It's just a cub! Don't hurt it, don't hurt it!"

Then the man crumpled to the ground. Otter stood there, club in hand, beating the dogs back. Black-spotted Dirty launched himself, teeth bared, at a second warrior, who raised his club against the dog, but Otter struck first with a spear, impaling him.

The wounded cub struggled in Winter's arms, bloody, still crying in panic. Otter yanked the spear from its shoulder, and it screamed, flailing wildly. For a moment Winter nearly lost hold of it again. When she next looked, Otter was running down the hill, spear in one hand, club in the other. But the battle was over.

Winter limped after Otter, cub in her arms. The enormous grizzly lay

on its back, bristling like a porcupine with spears and arrows, twitching, eyes glazing. Bloody foam blew from its lips. Scattered around lay men and dogs, mauled, whimpering, dying. And bloody-handed Rumble and the exhausted, grim-faced woman stood in the midst of it all, facing each other without recognition.

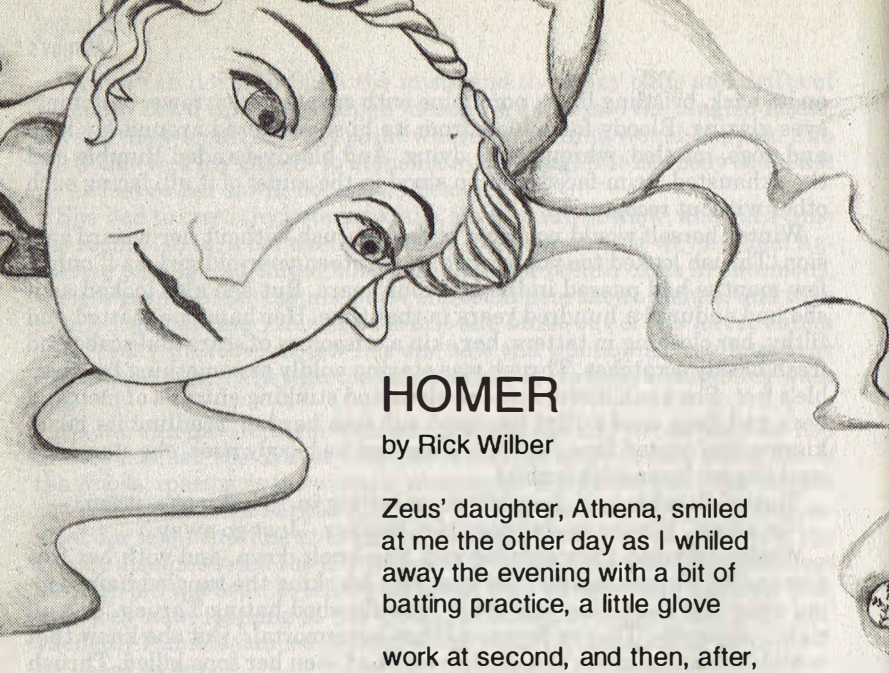
Winter herself would not have known Thrush without her wizard's vision. Thrush looked too young, like an eighteen-year-old girl, as if only a few months had passed in the last four years. But she also looked as if she had endured a hundred years in that time. Her hair was matted and filthy, her clothing in tatters, her skin a crisscross of scars and scabs and fresh bloody scratches. Thrush was staring wildly at something by Rumble's feet. She sank down, into the blood and stinking entrails of men and bear and dogs, and pulled her dead cub into her lap, cradling its head, kissing its snouted face. And cheek against its bloody nose, she started to wail like an inconsolable child.

"But—" Rumble said, bewilderment setting in. "That isn't—it isn't—"

"Go away," Winter said to her older brother. "Just go away."

Winter released the surviving cub. She knelt down, and with her free arm pulled Thrush against her shoulder, stroking the tangled hair, wiping away the tears. She seemed to have finished hating Thrush. "It's all right," she said. "They're free now. They're immortal." But she knew that would be scant comfort to a mother who had seen her sons killed. Thrush was not a wizard. She could not see the dark, wild souls of her bear children as they were: beyond form and beyond essence, ancient and young, eternal and ever-changing in their house at the very threshold of the world, where sky and mountain and bears alike become sheer, burning light. ●

We appreciate comments about the magazine, and would like to hear from more of our readers. Editorial correspondence should include the writer's name and mailing address, even if you use e-mail. Letters can be e-mailed to 71154.662@compuserve.com or posted to Letters to the Editor, *Asimov's,* 1270 Avenue of the Americas, New York, N.Y. 10020. Letters may be shortened and edited for publication. The e-mail address is for editorial correspondence *only*—questions about subscriptions should be directed to Box 54625, Boulder, CO 80322-4625.



# HOMER

by Rick Wilber

Zeus' daughter, Athena, smiled
at me the other day as I whiled
away the evening with a bit of
batting practice, a little glove

work at second, and then, after,
the aspirin and the laughter.
It's been a long, long voyage
getting here, but middle-age

beats, as they say, the alternative.
So I smiled as I dug in, not jaded
now, as in my youth, not rejecting
the Game, but embracing it, the object

of my desire. Evening's rosy-fingered
sky sat heavy out in left as I lingered
before taking the first pitch, a fat
one, right down the middle that

I swung on and sent back out
to short center. There. Doubts
erased about personal defeat. I
could hit the damn thing, at least.

Illustration by Shirley Chan

And then a second pitch, a third
and then more and more as I heard
again that Siren song, that crack
of the bat that seduced me, back

in a lost youth, when this was all
that mattered. This game. This bat
and ball. And then, toward the end
of my time at the plate, when

I'd begun thinking at last of Home,
and supper with my Penny, came
the perfect pitch. I saw it so clear
against the pale red sky, and dear me

it felt so good. I stepped into it,
habits formed some forty years ago brought
the shoulders and then arms through, the wrists
snapping and rolling over the fists on the handle

of the bat, the hips rotating, that little stride
with the left foot, the ball's bright hide against
the moving bat (yes, I saw this moment
of connection!). The feel of contact meant

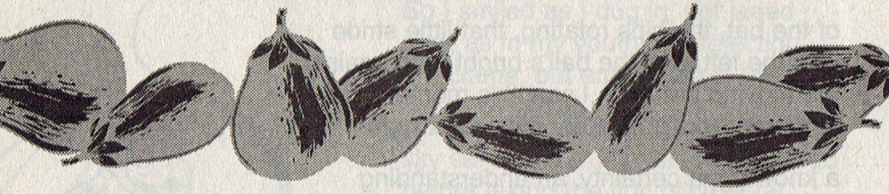
a knowing, a certainty, an understanding
that its high, lazy arc would clear that
fence. I watched it go. Felt it in the muscle
and tendons. Felt it as this dumb

boyhood game, this wonderful primal dumb
boyhood game, finally sent me home.

Michael H. Payne

# THE LANGUAGE OF GHOSTS

The author lives along the California coast a couple of hours south of Los Angeles, where he works at a local library and sings and plays guitar at a nearby church. He credits two of our earlier stories—"Whinin' Boy Blues" by Allen Steele (February 1994) and "The Day of Their Coming" by G. David Nordley (March 1994)—with providing inspiration for the following tale. Credit is also awarded to "a plastic M&M dispenser my brother gave me, and, of course, the eggplant, a fruit that is one of the wonders of the world."



"Behold the mighty eggplant!" Lynn heard Orel's raspy voice announce. "Noblest of all vegetables!"

A shiver twitched down her back even in the dusty afternoon heat; she stopped there in the middle of the road and let out a groan. Next to her, Malcolm cleared his throat. "Uhh, Lynn? I think your rachnoid—"

"Don't say it, Malcolm." She glared at him. "Don't even *breathe* it!"

Malcolm shrugged, and Lynn couldn't help noticing how *his* rachnoid rode out the motion of his shoulders without even a click of complaint. He

reached up and stroked the little robot. "You want me to send Keshia after him?"

The simple question, the assumption that she couldn't manage her own rachnoid, that was somehow worse than if he'd just started laughing at her. Lynn tried to keep her mouth from tightening. "Don't worry about it. You just go on ahead; I'll see you later in town, okay?"

He shrugged again. "How 'bout if Keshia keeps an ear open, then? In case he blows a gasket or something."

Keshia stirred on his shoulder. "Indeed, Miss Baden-Tan. Though it grieves me to speak so of a brother and colleague, Orel is far from the most reliable of our cluster. Please allow me to monitor the emergency frequencies should you find you require assistance."

"That's okay," she got out through clenched teeth. "I mean, thanks, but he's just being stupid. Like usual."

Malcolm shook his head. "I don't get it. Your Grampa did a great job on my Mom's rachnoid when the combine grabbed him last fall: you'd think he could fix Orel up no problem."

Lynn tugged at her backpack. "You'd think that, wouldn't you?" She forced a smile. "I'll see you at dinner."

"Okay." He gave Keshia another pat. "Oh, the Conovers were going into town today, too, so I invited them to join us. Hope you don't mind." He smiled, turned, and started back along the road toward town.

Lynn stared after him. Mind? Why should she mind? Just because he had invited her parents' best friends along on what she had *thought* was going to be her first date, her first romantic evening alone with Malcolm, an evening she had been dreaming about all week! Why should she *mind* that her whole life was ruined?!

She spun away then, stalked to the edge of the path and down into the eggplant, all bloated and purple and shiny. Orel's tinny voice led her straight to him, clinging to a bush with all eight legs and muttering, "So round, so firm, so fully packed. . . ."

Like things weren't bad *enough*. She snapped her fingers in front of him. "Come on, Orel; this is not how I planned to spend my only day off this week."

His eyestalks fluttered toward her. "But mistress! Acres and acres of eggplant! How can such things *be*?"

"It's the only stuff that'll grow out here: you know that." She wiped the sweat from her forehead and squatted down. "Now are you going to walk, or do I carry you?"

His stalks wavered between her and the bushes. "*Would* you carry me, mistress? I'll be able to see the eggplant better from the vantage of your shoulder."

"Fine. But I don't want to hear one word about how my walking shakes you up, you get me?"

"I shall so endeavor, mistress."

She reached out an arm, watched him creep up the denim of her shirt, then tipped her head to give him room to settle on her left shoulder, his legs stretching all prickly down along her neck. She blew out a breath, made her way up the slope to the road, and set off toward town again.

It just wasn't *fair*. Here she was, the granddaughter of Dr. Marcus Baden-Tan, the man hailed throughout space as the leader of the only successful human colony on an already inhabited world, and she had to live with this stupid, malfunctioning rachnoid. Grampa could blather all he wanted to about Orel's delicate balance of organic and mechanical systems, the breakthroughs this was supposed to represent, but that didn't fool Lynn: Grampa always used big words when he was stumped.

Orel was vibrating on her shoulder now, his scratchy voice mumbling things like, "Hear how I shall rave and rant the virtues of the sweet eggplant!" and "All ten worlds proclaim your fame: oh, eggplant, let resound your name!"

Hopeless. Her dreams evaporating under Chaldi's pale blue sky, Lynn set her jaw and kept walking.

Soon, native plants started appearing in the fields, umsu with its red flowers, tall fronds of boratch, the eggplant now only in a row along the road. Single rendar trees stood at regular intervals, growing closer and closer together as the flats crumpled into hills, until the fields became forest, reddish leaves dark against the blue-white of the sky.

At least now she was out of the sun, though the muggy air of the long Chaldi summer kept things more than hot enough. Soon, pointed roofs began appearing among the trees, so she snapped her fingers in front of Orel till his eyestalks jerked back. "My apologies, mistress. What are your wishes?"

"My wishes?" Lynn spat out a laugh. "I wish I didn't need you along to talk to the tayshil. In fact, I wish you were on the next warpship out of here. Or I wish *I* was."

"Now, mistress." One of Orel's stalks bent around to blink at her. "We are both too organic to survive travel in warp: you know that. And as for the tayshil, even if their vocal range were not beyond human hearing, their languages—"

"Yes, thank you, Mr. Science." She batted the eyestalk away. "Just remember: no talking to anyone on your own about *eggplant*. You only translate what *I* say, right?"

"I shall so endeavor, mistress."

"Good. Now plug in." She pulled her hair away from her ear, felt a tickle as Orel ran his translator leg up to her neural shunt, a slight jolt as he plugged in, and the silence around her bloomed with sound, pixigs chirping in the trees, the garbled chatter of a metin scuttling through the underbrush beside the path, tayshil voices from the town ahead, the tinkle

of the crystal nets that hung from every market stall on a trading day. The road wound around an outcropping, and then Lynn was passing through the gate posts into Hasquirk.

Not that this was *really* Hasquirk. Lynn had only been to the actual city down along the coast a few times with Grampa, but its neat, round houses and red glass spiral buildings sure made this place seem like the subordinate farming village it was. Lynn looked from the thatch huts to the packed-dirt road, and blew out a breath.

Orel stirred on her shoulder. "Did you speak, mistress?"

Lynn didn't bother to reply; she just stalked past the huts, through the row of red adobe warehouses, and out into the marketplace. Booths sat in zigzagging lines, dark-furred tayshil examining the wares or shouting from the stalls, the shimmering chime of the crystal nets filling the air. The spicy scent made her smile despite everything, and with it being market day, no one had a radio blaring: the rattles and quacks of tayshil music made her teeth ache.

"Sure, and if it isn't Miss Lynn!" a voice called, and she turned to see Mr. Chonik, recognizable by the golden rings flashing from the floppy tips of his ears: the only other tayshil who wore jewelry were the officials Grampa met downtown, and Mr. Chonik was the local mayor or something. He flicked a claw at her from his booth. "Bright waters to you, miss, and how be that grandfather o' yours?"

Lynn started toward the stall, flicking her fingers in return and muttering under her breath, "I really wish you'd drop the stupid *dialect,* Orel."

"But, mistress, my translations must reflect the richness of the tayshil languages. Mr. Chonik's northern origin is obvious from his speech, so the brogue I give him—"

"Just shut it down." Times like this made Lynn glad that human voices were pitched too low for tayshil ears. "Grampa's quite well, thank you, Mr. Chonik," she said, coming up to the booth. "I hope you and your family are the same." As always, she had to blink at the stereo effect: her actual words in her ears and Orel's translation translated back through her neural shunt. Most folks had their rachnoids filter out this echo, but then most folks could trust their rachnoids not to start ranting about eggplant.

Mr. Chonik pursed his lips in a tayshil smile and leaned forward, one four-fingered hand coming up to stroke Orel; Lynn puckered in return and reached for the metin dug into the back of Mr. Chonik's thick neck. The metin tapped her arm with one chitinous leg, and Mr. Chonik straightened up. "Well now, Miss Lynn, how'd you find those ghost stories I lent you?"

Lynn grinned. "Oh, Mr. Chonik, these are even better than the last ones. I mean, that whole scene in 'The Rattling Wall' where the ghost comes gibbering out of the woods, into the murderer's house and tears his head off, it's terrific!"

"Well, I'm glad to hear it." His eyes widened. "It's not proper reading for someone of my stature in the community and all, but, aye, that one's my favorite, too. Now, what can I help you with this fine day, Miss Lynn?"

"Oh, I'm just wandering." She pulled at her backpack. "It's almost Grampa's birthday, so I was going to pick up one of Ms. Bahsh's carvings for him."

His cheek pouches fluttered. "That's right: you folks celebrate your actual birth rather than your joining." He touched his metin, his lips pursing. "You might be interested in knowing that up north where I come from, potted umsu's the traditional joining day gift." He spread his hands. "Just for a bit of variety, if you like."

"Really? Well, I'll look around." Some other tayshil were coming out of the crowd toward Mr. Chonik's booth, and Lynn heard Orel's raspy voice in her ears: "Mistress, note the quiver in the whiskers of these approaching tayshil. It indicates anger and leads me to believe that Mr. Chonik is needed in his capacity as judge to settle a dispute."

Mr. Chonik had caught sight of them now, and a slight quiver passed over his own whiskers. Lynn pushed out her lips and flicked her fingers at him. "Well, thank you for your time, Mr. Chonik. I'll see you later."

His lips barely twitched. "I certainly hope so, Miss Lynn. But at any rate, a good morning to you."

