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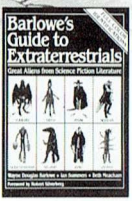

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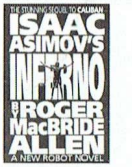

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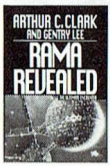

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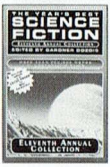

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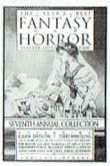

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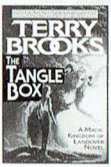

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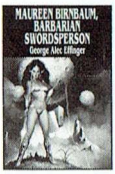

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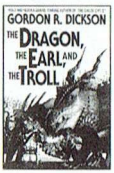

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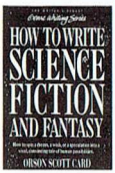

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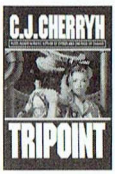

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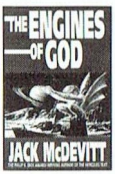

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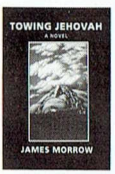

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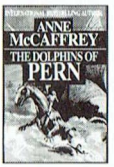

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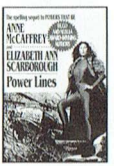

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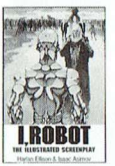

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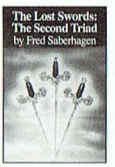

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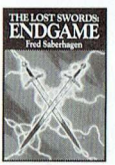

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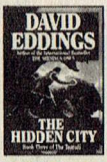

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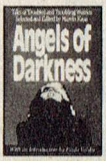

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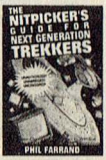

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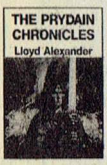

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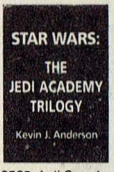

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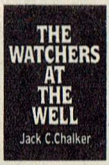

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POEMS

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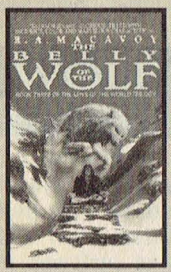

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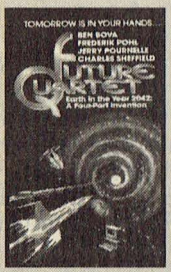

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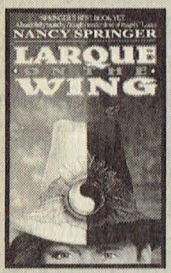

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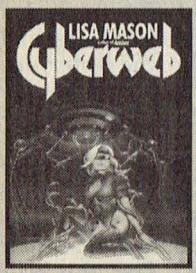

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REFLECTIONS by Robert Silverberg

GRESHAM'S LAW AND SF

Gresham's law is at work in science fiction, and bad books are driving out good ones. The prospect is that the process will continue and grow even more harmful with time.

A little economic history first. Sir Thomas Gresham (1519–1579) was an English banker who lived during the reign of Queen Elizabeth I. Gresham's great contribution to economics was the idea of forming an equalization fund to support the exchange rate of his country's currency—an idea that the Queen rejected, apparently because the royal treasury didn't have enough cash on hand to make the concept work, but which is common practice everywhere today.

One concept for which Gresham was *not* responsible was Gresham's Law. The economist Henry D. MacLeod, propounding it in 1857, attributed it erroneously to Gresham. In fact, the mathematician and astronomer Nicolaus Copernicus, he who overthrew the concept of the geocentric universe, stated the principle in a book on coinage a generation before Gresham was born. And in Gresham's own time the concept was put forth by one Humphrey Holt, who in 1551 observed that the debasement of English currency late in the reign of Henry VIII was causing coins of pure silver to disappear from circulation, leaving only the base coins in use and bringing about severe inflation, "to the decay of all things."

Regardless of who deserves the credit for putting Gresham's Law into words, the basic idea has been understood by merchants and moneychangers since coinage first began. It works this way:

Bad money drives out good.

One example of this occurred in the Roman Empire in the third century A.D. For everyday circulation the Romans had long used a small silver coin, the denarius, and a heavy bronze coin, the sestertius. The purchasing power of one denarius equaled that of four sestertii, and the two coins were interchangeable at that ratio for centuries. But about A.D. 200 Rome fell on hard economic times, and the emperors began to debase their silver coinage. At first this was barely apparent, to the great profit of the government, but the de-

basement went on and on until the supposed "silver" denarius consisted mostly of bronze, with a light wash of silver on its surface to make it look legitimate.

The first thing that happened was that the old pure-silver coins vanished from circulation. They were worth more as silver bullion than they were as denarii, and so they were melted down and used for jewelry, or recycled into the new base-metal coinage. Then the bronze coins began disappearing too, because the old four-to-one ratio was now out of whack: there was a lot of useful bronze in a big, heavy sestertius, whereas the new "silver" coins had hardly any intrinsic value at all. So the Roman people melted down their sestertii and turned them into things like nails and swords and plumbing fixtures, or else hoarded the coins against some future time when the old currency ratios would return.

Something similar happened in the United States about thirty years ago. Our coinage used to be made of silver, valued at a dollar an ounce. That is, the old silver dollar weighed just about one ounce, the half dollar contained half as much silver, and so on. But during the 1960s the market price of silver rose far out of parity with the official coinage rate. The ounce of silver in a silver dollar was now worth three or four dollars as melted-down bullion. Obviously this made no economic sense; and so our silver currency was abolished and replaced with dollars, half dollars, quarters, and dimes struck from a copper-nickel alloy that had only token value as metal.

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driving our good silver money out of circulation. The remaining silver coins immediately disappeared, most of them melted for their metal, the rest hoarded by collectors or speculators. When I was a boy, I would not infrequently find coins sixty or seventy years old in my pocket change; but today you will *never* be given a dime or a quarter older than 1965, when the alloyed coinage was introduced. Gresham's Law has seen to it that all of our silver coinage of earlier years has gone out of circulation.

What does all this have to do with science fiction?

Simply this: since about 1975, when books based on popular SF movies and television shows began to be published and enjoy huge sales, a gradual debasement of the stuff we like to read has taken place. Once upon a time—when science fiction was exclusively the province of a few low-circulation magazines—SF editors and readers put a premium on thoughtful, serious ideas and crisp, literate writing. That was the heyday of John W. Campbell's superb *Astounding Science Fiction* (now *Analog*) and, a little later, Horace Gold's *Galaxy* and the *Fantasy & Science Fiction* of Anthony Boucher and J. Francis McComas. That was the heyday, too, of the great writers who gave modern science fiction its character: Asimov, Heinlein, Sturgeon, De Camp, Simak, Kuttner, and the rest of Campbell's team in the 1940s, and Leiber, Kornbluth, Pohl, Clarke, Bradbury, Bester, Vance, Anderson, Blish, Dick, and many others a little later on.

Since the readers knew what they liked and magazine circulations varied very little from month to month, editors were motivated to publish the most challenging and vigorous stories they could find. They didn't have to worry about driving readers away by publishing excessively challenging and unusual fiction: the audience was steady, issue after issue, so long as the general quality level remained consistent. For young and unsophisticated readers, there were such action-oriented magazines as *Planet Stories* and *Amazing Stories*; when they were a little older, they would usually graduate to *Astounding* or one of its handful of adult-oriented competitors.

The coming of paperback publishing changed all that. Each book now was a unique item, with its own highly visible sales figures; but each of those unique books fell into a larger class of fiction according to type—the old Campbellian cerebral SF, the wild-and-woolly *Planet Stories* type, the fantasy-tinged sword-and-sorcery type, and so forth. Unsurprisingly, books of the more simpleminded sorts sold better—sometimes a great deal better. In a free-market economy there will always be more cash customers for Schwarzeneggeresque tales of violent conflict than there are for sober Campbellian examinations of the social consequences of technological developments.

Paperback publishers are not charitable institutions. They are in the business of what is accurately called "mass-market" publishing. The sales figures were unanswerable; and, gradually, over a period of ten or fifteen years, the older kind of science fiction, the kind

that we who first discovered it forty or fifty years ago thought of as "good" science fiction, began to disappear just as completely as Roman sestertii and American silver dollars had.