Lynn walked around the booth and into the market, tayshil voices weaving up to her from ahead. But behind, things had grown quiet, and she looked back to see the tayshil around Mr. Chonik's booth staring after her, their whiskers visibly twitching. She blinked, cold prickling at her back, then put a few booths between them and herself. "Hey, Orel, you don't think they're angry at *me,* do you?"

"Unlikely," the rachnoid buzzed. "Our behavior has been within the bounds of propriety, and their lack of xenophobia makes the tayshil unique among known peoples. Your grandfather attributes this to their symbiotic relationship with the metin, but the reluctance of the tayshil to discuss this and most metin-related questions, however—"

"Yes, thank you, Mr. Science." Lynn poked his carapace. "This is my day off, remember?"

"But mistress! The questions!" He began tapping her back. "All evidence indicates that metin and tayshil cannot reproduce without each other, one metin born for each tayshil child! Yet we find metin wandering wild in the woods!"

"Orel . . ."

"Before joining, young tayshil and young metin are no more intelligent than, say, large canids, yet these wild metin produce a warbling that seems too structured to be merely—"

"Orel!" She flicked a finger into his side.

He jumped on her shoulder, his eyestalks turning to blink at her. "Mistress, that is very painful."

"You know the rules, Orel. On Monday, I'll find this all fascinating. Till then, I don't give a rip, understand?"

She felt him slump against the side of her head. "I shall so endeavor, mistress."

"Good." She wandered then, not sure if she wanted to find Malcolm, until the bright red of shurtri caught her eye, stacked in bunches next to some huge eggplant: boiled shurtri was Grampa's favorite, just right for his birthday dinner. So she stopped, and when the proprietor turned, a tayshil only Lynn's height with a farmer's vest and a scar marring the fur along the left side of her face, Lynn pursed her lips and reached for the tayshil's metin.

But the other drew back, her whiskers twitching. Lynn blinked: no one had ever done *that* before. She left her hand outstretched, thinking maybe the farmer had misunderstood, but the tayshil jerked her chin and said, "Use that hand to pick your root and pay me, invader: that's all I need from you."

The back of Lynn's head suddenly felt tight: she'd never heard a tayshil use the word "invader" before. "I'm sorry," she muttered. She moved past, but the farmer followed, her arms crossed, and Lynn found herself clearing her throat. "You, uh, you've got a lovely selection here. Really." She felt like an idiot immediately and pulled her mouth shut, but she heard her voice continue along the neural link: "And your *eggplant,* ma'am! So robust! The finest I've seen in weeks!"

"Orel!" Lynn said through clenched teeth, but the rachnoid was already going on: "They seem almost hydroponic! I'll wager you use natural deterrents against the flea beetles and that your farm is near the mountains, yes?"

Lynn pushed her lips out and clapped a hand over Orel's face: she hated it when he did this! After all, to tayshil thinking, the rachnoids were just metin, joined with a human into one mind. With normal rachnoids, that wasn't far wrong, but Lynn had never been able to think of a way to explain to the tayshil that Orel was *not* a normal rachnoid.

She was just starting to back away, determined to take Orel off somewhere and yell at him, when the farmer pursed her lips. "You know your eggplant, huh? The one good thing you humans've done, I'll admit that. Helped a lotta dirt farmers 'round here, this stuff growing out on the flats the way it does." She pointed the smallest finger of her left hand at Lynn. "So you pick your choice, and I'll not bite your head off, deal?"

Lynn stared, Orel's voice buzzing in her ear: "Point your left pinkie at her, mistress, and agree."

"Uh, sure," Lynn said, raising her hand and pointing. "Deal." She heard Orel translate it, saw the tayshil purse her lips, turn, and greet

another customer. Lynn blinked, then looked down at the shurtri. "Orel, what's going on?"

He was quivering on her shoulder. "Unknown. Such animosity is unheard of in human-tayshil relations."

"You seemed to know that bit with the finger."

"In tanaksh, a local ball sport, the gesture signals a truce between two players. I felt it best to take the offer."

Lynn blew out a breath. "Yeah." She dug through the shurtri till she found a bunch with the veins still pink, then turned to the eggplant piled in the next bin. "Well, I guess we'd better buy one now that she thinks I'm an expert."

Orel gave a little wiggle. "Oh, mistress, *may* we? That one to the left there, just beneath that one, yes, oh *yes*, the very one . . ." His voice trailed off as Lynn pulled one of the vegetables from the stack. "Oh, such tone, such clarity! Truly a virtuoso eggplant, mistress!"

She looked at it. It was an eggplant, the same as every other eggplant she'd seen since Grampa had introduced the things. She shook her head and walked around the stand to where the farmer was taking money from a customer.

When the tayshil turned, both her lips and her whiskers seemed to twitch. Lynn dug out some coins, held them up, and caught her breath as the farmer's spindly fingers twined about her wrist, the scar bristling the fur along her left cheek. "We have a truce, human, so heed me: go back to your settlement and do not return for the next three days. That's all."

She let go of her wrist then, poked through the coins, and held one up as change. Lynn took it slowly, and the farmer's lips twitched; she gave Orel a quick poke, and Lynn barely had time to brush her metin before she had slipped away.

Lynn stood for a moment, then moved to the side of a water seller's cart, slung off her pack, and squatted down to load her vegetables in. "Orel, can you contact Malcolm and Keshia? See if anything weird's happened to them today."

She'd gotten the shurtri in and was making room for the eggplant when Orel said, "Mistress, they do not respond."

Her hands froze. "Try the Conovers."

"I have, mistress. All frequencies are blanketed with static, even those normally used by tayshil broadcasting."

She was turning to him, a "What?" on her lips, when the ground shook, and black smoke blossomed into the air above the warehouses that ringed the marketplace. More rumbles, and smoke began pouring up all across town.

Shouts slapped at her neural link, "Kill the invaders!" and groups of tayshil in beige vests rushed howling from the warehouses, clubs in their hands, knocking shoppers to the ground, leaping at the booths. Another

string of explosions, and the smoke covered the sun, a sudden twilight falling.

Through the rising screams, Lynn could just hear Orel's buzzing voice: "Mistress! Quickly! We must take shelter!"

"What's going on?!"

"Unknown! But I would rather not be here in the center of it!"

Something whizzed overhead, dropped into the middle of the marketplace, and flame started licking up from the stalls. Lynn grabbed her pack and took off for the road out of town.

The smoke was spreading along the ground now, making it hard to see. "Is this the right way?!" she had to call more than once, shattered booths looming out of the darkness and making her change direction.

"As far as I can tell, mistress," Orel would reply, sometimes adding, "Bear left, if you can," or "Around to the right here, mistress." Finally, she heard, "I believe we are nearly to the warehouses, mistress. From there, we can—" His voice broke off, then hissed, "Mistress! Shapes ahead!"

An abandoned booth lay in pieces to her left; Lynn jumped into it, peered out through the cracks, and saw several tayshil come running out of the smoke. Firelight glinted from the ears of one, and Lynn realized it was Mr. Chonik.

They ran past, and Lynn was just about to stand and wave when one of their heads exploded, dark glop spraying forward as the figure fell. Lynn saw Mr. Chonik spin sideways, liquid spurting from his stomach, then he folded up and dropped onto the roadway.

A group of tayshil in vests came racing up then, two with tubes that she recognized as tayshil guns. One fired into the smoke after Mr. Chonik's companion, and the other placed his weapon against the head of the still-twitching Mr. Chonik.

Then lights sprang on, cutting through the smoke from the other end of the marketplace. They converged on the group, and two heads blew up; Lynn heard bullets ping past, and she threw herself down into the wreckage. The lights dashed over the gaps in the boards, more shots rang out, then the spots streaked away through the haze.

It took her a moment to uncurl, to get to her knees and peer over the booth's remains. In the dull glow of the smoke, Lynn could see six tayshil bodies sprawled, only Mr. Chonik's still with a head. Lungs stinging, eyes tearing up, Lynn could only stare, her knees and elbows frozen.

Out among the bodies, though, something was moving. Lynn blinked; a metin was creeping onto Mr. Chonik's shoulder, its eyestalks waving. A high keening voice came to her then, words tickling her neural link: "Alone, bereft, a ghost flitting fitfully, I am dead and yet I live, alone, bereft, a ghost flitting fitfully, I am dead and yet I live, alone . . ."

"Orel?" she finally got out. "What's happening?"

"I do not have enough information, mistress."

"Me, neither." The voice was still whispering in her shunt, the same phrase over and over. "Is that the metin?"

The rachnoid leaned forward. "Metin do not talk."

"Well, I'm hearing *something*. Aren't you?"

"I am. The metin . . . it appears to be speaking what might be some archaic form of—"

"Great." Lynn dropped to her hands and knees and crept out from the wrecked booth.

Orel's legs grabbed tight at her shoulders. "Mistress! What are you doing?!"

"Getting our information. Hang on." Other than the wavering voice, all she heard was a crackling now and again: either guns firing or wood burning. Lynn did her best not to think about the things that stuck to her hands as she crawled to the bodies, glad she couldn't smell anything but smoke. Teeth gritted, she skirted around to Mr. Chonik's side.

The metin had made its way to his leg, its voice repeating in her neural link: ". . . I am dead and yet I live, alone, bereft, a ghost flitting fitfully, I am dead . . ."

"Okay," she whispered to Orel. "Talk to it."

His bristly hair dug at the back of her neck. "Mistress, I have no idea what to say."

"Fine. Just translate, then." She lowered her head. "Mr. Chonik, can you hear me?"

She heard Orel's translation, then a faint voice saying, "No, I can hear nothing. I will never hear anything again."

Lynn blinked. "Then how did you hear my question?"

"I didn't." The metin stopped on Mr. Chonik's lower knee. "I am but a ghost flitting fitfully."

Orel buzzed in her ear. "My apologies, mistress. Its syntax is changing even as it speaks. It seems to be using two different constructions: one for itself joined to Mr. Chonik, and a second for itself now."

"Great." Lynn held out a hand. "Former Mr. Chonik, will you come with me?"

The metin waved its antennae a bit more, then raised its two front legs. "Do you offer sanctuary?"

Lynn licked her lips. "Yeah, I guess I do," she said, but she stopped when she didn't hear the phrase translated. "Orel, tell him we do."

The rachnoid fidgeted on her shoulder. "Perhaps, mistress, you should reconsider."

"What? Why?"

"The phrase which I rendered as 'sanctuary' has a ritualistic sound to it. We are entering unknown social areas, and I do not wish for us to become tangled in matters too deep for our understanding."

"Uhh, Orel, I don't think we can get tangled any deeper."

"Mistress—"

"Orel, this is Mr. Chonik! Or, at least, what's . . . what's left of him. . . ." She forced herself to swallow the lump in her throat. "We can't just abandon him! And, c'mon, what about all your metin questions? I mean, the answers are right here in front of us, if we can get it back to the settlement!"

The rachnoid buzzed. "I thought this was your day off."

Lynn flicked a finger. "Offer it sanctuary already."

"As you wish, mistress." Through the neural shunt, then, Lynn heard: "Yes. I offer you sanctuary."

The metin touched her fingers. "I accept. A ghost can do no more." And with that, it began creeping up her arm.

Lynn watched it, her neck tingling. "Orel, the ghosts in Mr. Chonik's stories. Do you think—"

"We ought not to jump to any conclusions, mistress."

"But it makes *sense*, Orel! Gibbering, wandering the woods, seeking vengeance: they're the metin of folks who've been murdered!"

Orel tapped her back. "Only those murdered incorrectly. With a shot to the head, the metin is killed as well."

By now, the metin had crawled up to Lynn's other shoulder, and she touched it gently. "Are you comfortable?"

"I am a ghost." Its antennae tickled her ear. "I shall never be comfortable again."

She had to swallow as she turned to look into the smoke. "Orel, any luck with the radio yet?"

"None, mistress."

"Great. So which way do we go?"

She felt the rachnoid shift, saw one leg point up the road. "From what I can make out of our surroundings, I would guess this way, mistress."

"Okay." Rising into a half-crouch, Lynn started scooting along in the direction Orel had pointed, the voice of the metin still whispering along her shunt: ". . . flitting fitfully even in sanctuary, I am dead and yet I live . . ."

She hadn't gone far when Orel hissed: "Shapes ahead!"

Lights flashed on, a voice called, "Stop or we'll shoot!" and out of the smoke came a group of tayshil dressed in pale vests; four or five had weapons, all pointed at her. One stepped forward, and in the light from behind, Lynn could see a scar puckering the fur along its left cheek. "Human," the farmer's voice came to her. "I told you to leave town."

The others had moved up to surround her, and Lynn heard one say, "Hey, that thing's got two metin."

Voices mumbled from the circle, and the farmer stepped closer. Her eyes moved from Orel to Mr. Chonik's metin and back again, and she scowled into Lynn's face. "What're you up to, human? Where'd you pick that up?"

Lynn licked her lips. "It's Mr. Chonik's. Your shooters got him in the

stomach, then ran off before finishing their job. Even I know that's not right."

Fur bristled over the farmer's face, and she spun to glare at the tayshil behind her. They had all taken a step back, their ears flicking, and even the farmer looked a little shaky as she turned to Lynn again. "So. That still doesn't explain what you're doing with it."

Lynn thought quickly. "Well, it asked me for sanctuary." She didn't hear the translation, so she stopped. "Orel? Tell them it asked—"

"Mistress, let me remind you that we are entering unknown areas of social discourse. Caution may be—"

"Orel, we've got a real, live ghost here, and they're the murderers! Remember Mr. Chonik's stories? They've got to be scared! If we stick with the metin, I'll bet they won't mess with us! Now, go on: tell 'em!"

A brief moment of silence, then Lynn heard Orel's version of her voice: "It asked for sanctuary. I'm granting it."

The farmer brushed her cheek fur. "Right. You speak the language of ghosts, human?"

Lynn reached up and touched the metin on her shoulder. "I do, yes."

The tayshil all gave a hiss; several jumped another step back. The farmer's whiskers stopped quivering. "You . . . you *lie*. You lie, human!"

Even in the smoke and the heat, the sweat on Lynn's forehead had gone cold. Knowing Orel would speak her words in the steady voice she couldn't manage, she said, "Would you like me to ask it the names of its assailants?"

The farmer's ears sprang up, and one of the armed tayshil stepped forward. "How?" he asked. "How can a thing like you know the language of ghosts? You're an invader, not a—"

"Shut up!" The farmer whapped the other in the chest, then turned back to Lynn. "I think you'd better come with me back to headquarters, human."

Lynn raised her left pinkie. "Another truce, then?"

The others just stared, but Lynn saw the farmer's lips purse. "All right," she said, pointing her little finger. "Another truce." She turned to the tayshil who had stepped forward. "Dirosh, take the troop around the perimeter again. I'll escort this human myself."

His hands twitched on the gun barrel. "You sure, Prin?"

"Hey, didn't you see?" The farmer flicked her fingers at him. "Me and this human, we've got a truce."

"This isn't a game, Prin! These are invaders!"

The farmer whapped him in the chest again. "Get going, Dirosh." She looked back at Lynn. "What's not to trust in a face like that?"

Dirosh swiveled his head toward Lynn, and Lynn tried her best to look harmless. After a moment, he let go of the gun with one hand, flicked his fingers at the farmer, then called out, "All right, let's go! We've got a town to secure here!"

The group trickled past—wide around her, Lynn noticed—till they were lost in the smoke. Prin stood with her arms crossed, then said, "This way."

She started off, and Lynn followed. "Orel," she muttered, "any idea which direction we're headed?"

The rachnoid shifted on her shoulder. "Back into town, I would guess, mistress. Away from the road, at any rate."

"Great." She stuck close to the farmer, the scene of heads being pulped still vivid in her mind: one stray bullet, that was all it would take.

A few patrols stopped them, but they were all wearing the pale vests and all seemed to recognize the farmer. Lynn saw other bodies, their heads gone, sprawled around the market, saw groups of tayshil huddled together, armed tayshil standing around them. But wasn't this an anti-human riot? Why were they holding other tayshil? She cleared her throat. "May I ask, Ms. Prin, what all this is about?"

"No," came the reply. "Just walk."

So she walked. After a few minutes, they came to the ring of warehouses and passed through them into the village. Thatched huts slid by in the smoke as the farmer led Lynn around corners and down streets. "You recognize anything, Orel?" she muttered.

"No, mistress. I am only familiar with the market and the government buildings around Mr. Chonik's house. I would hazard a guess that we are on the other side of town."

Down a few more streets, and smoky torches began appearing on every corner, armed tayshil standing beside them; they waved, and let her and the farmer continue. Around one more corner, and Lynn found herself staring at a well-guarded and torchlit hut, twice as long but narrower than any of the others, tayshil in pale vests filling the street in front of it. And sitting on the ground by the door were four humans: Mr. and Mrs. Conover, their daughter Lucy, and Malcolm.

Lynn felt her shoulders loosen. "Orel, can you get in touch with their rachnoids from here?"

"Possibly, mistress," she heard, then she saw the four all suddenly sit up. Malcolm tried to rise, but several tayshil swung their weapons toward him. Orel's voice came to her: "They say they are fine but are concerned for our collective safety."

"Can't imagine why," Lynn muttered as the farmer led them into the press of dark-furred bodies.

"Make way!" the farmer was yelling over the mumble of the crowd. "Coming through, here!"

The tayshil parted before them, some with a hiss and a jump, till they came to those guarding the humans. One of them flicked her fingers. "One more, huh, Prin?"

"No," the farmer replied. The two stroked each other's metin. "This one's gotta go inside."

"Why?" Malcolm was on his feet again, the others following. "What'd she do? You can't—"

"Malcolm, please." Mrs. Conover took his arm. "What's going on, Lynn? No one'll tell us—" She broke off then, her brow wrinkling. "What's that on your shoulder?"

"Enough," the farmer said, her whiskers fluttering. "You humans have been in collaboration with our invaders since you arrived here, and right now you have exactly one chance to avoid their fate." She crooked one of her thumbs at Lynn. "If this one comes out alive, you and your settlement will be released into her custody. If she doesn't, you'll go to trial with the rest of the invaders. Understood?"

"Lynn?" Mr. Conover's bald forehead shone in the torchlight. "Do you understand?"

Lynn swallowed. "Orel, don't translate this. I'm not sure. Wish me luck. Orel, translate this. Don't worry: once I prove I can talk to ghosts, we'll be on our way."

Everyone stared at her then, humans with eyes wide and tayshil with ears trembling. The farmer pointed to the hut's doorway. "You go first," she said.

The door was the usual mat of reeds, but it was woven with a more complicated pattern than Lynn had seen before, a pattern that seemed to twitch in the torchlight behind her. With another swallow, Lynn pushed the mat aside.

A corridor lay beyond it, something Lynn had never seen in a tayshil house: they didn't seem to like interior walls. Another mat hung at the end of the corridor, so Lynn let the outer mat drop, walked to it, and lifted it open.

The room on the other side was lit only by several pits of coals. Shapes moved up and down over the walls, and as Lynn got used to the dim light, she saw metin, dozens of them, perched in alcoves overlooking the room, their antennae flitting shadows along the walls. Their voices rustled like tree branches in Lynn's neural link, no words reaching her, just sounds. "Orel?" she murmured. "What are they saying?"

His legs scratched at her neck. "Give me time, mistress. It is very like the language spoken by Mr. Chonik's metin, I think: the root forms, for instance, seem—"

"Will you just—!" she shouted, but she stopped when she noticed another figure in the room, a thin, hairy tayshil squatted against the far wall, double knees folded, the spurs along them telling her he was male.

Something prodded at her back. "All the way," came Prin's voice, and Lynn stumbled into the shadowy room. The farmer came up beside her and flicked her fingers at the figure across the room. "Speaker," she said.

The other tayshil flicked a finger, a breathy voice coming to Lynn's shunt: "Prin. What have you brought me?"

Words were starting to poke through the background muttering: "Ghost," Lynn heard clearly, more rustling sounds, then, "This one walks with ghosts."

Mr. Chonik's metin, Lynn noticed, had stopped mumbling, its legs tightening around her bicep. Prin was going on: "A human, Speaker. She says she speaks to ghosts."

"Indeed?" came the breathy voice again, then a louder, harsher voice crashed into Lynn's shunt, the tayshil across the room lifting his arms, his eyes glinting at her: "Do you so speak, human? Do you so speak?"

The metin in their alcoves leaned forward, their scratchy voices calling out, "Do you? Speak! Speak to us! Speak!"

A shiver rustled down Lynn's back. "Orel? Can we?"

"Possibly, mistress, if you keep it simple."

"Great." She cleared her throat. "I speak. I speak for this ghost. He asks me for sanctuary. I give it to him."

She heard Orel's translation through her neural link, his voice more strident somehow, and the metin along the walls all started hissing, "Sanctuary! Sanctuary!" over and over again; even Mr. Chonik's metin took up the chant, swaying slightly on her shoulder. The tayshil across the room rose slowly, creaking as he slid up the wall. "So," he said, his voice soft again, barely audible over the metin. "You are a Speaker."

Prin took a step forward. "She is? You know her to be?"

"They know her." The Speaker waved a hand. "She walks with ghosts, they tell me, and now I hear that she talks with them." He flicked his fingers at her. "You are a colleague of mine now. I am Rogateth. You are. . . ?"

Lynn licked her lips. "Lynn Baden-Tan. I . . . I know I'm not tayshil, Speaker: I wasn't born on this planet, but—"

"None of us are born tayshil." Rogateth reached out and stroked Orel. "We become tayshil after our joining."

"Whatever." Lynn poked the Speaker's metin. "But, sir, you should know that we are not invaders. We came—"

"Invaders?" Rogateth turned away. "You are not from here, as you say, but you are not the invaders. Invaders are those who do not treat our ghosts with respect, who do not treat our ways with respect."

Lynn blinked. The Speaker raised his arms. "The northerners allowed our ghosts to wander into the woods, for they have no Speakers among them and have no respect for ghosts. These are the few I was able to save."

He looked back at her. "Return to your settlement and ask your people not to enter this town for three days. Trials must be held and grievances redressed. You, however, Speaker, will be most welcome. I cannot offer sanctuary to the ghosts of the northerners that will result, not after they have sent our ghosts out into madness. Knowing that you would be there to offer it would soothe me greatly. Will you do this?"

Lynn blinked at him. "You mean . . . all that . . ." She waved a hand toward the wall. "It wasn't about us? Us humans?"

Prin crossed her arms. "You humans were suspected of being collaborators. Since you offered your eggplant to us as well as our invaders, though, and now that we see you've got Speakers . . ." She flicked her fingers. "Take your people back to your settlement. I'll come for you tomorrow, Speaker Lynn. If it were up to me, these northern ghosts could wander from here to Shaffit's Pit, but it's not up to me."

"Indeed it isn't." Rogateth pursed his lips. "All ghosts deserve sanctuary, Prin, all ghosts." He flicked his fingers. "Now go. I must prepare for tomorrow's trials." He padded back to the wall, sank down into a squat against it, and Lynn heard his harsher voice again through the shunt: "You know me, o ghosts. Hear me now. Those who made you ghosts will become ghosts themselves."

"Ghosts!" came the cry from the metin all around. "To live by the ghost is to die by the ghost! All ghosts! All be made ghosts!"

Lynn barely noticed Prin at her arm till the farmer poked her. "Speaker Lynn?"

"What?!" Lynn jumped, sending the farmer back a step. "Oh, right, yeah. I'm . . . I'm sorry. Let's go." She turned and pushed the mat aside, the hissing of the metin still ringing down her shunt. "Orel, what're we going to *do*?"

The rachnoid shifted on her shoulder. "Well, first, we are going to get the Conovers and Malcolm home. Then when Ms. Prin comes to collect us tomorrow, we are going to come into town and witness the trials, taking home with us the metin of anyone killed by anything other than a shot to the head. That would be my guess, mistress."

"But . . . but why?!"

"Because we have been *asked* to. I think your grandfather will agree that this is the best course of action."

"That's not what I meant, but you're right." She rubbed her eyes, then reached for the outer mat. "All this politics going on around us, and we never even noticed. I mean, I can see now why Mr. Chonik and his friends down in the city didn't like to talk about the metin, but I just wonder what else they neglected to tell us?"

"I'm sure we will find out, mistress."

The torchlight seemed very bright as Lynn stepped outside, and the muttering all around dropped away. Prin pushed past her and shouted, "All right, listen up! This is Speaker Lynn! She is to be accorded all due courtesy, got it?!"

The tayshil all stared for a moment, then lifted their hands and flicked their fingers. Lynn flicked hers in return, muttering, "What, Orel? Am I supposed to give a speech?"

Before the rachnoid could do more than wiggle, though, the tayshil had

turned back to their own conversations, only the eyes of the four humans still on her. "You okay?" she heard Malcolm call to her.

Lynn spread her hands, started toward them, thought of something, and turned back to the farmer. "Prin, can we get vests? I'd rather not have anyone taking shots at us."

"Sure thing, Speaker." Prin took hers off and handed it to Lynn, then called out, "Hey, Tair! You guys give the humans your vests, okay? I'll round you up some more, but they've got traveling to do yet."

One of the guards flicked her fingers, and she and the others began undoing their vests. Lynn came up to the group just as the baffled humans were taking the vests from their former captors. Lynn raised her hands before they could start asking and said, "Don't translate, Orel. Let's get back to the settlement first. This's all some sort of civil war or something, but I think we're okay for now. Translate, Orel. Speaker Rogateth has told me some interesting stuff, and we've got to get back to the settlement to share it with the others. There was a lot going on here that we didn't know about."

They stared at her, but Mr. and Mrs. Conover nodded, shrugging into their vests, their rachnoids scuttling up and around to avoid being buried by the cloth, Lucy looking too scared to ask any questions. Malcolm shook his head and grinned. "I'm glad I don't come into town with you every day," he said.

Lynn forced a smile—well, so much for romance—and the guards laughed, their eyes opening wide. One of them gave her a torch. "You'll need this till you get out of town; I'll bet this smoke stretches halfway down the hills."

"I'll bet." Lynn took the torch. "Any idea how to get back to the road from here?"

The tayshil laughed again, then gave a series of directions that Lynn hoped Orel was taking note of. Lynn pushed out her lips, stroked the guard's metin, waited till she'd tapped Orel, then muttered, "Which way, Orel?"

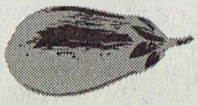
"Straight ahead, mistress, for seven blocks."

"Right. Come on, folks." She pushed through the furry bodies. "And Orel?"

"Yes, mistress?"

"The next time I say anything nasty about eggplant, you just whap me right in the side of the head, understand?"

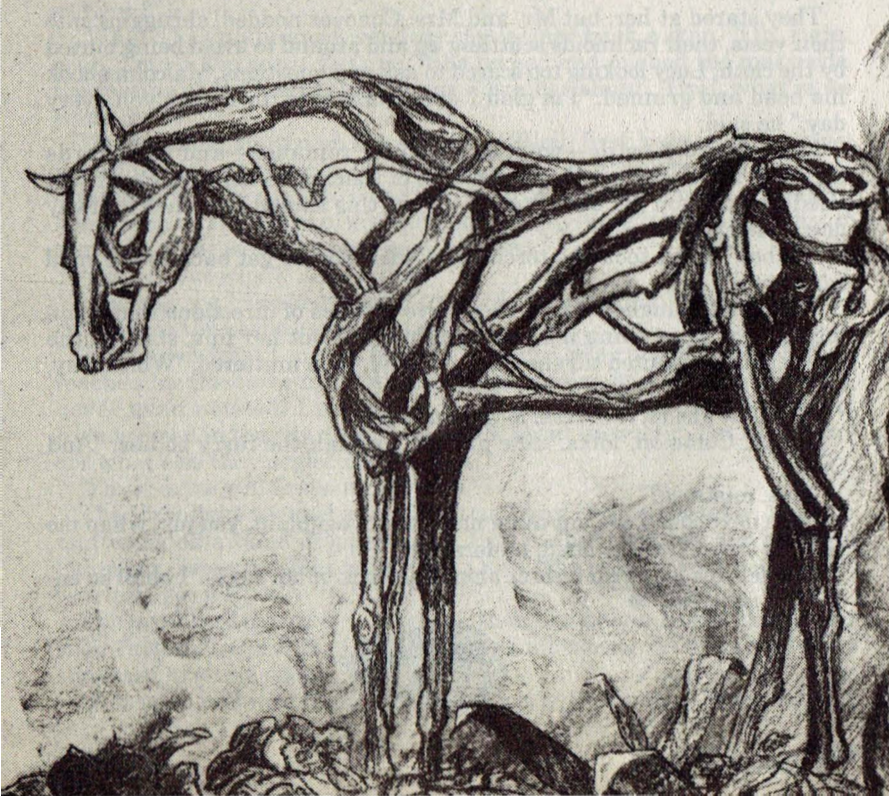
She felt his legs grip tighter along the back of her neck. "I shall so endeavor, mistress." ●



Mary Rosenblum

# THE BOTANIST

Illustration by Laurie Harden



**Readers of Mary Rosenblum's popular novel, *The Drylands,* have asked her what will become of the forests in that future—does she envision the entire country as a desert? Ms. Rosenblum replies, "Well no, I don't. So I took a look at the forests of southern Oregon, and what happens to the trees, in 'The Botanist.' " The author has just sold her first mainstream mystery, *Blood Work,* and she is working on *Black Sheep*—the second book in the series.**

"I don't know if they're ready to tap," Keri said. She took his hand, and her touch drowned the tree song in Daniel's head. "I'm way behind on my quota. Come help me, please?" She leaned toward him. "You always get through early. You're never wrong."

Daniel looked away, swallowing dry-mouthed as her breast brushed his arm. The mothwing touch of her flesh, coupled with the humming ripeness of the sap-trees, made him dizzy. Keri was sixteen to his just-fifteen, soft with new curves where last year she had been muscle-on-bone, like a yearling colt. In this same year, she had become almost a stranger, in a way that troubled his dreams at night. "Somebody's using the old greenhouse," he blurted out. "I was gonna go see."

"Oh, it's just some dope-grower starting plants." Keri dismissed the mystery with a toss of her head. "Please help me, Daniel?"

He sighed, thinking about the thirty trees he had left to tap. Jensen, the super, would give him grief if he didn't finish. He might fire Keri if she came up short on her quota again. "All right." He retrieved his pack from where he had cached it against the swollen bole of a tree. The sample jars rattled as he dropped his bark knife into it and swung it over his shoulder.

"I cut a bunch of trees and they weren't even close to ready." Keri fell in beside him, arms swinging as they walked. "You never cut a tree that isn't ripe. What do they do?" she asked lightly. "*Talk* to you?"

And that hurt, because she had understood, last summer. But all of a sudden, it was like they had never talked, never lain side by side in the tall meadow grass while clouds walked across the summer sky and he told her about the world he knew.

He had thought she understood, anyway.

"Let's get those trees done," he growled.

Her section was above his, just below the Scrub, where the mountain got too rocky to grow the deep-rooted bio-trees. Jensen had given her a small plot that produced some kind of polymer for manufacturing. Not very important—because he knew she wasn't talented with trees. But he

had hired her anyway. Daniel had never been able to figure that out. He walked quickly through the evenly spaced trunks, letting his fingertips brush the rough bark of the big trunks, feeling the humming song of the trees in his bones. Mostly they were green—too low a concentration of the engineered substance to be worth tapping, yet. But a few were ready. "That one. This one. And this one." He touched them lightly, walked on, and left her to scurry after with a marking chalk. He was being rude, and he derived a bitter satisfaction from her scrambles.

He reached the end of her section and emerged from the shadows into the fading light of evening. Through the stunted, twisted trees of the Scrub, he saw an opalescent glow, like a landbound moon trapped in the wild growth. Shedding his heavy pack filled with sample-vials, he slipped into the shadows, tingling with the wild trees' song. It felt like bubbles in his blood, all light and tingling. The glow came from the old greenhouse. Someone had replaced the broken panes of glass with translucent plastic, Daniel noticed. He edged closer, slipping his tapping knife from his pocket.