You aren't likely to find many of the wonderful novels of Theodore Sturgeon, Fritz Leiber, or Alfred Bester in your neighborhood bookstore. Simak is a rarity; Blish is forgotten except (ironically) for his *Star Trek* novelizations; Kornbluth and Kuttner are utterly unknown. Much great work of Vance, Dick, even Bradbury, Clarke, and Heinlein, has been shoved to the back rows in favor of the latest adventure of Princess Leia, the fourteenth volume in some popular robot-warrior series, and the ninth installment of a cops-and-robbers-in-the-asteroid belt epic. I confess that I'm having trouble keeping some of my own best books in print these days. It isn't that these books of twenty and thirty and fifty years ago are creaky and obsolete. They aren't. It's that they can't hold their own competitively in the stores with the flashy new media-oriented kind of SF and the interminable sequels to the mediocre books of a few years ago. Aside from the occasional brilliant Zeitgeist-shaping novel like *Neuromancer* or *Snow Crash,* just about the only SF books that do well commercially nowadays are series books and Hollywood spinoffs.

This is sad on two accounts. One is that the books I'm talking about

have a lot of great reading to offer. (Where are Sturgeon's *More than Human*, Ward Moore's *Bring the Jubilee*, Hal Clement's *Mission of Gravity* these days? In and out of print in the wink of an eye whenever some courageous publisher reissues them.)

Worse—far worse, I think—is the loss of these classics as exemplars of the type. Young science fiction writers traditionally take the work of their great predecessors as models for their own early books and stories. I grew up reading the classic SF of what is still called the Golden Age, a period that began in 1939 and ran, by my estimate, to the early 1950s. When I began writing, my goal was to equal the attainments of those writers who had filled my head with their wondrous visions years before. I still keep that goal in mind with every word I write.

But what of the young writer of today, who has no access to those classics, and who may very well come to regard the crudely written and crudely conceived formula-ridden mass-market stuff of today's paperback racks as the proper ideal to follow? What they read is what they will write. Junk begets junk. So the newer writers will give us imitations of works that themselves would probably not have been able to see publication a generation ago.

That's what I mean by bad science fiction driving out the good. As our classics go out of print, we are losing touch with our ideals, our Platonic forms of the finest SF. Superb work is still being done by some writers, of course. Indeed, some of the best science fiction ever written has appeared in the last decade. But most of that high-quality work struggles in the marketplace and has a sadly short shelf life, driven out of sight by the vast tide of you-know-what, often causing its writers to wonder why they had bothered. Thus does Gresham's Law operate on our field, "to the decay of all things." I wish I saw a remedy for it. ●

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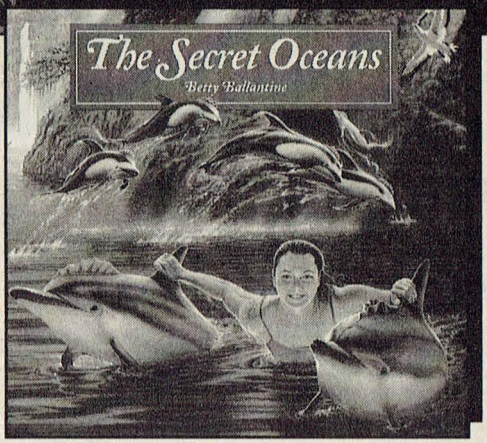

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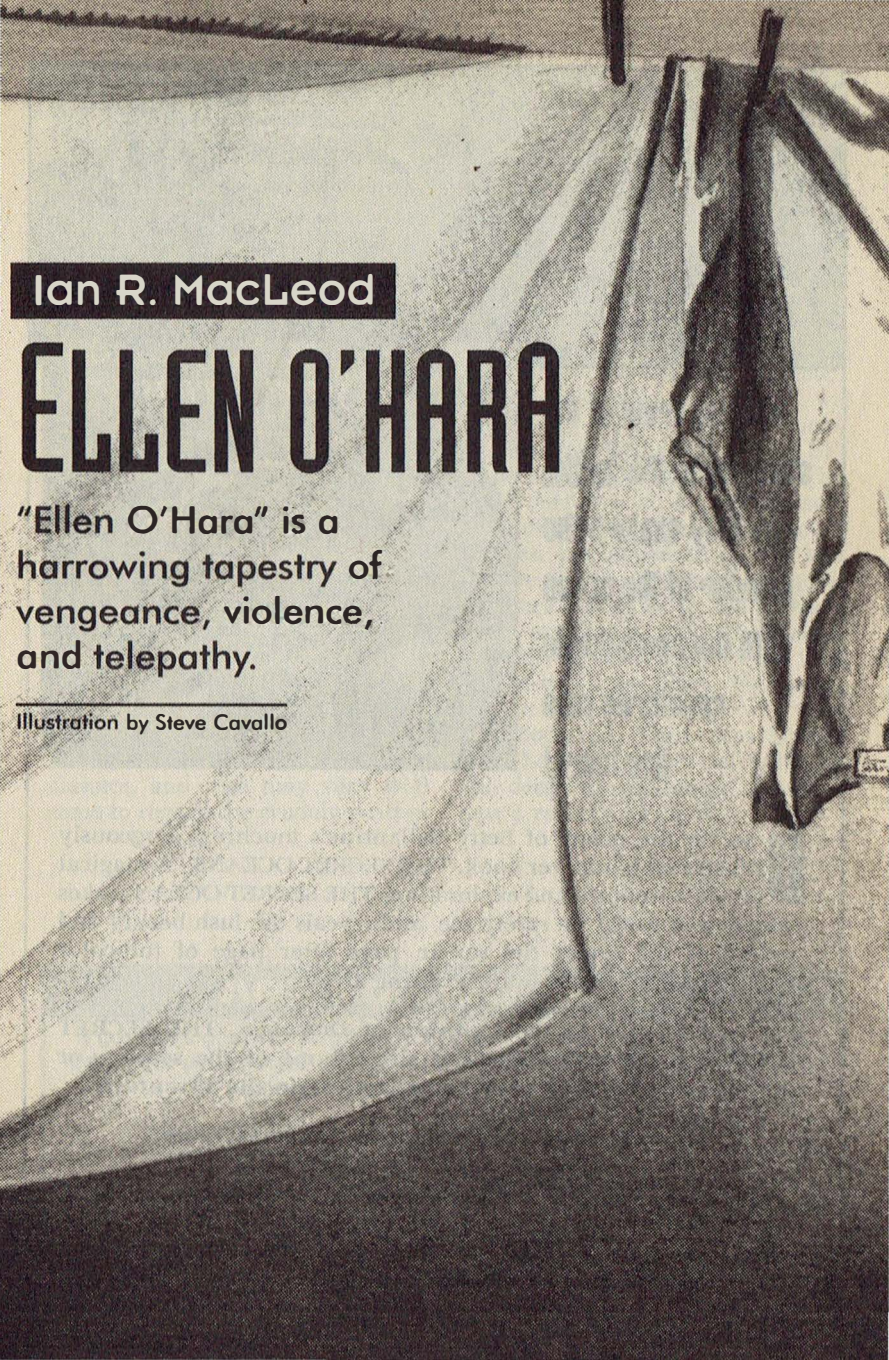
Ian R. MacLeod

ELLEN O'HARA

"Ellen O'Hara" is a harrowing tapestry of vengeance, violence, and telepathy.

Illustration by Steve Cavallo



The man who came through the back gate into the garden didn't look like a killer.

"Is your dad in?" he asked, dodging the washing, flapping out a handkerchief and mopping the sweat from his face. On this summer evening, Ellen O'Hara didn't think it odd that he wore a thick jacket.

"My dad?"

"It's just a word I want." The man leaned down out of the chimneys and a blue golden sky. He had plump, smiling cheeks that were glazed with stubble. "Will you get him for me, sweet?"

"What do I tell him?"

"Tell him . . ." The man's eyes moved away, narrowing against the lowering sun. "Tell him it's Jim would like a word."

Then Ellen was turning, barefoot over hot paving and slick kitchen linoleum into the front room. The telly on, Ma out cleaning offices, and Dad in his vest after a day at the plant, with the tray on his lap that he used to write the letters he sent to the *News*.

"Dad, there's a man called Jim wants to see you."

"Jim?"

"He's at the back."