"Daniel!" Keri hissed from behind him. "What are you doing?" She grabbed his shirt. "Don't!"

"Why not?" He shook her off, annoyed because—filled with the wild tree song—he hadn't heard her sneaking up on him. "I want to see who's there."

"What if it's the ghost?" She shivered and pulled herself against him. "The crazy survivalist who killed his wife and kids with a machine gun. My cousin Patti saw him one night."

"I'm not afraid of the ghost." It was a sad thing, like the scent of rotting melons on the night wind.

"Then they're dopers, and they'll kill you."

"Not this close to the bio-trees." The heat of her flesh burned him and made him shiver. He pulled free of her grip and began to slip purposefully toward the glowing arch of glass. "If you're scared, go home." Behind him, Keri drew in a hissing breath.

"You want to get yourself killed, you go right ahead, Daniel Garver! When are you going to *grow up?*" And she fled, making enough racket to wake the dead.

"I'm . . ." He bit off the words, because she was gone. She was mad. He clenched his teeth and turned his back on her absence, creeping closer, damned if he'd leave before he'd looked inside, and so what if they *were* dopers?

But his heart was hammering as he slipped his tapping blade through the corner of a plastic pane, and sliced out a tiny triangle of a peephole. Warm air seeped out, damp, sulfurous, and earthy. He pressed his eye to the space and forgot about ghosts and untapped trees. Above leaking hot water pipes, a thousand glass dishes sparkled on aluminum benches be-

neath banks of halide lamps. Green leaves sprouted from the dishes, and flowers glowed like scattered jewels—white, and pink, and yellow.

A hand closed on the back of his neck, and Daniel yelled. The hand lifted him like you'd lift a puppy and shook him, then set him roughly down.

The sheer, casual strength of that gesture—so unlike his father's labored violence—banished fear. Daniel stared up at the man who towered over him. He was as big as a TV wrestler, only his muscles were rock-hard and real. A tail of very blond hair fell down his back, as if in defiance of a receding hairline. His stark profile and high cheekbones looked vaguely familiar.

Daniel gulped in a labored breath, acutely aware of the fingers denting the flesh of his neck. "What are they?" He moved his chin fractionally toward the greenhouse. "They're not dope."

"No, they are neither marijuana nor genened coca, nor whatever else gets cropped around here." The man lowered his chin and gave Daniel another, almost gentle, shake. "Beat it." He let go and dropped Daniel to his feet.

"Why?" He staggered and caught his balance. The giant went into the greenhouse without answering. He moved like a bear, massively graceful. "Why grow the stuff, if it's not dope?" Daniel trotted after him. "Is it worth a lot?"

"Is that all that matters?" The man rounded on him so fast that Daniel almost fell over. "How much something is worth?"

"Yeah." Daniel studied the stranger. His eyes were so pale that they were almost lavender, and you couldn't even see his eyebrows. He was even fairer than Keri. "Far as I know, everything costs money."

"Just the junk." The man went into the greenhouse and slammed the door. Daniel tried it. It wasn't locked.

"I didn't say it was a good thing." He slipped inside, sweltering instantly in the thick, sulfurous air. "That's just how it is. It stinks in here."

"Geothermal heat." The giant grunted. "Sulfur in the water. Who invited you?"

Daniel wandered over to peer at the delicate white blossoms. The plants grew in dishes of amber-colored jelly. At this end of the bench, a few dishes held squat plants with small furry leaves. They weren't pretty plants. Nondescript green flowers barely showed among the foliage. His throat suddenly tight, Daniel touched one of the leaves. "That's an orchid," he said softly. "They grow where it's damp. I thought . . . they were on the List."

The man's sudden and utter stillness made him look up.

He was staring at Daniel with a strange expression on his face. "Who told you?" he asked roughly.

"Everybody knows about the List." Daniel shrugged. "My mom told me about the orchid." He pushed the dish a tiny fraction of an inch away.

"It . . . people thought it was extinct. It isn't. It's . . . not on the List anymore." The bear-man cleared his throat, his eyes still fixed on Daniel's face. "They're very rare. I . . . I clone them from tissue stocks. So they can be replanted. We . . . we're losing what we had. Changing." He looked away.

*Changing.* His mother's words. They banished Daniel's curiosity about why the man was lying. "I got to go," he muttered, and headed for the door.

The man called after him, but Daniel didn't stop to hear. He didn't need to see to find his way through the bio-trees. Their singing on a warm night like this was deafening. Snatching up his pack, he slung it over his shoulder and ran upslope into the Scrub. After awhile, he crossed the line where the old trees had died as the rains dwindled, and the young ones grew sparsely, struggling for life. Their song was pain and patience, and the waxing moon poured down light on their quiet desperation. Daniel slowed to a walk, secure that the giant hadn't chased him.

*We are changing,* his mother had cried one night. *We have changed the Earth too much, and now she is changing us. I am so afraid.*

Afraid of him. Her son.

Daniel stopped to pick a spindly fir bough. It was right. The lopsided orb of the moon crested the tips of distant firs as Daniel pushed through the huckleberry brush and out into the tiny clearing. It was an old burn scar that had never healed. Fireweed edged the low brush with a sweep of pink spikes, and blackberry canes sprawled across the thin soil.

Three horses stood in a small patch of grass and wildflowers. The stallion's head was up, his mane lifting as he scented the wind, ears pricked with alarm as if he had caught a whiff of cougar scent. One of the mares still grazed, but the other had lifted her head, too, alerted by the stallion's unease.

They were built entirely of branches—cedar, madrona, oak, maple, fir, alder, cascara, ash. All from the Scrub. All wild, old-type trees. Daniel stepped softly onto the lush, watered grass. The fir branch completed the curve of the stallion's near shoulder. Pleased, he stepped back, eyes half closed, seeing them as he did in his dreams, all sinew and wary intelligence, nostrils flaring as they scented the dry wind that blew down the desert canyon. "Close?" he asked softly, and felt the cool touch of fingers against his cheek.

Footsteps crackled in the brush at the edge of the clearing. "I figured you'd come up here," Keri called out.

"I thought you went home." Daniel raised a hand against her flashlight beam.

"He might have been a doper."

"And you were gonna save me?"

"That was stupid—walking in on him like that." Keri flung herself

down in the grass beside him, her flash streaking the meadow with stark black shadow before she clicked it off. "What if he'd had a gun?"

Daniel squatted beside her, his flip words silenced by the echo of recent fear in her voice. "You didn't turn in your samples?" he asked gently. "Jensen is going to fire you."

"He won't," she said abruptly. There was a sharpness in her tone that made him narrow his eyes.

She was looking at the horses, and he studied her surreptitiously. They had been friends forever. Two years ago, Keri's mother—a gentle potter, direct descendant of the sixties-hippies who had lived here once—had hitchhiked to Medford and had never returned. Keri still lived in their cabin, easily evading the half-hearted visits of the occasional social worker. The change had really begun then, Daniel decided.

"How can they look so real?" Keri tossed a pebble at the stallion, pretending not to notice Daniel's bristle. "It's like I never really saw a horse until I looked at yours. I wish I could do art like that."

"You do better than me. Your watercolors. And the horses . . . they aren't . . ." He shrugged. "I'm just doing them, you know?"

"No, I don't know," she drawled. "And if my watercolors are so good, how come nobody at the market will ever buy them?"

"Because people around here don't know *good* when they see it," Daniel said shortly.

"Ha." Her tone was wistful. "If I could, I'd put in for a Federal Arts scholarship. Get out of these damn trees."

He blinked at her, genuinely shocked. "What's wrong with the trees?"

"It's not the trees, it's the *people*. Do you want to live out here forever?" She waved her arms at the dark Scrub. "You can work for a Company asshole like Jensen, or you can grow dope and get killed by a narc or a raider before you're thirty. *You're* a citizen's kid." She threw another stone at the horses. This one bounced off the grazing mare's nose. "You can get an education. You can get out of here and *do* something."

"Stop it." He seized her wrist as she picked up another pebble. For a moment they strained against each other, not speaking. Her thin T-shirt lay softly against her ribcage, its print of flowers faded to a memory by too many washings. Her breasts swelled beneath the thin fabric, and Daniel had a sudden vision of her nipples beneath, pink and puckered. He let go of her abruptly, and she scrambled to her feet.

"I got to go." She brushed grass from her too-tight jeans with brisk angry strokes. "Look at me. I'm a mess."

"No, you're not." Sudden guilt seized him. "Let's go tap some more of your trees. If you bring in a bunch of ripe samples, Jensen won't be pissed."

"You don't get it, do you?" She tossed her hair back over her shoulder, talking down to him like he was a child. "Don't worry about Jensen. He

doesn't care if I ever tap a ripe tree. And I've got a date. I wouldn't have come up here except I was worried about you." Her pale hair caught the light as she whirled and began to run. "Your dad is home," she called back over her shoulder.

"Keri?" He scrambled to his feet, but by then she had vanished like a doe among the wild trees.

A date? Daniel stared after her, thoughts in a turmoil. Dad was home? He shook himself. Dad shouldn't be home yet. Aware suddenly of the dew that chilled his face, he grabbed up his sampling pack, and headed down the slope at a brisk trot.

"Where have you been?" Jess said as Daniel opened the door. Fists on his hips, he loomed over Daniel in a stance that was wholly their father's. "You're late." Behind him, the living room was lit by the glow of the big-screen TV. "The shift super left mail on the TV, asking where the hell you were." He lowered his voice and glanced over his shoulder. "Bad timing, kid."

"What happened?" Daniel whispered as he leaned his pack against the door. "I thought it was going to take three weeks to clean up that watershed."

"Don't even ask," Jess said shortly.

"That you, Danny?" Their father emerged from the shadows, an unopened beer in his hand. "Your damn Company boss called here. First thing I see when I turn on the tube—a message from the prick telling me that my son can't even do a wimpy Company job right." He popped the top on the beer and shook foam from his fingers. "A son of mine does any job—even a Company job—he does it *right*."

"I . . . was checking for mushrooms. Up in the Scrub. The buyer's paying a hundred for chanterelles and I sort of . . . forgot about the time. I wanted to tell you I'm okay before I turned my samples in."

His father grunted and turned away to flop down onto the sofa. He had downloaded some old movie from the sat-link. Which meant that the contract had been canceled, and not just postponed pending hearings. Daniel looked at Jess, who shrugged his massive shoulders. "A private survey turned up a List species," he said under his breath. "Some stupid plant that's been Listed since '95." He shrugged and headed for the bathroom.

"I went over every square foot of that contract acreage." His father stared at a bloody shoot-out on the screen. "There wasn't a List species on the whole hundred acres. Not a bird, not a bug, not a damn leaf. I didn't have a miss on a contract for five solid years, and now every damn job I take, some List plant turns up. You tell me how those damn plants sprout overnight, huh? I'm not blind and senile, yet."

Daniel jumped as his father's beer can clanged off the wall. Foam splashed across the grimy plasterboard and the can rolled across the bare

boards almost to his feet. Stiffly he bent to pick it up. "You'll get another contract," he said. "I mean, how many licensed fellers are there?"

"You know what Dan Farrow told me? The Forest Service honcho who hired me? He said I'm a jinx. You think they're gonna hire me again? Who else is there? There's no real timber 'cept the Preserves and the National Parks, and the Preserves have their own private crews. That out there. . . ." He waved a hand at the walls and the plantation beyond. "That's a *farm,* not a forest. Planted like turnips. So that people like you can go around sucking sap out of them. You don't need any skills to suck a tree, or drive one of those remote cutters for the garbage trees they feed to the vats." His lip curled. "A bush hand out of the valley could harvest crop trees. Hey, I got *skill* at least. When they hire me to fell a dying tree, I don't break a branch on the good ones."

"Hey, Dad, I'm off." Jess emerged from the back of the house, buttoning his clean shirt. "I got a date."

"You always got a date." Their father reached for the remaining half of a six-pack on the floor. "You watch yourself, you hear? You can't support a family as a feller until you got a rep with the Service."

"Relax." Jess grinned and winked. "I'm careful."

"Yeah, right," Dad grumbled as the front door slammed. "Hot-blooded kid." He shook his head. "Just like I was. He better be careful, or the Company'll own him. Like they own *you.*"

"They don't own me." Daniel wiped up the spilled beer with a towel and carried the can into the kitchen. "They just pay me money."

"Yeah. You work for them, you belong to them." His father hiccoughed. "You had any dinner?"

"Nobody owns *me.* I paid for you to go to the Company's school, and I pay for their doctor. 'Cause that's the only clinic and the only school and we don't take handouts from the government. I *pay.*" He paused to drink beer. "They don't own me. Nobody ever owned a Garver, not for five generations. We worked for ourselves, good times and bad, always in timber. It's in our blood."

*Our* meant him and Jess. Daniel tossed the can into the recycle bag, a bitter taste in his mouth. He dropped the towel onto the pile of dirty laundry accumulating in the corner. His father's cork boots lay on the floor beside the door, caked with ocher mud. On the table, a plastic bag held a wilting green plant still rooted in a clump of dirt. The List species? He touched the plastic gently. You could do federal time for digging up a List species.

"You listening to me?" His father yelled from the living room. "Your mother understood. You're like her—more like her than me—right down to your tree sucking."

Daniel took down a family-sized package of chili from the cupboard, emptied it into a bowl, added a package of precooked noodles and shoved the whole thing into the microwave.

"She understood," his father yelled from the living room. "She understood about owning yourself. What's *your* problem, Company boy?"

The timer sounded, and he removed the steaming bowl from the microwave, put two faded place mats down on the scarred kitchen table. His mother must have bought the place mats. He touched the frayed corner of one blue rectangle. He had never thought about that before—that this had been her choice at some store. He wondered what other colors she had rejected, what other patterns.

"You *answer* me when I speak to you!" His father appeared in the doorway, hands braced on the frame, breathing heavily. "Goddamn it, you show me a little respect, or . . ."

Daniel looked down to find his bark knife open in his hand, the narrow blade gleaming silver in the light. Razor sharp. "You killed her," Daniel raised his eyes to his father's face. Very deliberately, he closed the knife and slid it back into his pocket. Then he opened the back door, went out, and grabbed his sampling pack from the porch where he'd left it. Clearing the steps in a single bound, he sprinted into the darkness, pursued by silence.

Daniel felt the giant's approach like a ripple moving through the tree's ripe song even before he saw the glow of his flashlight. He ignored the man as he inserted his bark knife carefully into the smooth skin of a tree, making a small V-shaped incision through bark and cambium. Prying the wound open slightly with the knife, he opened a sample bag and applied its adhesive edge to the lip of cut bark beneath the point of the V. Sap was already beading up along the cut tissues, and as he stuck the small plastic rain awning to the bark above the cut, the first droplets trickled into the bag.

"What does this one produce?" the giant said. Light pooled at Daniel's feet, making him squint.

"Human insulin. This whole section produces insulin." Daniel closed his knife and checked the seals on the bag and awning to make sure that neither would fall off.

"Do you know what kind of tree it is?" The giant's voice was harsh.

"They're bio-trees." Daniel turned around. "They're made. But the engineers started with black locust, if that's what you mean."

"That's what I mean." He swung his flashlight in a wide arc. "Do you always work at night or are you doing a little freelance harvesting on your own?"

"I'm not stealing. I didn't finish this afternoon." He tucked the wad of empty bags and the extra rain bonnets into his pack and stuck his knife into his pocket. "I'm finished now."

"Does your mother know you're out here?" the man asked abruptly. "Did you tell her about me?"

"She's dead." He shouldered his pack, listening to the strange echoes beneath the man's words. "She died when I was seven."

For a moment, the giant went very still, then he turned on his heel and started back toward the distant glow of the greenhouse. He walked uncertainly, as if he couldn't see well in spite of the light he swung like an automaton. Daniel caught up with him as he reached the door of the greenhouse. The survivalist ghost was out tonight. Its vague yearning brushed the fringes of Daniel's awareness like the touch of an unseen cobweb. "She had cancer." Daniel answered the question that the giant hadn't yet asked. "Liver cancer."

"Why not a transplant?" The words had a strangled sound and he shook his head violently. "Never mind."