Dad nodded. His face was a mixture of puzzlement and understanding. Ellen O'Hara had replayed that expression a million times since, had searched for every possible meaning. She knew that evening as she stood by Dad's chair that they were treading a difficult path, staying on here in Hayter Street long after the others of their kind. She knew it from the kicks and the curses that came her way at school, and from the slogans daubed on the walls. She knew it because of evenings she played alone in the back garden when she could hear laughter and the whoosh of bicycles down the alleys. But still, there was nothing unusual about someone wanting to see Dad.

He lifted the tray from his lap. He heaved himself up from the chair. Patting Ellen's head, he ambled out from the front of the room and through the kitchen, and she followed him into the light of the garden where the man was standing between the washing and the roses, his hand beneath his jacket, the smile still fixed on his face. It was a useful smile. Ellen came to understand that later; one he must have practiced, knowing it wasn't possible to keep the facial muscles slack when you were on a job.

Dad was ahead of her, his feet in holed slippers. A vision of his broad fleshy back. The man still smiling as his hand reached into the jacket, and the chimes of an ice cream van falling softly on the air. The scent of cooking and the tired closed-in heat of the alleys, the scent of the pink-hearted roses. That, and the drone of the bees, the voices. That, and the feel of the killing to come. Ellen could smell it hear it taste it now. It

was there in the long moment as the hand slid out from the jacket with the gun with two long black barrels, pointing like a dog's nose. It was there as her mouth filled with a scream.

"I've always had good residents in 3A. Some of the stories I could tell you . . . ."

"I'm sure."

Along the corridor, beyond the numbered doors, a kettle was screaming, a couple were arguing, a baby was crying. Someone was coughing and in pain as they lay in bed.

"Here we are."

The old woman turned the key and pushed at the door. There was a bed, a chair, a gas ring, and the sound of city traffic broke like a tired sea.

She put her case down on the mattress.

The old woman asked, "I don't suppose you'll be staying long?"

"No," she said, peering at herself in the clouded mirror above the chipped corroded sink, straightening her hair, checking her face. "It's just a few days. . . ." She was keeping her accent soft. She wanted to sound like the girls who came from the South to the clinics here to get the termination their own laws didn't permit.

"What part of Ireland are you from?"

She turned back to the old woman. Smiling. Taking her in. Kerry. The old woman had memories of Kerry. Of childhood. White cottages. The blue-green hills of long ago.

"Kerry," she said.

"Ahh . . ." The old woman sighed, and momentary brightness filled her eyes.

The Royal Ulster Constabulary came to the house, and the hand-wringing aunts who fluttered with cups of tea, and the people from the telly and the newspapers. Ellen was surprised by all the fuss. After all, it was too late now—wasn't it? But the back garden was taped-off and picked over like a shrine, and people she barely knew kept giving her money and sweets, and trying to hug her. She was shown pictures of faces by a police officer. The men were ugly, grainy, in photoflash—they all looked like killers.

Then Ellen saw her dad again. On the telly, on the local news, in a brief clip from an interview he'd given standing out in the street a few months back. She'd missed the broadcast at the time and her disappointment had been intense. Now she got the chance to see how different the house and Hayter Street looked on the screen, and to hear her dad talking about the Democratic Route in his best jacket and tie, with his shirt

collar sticking up. There he was, captured inside the glass of the screen like some rare fish, a Republican Catholic who'd chosen to stay on in the wrong street in the wrong area. They said the killing had been claimed by a new and obscure group.

Then came the funeral, which seemed to Ellen like some mad party, with all the cooking and the dusting beforehand, and the panics about what to do with the furniture and whether there would be enough booze. She had to wear her school blazer and itchy woolen tights, and a black car slid down the street like something from another world. Men dressed like crows carried away the long box that had lain in the back room. The priest lied during the service, talking as though he'd admired Dad rather than thought him a dreaming fool, and he and everyone else piled into the house afterward, and the place reeked of sausage rolls and hair oil and mothballed hats and sweet brown sherry.

Ellen waited for them to leave, to stop looking down at her and going on about the poor wee thing and the shame of it all. Eventually, as evening began to close in and the paper plates were stacked in bin liners outside by the roses, they piled into their rented Cortinas, grumbling about the lack of buses and the taxis that wouldn't cross the Peace Line. And the few neighbors who'd come to pay their respects also slipped away along Hayter Street in the deepening twilight, hoping not to be seen.

Ellen and her Ma moved out soon after the funeral. When the neighbors heard they were going, they became relaxed, almost friendly. Mrs. Hanrahan from 22 helped with the packing, and the Coys at 16 got a special rate for the van. But within days of their leaving, the windows of their house were smashed and the walls were scrawled and the rooms all stank like a toilet.

They went to stay at Kellaford, Uncle Tod's farm near the Border. At first, the arrangement was declared to be temporary, but Dad's pension from the plant wasn't enough to pay any decent rent, and Uncle Tod didn't mind them being there. Kellaford had the space, as long as you were prepared to put up with the rain that dribbled in through the roof and the worms that wiggled out of the taps.

An old orangery leaned against Kellaford's south wall. Many of the panes were broken, and those that remained were clouded with moss and lichen. The ferns had swarmed out of their shattered pots. The trees and vines were still vigorous, but they were sterile. Nothing had been harvested in the years since most of the land had been sold off to pay taxes, but the orangery still gathered heat from the sun over the hills and held it long after the air outside had turned blue and chill.

In the weeks after their arrival, Ellen sat there for many hours,

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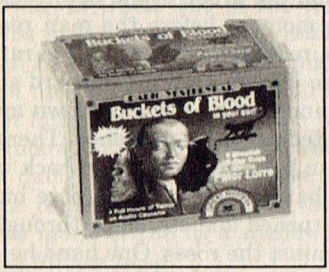

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perched on a rusted pipe, gently rocking to and fro. She kept thinking of the man in the back garden with his fat ordinary face who ducked between the washing and the roses. How was she to know, how was she to tell? She replayed the incident again and again, willing something different to happen, willing some extra bud of knowledge to break open in her head. If only she'd *known* about the man. If only she could have warned Dad.

Darkness flowed, climbing over Kellaford's wild gardens, welling inside the green warmth with the beetles, the scurrying mice, and the gleam of the broken glass that she stooped to lift and turn in her fingers as soft wings of shadow gently batted her bare face and her arms. A man leaning out from the chimneys and a blue golden sky. How was she to tell? And Dad going out there, into the garden, summoned by *her*. And then the shotgun that came out from beneath the man's jacket. Raised in his hand and her voice screaming with the chimes of the ice cream van and the pink smell of the roses and the drone of the bees. Yes, she had known then, known even in the moment before the man reached into his jacket. The feeling of it had poured into her, buzzing and rattling in her skull. The killing wave. But too late, too late. A fat hard slap of air that wasn't like a gunshot at all, and Dad's back was blown away.

Ellen turned the glass shard as scented darkness deepened. There was blood on her face and hands as the man pushed the shotgun back inside the jacket. A clumsy moment as the barrels caught on a loose button, and Ellen still screaming as the man turned and stumbled through the washing and was gone. Dad falling against the roses. One hand held up, the back of it caught on the thorns of the roses and seeming to wave. And blood on the roses, blood on the pink-hearted roses. Garlands and sprays. Clots of it on the washing.

Ellen O'Hara turned the shard. Over and over in her fingers, up and down her wrists. Her hands and arms were smooth now, slippery warm. The scream of a fox, out in Kellaford's garden, out in the country night. No, it was her. The bees were quiet, there were no roses and no fox in the darkness, and she was screaming. Uncle Tod's wide shoulders came up against the broken panes of the orangery, blocking the stars; a giant from another world. The stable smell of him as he stooped over her and began to mutter about Your poor Ma worried sick and what do you think you're up to out late young lady making all this racket? Reaching to lift her head and take her inside for a warming spot of tea, then his breath turning quick as his big hands slid from the glossy wounds along her arms.

Early that evening, feeling clean and scared and new, she tied a blue ribbon in her hair, put on a white blouse and a knee-length blue skirt,

checked her face in the mirror, and closed the bed-sit door behind her, pulling hard to engage the feeble lock. She walked down the stairs and out into the warm and gauzy evening, along the suburban streets with their half-wild gardens and cars up on bricks, the buttons of the flat numbers and the people passing by; smiling, distracted, homeward-bound. A strange city, a foreign city. Yet so much the same.

Outside the Underground, she waited for the old woman to finish, then stepped past her into the telephone booth. She looked at her watch, then dialed the number she'd memorized and let it ring four times as she watched the cars go by. Then she put down the phone.