"She didn't get a transplant because she didn't have that kind of health care," Daniel said flatly. "You knew her, didn't you?"

"I knew her." He held the door open so that the humid sulfurous air flowed around them. "Dr. Carolyn Foster," he said softly, and his words yearned like the survivalist's ghost.

"Doctor?" Startled in spite of himself, Daniel said the word aloud. "What kind of doctor?"

"You didn't know?" His voice was hushed. "She never told you? Maybe not." Bitterness scored his words. "She was one of the people who designed those trees you just slashed. She was one of the best botanical engineers in the treecrop industry. A genius. Every company in the business tried to hire her. They offered her the damn moon to come run their R & D departments. God knows what she could have done if she hadn't . . ." He drew a deep breath. "I . . . I worked for her. I was a technician back then—right out of school. She was so damn good." He drew a deep breath. "I'm Albert. Albert Breslau."

Botanical engineer? Daniel stared into the darkness, straining to pick out the trunks of the trees he had sampled. And he wondered if his father knew about her. It occurred to him that if he did, and if he had said nothing about it all these years, then he was a different man than the one Daniel thought he knew.

Everyone was changing. Keri. His mother. Dad. Only Jess seemed irrevocably himself. Daniel smiled crookedly. And realized that Albert was watching him closely. That he had expected his name to mean something to Daniel.

"Will you show me what you do?" Daniel asked him. "Will you tell me what my mother did?"

"Yes." He looked disappointed. "Yes, I will."

He led Daniel through the greenhouse, pointing out each species of plant, describing its habitat, when it was last reported, why it had vanished from the drying, decreasing world. The survivalist's ghost had followed them in and drifted along with them like a cooler current in the thick air.

"For awhile, we wanted to save every species that had ever existed." Albert halted at the far end of the greenhouse in front of a narrow bench covered with shiny instruments and two microscopes. A cot had been wedged between the bench and the side wall. A rumpled sleeping bag lay on it, and a small laptop. "These days we're much too busy feeding ourselves to worry much about other species outside the Preserves and the parks." Albert tapped the microscope with one blunt finger. "That's what your mother was doing. Finding ways to save our butts as we ran out of water for the usual crops." Up close, he looked tired. Lines had begun to etch themselves permanently into his face, and silver glinted in his pale hair. He was older than Daniel had thought at first. "Funny," he said heavily. "She was so intense. It was just a job to me—but I'm the one who stayed the course."

Daniel didn't answer. The syllables of his mother's name lay between them, preventing casual conversation. He wandered over to the end of one growing bench. Plants with narrow leaves sprouted in their dishes of jelly. He examined the fine spiderweb of pale roots. A few of the plants had tightly furled white buds.

"What I do here . . . I use tissues from endangered species that aren't on the List yet. I have a federal permit to collect them. I clone their cells and grow new plants from them to rebuild the populations.

From each cell, a new plant.

"What a waste." Albert turned his back suddenly, shoulders bowed, fists clenched. "All that talent wasted. She should have been cured. She should have kept on with her work, but she just walked away. She could string DNA like beads, and she goes and marries some dumbshit backwater local. What the hell was wrong with her?"

"She loved horses. The wild ones." Daniel spoke to the white flowered plant in front of him. "She said they died."

"Did they?" Albert looked blank. "I don't know. I was never involved with desert programs. She grew up in the desert, didn't she? Nobody lives out there anymore."

"It hurt her." His mother had worked with this man—talked with him, maybe laughed at a joke he made. Just as with the place mats she had bought, the sudden sense of connection dizzied him. It was as if a window had opened and he had caught a glimpse of his mother walking through a life he had no knowledge of. He moved down the bench and picked up the orchid. "This is still on the List."

"I told you it wasn't." Albert glowered at him.

Daniel touched a delicate leaf. "If it's found in a park, or a Preserve, you can't disturb anything around it. Not even to take out a single tree."

"I told you these are all rare plants." Albert's gaze didn't waver. "What does this have to do with anything?"

"Why don't you change them?" Daniel looked at the bench full of instruments. "Why don't you make them more adaptable?"

"Like the trees? Like the biomass bushes down in the valley—the ones you can irrigate with 30 percent seawater?" For the first time, a hint of uncertainty softened the man's face. "If I did that they . . . they wouldn't be the same plant."

*I am afraid,* his mother had said. *We are changing.* The survivalist's ghost had drifted away.

"How old are you?" Albert asked abruptly.

"Fourteen." Daniel watched the man's eyes flicker.

"I last . . . saw your mother almost fifteen years ago. You look like her." For an instant, a bleak loneliness filled his face. "I had come back to . . . ask her to come with me. To beg her." He turned his back on Daniel and pretended to do things with the instruments. "You can make a good living as a skilled tech. I could train you."

The survivalist's ghost drifted back, as if drawn by the yearning in Albert's voice. It brushed Daniel's face like a breath of cold clammy air. "Okay," Daniel said slowly. "If you teach my friend, too."

"All right." But Albert frowned. "When can you come out here?"

"Late afternoons." He could finish his shift in the plantation early if he didn't take breaks, and still get home by dark. "See you tomorrow," he said.

"What's your friend's name?" Albert called as he reached the door.

Daniel looked briefly over his shoulder. "Keri." Then he ducked out into the fading night to retrieve his pack and go file his samples in the night-drop bin.

Keri was reluctant to go at first—distrustful of this stranger who had no monetary reason to be doing what he was doing. To her way of thinking, that made him crazy. They were both tapping the ripe insulin trees now. Jensen had assigned her to work with him instead of firing her. He came by every afternoon and Daniel watched him watch her, and watched her pretend not to notice. It made Daniel angry and clumsy, and he couldn't be clumsy. Each tree had to be carefully cut—not too deep or it would cause irreparable harm—not too shallow, or the sap flow would be poor.

The tough plastic collection bags reminded Daniel of the IV bags that had hung above his mother's bed during the last days of her life. Only those bags had shrunk, not swelled like these.

They had to check the bags constantly to make sure that the tubing that led from the tap to the bag didn't plug up. As each bag filled, it was labeled with the number of the individual tree, the sector number, and their ID. Then they lugged the bags out to the access road and packed them carefully into insulated plastic crates. Four times a day, the crates would be collected for processing. Jensen himself collected their bags. He didn't collect from any other sector.

This plantation produced pharmaceuticals exclusively. They did the crude extraction of the drugs on-site and then sent the extracts to another plant for refining. All the bioform trees were cloned from a single tissue stock. The technicians who did the cloning made good money. So Keri let herself be persuaded, and they went to the greenhouse after their shift.

There, Albert taught them how to clone cells. He was a good teacher, and a demanding one. The main requirements were precision and sterile technique. He asked them about the town and themselves as they began to get comfortable with each other. He told them about the huge bush farms in the river valleys, where bio-mass from salt-tolerant bushes, digested into syrup by bacteria, fed the vats that produced everything from corn oil to orange juice. He told them how the seawater mix that watered the bushes left its white signature on the valley soil.

He didn't talk about himself much. And when he did, his life rang hollow, like the shell of a wild tree whose heart had rotted out. "Why didn't you ever get married?" Keri teased him one afternoon.

"I wanted to. I wanted kids," he said. He sent them home early that day.

He kept on teaching them things even after they had mastered the cloning technique. "He just likes having us here," Keri said as they left one evening. "He's really lonely."

"He was in love with my mother."

"What?" Keri stopped and planted her fists on her hips. "How do you know *that?* And don't tell me your ghosts told you!"

"They don't talk. I just know." The way he knew when someone was lying. Daniel looked at the jut of her hip beneath her hand, followed its curve. "Tomorrow's Saturday. Want to meet by the horses? Dad and Jess are leaving for another contract job in the morning and we can go hunt for mushrooms."

"I can't." She veered away, following the trail that would take her to the cabin that she had shared with her mother. "You better hurry home or you'll be late. Your dad's new contract got postponed for a week."

"Keri!" he called, but she merely waved and didn't stop and he found that he couldn't run after her. A few months ago—a year ago—she would have gone with him. Daniel scuffed his feet, scattering rotting needles and bits of bark.

The trees in this sector had been freshly tapped, and whatever it was in their sap, it had a sharp, not unpleasant smell. Daniel touched his finger to a clear drop that wept from the badly sealed tube of a tap, touched his tongue. The stuff tasted as bitter as tears. He wiped his finger on his jeans and headed upslope as the day died, up to the clearing where his horses grazed.

He hadn't been back here much since that evening when he had met Albert. Between the tapping and the afternoon cloning lessons there hadn't

been much time—not when he was supposed to be home by dark. The truth was greater than that. Keri had been part of their creation, and her envy had tainted them. Because her paintings were something the horses weren't.

They were hers.

Now he stood in the darkness, one hand on the crooked trunk of a young cedar, wrapped in chilly night. In the dark, it was easy to imagine them flesh and blood—dark bays or blacks, perhaps. And he realized suddenly that they were almost finished. Another twig, two maybe, and they would be done.

The moon rose finally, nearing the full again, casting its pale radiance into the meadow. The stallion seemed to bow its head to him, but that was just a trick of the uncertain light. A ghost brushed his awareness—old and clammy with years.

Daniel turned away and went home—down through the plantation darkness and the smell of raw sap.

He was late, but the only light he saw on in the house was the porch light. For a minute he thought that maybe Keri had been wrong, and Dad and Jess had left early to carefully remove the diseased and dying trees in the Wallowah Preserve. Then a figure appeared at the edge of the yard, emerging from the shadow of the trees into the yellow glow of the light.

Jess.

Hands in his pockets, he climbed the steps slowly, trailing a musky aura of satisfaction that disturbed Daniel the way Keri's breasts had disturbed him. He started as Daniel bounded up onto the porch after him, turned around with a scowl. "What are you doing out this late?"

"What are *you* doing out this late?" Daniel perched on the rickety porch rail so that he could look his brother in the eye.

"I had a date."

"Did you make love?" Daniel said softly.

"Maybe. What of it?" Jess reached for the door handle.

"Do you love her?

"None of your business, little brother." Jess grinned. "Just wait a couple of years."

A scent tickled Daniel's nose—grass and old needles, and a musky animal scent that squeezed his loins. He sucked in a quick breath. "I want to know who it is." He pushed past Jess to block the door. "Tell me, Jess!"

"What's got into you?" His brother stared down with a bemused expression. "Do you really hate Dad?"

Daniel stared up at him, caught off guard by Jess's unexpected words.

"Because of Mom? Because she could have gotten treatment if he'd worked for the Company instead of being an independent contractor? He

thinks you hate him." He looked sad. "When we're out on a job together he's . . . easy, you know? He jokes around. Laughs."

"He thinks I'm not his kid." The bitter words scorched Daniel's throat. "Don't you get it, Jess? She was with somebody else."

In the instant of silence that followed his words, Daniel heard the distant cry of a screech owl hunting mice in the scrub. Then his brother's palm exploded against the side of his head. He fell hard against the wall, and slid down to the floor, his vision swimming with red light.

"Don't you ever say that again." Jess loomed over him, fists clenched. "Or I'll beat the shit out of you." He turned away abruptly.

For a moment, the porch light shone full on his face, casting shadow beneath his stark cheekbones. Leaning on his elbows, Daniel stared up at him and swallowed. He finally understood. But before he could say anything, Jess had crossed the lighted yard and vanished into the darkness between the stems of the plantation trees. The distant owl hooted mockingly and the wind sighed in the branches of the plantation trees. Daniel got slowly to his feet. Leaning on the porch railing, he stared after his brother.

"Do you hate me?"

Daniel turned slowly, licking his lips. His father stood just beyond the screen door. They had avoided each other since that night in the kitchen—had both been polite and cautiously distant. Streaked with light, shadowed by the dusty mesh of the screen, he looked . . . old. "Do you?" he asked again, harshly.

"I guess." Daniel looked out at the dark trees, unable to lie. "She could have gotten cured."

For a long time his father was silent, and Daniel wondered if he had gone back into the house.

"When she got pregnant with Jess, I told her I was going to take a job with the Company. It scared me that something could happen to her. Or to the baby. We'd only been married a month or two." His voice came softly through the screen. "She said no. She said I would have to become a different person and she didn't want me to change. She said she'd take her chances. And Jess got born okay, even though he was early. You, too." Again there was a long pause. "When the doctor found the cancer, it was too late. Don't ever blame yourself, she told me. It was her choice. But . . ." His voice faltered. "It was *my* choice, too, and it wasn't me who did the paying."

Daniel shifted on the warped boards of the porch, choked by words that could never be said.

"I'm not asking you to forgive me," his father went on in that same harsh tone. "I see her every time I look at you. You're like her, too. You'll do what you want, and do it real well."

The screen mesh divided them, blurring the expression on his father's

face. "Did you know what she used to do?" Daniel asked softly. "Did you know who she was?"

"Yes." He nodded once. "She made me promise never to tell anyone—not even you kids. She said it was too easy to let what other folks wanted from you take over your life and run it."

He had known, and he had never said. And the love in his voice was as real as the yearning brush of the survivalist's ghost. Daniel bolted off the porch, clearing the steps in a long leap, nearly losing his balance on the dew-wet grass as he staggered into a run.

"Daniel, wait!" his father called.

He kept on running, dodging the humming bio-trees as he stumbled through the darkness on his way to the paved road that led into town.

He entered the clearing in the pre-dawn dark. The stars had vanished and a rising wind gusted through the tree tops with the sound of angry whispering. Keri was there, sitting on the ground beneath a bent cedar. Arms crossed on her raised knees she stared at the horses, her pale hair shining like silver in the moonlight.

She was pregnant. He could feel the new life in her belly. A ghost drifted through the trees, a wisp of sensation. The life in her belly had the same distant feel of preoccupation. She looked up as he approached, but said nothing. A bruise on her throat drew Daniel's eye, dark on her pale skin. His belly clenched like a fist beneath his sternum.

He sat down beside her, not quite touching her.

"I want to get out of here," she whispered. "I want to *be* someone. I've got to have a job to do that."

There was nothing to say.

"Or I could get married." She tossed her head so that her loose hair fell like water down her back and the bruise on her throat glowed in the pale light. "Why not raise somebody's kids? If I'm married, I can get an ID number. I can become a real citizen. Why not do that?"

"To Jess?"

"What if it is?" She tossed her head again, her profile stark. "So what?"

"It's not you."

His mother had said these words to his father. That sudden awareness silenced him briefly, but he held her angry stare. "You got to be what you want to be," he whispered. "Jensen isn't going to give it to you. Or Jess."

Her sudden stillness was the frozen terror of a blacktail doe caught in a headlight beam. "I have to have the job," she breathed. "I made him put me with you. Jess . . . loves me."

Daniel swallowed, realizing that he had wanted her to deny his words more than he had ever wanted anything in the world. He forced himself to look at her, at the mark of his brother's mouth on her throat. "Jess is leaving for good in the morning," he said harshly. "He took a

three-year contract with the Wallowah Preserve. He said to say good-bye to you."

"No." A sudden gust of wind tore the word from her mouth. Her hand slid unconsciously down to cover the taut flatness of her belly.

The body knew, Daniel thought bleakly. Even if she didn't, yet. And because he had never before lied to her, not once in all their years of shared play and grief and dreams, he watched belief twist into hurt and acceptance. The pain of it tore at his own guts. She cried, and he couldn't comfort her. Instead, he walked down through the wind-tossed trees to the greenhouse.

"I want to show you something," Daniel said as he pushed his way into the damp sulfurous warmth.

"How about later?" Albert looked up from the workbench, his glass knife in his hand, a frown of concentration on his face. "I'm just starting a new batch of clones."

"You need to see this." Daniel let the truth of it come through in his words. "Right now."

"All right." Albert set down the knife on his sterile tray with precise care. "Are you in trouble?"

"No." Daniel led the way through the dense trees that bled valuable chemicals when you cut them—because his mother had designed them to do that. So that they would survive, and so would the people who lived here. They wouldn't die, like the desert horses. Albert followed close behind, sweeping his flashlight beam across the faint path in short irritable arcs.

"My mother changed these." Daniel let his fingers brush the rough bark of a tree. "She knew the old trees wouldn't survive, but she took their genes and turned them into something that we needed."