Ellen had a fever. Perhaps it came from the wounds on her arms that had barely bitten into the flesh, were scarcely deep enough for danger. More likely it came from sitting out until all hours in that damp cold godforsaken orangery. I mean, she could hear Ma saying to the priest, the doctor, to Uncle Tod in the creaking hallway beyond the bedroom door, the kid was too young to intend anything. Too young to know just what in God's name she was doing.

Ellen turned over. Her hair and the pillow smelled of damp flesh, like a towel hung out all week in the bathroom. There was a fly buzzing at the window, and the curtains were drawn. They were both thin and white, dampstained at the edges. Where the sun broke through them, and she could see the figure of the Blessed Madonna that hung there, and the mark of the fly's shadow. She opened her mouth and let the buzzing fill her head.

"Weeeellllll . . . . Young lady." Doctor Kelly was sitting beside her, with a nest of veins like tree-roots in his nose.

"Yes . . ." The tight white bandages made her arms feel as though they didn't belong. She saw that the red roots also filled the whites of Doctor Kelly's eyes. She thought of the tree that must surely open its boughs there, inside his head.

He leaned over her. Then, without moving, without losing sight of his weary face, she was in another room. She saw a dead hand on a sheet. She saw flowers in a bedside vase. There was no warmth, no pulse, no heartbeat. Only the smell of shit and carnations. A worried voice saying *Doctor Kelly, I'm sorry about the mess. And him always so finicky. . . .* But never mind, Mrs. Mayo, never fucking mind. The social worker will be around from the Town Hall.

"Who's Mrs. Mayo?"

"Who's Mrs. . . ?"

Doctor Kelly was leaning close over her now, puzzled and blinking, with the drink on his breath and the carbolic and leather smell of the bag he'd opened beside her. The roots of his eyes, the roots of his nose, and

a vision from the tree inside. How could the kid know? But then . . . and maybe . . .

Ellen turned over in the bed, making a fretful noise, pushing away his unease. "I feel . . ." she said as Doctor Kelly's fingers moved to undo her buttons for the chill of the stethoscope. "I feel . . ."

Emerging from the Underground into the traffic of another part of the city, she turned right by the smart shops, then again along the trim hedgerows, swinging her heels and her ribboned hair, smiling up at the hazy pink sky.

The signs said Parking For Permit Holders Only, and the new red Saab wasn't out of place. The trees lined the road on both sides here. Not overlooked, near-on perfect. A dead end. She puzzled for a moment over the key. Then the locks thunked open, and she lifted the boot, and the big black nylon rucksack that Stevie had made up for her was there inside.

By the onset of winter, Ellen had settled into the routine of life at Kellaford. The school bus clanked down the lane, its interior thick with the fumes of tobacco, wet coats, packed lunches, boiled sweets. And the other children, kids of her own age, would sometimes glance at her from their seats or across the playground in their gossiping groups, as though she belonged to another race. To them, the big town was far away—almost mythic—and they knew about her dad, who had been shot by the Proddies. It was treated as a kind of perverse bad luck. But Ellen wasn't bullied or picked on. She was just left to herself. In the lessons, in the playground, on the streets of the little town, she'd learned how to be alone.

Climbing down each afternoon from the school bus and filling her lungs with the clean air, looking up at damp green hills and relishing the loneliness, Ellen often felt close to her dad. She remembered those afternoons after school when he'd come to collect her after finishing early at the plant and lift her over the railings. All the stuff he'd told her that the teachers had long forgotten, or never known. About Lugh the beautiful, who wore the Milky Way as a chain around his neck. About Finn MacCool, and his warriors of the Fianna.

She remembered the gleam in Dad's eyes, and his rolling walk on the long way back past the big houses on Malone Road and down along the lough. Her dad had had dreams of the future as well as the past. He'd tell her that any fool could look at a map and see that this country was all wrong. He'd put his arm around her and tell her that maybe, Ellen O'Hara, your generation will be the one to see it all come right. After

all, history was in their favor, and the only thing that could slow it down were the hotheads who shot and maimed.

One evening when the clouds were clearing after a day of rain, Ellen was walking between the gleaming ruts back down toward Kellaford after the school bus had rumbled off, when another sound came out of the air. She looked up at the green Army helicopter as the overhanging trees began to stir, shaking heavy droplets down on her. It was close now, close enough for her to see the soldier leaning from the open door. She'd only seen the machines in the distance before, buzzing tiny as dragonflies as they patrolled the Border.

She walked on more quickly, splashing through the rutted puddles. The helicopter followed. She began to run, glancing back, hardly believing the noise and the wash of air, the smell of metal and teardrops. She was deeply afraid, yet filled also with a sense of awe.

Uncle Tod was out seeing to the tractor in Kellaford's yard. Ellen climbed the loose stone wall and stumbled into his arms, and the helicopter banked away, combing the wet ungrazed grass of the east fields. Uncle Tod shook his oil-stained fist, and Ellen joined him, shouting, waving her arms at the bloody Brits, shooing them off like geese, suddenly filled with release and exhilaration.

In her dreams, she'd visited the heart of this city often enough. She'd known about the big buildings, the jangly accents, the policemen who walked without bullet-proof jackets or guns, the cars parked along the shopping streets. Here, there were no boarded-up shops, no checkpoints, no Touts Will Be Shot, no Fuck The Pope. No oildrums filled with rubble.

She wandered along hot pavements amid the neon and the cooking smells. Past shops open late to sell popcorn, shrinkwrap porn, and big beefeater teddys strung up in their bags. No matter what she did with the straps, the black nylon rucksack pressed hard on her shoulders. Again, she checked her watch. She tried to open her mind, but felt only the clash and clamor of traffic, the faint oily smell of stuff inside the bag that her own body heat was warming, and the acrid swirling against the thin casing of the vial and the wires that led from it, and gluts of bilious music from the open doorways of bars. Lights and thoughts and faces roared by. Streaming, disconnected.

She stood by the wide river and watched it flow, drawing more of the night out like strands of ink from beneath the bridges. Her throat caught on the rank garbage air. She vomited it out, and saw the light of the stars, and Uncle Tod leaning out from the orangery darkness of Kellaford to lift her. *Now will you come and let me hold you. . . .*

* * *

His name was Stevie Rork. He was just two years above her at school. He even took the same bus, although he took it so rarely it was years before Ellen realized the fact. Stevie wasn't that much to look at. He was thin, with longish yellow hair and a fox's pointed face. But everyone—even the teachers—had to admit that Stevie was clever, that he was a charmer, even if he'd probably never come to any good. In many ways, Stevie was like Ellen, an outsider for no reason that anyone could really put their finger on. But he was a fierce fighter, who would fly at anyone with a weird catlike anger. And he was a fierce dreamer, too. He'd take dares, stay out all night in abandoned and supposedly haunted hovels, go on wild drives in other people's cars. Once, he'd swum to the bottom of Finnebach Lake, and swore blind ever afterward that he'd seen a green enchanted kingdom below.

Ellen saw him tumbling drunk out of the bars with the big lads on market day, with her Ma tutting and pulling her on. She saw him walking alone by the misted silver of Finnebach Lake. She saw him at the turn in the stairs at school, and felt the drop in her belly as he looked back at her.

She walked up to Stevie Rork one evening outside school, when the trees hung uprooted in the mist. She looked up at him and said, "I want to be your girl."

"When did you decide this?" he asked, glancing back along the fog-wreathed railings for the hook of some joke.

"A while ago," she said. "One day in school when you looked down at me at the turn in the stairs."

Stevie stopped laughing as the memory of her came back to him. And he pushed back his hair. "And you could tell, could you? You could tell just from my look?"

Ellen smiled. She was feeling Stevie's eyes on her, and how she seemed to him with this red scarf around her throat and the mittens her mother had knitted on her hands and beads of yellow-lit moisture catching fire in her eyes and her hair. He wanted her—and already she knew him better than anyone, and knew that she would find the ways of making him want her more.

She walked down concrete steps into the bar by the river, where there was whispered music and pale deep-pile. She sat on a high stool with the black nylon rucksack pushed beneath her, and ordered a drink at the bar. She drew a breath, sniffed, and looked around. Lads from the glass cliffface Government offices that lay around this place sat with their ties loose and their briefcases tucked under the tables. There were older men, solitary or in smaller groups. A few girls, smartly dressed, looking bored.

"Some place to be alone . . . ."

She glanced over at the man who sat two empty stools down from her. Bulging buttons, and a pinstripe suit.

"I said—"

"—yeah." She took a swig of the cocktail she'd hoped would stiffen her resolve. Jesus, it was cold—and had cost enough. The man had a fat ordinary face. As he leaned over, nearly overbalancing, the booze he'd drunk and the food he'd eaten slid out on his breath, rank as the river.

"You staying, or visiting?"

"I'm having a drink. Alone." She looked at him. She'd seen plenty of his kind in the bars on the day the Broo paid out.

"You're *Irish,* aren't you? I *thought* there was something. Some thick bloody Colleen thinks she can come over here. I'll tell you, right, that I can take the blacks, easy. See, they don't go around killing our lads. Smearing shit over cell walls. . . ."

She sat and said nothing. Finishing the drink as quickly as she could without choking, feeling the icecubes chattering in the glass, and the need to be done with this thing. And she was off the stool, bending quickly down toward the black nylon rucksack that her foot had nudged out of sight in the low space beneath the bar, peeling back the velcro, slipping her hand inside, finding the plunger, and pushing.

Then, turning, she was gone.

"You and me, we're not part of this place," Stevie had said one afternoon in the spring after they'd made love in the damp grass by the standing stones at the corner of East Cornu field and were lying wrapped in the blanket that Ellen had brought up the lane from home, looking at the hawk in the sky, the clouds that chased the sun.

She snuggled under the crook of his arm, smelling him and the grass and the wind that lifted off the green and glittering valley. "Where should we be, then?"

"Somewhere where there's no one like us. Where the Brits aren't in charge."

"Your dad got away."

"My dad's hiding in the South. He's a fool. He's been used by the Cause. I'd happier be a decent criminal than that. . . ."

She closed her eyes and snuggled deeper. She could never really tell when he was serious, when he was joking.

She said, "I don't understand you, Stevie."

She felt the rumble in his thin chest as he laughed. She shrugged and snuggled deeper and kissed his nipple, feeling the red flame inside him. And the image of a room of yellow billowing curtains, a smiling man

with hollow eyes leaning down into a cot, bringing the smell of booze and nicotine. Stevie's Dad.

He pushed her over, and began to nuzzle at her breasts. He said, "I love you."

She looked up at the hawk in the sky, and at the jewelled trembling grass around her face, and at the white billows of hawthorn, and she felt the lumpen earth dissolve as the warmth began to spread. Stevie's desire was strong again now, always breaking, always rising, green over blue like the wall of a rolling wave. And yes, as he kissed her and the sun broke through the yellow curtains, he did love her. At that moment, he loved the whole world. He loved it as he loved and took Ellen, and as he loved his new Honda motorbike that he kept up the payments for by delivering messages for the local Brigade.

He lay there afterward with his head propped in his hand, looking down at her with the rug pulled back, trailing his fingers over her skin.

She closed her eyes, feeling the shining air and his fingers and his gaze on her, the smile on his lips. She felt the sky still hissing in her ears, and her scent on his fingers, and the warmth of his thoughts, opening. Layer within layer within layer. A box within a box. Car headlights beaming into a dark road where something, quite suddenly, leaps out. . . .

Suddenly, Stevie sat up on his elbows. "What's that sound?"

That night, the streetlamp flickered at her window like a weeping moon, and the old man in the room above was coughing and turning, his pain reaching down through the ceiling on strands of blood and mucus. When she finally slept, she dreamed that a dark-winged beast was squatting on her chest, scratching at her heart with sharp feathery claws, choking her.

The sound was an Army Land-Rover, coming up the lane. They saw the machine's mottled green roof riding over the hedges.

Stevie said, "Let's get out," but the soldiers were already coming at them down the field and from both sides at a run. Pushing through the hawthorn, wading through the rutted mud, kids from the mainland with their fear and their rifles and their heavy boots. They must have watched Ellen and Stevie lying on their blanket in the corner of the field, and moved in ahead of the Land-Rover.

Only the captain made a gallant effort to keep a straight face. He told them they were taking a bloody risk, skulking out in a field this close to the Border. He told them that it was the oldest trick, two paddies pretending to fuck so they could touch the wire that led to some culvert. But he'd let them off because they looked like typical young idiots, a

thicko micko and his titless whore. As they wandered back down the field in their mud-heavy boots and jingling packs, one of the soldiers stumbled, lunging at Stevie with the butt of his rifle, slamming him hard.

She got up early, woken by the chill of her own sweat. She ran the tap into the sink until it produced luke-warm water, shampooed her hair, and listened to the BBC news on her portable radio. There was a lot about the bombing—there always was when it happened on the mainland.

She twisted open the bottle of hair-color she'd bought at the chemist on the corner, and read the instructions. *A small explosion in a riverside bar. One dead, three seriously wounded. Now sport—and a bad day for England.* . . . By eight-thirty, she was packed and out, wearing a short blue dress, pale tights, with her damp yellow hair hidden under a white headscarf. Around the corner, she dumped her suitcase into a big communal dustbin.

She walked the streets. She was far too early. She unwound her scarf and combed out her hair in a public lavatory, and then drank coffee in a cafe on the local high street, gazing at the newspapers the people were reading, with their headlines and their rough drawings of impressions of a thin, dark-haired girl. Glancing at the reflection of a stranger in the cafe window, she checked her watch.

Ellen sat in Kellaford's big kitchen. It was already late, and the generator was down. She actually liked the old farmhouse better this way, with the dark coming in rather than the light going out.

Ma had arranged the evening so that the two of them ended up sitting at opposite sides of the kitchen table beside the paraffin lantern, with nothing but this silence between them, and Uncle Tod in his parlor chair with a plastic jug beside him, thinking, as he always thought, of his dead wife, whom Ellen had never known. She'd died in the birth of a son who was already dead, choked on something called the umbilical cord, which Ellen imagined must be like some kind of noose. Ellen studied the table's deeply rutted woodgrain, thinking, as she had thought before, that it looked like a drunkenly ploughed field.

Ma clicked her tongue. "You're still going with Stevie Rork, aren't you?"

"I'm not *going* with anyone."

"Then whatever word you choose to use."

"Why ask, if you're so sure?"

Ma sighed and lit a cigarette. The smoke swirled up and around the

lantern between them, drawn to the heat of the flame. Ellen watched as it settled, drifting into half-seen hills.

"I know that you're of that age, Ellen. But why choose Stevie?"

"What's wrong with him? He's had a few scrapes, but who hasn't?"

"You *know* what his father was?"

"Stevie hasn't seen his dad in years."

Which was true; Stevie's memories of his father were virtually nonexistent, just that figure in the room with billowing yellow curtains, the smell of booze and nicotine. And there was a photograph above the coin-in-the-slot TV in the Rorks' terraced house. It showed a thin man with hollow eyes in a wedding suit, smiling awkwardly, looking out of place. That's my dad, Stevie used to say, pointing.

"You know what'll happen to Stevie, Ellen. You deserve better than getting pregnant by a man who's going to spend half his life in the Kesh."

Ma sucked her cigarette down, and ground the coal out in a saucer, her fingers trembling. "Think about it. Think about you and Stevie. And I know, Ellen, that you're still hurting because of what happened in Hayter Street. But your dad *hated* the Provos, Ellen. Hated the men preening with their guns. . . ." Ma shrank back in the chair, into the shadows, away from the light, almost as if she was falling. There. She'd had her say.

Ellen nodded, thinking *Hayter Street*—of the way that Ma said Hayter Street, and all the faded images it conjured. Dad a younger man than Ellen ever remembered. But as he leaned over in some park, his bones and the sky showed through. It was all so pale, so thin, almost transparent. Then coming back to Hayter Street that day and seeing the blue cars and the circling lights and the neighbors standing out. Knowing what it meant. And everything afterward like the cold breaking of an endless wave.

"I don't plan to waste my life, Ma," Ellen said eventually, gazing at the half-figure she now saw. The shivering glint of an eye. "Not on Stevie Rork or anyone else . . . ."

She stood up and left the kitchen, running along the corridor, pushing at the damp-rotted door at the far end, bursting out into the orangery, where shards of glass hung from the roof on threads of dead ivy, turning and tinkling. She sat down on the old rusted pipe and folded her arms close around her chest, rocking gently to and fro.