"*I* told you that." Albert paused to catch his breath.

"Then she realized what was happening."

"Which is what?" Albert sounded irritable. "I loved your mother." He swung the light beam across the tangled branches of the malformed firs and madronas and cedars. "I thought she loved me. But she ran away. From her work and from me. When I finally found her, she was married to this *rube*. Had his kid." Bitterness edged his voice. "What was she doing? Punishing us? Herself? And she loved me." He shone the light full on Daniel. "I found out that much at least, no matter how much she might want to pretend she didn't. I proved it to her. You look like her," he said abruptly. "And you . . ."

"No." Daniel raised a hand against the light. "Not here," he said. "Just a little farther. Then I'll tell you what you want to know."

Albert looked puzzled, but it was a mask, and excitement shone through it as he followed Daniel into the scrub. "There was never anyone else in my life," he said as they reached huckleberry brush. "I never wanted anyone else. I had to come back. To ask her . . ." He drew a deep

sobbing breath. "When I saw you, and I realized . . . I want you to come with me." He stepped in front of Daniel, blocking his path. "I took a leave from my university position, but I can go back any time. I'm a doctor, now, with a university. I can get you a scholarship. You can live with me. You can *make* something of yourself. You don't have to be a loser."

"Look first," Daniel said and stepped around him, pushing quickly through the brush so that Albert had to follow.

He fell silent as they emerged from the scrub into the tiny clearing. "My God," he said, and then stood silent again, playing the flash beam slowly across the nervous stallion and the grazing mares. After a while, he drew a long breath. Sighed. "Who did these?" he whispered.

"Keri." Daniel faced him, offering the second lie of his life. "Don't tell her I told you. She'll just say somebody else did 'em. They mean something special to her."

"They're incredible," Albert breathed. "She has real talent."

Daniel looked away struggling with a sudden desire to tell this man that the horses were his, that *he* was what Albert had come here to find.

Only they weren't, and he wasn't either. "I am not your son," he said. "Dad paid to have a DNA analysis run on me to make sure." The third lie, he thought. The last. Although it was also a truth. "I want to tell you about Keri," he said softly. "Her mother deserted her years ago. She was a doper and Keri doesn't have an ID number. You should see the paintings on the walls of their cabin. She uses kids' watercolors. That's all. And they're . . . incredible. Only nobody is ever going to know," he said fiercely. "She isn't ever going to make it. Unless somebody helps her."

"You mean me, right?" Albert slashed the light beam across the scrub like the blade of a sword. "You want me to take her home like a puppy I found in the woods?"

"You wanted to take *me* home with you." Daniel watched him flinch. "That's why you came here, isn't it?"

The survivalist's ghost had followed them from the greenhouse. It wrapped them both suddenly with a chill moment of yearning and loss. Albert shivered as it drifted away. "You don't know what you're asking."

"You called my mother an artist," Daniel said steadily. "Keri is one."

"You want me to save her." Albert looked down at him, angry. "You think I can do that."

"I don't know." And now he could let himself tell the truth. "I don't know if she'll go with you, but she might." He held Albert's eyes. "She doesn't belong here."

"I don't . . . know."

"And she can show you how to get out of here with your skin in one piece." He played his last card pitilessly. "They know about you, in town. They know what you're doing up here."

"What? Growing endangered plants?" He drew himself up. "That's a damn crime around here?"

"There are a lot of people around here who work on freelance contracts for the Forest Service. You're growing those plants for a big timber management company. They're planting them where they'll blow maintenance contracts awarded to freelancers like my dad."

Albert flinched. "I . . . I didn't know. They said they were with the Forest Service themselves."

He was lying. Daniel crossed his arms and waited until Albert's eyes slid away from his. "They're coming up to wreck the greenhouse tonight. If you're there, they might even kill you."

"No." Albert had gone white. "Maybe . . . maybe some of them are getting used . . . for the wrong purpose. But they're getting planted. They're growing. And I've made them . . . hardier. They'll survive this time. Do you know how *hard* that was to do? I'm as good as your mother. I am. She wouldn't run from me, now."

Daniel looked at his angry, pleading face, and pitied him. You'll never understand her, he thought sadly. "Keri has an old pickup that runs. You'll have to buy gas, though."

"I don't believe any of this crap."

Daniel shrugged and started to walk away.

"Wait." Breathing hard, Albert ran after him. "All right. I'll go with Keri. Taking her along is the price, right?"

"Uh-huh." Daniel smiled.

Albert mumbled something under his breath, but he nodded once, jerkily. "All right," he said. "I can probably get her a scholarship year at the school of art. If she doesn't keep her grades up, I can't help her."

"She'll keep her grades up," Daniel said. "Her cabin is this way."

He came back through the clearing just before dawn. Albert had gotten very quiet when he looked at Keri's paintings. He wasn't taking her along just because Daniel had coerced him. Not anymore. Maybe it would mean something to him, to have discovered a famous artist. It would give Keri the start she needed. He didn't doubt that she would take it from there—even with a child. Keri had been reluctant, but not very.

In the graying light, the stallion scented the wind, testing for cougar. Daniel shed the daypack he was wearing, opened it and fished out the small plants it contained, cupping them lovingly.

People from town had destroyed the greenhouse during the night, but he had found these among the wrecked benches and broken equipment. Tiny green flowers peeped from among the leaves. The orchids his mother had showed him. They were nothing special to look at. As he scooped shallow holes beneath the horses and tucked the plants into the moist dirt around their hooves, he wondered briefly if Albert would

ever find out that it was Daniel who had told people in town about his plants.

He didn't care.

He straightened slowly. The horses were finished. Unexpected tears stung his eyes, because he wished they *were* his—that he had talent like Keri. As he stepped back, he felt his mother's ghost. It surrounded him for an instant, brushing the edges of his mind with love and sorrow. "You felt them die, didn't you?" Daniel murmured. The horses, wild tree species, all the plants and animals and people that couldn't adapt. "Dad was like the horses, wasn't he? Something from before—something that couldn't change." His tears spilled over and the horses blurred, seeming to shift restlessly, as if they would bolt into the woods at any second and vanish. "I'm not like you," he whispered. "You knew that, too."

Her ghost left him suddenly, the way they faded, dissipating on the wind. "Good-bye," Daniel whispered. "I love you."

The wind touched his cheek, drying the tears before they could fall. And he turned away, picking up the empty daypack, thinking of his tall powerful brother, who was built like a TV wrestler—thinking about Jess's face—the way it had looked that last night beneath the porch light. Jess was Albert's son. Unmistakably so.

He started home, tired, to tell Jess that Keri was gone. He and Dad would go out on the Wallowah contract, and maybe Jess really would go to work for a Preserve, because he wasn't like Dad. He could change.

Clouds were boiling up in the west, and the first gusty breath of the coming storm riffled his hair as he reached the plantation trees. They swayed with the gust, and their singing filled his head. He knew, the way he knew things, that when he went back to the clearing, the horses would be gone. Scattered by the wind, you could say. Finished. "Good-bye," Daniel said again, and felt the faintest brush of fingertips on his face. ●

# ON BOOKS

Norman Spinrad

## ETHNICITY

**HOLY FIRE**
Bruce Sterling
Bantam Spectra, $22.95
**THE GREAT WHEEL**
Ian R. MacLeod
Harcourt, $16.00
**BLOOD BROTHERS**
Steven Barnes
Tor, $24.95
**IDORU**
William Gibson
Putnam, $24.00
**LOOKING FOR THE MAHDI**
N. Lee Wood
Ace, $12.00

I thought about simply titling this column "Race," but I chickened out. And not for the first time. And not without plenty of company.

I thought about calling this column "Race, Religion, and National Origin," after the hoary old legalism, but that smacks too much of political correctness, a stance which I have never taken any particular pains to assume.

So "ethnicity" it is, a snooty word with a whiff of euphemism about it maybe and nowhere near as sexy as my first choice, but in the end closer to the truth.

What am I gingerly sidling up to here?

Well, I might as well begin with an embarrassing story on myself.

My first novel, *The Solarians*, was published by an outfit called Paperback Library in 1966. Although several corporate moves and many years later, Paperback Library was to evolve into Warner Books, in those days it was strictly a bottom market paying bottom advances to beginning writers such as myself.

I was twenty-four years old when the sale was made, and quite happy to have sold my first novel, even if it was to a sleazebag publisher for the even-then-less-than-princely sum of $1250.

When my agent told me of this career breakthrough—and, hey, *any* first novel sale to *any* publisher for *any* amount of money always *will* be a career breakthrough—he informed me somewhat uneasily that the sale was contingent upon my doing a minor rewrite.

Well, sure, no problem. It's too long? It's too short? Needs another draft to improve the prose? The editor found a flaw in the plot logic?

Uh, well, nothing like that. . . .

*The Solarians* is a kind of space opera set in the far future. In the

manuscript, the hero's name was Jan Palacci.

Why?

Why not?

This was humanity of the reasonably far space-going future, when national identities would surely have intermixed and melded to the point where ethnicity as we presently know it would no longer exist, and so, while ethnic identity played absolutely no part in the story or my hero's character, it seemed logical to indicate this by giving him a vaguely Slavic first name and an Italian last name.

Beside which, all those Wonder Bread one hundred percent Anglo names one read stuck on the people of the science fiction future seemed silly, unrealistic, and boring, right?

Wrong.

Real wrong.

The name "Jan Palacci" has to go, I was told.

Why? Did it mean something dirty in Serbo-Croatian or Urdu?

No, I was told, they want a more "all-American" name.

My mouth fell open.

"Yeah, well how about Bronko Nagurski?" I snarled.

Not funny.

Well, what can I tell you, I wanted to sell my first novel, I had no choice, so I did it. Way back when in the dim days before find-and-replace programs and computers, with an eraser and a blue pencil, cursing and fuming all the while, I went through an entire novel manuscript changing hundreds of "Jans" to "Jay" and hundreds of "Palaccis" to "Palmer."

But this is not going to be primarily a screed about the mandatory Anglicization of heroes' names in American science fiction of days gone by (or maybe not so gone by), nor about the bleaching of black characters' skins on the covers of paperbacks, a practice that may not have entirely disappeared. Nor will it be a call for politically correct color and culture blindness, for books that are equal-opportunity employers.

Au contraire.

The more pressing, interesting, and perplexing question is, why has comparatively so little American science fiction been written that *explores* questions of ethnic and racial confrontation, conflict, or identity?

And more subtle and pervasive than that, why have the ethnic identities of most of the characters in even near-future science fiction been ignored or even denied?

Logically, at least, it does not compute.

Paperback Library forced me to change an Italianate name to something more Anglo. Jewish names are common on the production end in Hollywood, but how many of the many Jewish actors and actresses out there haven't changed their own names? And for that matter, how many Polish, Italian, Czech, or Russian names do you see in acting credits? A man from Mars perusing *Variety* would be led to believe that something like 90 percent of the members of

the Screen Actors' Guild were of entirely Anglo origin.

Politically and socially, anyone who claims that this is a sigil of the willing annihilation of ethnic identity in the service of assimilation into the all-American Mainstream is full of it, and what it is we need not go into here.

This massive assumption of faux Anglo names by public personalities, far from being an attempt to deny any ethnic identity, is an attempt to *shift* ethnic identity for career purposes.

For in the real world, racial and ethnic identity run through the psychic core of American society and the lives of everyone in it like a hot wire.

*Everyone* has an ethnic identity, like it and/or not, for better and for worse, emphatically including White Anglo-Saxon Protestants, which is becoming all too apparent as these descendants of British immigrants lose their majority status.

Ethnic identity, aside from the obvious political aspects, effects, in greater and lesser degree depending upon other factors, our *style*—what we eat, what we drink, how we dress, what music rings our nostalgic chimes, who we marry, where we may go on our vacations, even what we think is funny.

Ah yes, I can sense those sweaty palms out there, I can smell those discomforted pheromones!

What's he *talking* about, Maude? You're not supposed to *say* these things! It's not politically correct! It's . . . it's *Un-American!*

Au contraire, folks, nothing is *more* American.

Not that America has a monopoly on questions of emotionally charged ethnic identity.

Europe is a snake-pit of millennial ethnic vendettas. The Irish and the Ulstermen and the British. The English and the Irish and the Scots and the Welsh. The French and the Germans. Not to mention the unmentionable events in the former Yugoslavia and the former Soviet Union.

Or the blood feuds of the Middle East that go back to Biblical times. Or the carnage still proceeding from events on the Indian subcontinent going back to the days of the Moguls. Or the centuries-long struggle between the Hutus and the Tutsis. Or the Chinese versus the Tibetans. Or the fate of the Ainu in Japan. Or . . . or . . .

Nothing is more American?

Nothing is more *human.*

Nor is ethnicity by any means all bad. It's hard to imagine what we'd all be eating without it. Or what music we could possibly be listening to. Or even what language any of us would be speaking.

Worldwide human culture is a complex and multiplex bouillabaisse of ethnically derived riches and American culture is the same in miniature. It's as American as pizza and chow mein. It's as French as a mergeuze cous-cous. It's as British as chicken vindaloo. It's as German as a donar kebab.

So why has so little science fiction been written about it?

So why does so little science fic-

tion even factor in ethnicity as an aspect of future societies?

Indeed, why does most science fiction seem to take pains to deny it?

It's certainly not that the subject of race and ethnicity is taboo in literature in general in this day and age. The bookstores are full of contemporary and historical novels in which it is central; whole literary careers have been successfully built around its exploration, up to and including those of Nobel winners.

Of course there's a large body of science fiction which deals with *racial conflict* in its starkest terms by analogy or metaphor. More alien contact stories than not are probably based upon human racial and cultural conflicts one way or another.

But near-future science fiction that deals squarely with the very same racial conflicts that exist in the immediate real world of the reader without transposing them to outer space or elsewhere is another matter. Novels like Steven Barnes' *Blood Brothers* are a rarity.

Barnes has written a great deal of stuff in collaboration with Larry Niven and/or Jerry Pournelle, which is not relevant here.

What is relevant are the three solo novels he has also written, *Street Lethal, Gorgon Child,* and *Firedance,* all with the same protagonist, Aubrey Knight, who, like Barnes himself, happens to be black.

Or rather Afro-American. Or African-American. Or . . .

Oh, the hell with it!

Look, as long as we are in these deeply politically incorrect waters anyway, let's get a few things straight.

First of all, while I agree that any ethnic group has a right to choose its own collective moniker—though how thirty million people are supposed to agree on that is another matter—I do not like the term African-American and will not herein use it, preferring Afro-American instead.

Why?

For literary reasons, not political ones.

One of the main but less recognized contributions of Afro-Americans to American culture has been the enrichment of American English with an abundance of words and expressions that roll trippingly off the tongue because Black English has always paid due attention to poetic and prosaic scansion. "African-American" ain't one of 'em. It's a clunker. It's got too many syllables and a rhyme that gives it a dumb sing-song rhythm. It reads like a leadenly politically correct honkification. So Afro-American it is, herein, not rock and roll either, maybe, but what can you do about it?

Secondly, Steve Barnes is someone I know pretty well, which is to say I cannot and will not ignore the fact that he is Afro-American, since it is germane here. And if that bothers you, well, hey, wait until I get to my own wife's novel.

I've said that Aubrey Knight *happens* to be Afro-American like

the author of the novels in which he appears, which is rather interesting, and one might say admirable. *Street Lethal*, *Gorgon Child*, and *Firedance* are near-future action-adventure-political novels in which the fact that the hero happens to be Afro-American has realistic relevance to his character and situation but is not as important to him and the story as his puissance as a martial artist and the inner life which comes with following such a discipline. Just as the author's character itself is perhaps more strongly formed by his following of the martial arts than by his ethnic identity.

*Blood Brothers*, though, is something else again; a major step forward for an author who has spent entirely too much time and creative energy toiling in other people's franchised vineyards, and one of the few, if not the only, SF novel to deal forthrightly, deeply, directly and even to some extent ironically with racial tension and conflict in present-day America.

I haven't been in Los Angeles since the riots and Barnes has left California, but I have a feeling he was deeply affected by them, and, at least in literary terms, all for the good.

*Blood Brothers* is set time-wise at least partly during the Los Angeles riots—or to be frank about it, as the political mush-mouths say, the Los Angeles race riots—and Barnes gives us an intimate, passionate, believable picture of what led up to the riots, the riots themselves, and the psychological aftermath, from the point of view of one of his two main present-day protagonists, Derek Waites.

Like Aubrey Knight, Waites is an Afro-American, but a martial artist, he ain't. What he is, is, well, a computer nerd, a wizard games software designer, who, in a previous incarnation as Captain Africa, underground hacker, went too far, got busted, did time, and blew his marriage to the upwardly mobile buppie he still loves, if not entirely his role as loving father to their two children.

In *Blood Brothers*, going against stereotype again, the physically supercompetent, gigantic, and muscular martial artist is Austin Tucker, as white as they get, a former military special forces type, doing long hard time for the murders of his wife and children, murders that he did not do, and that he fought like a demon to prevent.

Waites and Tucker are the Blood Brothers of the title, their family connection going back to the days of slavery and a convoluted master-slave relationship between two evil near-immortals—a white slave-owner and the black African slave, a former king and evil magician, who taught him a truly terrible path to eternal life.

And via the discovery of a diary and also through a kind of channeling, Barnes also gives us a long first-person account of slavery days through the point of view of Tucker and Waites's female ancestor, a slave whose descendants' children have in present time be-

come the human sacrifices whereby both the African and the former slave master maintain their evil existences.

So what we have in a formal sense is a strange but ultimately successful melange of a kind of cyber science fiction, a kind of African magic fantasy, and a sort of magic realistic account of a slice of historical slavery, in which Waites and Tucker, the computer nerd and the martial artist, fight their way through to destroy the twin villains, in Los Angeles, in virtual game reality, in the realms of African magic; the former to save his children, the latter to avenge their hideous deaths.

*Blood Brothers* may have its flaws—too much reliance on physical action to resolve plot points, too much super-skill on the part of Tucker—but it's certainly the best work Steven Barnes has done, and the promise of an emergence into literary maturity.

Not only does it confront present-day—and for that matter past—racial tensions straightforwardly and honestly, it manages to do it with, at least in places, a sense of humor. The choice bit where Tucker takes Waites, his wife, and his children, to a crazed neo-Nazi militia camp for shelter is funny, scary, yet ultimately all-too-realistic.

And while not particularly germane to the present discussion, the centrality here of both Tucker and Waites' relationships to their children is also rather rare in science fiction, and the portrayal of Waites' relationship with his kids and the depiction of the children themselves particularly well done.

But there *is* something about *Blood Brothers* that *does* really disturb me. Twice in the novel, and it *is* a necessary plot point, Barnes describes in precise detail exactly how to kill someone with a single heart-stopping blow. And from what I know of anatomy, it seems like it would really work.

I'm wrong about this, right, Steve?

I hope.

At any rate, please don't try this at home.

But I have a bad feeling that some people will.

I also have a bad feeling that there will be a certain number of screams of outrage at my mere mention of *Looking for the Mahdi,* by N. Lee Wood, since the author is my wife.

But just as it would have been archly evasive of me to pretend I had no idea of Steven Barnes's ethnic identity or devotion to the martial arts while reviewing *Blood Brothers,* so would it require torturous dissembling to deal with the subject of ethnicity in modern science fiction without at least telling the story of the publishing history of *Looking for the Mahdi,* which I know all too well.

Since the author admittedly *is* my wife, I shall sail the narrow channel between the Scylla of praising the book fulsomely and being justly excoriated for outrageous nepotism and the Charybdis of doing anything less at the risk of

getting a frying pan laid upside my head by venturing no opinion at all and sticking strictly to the objective facts.

Which are instructive enough.

*Looking for the Mahdi* is the near-future story of television journalist Kay Bee Munadi, who is inveigled by an American security agency into delivering John Halton, a "fabricant" or android bodyguard, to a powerful political personage in the fictional country of Khuruchabja, where she had previously made her mark as a journalist disguised as a man, and hence well knows the language, the country, and its people. Or such is the cover story she is initially fed.

The complex plot which unfolds is a tale of political intrigue, cybernetic devices, love, cynicism, and idealism. The quality of the book is not for me to comment upon. The strictly objective fact is that once it was finally published in the United States, it was deemed worthy of purchase by publishers in Britain, Germany, Russia, Romania, France, and Israel, and was eventually listed as a "notable book of the year" by the New York *Times Book Review.*

I say "finally published" because it took something like four years to find a publisher for this novel; a novel which, when eventually published, garnered favorable reviews and foreign sales, and no discernible outrage.

Why?

Given this retrospective evidence that the problem couldn't have been the coherence of the story or the quality of the writing, one must assume that it must have been something in the subject matter of the book as described above, right?

Well, not exactly. I *was* deliberately dissembling. I left one thing out.

Kay Bee Munadi's full name is Kahlili bint Munadi Sulaiman.

She is a Palestinian-American.

Has there ever been an American science fiction novel before with a Palestinian-American heroine or hero? If there has, I haven't heard of it. But what was the problem with that, you may well ask?

There have been many science fiction novels with Arabic characters, and while they have admittedly usually served as villains, that has not always been the case. Indeed, if you are at all knowledgeable in such matters, it's perfectly obvious that the culture of the universe of *Dune,* one of the most popular SF novel series of all time, is identifiably Arabic, and even arguably specifically Shiite at that.

Be that as it may, more than one editor who regretfully passed on the novel openly expressed trepidation about the ethnic identity of the heroine. This was before the Arafat-Rabin handshake and the bombing of the World Trade center occurred somewhere in the middle of this difficult marketing effort.

Did a Palestinian-American heroine in a science fiction novel expose a naked prejudice in the

publishing industry that no one had previously realized had existed simply because no book had come up against it before?

Maybe, or maybe not. Yes and no.

After all, after the Arafat-Rabin handshake, the novel sold easily enough, not only in the United States but in several other countries, including even *Israel.* So perhaps rather than a deep-seated prejudice being at work, it was a matter of a temporary political atmosphere that made *Looking for the Mahdi* a risky commercial proposition, PR- and distribution-wise, until Palestinians suddenly became trendy.

Yes and no. Maybe and maybe not.

In retrospect, maybe there was another thing about this book that made editors uncomfortable, a more general taboo that was broken.

Namely that Kay Bee's ethnic identity is *important* to her, a central fact of her character and her story, and, moreover, it is a *real* and *specific* ethnic identity embedded in a world of the not too distant future.

Aside from questions of race—which have been around so long and are so central to American society that it's impossible to ignore their effects on the psyches and lives of Afro-American or Hispanic-American characters—how many science fiction novels can *you* think of in which a lead character's ethnic identity was formative, was acknowledged as such by the character in question and struggled with, even be that character something as politically mildly charged as Irish-American or Italian-American?

Not very many.

It seems there is a general taboo at work here, at least when it comes to science fiction, and particularly near-future science fiction wherein the fictional universe is identifiably a direct extrapolation of our own culture, a taboo so subtle yet so pervasive that it is not even easy to detect.

Namely that while you can have a Jewish-American hero or an Italian-American hero or an Asian-American hero and, post-Oslo, it would seem a Palestinian-American heroine, things get dicey when such a specific ethnic identity is portrayed as significant to the story and/or the character.

And indeed, even in my own *Little Heroes,* where one viewpoint character is a Chicana and another a New York Puerto Rican who even speaks an argot of English and Spanish, and significant characters are Afro-American, Vietnamese-American, and so forth, for some previously unexamined reason, I never presumed to make any of these ethnic identities *central* to the psyches of the characters or the events of the story.

And though no, Lee and I never discussed it, and I have never really pondered it before, the Middle Eastern country in *Looking for the Mahdi* is no real place but a science fictional composite called Khuruchabja, as if on some level the author realized that con-

fronting a heroine who is self-consciously Palestinian-American with a real and specific *other* Middle Eastern ethnicity and watching the sparks fly would be pushing an elusive something a bridge too far.

And indeed, this Ruritanian Solution has always been a common strategy within the science fiction genre, and for that matter beyond, "Ruritania" itself having entered the language from its original use as a fictional composite eastern European country.

In part, perhaps, this is simply a matter of avoiding historical problems when it comes to period pieces and instant obsolescence when it comes to science fiction, but only in part.

There is a great deal of deeper reticence in dealing speculatively with the real effects of real ethnic identities, nor does this seem to be a uniquely American phenomenon.

To judge from the name and the address on the manuscript of *The Great Wheel,* Ian R. MacLeod, the author of this impressive first novel, is most certainly a resident of Britain, and may be a Scotsman living in England, which should tend to give a bit of an edge to his sense of ethnic awareness.

And indeed, the theme of *The Great Wheel* is a profound confrontation of ethnicities on a future Earth, to the point where ethnic alienation, a cross-ethnic forbidden love affair, and the question of ethnic identity are central to the story of the protagonist, Father John, a quite identifiably British priest of a somewhat mutated but quite identifiable Roman Catholic Church.

Yet MacLeod will not quite go so far as to give his richly detailed future North African setting a present-day specificity, invoking geological cataclysm to blur the landscape, and calling his Arabic Third World setting the "Magulf," obviously a combination of "Maghreb" and "Gulf," which, given the generality of the territory, would seem to refer to the Gulf of Libya, rather than to the one further to the east of Gulf War fame.

And this, mind you, is a novel *about* ethnic and cultural identity on every level, about the confrontation between the cultures and consciousnesses of Europe and the Third World, about colonialist attitudes and the responses they generate, about a priest's religious, cultural, and personal crisis of conscience.

Moreover, the future Britain that Father John hails from is quite specifically British. Indeed, one might argue that MacLeod's slow pacing and nostalgically overprofuse speculative description in the scenes between Father John, his parents, and his long-time comatose big brother Hal set in Britain are even a characteristically British flaw, the obligatory family drama subplot to establish literary seriousness for a science fiction novel.

Made a bit more tedious to read by the fact that the heart of the novel is set in the "Magulf," where Father John has been posted by the Church, where he finds him-

self in a kind of love affair with a native "Borderer" woman, where they must track down the source of a bad batch of native drugs that causes leukemia in many of its users, where he confronts his loss of faith, and where the central thematic issue of the true nature of the relationship between the Europeans and the Borderers undergoes a subtle transformation whose nature I am not about to reveal here.

In a way, *The Great Wheel*—and I still can't decide whether the Buddhist double-entendre is deliberate—is an extension into the science fictional future of the familiar tale of a priest sent to Third World climes where what he sees shakes his faith and where he must ultimately decide which side true morality demands he be on.

MacLeod uses an overarching metaphor that makes it quite stark here. The Europeans have all sorts of medical implants—electronics, nanotech beasties, genetic slice and dice jobs, and so forth—which keep them healthy under almost any biological assault until the sudden onset of aging. The Third World Borderers of the Magulf, living on the edge of some vague and enormous African geological catastrophe, are benefited by no such modern advances.

What is more, it is dangerous for Borderers to even *touch* Europeans, indeed to even touch objects touched by Europeans that haven't been sterilized, for if they are infected by the nanolife within European bodies, the effect is disease, not good health. And without the nanotech, the Europeans would succumb to the profuse biological dangers of the Magulf.

So the Europeans must go gloved. They must sterilize whatever their bare skins touch. Father John can conduct a love affair with a Borderer only so long as he maintains his artificial internal health care systems in good order and only because she has had special treatments that allow her to work regularly in the European enclave.

Talk about ethnic confrontation and its consequences!

Here, Europeans and Borderers, though still both human, though still capable of interbreeding, have in effect become *allergic* to each other. Even the Serbs and the Croats haven't quite carried it that far yet.

Powerful stuff.

And while the descriptions of things back home in Britain can get a bit tedious, and the subplot set there a bit pro forma and its resolution not quite satisfying, perhaps this is partly in contrast to the fascinating detail with which MacLeod imbues every level of the culture of the Magulf and Father John's confrontation with it.

Indeed, the made-up ethnicity of the Magulf is somehow much more convincing than that of MacLeod's extrapolated future Britain; not just more colorful and exotic, but more detailed, more deeply felt, existing on more profound psychological levels, much more attractive, somehow, even in its squalor.

Which may be partly deliberate,

since this is in some ways a thematic point.

But the strange thing in terms of the present discussion is that MacLeod seems to demonstrate a detailed knowledge of the culture of the Maghreb herein; he would have to have been familiar enough with it to have extrapolated a specific North African culture of the future to create such a convincing Ruritanian "Magulf" in the first place.

I know from personal privilege that much the same was true of N. Lee Wood's Khuruchabja—the research required would just as well have allowed her to set *Looking for the Mahdi* in a near-future Afghanistan or Saudi Arabia.

In both cases, the "Ruritanian Solution" would seem to have been not a necessity born of ignorance due to lazy lack of research but a creative choice, literary or political, conscious or otherwise.

Why?

Perhaps because the present-day implications of speculation on the conflict between real-world ethnic identities in a future that has visible continuity with our own, on the identity and moral crises in the psychic cores of characters involved in such a story, makes it currently just too hot to handle.

And not just in terms of political correctness or pragmatic marketability, but because we as writers and humans have not yet quite evolved to the point where we can handle such material psychologically ourselves.

I say "*we*" writers because, having tiptoed up to the shore of these deep waters in the writing of *Little Heroes,* I too did not quite have what it took to take the plunge.

A novel like William Gibson's *Idoru,* on the other hand, deals quite specifically with the cultural confrontation between two very specifically American viewpoint characters and a future Japan, and yet evades, or better, ignores, the psychologically and politically charged center of ethnic identity in a manner that is in its way the inverse of the Ruritanian Solution.

The story line is, well, simple.

Colin Laney, a kind of cyberwiz who works for *Slitscan,* a sort of latter-day *National Enquirer* of the net that more or less controls and creates the schlockola celebrities it covers, is hired to help find out what the hell is going on by the corporate entourage of Lo/Rez, a big-time rock band, whose lead singer, Rez, has announced that he is going to marry Rei Toei, the "Idoru" of the title (Japlish for "Idol," apparently a real word in modern Japanese referring to the manufactured teen music idol of the moment). This seems somewhat odd, since Rei Toei is an "artificial rock star" à la *Little Heroes,* a program without corporeal existence.

Chia is a teenage fan of Lo/Rez dispatched by her local club to Tokyo on a similar mission. Along the way, she is slipped a package by smugglers whose contents will prove to be the McGuffin of the two interpenetrating and ultimately converging tales of connivance,

chase, and escape, much as the purloined sunglasses were in Gibson's last novel, *Virtual Light*.

So what we have here is basically the story of two postmodern and basically West Coastal Americans chasing and being chased by assorted colorful characters through Gibson's postmodern Tokyo.

With this novel, Gibson seems to have pretty much completed his segue out of the cybermonde of the *Neuromancer* trilogy and into the territory of the future Pacific Rim, where the west coast of North America (spiritually and pop culturally speaking California) rubs up against Japan along a virtual interface somewhere between Hollywood and cyberspace.

Interesting territory, this; arguably the venue where the future destiny of the species will be forged. Gibson's (and the real world's) thoroughly mediated California certainly represents the cutting edge of the Disneyized First World, and Japan perhaps the only credible non-Americanized cutting-edge high-tech future available on the planet.

Like China or India or other classical Third World societies, Japan has an indigenous culture centuries older than that of the west. But unlike any other classical Third World culture, Japan has an unbroken continuity of *popular* culture going back almost as far, to the point where there is even such a thing as various periods of classical Japanese *porn*. And unlike any other classical Third World culture, Japan sucked up western technology like a sponge, but rather than being absorbed by western civilization thereby, Japanized what was culturally useful, and excreted the rest.

The above is admittedly a vast oversimplification, the relevant point here being that the Japanese have developed their own vision of a high-tech cybernated mediated future, and it's their own, not a hand-me-down version of ours.

For this good reason, perhaps, the Cyberpunks in general, and Gibson in particular, have always been vaguely Nipponophilic. Here, Gibson sets most of an entire novel in a future Japan, as seen through the eyes of two American viewpoint characters of differing degrees of sophistication.