She was sick of Kellaford's empty longing, sick of school; of the girls with their need for clothes, make-up, and attention, and the boys who spent half their lives thinking about sex and the other half trying to forget it. Stevie might end up gunned down or in the Maze, but at least he had his plans and his dreams. And he had that sense of *risk*. It might

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seem more obvious to her, but she knew that others felt it, too. That was why she'd been drawn to him.

It was something her dad had had too, although he'd taken his chances in different ways. Back in the days before the Provos had taken over, he'd been a proud Republican. He'd walked on the civil rights marches, helped print the pamphlets, argued merrily with his Unionist neighbors, and stood on tables in smoky rooms. But then the burnings and the stonings had begun, and people were forced out of their houses. Whilst Dad had made his stand in Hayter Street and talked of peace and power-sharing and Fin MacCool, the IRA had shaken off the cozy drinking-club chat, re-armed itself, and prepared for war. Like the old guard Republicans, her Dad had still talked of peace—and where the hell had it got him?

Ellen stooped down and picked up a green-mottled shard of glass from the orangery floor. She turned it in her hands and looked out through the broken panes at the black hills with the stars above, remembering how she'd once stayed out here. In all the years since then, nothing had really changed.

When Ellen finished school, she went back to the city to study. She'd worked hard those last terms at school, and had the grades and a place doing Business Studies at Victoria Road to prove it.

Mid-afternoons, when lectures were finished, she would leave the windswept campus and her neat room and go across the park, passing through the checkpoints that guarded the big shops. Or she'd walk up the streets beside the lough, past the high gabled-houses where the gulls wheeled in the salt-laden air, and her dad had once talked of peace and the dawn of Eire Nua as they walked the long way home from school.

She remembered how the walls in the west of the town told you where you were. Fuck The Pope. God Save The Queen. Hang The Fenian Bastards—that meant you were in the camp of the enemy. Die, Soldier. No Strip Searching. Eire Nua in designs of wild Celtic—that meant you were home. Not that there was much else that was different. She once made a point of entering the alien heartlands of the Crumlin Road, trying to find Hayter Street. It had been razed, there was some new estate that was already grey and tired and old, the houses For Sale and the men all pushing prams, out of work. She wondered about the fat, smiling man, and where he lived. But the faces she saw, and the beery wash of anger that broke from the doors of the pubs and the drinking clubs, were the same that she found beyond the barricades and the checkpoints amongst her own people a few streets away.

The flats rose high over the grey rooftops, tombstones to civic architecture. Stevie had told Ellen he'd only got one with the help of some arm-twisting from Brigade, although she found it hard to believe you could

give these places away. It was damp inside—noisy, hard to heat, poorly plumbed—but Stevie was happy with it; enjoying his independence after a lifetime of shared beds and hand-me-down shoes. With his wage from Brigade, plus the Giro and the job bonuses, he had more than enough to keep himself in take-aways. Crouching over Stevie on the mattress on the bare floor, letting him pull off her blouse and bra to suck at her breasts, Ellen would reach toward him and feel only the continued certainty of his love for her, his innocent need. The two other boys she'd been with filled their heads with worries and fantasies when they made love, but Stevie only ever thought of the sweetness in her. All she'd see in him was Ellen, Ellen. It was like making love in a hall of mirrors.

Stevie would often fall asleep afterward, and she would lie beside him, studying his face in the pale light that came through the curtainless window, wondering if anything about him would ever really change. But Stevie was a killer now. That was the oddest thing of all. Her Stevie—the thin lad she'd always known—had shot a soldier dead, and helped stuff the body of an SAS man left at the roadside with Semtex. But it was hardly there, that part of him; Stevie had this bright vision of a land free of the Brits, a Shining Isle where there was birdsong and music in the summer fields. Sometimes, lying tangled in Stevie's arms and close to the edges of dream, Ellen could even walk beside him along the clean wet streets of a new city after some redemptive rain, the soldiers gone, the barricades down, the slogans washed away, the people smiling and waving as they drove by in new white cars.

Only sometimes, just as his consciousness arose, would she catch flashes of the things he fought to suppress, the blood-filled gap between the dream and reality. She saw a fat, shirtsleeved man, caught in the crosshairs as he walked toward his car. And, in some corner of her mind, the fat-faced gunman was still dodging under the washing, smiling down at her, asking if he could have a word with her dad. And she was still running inside to get him, not knowing what a killer felt like, not knowing even now. Was it someone cold? Someone angry? Was it a stranger, a dark angel—or your closest friend?

When Stevie woke, she'd wet the tea for them both and make a few pointless efforts to tidy. She'd let Stevie's old dressing gown hang open as she moved around the flat or leave her clothes off entirely, soaking up the glow of his regard, knowing that he was never happier than when he lay there smoking, sated and disconnected, watching the gentle movements of her body.

"I've been thinking," he said one day as she stood by the window, looking down at the rows of narrow streets where she could see the red berets of an Army patrol moving along the Falls. "You should stay here."

"Stay?" She turned toward him, unthinkingly tightening the sash of the dressing gown.

"I mean," he said, affectedly casual as he lay in bed, tapping his cigarette into the ashtray he'd propped on his thin chest, "this is daft, us living apart in the same city. You don't belong with those stuck-up kids."

She nodded. That, at least, was true. The other students at Victoria Road thought that she was thin and pale and strange, this girl who looked at you but never said anything. They knew nothing about the Troubles.

"Well, Ellen . . ." He was trying hard not to push it, trying hard not to hope. "You and me. What do you say?"

She walked over to the bed. Looking down at him, meeting his soft brown eyes, she felt a deep tenderness. "I can't."

Stevie blinked, more from hurt than surprise. "Why not? You know I love you."

"Yes."

The kettle in the tiny kitchen started to whistle. She turned away to see to it, but Stevie sat up and grabbed her hand. Although she knew what he was going to say, she let him keep her there.

"Or we could marry, Ellen. Whatever you want. I'd quit active service. I'd look for a job."

"Some chance of that here."

"But what do you want?"

"I don't know."

"What is it with you, Ellen, eh?"

"What do you mean?"

Stevie chewed at his lip, suddenly close to anger or tears. "Why did you choose me?"

She pulled back her hand, rubbing away the sudden pressure of his grip. "I didn't *choose* you. We—"

"—what? You could have been anyone. Anything . . ."

"You know that's not true."

Stevie nodded in resignation. He let go of her hand.

That was it—they never really argued. There would sometimes be these bitter exchanges, but, after a few moments, Stevie always gave up in the frustration of trying to say things that he somehow seemed to guess she knew or felt. Even now, as she walked across the bedroom toward the tiny kitchen, she could feel him pushing away a vision of his flat with new wallpaper and floral curtains—a boyish dream of femininity—and her smiling down at him in bed each morning.

As winter came on, Ellen sometimes agreed to Stevie's pleas and stayed overnight with him in the flat. Late at night, men from Brigade would

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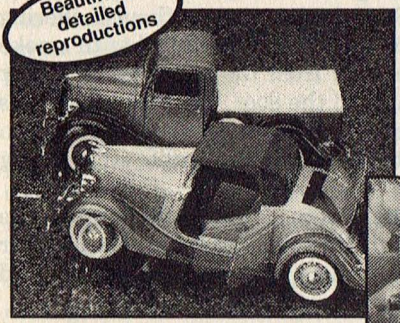

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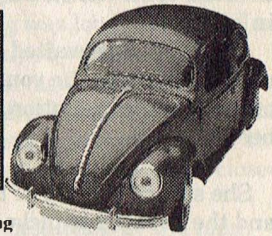

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come sometimes to talk. They'd look at her and smile as she gave them coffee, their eyes passing right through her. They'd wait for her to go into the bedroom and close the door before the real business began.

Other times, she'd turn the key he'd given her and find the flat empty. She'd sit and wait then, puffing at Stevie's cigarettes without bothering to inhale, looking out from the window. As the room filled with smoke and the night came in on a purple wind from the hills, she'd wonder which Stevie Rork it would carry through the door. The Stevie who was heavy with drink? Or the Stevie with the pinpoint eyes, the Stevie with the reek of cordite on his jacket and the crack of an Armalite still ringing in his mind?

One night, she waited and Stevie didn't return. Even before word came of his arrest, and the young women from the other flats along the corridor offered their consolation, she knew that this was the sign for which she'd been waiting.

She sat in the back of the car as the roads hooked deeper into the hills and the headlights picked out the grey corpse of a sheep at the roadside. Water and the lights of a house gleamed faintly in the shadowed valley below, and the standing stones on the far ridge stood out against the purpling sky. There was a gun under the coat on the front passenger seat. The man who sat beside her glanced down at her thighs, and said nothing.

They came to the large abandoned hotel just as darkness finally settled.

Ellen O'Hara's hair was short now, and her pale skin was brown from the tube of paste she'd bought with her new clothes at the airport. She wanted it to look as though she'd been here for some time.

She'd slept-in late on the bed in the little villa, and had taken breakfast in the café in the square of white houses, watching the playing children, smiling at their happy absorption and feeling the sun prickling on her bare neck. She'd looked in at a shop and asked about newspapers. But the English newspapers—the ones she could find—were a day old and filled with the Royal Family. She changed some money, bought a bathing suit and a towel, and drove her rented car down through the shimmering hills.

She took the steps to a beach, and stripped, and lay listening to the waves. The heat pressed down, and she thought of the man in the bar, the smell of his rank breath as he leaned toward her. And the sunlight seared though her eyelids—white, yellow, red, black; the flowering colors of high explosive.

The sand burned her feet as she ran past the sprawled bodies, flabby and brown, gleaming like braised meat. The water was colder than she'd

expected. It broke and pulled at her, pushed at her, drawing her out into the bay.

Surfacing, gasping, she looked back at the white shore. Even without moving, just treading water, she was being drawn out by the undertow. For a moment, she let the waves push and slide over her shoulders, across her face, filling her mouth. Then she kicked hard, and thrust with her arms, swimming.

The naked man was tied to a chair, which was bolted to a wooden pallet, which in turn was weighed down at the corners with blocks of concrete. His head was hooded and his breathing was loud and irregular. A few minutes before, his left foot had been pulped with a hammer.

In the light of a single paraffin lamp, the interrogators sat facing him from across the floor of the old hotel ballroom. Behind them, and on the ceiling, quivered the dusty remains of tinsel and paper streamers, the remnants of some Christmas bash in the days before the place had closed down due to lack of patronage.

One of the interrogators made a note and looked back at the man.

"Repeat the names."

The man did so. None of it was new now, but they listened anyway, and fed a new cassette into the machine. There was a weird sense of horror and sadness in the old ballroom; he was, after all, a soldier like them, someone who'd gone undercover and taken the risks his masters weren't prepared to face.

"Is that it?"

The man nodded, then gasped as someone pulled off his hood.

"You know what to do."

The man was sobbing now, but he kept his bruised and puffy eyes on Ellen as she walked out from the shadows. Two paces away, standing at the edge of the pallet to which his chair was fixed, she leveled the gun with both her hands. The others here would have to shoot him afterward, but tonight, *her* bullet was to be the first. And the man didn't hate, didn't love, was hardly there at all. He was just a searing empty pain that wanted to be over.

Dusk was falling when Ellen got back to the villa, and the light she'd left on in the bedroom wasn't showing as she looked up from the road. She climbed the steps, and saw that the front door had been forced. She pushed it wide, stepping into the heat of the kitchenette and feeling for life, wondering if this was the moment when it ended.

"That you, Ellen?"

It was Stevie's voice.

She ran into the bedroom and fell on the mattress where he lay, knocking the breath out of him.

"Here, let me see you." Stevie elbowed himself up and yanked the light-pull. He blinked. "Your hair . . ."

She put her hand to her bare neck, the skin slightly hot from the sun. Then to his face.

"You look the same," she said. But his cheeks were plumper, and the line of his jaw was blunter, less defined. She assumed it came from all those months in the Maze, then at the house where he'd made bombs on the mainland.

She put her hands on his knees and kissed him, liking the way she looked to him now, a different Ellen O'Hara with short blonde hair. Stevie was opening the buttons of her blouse, pushing it off her shoulders and starting to kiss her breasts. She tasted of salt. It was on his tongue.

After they'd made love, he drifted off to sleep, and Ellen lay beside him with his dampness inside her. But for the scent of thyme and the sound of the crickets and the warmth in the air, it was just like old days. But for the flab on Stevie's thighs and chest and belly in the moonlight. . . .

He grunted and burrowed his head deeper into the pillow. Some dream of a forest. Then headlights, and running. He stumbled in his dream, and muttered and turned over, sinking deeper.

Ellen stood up, padded into the little bathroom, and turned beneath the spray. She dried herself with a towel, went back into the bedroom, and looked down again at Stevie. It wasn't just the weight he'd put on. He'd changed inside, too. Even his dreams had paled. She remembered the Stevie who saw faces in the clouds, the Stevie who swam down through Finnebach Lake and drank the air up on the hills about Kellaford. She remembered the wild tenderness of his eyes.

Stevie dressed to go out when he awoke later in the evening. It wasn't what Ellen wanted, but she understood that he was sick of the months of prison and in hiding. They drove in the rented car down the road into town. Neither of them was used to holidaying abroad. It was a different world, here under the lights and the stars, in the warmth of the night. Stevie took her hand, and they wandered with the other couples beside the dark rigging and the sea-scents of the old harbor. They looked at the pictures outside the restaurants, and ate grilled fish in a square by the shore in candlelight.

"You're still looking sad," he said, pouring a second carafe.

She smiled and shook her head. Nearby, street music was playing, and the white spire of a church rose into the Mediterranean night. This place truly was lovely.

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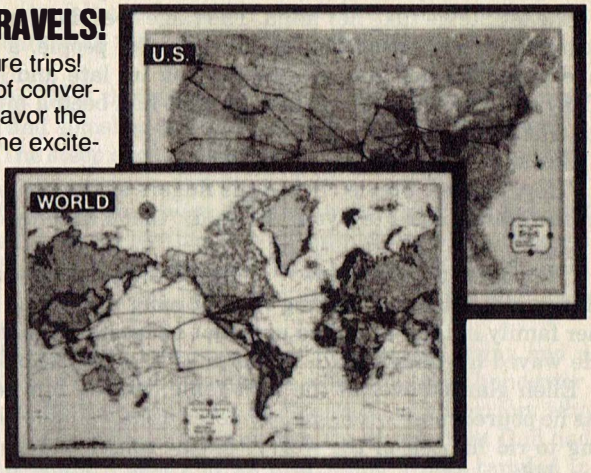

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"You did well, sweet," he said. "What did you think of the Saab?"

She let Stevie take her hand. The tables beside them had been pushed together to accommodate a larger group of people, a family with gran and granddad and the kids all staying up late and sharing the wine. They were Brits, Ellen realized now. It had been a mistake for them to sit this close.

She said, "We should be getting back."

"Hey, laddie!" Stevie clicked his fingers at the waiter, then looked up at the stars. "Did I tell you," he said, "that I saw my dad?"

"No."

"He's back in the city now. . . ." Stevie drank more sangria and belched. She gazed at his fat, shining face. "Living with some sour old bint and her family in the Falls. And not what I expected. Too much of this stuff." He waved his glass. "Still, it was good to meet the old bastard again."

Ellen glanced over at the next table, willing him to shut his mouth. As he poured more wine, she wondered at how simple he'd become, drinking to rid himself of the worry that he might end up an alcoholic like his dad.

Later, she drove Stevie out through the town and into the hairpin hills, winding down the window to let in a breeze that carried the scent of dust and orange groves, fearing that he might be sick. He lolled beside her, humming to himself. Checking the rearview mirror, she saw headlights glint into view out of the darkness behind them. A siren began to wail.

"Jesus . . ." Stevie hissed.

She guessed what would be in front of them even as the road dipped and the lights of another car were slewed ahead in the darkness.

"Just keep your foot down," Stevie said. Calm now, cold sober. "We haven't come all this way. . . ."

An officer standing at the side of the road was waving his flashlight to indicate that they should stop. At the last moment, as she swung the wheel, he tumbled out of the way. Branches scraped over the windshield, and the wheels skidded, then bit back onto the loose surface of the pale road on the far side. She felt something tug at the car, and heard a series of dull thumps. But she kept the accelerator floored.