A true cross-cultural story along the interface where the Japanese and American visions of the future interpenetrate. Potentially groundbreaking stuff if taken on a psychologically meaningful reality level, especially in the hands of a writer as skillful as William Gibson. Coulda been the champ.

Alas, it isn't.

Because he doesn't.

Instead, Gibson virtualizes his future Tokyo into a kind of manga (Japanese comics) version of itself.

I haven't been there in well over a decade, and it would seem that Gibson has, or if he hasn't, he's certainly done enough research to do a fine job of faking it. The surface of his future Tokyo sparkles with sensual detail, glimmers with inventive extrapolation of chic Japanese

pop cult schtick, convinces you that you are there.

The technical ability to do this so well has been William Gibson's strongest point all along. He is a wizard at inventing the specific details and detritus and brand names of an imaginary popular culture, and, by laying them on with a richness and density equaling that of the reader's own pop cult surround, creating a most powerful illusion of verisimilitude thereby. In addition, he is a most skilled craftsman in selecting and using sensual images and metaphors—not just sight and sound, but smell and touch and feel—to portray the emotional tone of his characters' movements through his settings.

Which is to say that few writers inside the genre or out are as good at rendering the phenomenological surface of complex and outré realities. As for what lies beneath the surface, well . . .

Unfortunately, in *Idoru*, the answer is not much.

The basic schtick—the marriage of the human rock star and the software Idoru in virtual reality somehow actualizing itself in artifact via nanotech—is, to be gentle about it, not something that exactly stands up to scientific or logical analysis. The plot line consists largely of a series of action loops built around the purloined packet, which ends in a blaze of special effects, but with no emotionally or thematically satisfying closure.

The American viewpoint characters are reasonably well-rendered, but the Japanese characters they encounter, while amusing, strange, and enigmatic, come off mostly as a series of types. Not the usual stereotypes, maybe, but in a strange way new stereotypes of Gibson's invention.

What we ultimately have in *Idoru* is the confrontation of two rather convincing future Americans —though Chia is less convincing than Laney—with a virtualized, manga-fied vision of a future Japan.

As Gertrude Stein said of Oakland, there's no there there. Although, to be fair about it, whether you agree with him or not, that just could be Gibson's whole point.

The most recent novel by the other Grand High Cyber Poobah, Bruce Sterling's *Holy Fire*, would seem on the surface to be much the same sort of thing.

Mia Ziemann is a ninety-four-year-old woman in a future America where medical technology is able to keep people alive much longer than that if their coverage will pay for it. The result, however, is an economy dominated by the medical industry and the super-old, a society in which youth has little chance to shine, and a psychology wherein caution is mandated by medical contract.

Mia becomes involved in a medical experiment which turns her into a ninety-four-year-old consciousness in a hot juicy teenage body.

Well, sort of.

Consciousness, after all, exists in a biochemical matrix, and while she retains the knowledge and intellect of a centenarian, those hor-

mones will do their stuff, will alter her consciousness and her outlook on life, will send her fleeing the lab and America into wild postmodern Europe fueled by and in search of that which has been expunged from the American gerontocracy—the Holy Fire of youth.

Thus the novel becomes a kind of bildungsroman in reverse as our aged Candide trips the life fantastic through Sterling's transmogrified future Europe, learning how to become young again.

Her journeys take her all over the map of Europe, and in this case, since I *have* been to a lot of these places fairly recently, and know people in some of them fairly well, I *am* in a position to say that Bruce Sterling has read them well, has had to, in order to extrapolate their futures in a manner so admirably convincing and indeed amusing to a traveler like myself.

This thumbnail description may make *Holy Fire* sound like a European version of *Idoru,* albeit with even less overall plot structure, and on the surface level, this is true.

But *Holy Fire* has what *Idoru* lacks—the Holy Fire itself, or more simply, if less poetically, *passion.* This is a novel that is about more than the plot or the phenomenological surface, this is a novel manifestly about issues and things and places and characters that Sterling cares about. And so, while it has less plot complexity than *Idoru,* it has much more real story.

Sterling would seem to have been in Germany and the Czech Republic and Italy or know well people intimate with the intellectual life and café society thereof.

He would have to, to have been able to so persuasively, knowingly, and amusingly extrapolate the cultural tics, concerns, theories, traits, and peculiarities of not just generic Germans, Italians, Swiss, Czechs, and so forth, but those of people from specific cities, from specific subcultures in those cities.

*Holy Fire* is, at last, a science fiction novel that far from ignoring the ethnic identities of its characters or opting for any Ruritanian solution, plays with them, explores them, makes them relevant and real, as Sterling integrates them into the story and theme not as the stereotypical attributes of stock figures, but as elements in the lifestyles and psyches of people he and the reader care about.

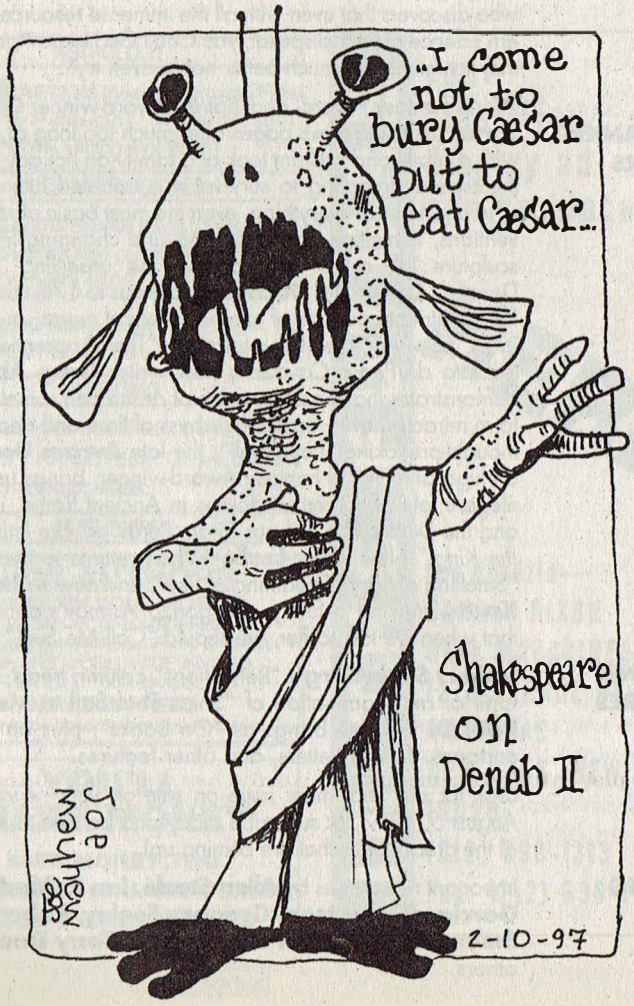
*Holy Fire* is an intellectually passionate novel about intellectual passion, and yet Sterling doesn't let it get away from him, doesn't let the Holy Fire blind his auctorial voice or critical judgment.

Not only are events, places, and people seen through the analytical eye of ironic amusement, certain of his European characters, and to an extent in the end Mia, see the world that way, too, so that this very attitude becomes a prism through which the author portrays subcultures of future European cultures themselves.

Yet Sterling's overall stance here is not one of coldly detached analysis or supercilious irony. It is a

warm and affectionate ironic look at future European youth, the mature regard of a writer whose sympathies are yet clearly with those a generation younger than himself.

And who in the end thereby, like his protagonist, manages to retain the Holy Fire thereof beyond what some might consider its natural span. ●



# NEXT ISSUE

**SEPTEMBER COVER STORY**

**Walter Jon Williams,** best-selling author of *Metropolitan,* returns to our pages after a long absence next month with a pyrotechnic new novelette called "Lethe," a compelling study of an intrepid explorer in a high-tech future who returns from a voyage to the stars obsessed with the past that he's lost, and who discovers that even with all the immense resources of modern science at your disposal, you Can't Go Home Again—and that sometimes it's much better not to even try. . . .

**OTHER TOP-RANKED WRITERS**

World Fantasy Award- and Tiptree Award-winner **Gwyneth Jones** returns to these pages after much too long an absence with a subtle and brilliant look at a family on holiday who find themselves struggling to survive in a troubled future Europe where just about everything, even the most basic of social conventions, is melting and dissolving and changing like an ice sculpture left out in the rain, in the unsettling "Balinese Dancer"; **L. Timmel Duchamp** takes us to 17th-century Italy for an intricate pavane of manners, sexual mores, and magic, in a powerful novella exploring "The Apprenticeship of Isabetta de Pedro Cavazzi"; new writer **Greg Abraham** demonstrates that the persistence of desire can sometimes perform miracles, even across the abyss of time and death, in the thought-provoking "Poyekhali"; the late **Avram Davidson,** a Hugo and World Fantasy Award-winner, brings us another elegant tale of sorcerous doings in Ancient Rome, in "Vergil and the Dukos: Hic Inclusus Vitam Perdit or, *The Imitations of the King.*" New writer **Leslie What** returns to these pages "Smelling of Earth, Dreaming of Sky"; and new writer **Aimee Kratts,** making a funny and gonzo *Asimov's* debut, insists that when we talk to her, we should "Call Me Sue."

**EXCITING FEATURES**

**Robert Silverberg's** "Reflections" column treats us to Part One of an examination of "Ships That Sail to Mars"; and **Paul Di Filippo** brings us "On Books"; plus an array of cartoons, poems, letters, and other features.

Look for our September issue on sale on your newsstand on August 5, 1997, or subscribe today and be sure to miss none of the great stories that are coming up!

**COMING SOON**

Important new stories by **Allen Steele, Ian R. MacLeod, R. Garcia y Robertson, Gregory Feeley, Robert Reed, Steven Utley, Esther M. Friesner, Tony Daniel,** and others.

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# SF CONVENTIONAL CALENDAR

Note the deadline coming up for this year's WorldCon. Plan now for social weekends with your favorite SF authors, editors, artists, and fellow fans. For an explanation of cons, a sample of SF folksongs, and info on fanzines and clubs, and how to get a later, longer list of cons, send me an SASE (self-addressed, stamped #10 [business] envelope) at 13107B Autumn Wood Way, Fairfax VA 22033. The hot line is (703) 449-1276. If a machine answers (with a list of the week's cons) leave a message and I'll call back on my nickel. When writing cons, send an SASE. For free listings, tell me of your con 6 months out. Look for me at cons as Filthy Pierre, with a musical keyboard.—Erwin S. Strauss

## JULY 1997

11-13—**ReaderCon.** For info, write: **Box 381246, Cambridge MA 02238.** Or phone: **(617) 926-1885** (10 AM to 10 PM, not collect). Con will be held in: Westborough MA (if city omitted, same as in address) at the Marriott. Guests will include: Budrys, K.S. Robinson, Clement, Chamas, Gardner, Gravel, Hartwell, Kushner, Lake, Ore.

11-13—**LibertyCon.** Days Inn & Convention Center, Chattanooga TN. Saberhagen, DiFate, Hogan, Zahn, Dietz.

11-13—**Shore Leave. (410) 821-5563.** Marriott, Hunt Valley (near Baltimore) MD. Long-time Star Trek con.

11-13—**Of Things That.... (612) 521-9725.** Sheraton Park Place, Minneapolis MN. Beauty & the Beast TV show.

11-13—**Infinity.** Angel Hotel, Cardiff, Wales, UK. C. Baker, Ed Bishop, J. Cohen, D. Banks, R. L. Fanthorpe.

11-14—**Wolf 359.** Norbeck Castle, Blackpool, England. J. Michael Straczynski, Bruce Boxleitner. Babylon 5.

16-20—**qep'a'loSDich. (Web) www.kli.org/kli.qepa.html.** Comfort Inn, Bensalem PA. Klingon language seminar.

18-20—**RiverCon. (502) 448-6562.** Executive West Hotel, Louisville KY. No guests announced at press.

18-20—**ConVersion. (403) 259-3938.** Carriage House Inn, Calgary AB. Connie Willis, Kim Stanley Robinson.

18-20—**Toronto Trek. (416) 699-4666.** International Plaza Hotel, Toronto ON. Dave Rossi, E. Stilwell. Star Trek.

23-27—**RatzeCon, c/o E. Marwitz, Box 1524, Ahrensburg 22095, Germany. (04531) 86106.** Ratzeburg, Germany.

25-27—**ConFluence, Box 3681, Pittsburgh PA 15230. (412) 344-0236.** Sheraton, Mars PA. S. Brust. Written SF.

25-27—**DiversiCon, Box 6036, Lake St. Stn., Minneapolis MN 55408. (612) 825-9353.** Radisson, Bloomington MN.

25-27—**ConCussion, Box 85762, Lincoln NE 68501.** Ramada, Council Bluffs IA. J. P. Hogan, Lancaster, Tucker.

26-30—**Asimov Seminar, Box 54, Rensseaerville NY 12147.** White Eagle Center, Hamilton NY. "Future News."

27-30—**International SF Con, c/o Yang Xiao, SFWorld, 11 Sect.,4 Renminnan Rd., Chengdu Sichuan 610041, China.**

## AUGUST 1997

1-3—**ConJuration, Box 874, Columbia MO 65205.** Ramada Inn, Jefferson City MO. Bailey, Lubov, Eilers, Berdak.

1-3—**PhrollCon, Box 42195, Philadelphia PA 19101. (215) 342-1672.** Clarion, Mt. Laurel NJ. C. Willis, M. Kennedy.

2-3—**LepriCon, 309B NE C St., Bentonville AR 72712.** Holiday Inn NW, Springdale AR. Hayden-Elgin, L. Synk.

28-Sep. 1—**LoneStarCon 2, Box 27277, Austin TX 78755.** Riverwalk, San Antonio TX. WorldCon. $135 in July.

## AUGUST 1998

5-9—**BucCONeer, Box 314, Annapolis Junction MD 20701.** Baltimore MD. Cherryh. WorldCon '98. $110 thru Sept.

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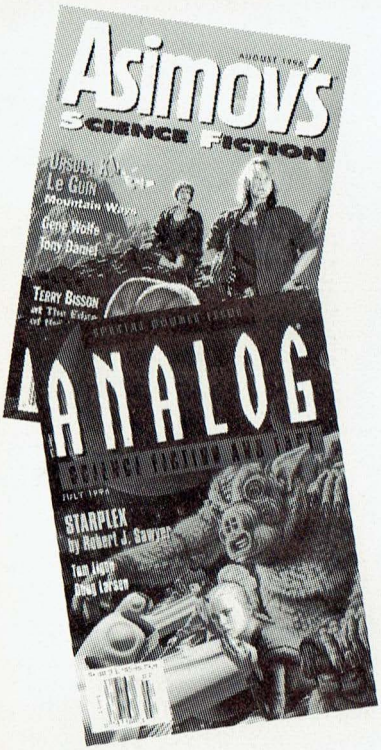


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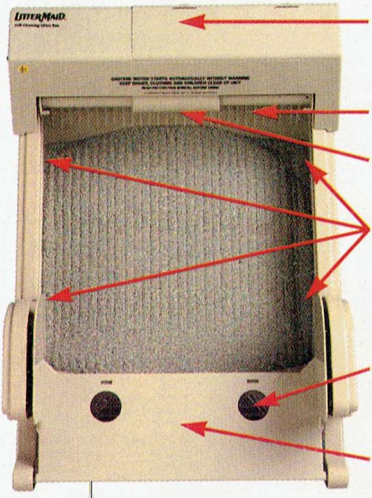
TECHNOLOGY UPDATE

# World's first automated litter box is completely odor-free, scoop-free and best of all, trouble-free!

Few things I can think of are as foul as cleaning the litter box at my house. Even when I clean it daily, it's difficult to keep odor away. And this problem is multiplied because I have two cats! But because I love them, and that's virtually all the maintenance they require, I do it... because there's no other option.

Well, today there's a solution that cat owners across the country will be thrilled about. LitterMaid is destined to make ordinary litter boxes obsolete!




**Automatic cleaning.** LitterMaid is a computerized, completely self-cleaning litter box controlled by a microprocessor. Electric "eyes" sense when the cat has exited the litter box, and minutes later, they signal the start-up of the automatic sifting comb. The comb sifts through the litter, scoops up any waste, and deposits it into a disposable waste container. The comb then returns to its original position, smoothing the litter.

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