She checked the rearview, and saw the lights of the following car dip left also toward the trees, then stop as one of them winked out. Then a fork ahead in the road. Then another, and something bright and hot was burning inside her. She chose east, toward the big northern towns. She felt at ease, pushing the car harder now, taking risks, rolling like a cold breaking wave, driving down this dark tunnel with just the headlights pouring ahead of her.

"We'll have to ditch this car soon," she said, looking over at Stevie

and seeing the way that he was slumped. For a moment, she thought it was the drink. Then she felt another giddy surge, and saw the wet gleam on his coat, and the bulging rents in the passenger door.

"A fine job you did," said the man who was driving, shaking his head as the car bumped and splashed along the rutted cross-Border track.

Ellen gazed out. The steep enclosed hedges were dark beneath the pale flush of the sky.

She said, "You do what you have to," shivering slightly and keeping her handbag pressed down on her lap as a sliver of dawn broke through the woodland of a far hilltop. She guessed that she'd already be the talk of the Falls bars for getting back here. Not that she wanted that. Not that it had been easy.

As the day brightened, she saw a castle's sheep-picked ruins and a hovering fleck that could have been a hawk or a distant Army helicopter. She thought of Lugh the Beautiful, and of Fin MacCool's warriors who were still sleeping beneath these hills, and how the stories that Dad had once told her of this island's past and its future had grown tangled in her head. Ellen O'Hara, he'd said, as the seagulls mewed and drifted over the rooftops of Malone Road and the light flashed up from the lough, everything here has to change. But the whole point was that nothing here *ever* changed. Later on, when all the truth had been forgotten, she'd be in the tales herself, a small new thread in the endless story.

They rejoined the roads, and the air blowing on her face through a gap in the window changed its scent with the textures of familiar soil. Finnebach Lake gleamed in the distance. They passed the pull-in down the lane where the school bus had once dropped her off. And there was Kellaford, ragged and brown and warm with the morning.

The front door swung open as she climbed out of the car, and Uncle Tod hugged her in speechless tears. She hugged him back, saying "I can't stay long. . . ."

Ma sat alone in the kitchen.

"How much did you hear?" Ellen asked, sitting down across the deeply grained table. They had a dog now. It growled at her from a cardboard box by the Rayburn.

Ma gave a shrug. "That you'd done something. That you were in danger. Then, that you were safe. Your hair—"

"—Stevie's dead."

"Well, there . . ." Ma drew on a cigarette. "There's no saying that it wasn't . . ." She blew out a cloud of smoke.

"Look. . . ." Ellen took out the photograph from the handbag on her lap, the photograph that she'd found in Stevie's wallet, pushing it across the table.

Ma lifted it with trembling fingers, glanced at it, then pushed it back. "They're looking like each other," she said, "aren't they?"

The photograph showed Stevie and his Dad standing outside a city bar, arm in arm. Their faces were clear enough, even through the blood-stains. They were both plump, and smiling.

Ellen said, "He's the man, Ma. Stevie's Dad. He's the fat man who came to Hayter Street. The man with the gun in the garden."

"Hayter Street. . . ?" Ma blinked and shook her head, long rays of sunlight pouring through the window into her grey sleep-tangled hair. Ellen felt grey emptiness, the slow-breaking wave.

"Stevie's Dad was a Provo, Ma. He was the one who shot Dad. You understand that?"

"What difference does it make now, Ellen, which side it was that killed him?"

"But *why?*"

"Your Dad spoke up, Ellen. He was a Republican who stayed on and talked about peace when the Provos wanted war. It was going to happen anyway, one way or the other, one side or the other—that was what I kept trying to tell him. . . ."

"They didn't even have the courage to admit it. . . ."

"I thought you'd know enough, Ellen, to realize that courage doesn't count. You of all people—the way you look at people. Seeing and not seeing. . . ."

Ellen said nothing, staring at Ma as the dog by the Rayburn, now half-asleep, began to growl once again. She felt empty and she felt cold. It was a cold that had never really left her since that night when Stevie died in her arms on that dark foreign roadside beneath the pines. She'd looked into the killing wave then, and it was cold and it was bright. It was pain beyond feeling that swept you on into a place of white. And it was already there, rolling and breaking inside you, long before you died.

"Then Stevie, Ellen," Ma said, shaking her head, genuinely amazed. "Of all the ones you could have had, you had to choose Stevie Rork . . . . I mean . . ." Ma began to laugh, then to cry.

The man drove her away from Kellaford, up the hill and through the little town, toward the safe house up in the plantations that was waiting. In the square, where the shops were opening, she asked to stop and use the loo. Too gallant to argue, the man parked his car in the shadow of the memorial. She was out quickly with her handbag into the old toilets, then through the other entrance and past the school railings where she'd met Stevie, into the cobbled streets beyond.

She took her time. It was late afternoon before she reached the city;

evening as the tombstone flats rose in sunlight over the terraced streets. Eire Nua. Touts Will Be Shot. She knew it well. And the kids were out playing, shooshing by on their bicycles, and the sound of familiar voices and the scent of cooking drifted from front doors open to the heat.

She checked the address that Stevie had so carelessly scrawled on the back of the stained photograph. The street was called Plunkett now, although the old A-Z still showed it as Gawain—named after some British hero, then re-named after an Irish one. No one looked at her here, nothing was strange, and the house was like all the others along Plunkett Street, with a gravelly square of front garden. She closed the iron gate, and knocked on the half-open front door.

She saw the faded tiling of the hall as she waited, and a lemony square of sunlight thrown across a picture on the wall. She heard the chimes, distant and ethereal, of an ice-cream van, and she wondered if they still came here, where the men in helmets and the Saracens patrolled. As the door swung fully back, she realized that her whole face and body were incredibly tense, and that she was smiling. Sliding her fingers into her handbag, feeling for the cold grip, she looked down at the boy who was standing there. He had his school tie on, and his school shorts.

"Is Mister Rork in? I'd like to . . . He's a . . ."

She swallowed, licking her lips, preparing to begin some generalized description of Stevie's Dad in case he was living here by some other name. But the boy knew him all right. He turned and skipped off down the hall. She could even see the man's face. She heard a door bang, and a shrill voice shouting, "Uncle Marty!" Looking down at the half-dead bush in the patch of front garden, she saw the shriveled pink-and-brownish flowers that hung there, and could smell the scent of roses.

She heard footsteps. The slap and sigh of slippers as a dark figure ambled up the hallway, a newspaper clutched in hand, a crumpled shirt half open to the belly. He brought with him the smell of beer and sweat and cigarettes, but he smelled and felt like *Stevie* too—she hadn't expected that—and he'd been asleep and was still yawning, flapping a hand over his mouth as he puzzled over this young woman standing in the doorway, part of his mind still trailed with the edges of football on the telly and with half-lost dreams.

"What is it that you're . . ." He stood before her now. In the sunlight, she could see the threads of red on his nose and along his grey-stubbled cheeks. Her hand was still in the handbag, clenched around the gun. Sensing the oddness of her posture, he glanced down. When he looked back up again at her face, he seemed to see everything, and knew what she knew.

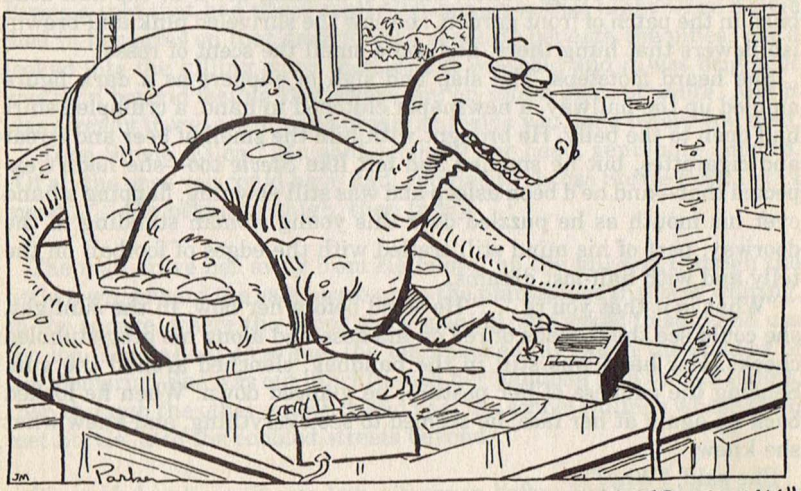
She said, "Why?"

He shook his head slowly, spreading his arms. "I should do this thing

now," he said, "if I were you . . ." She looked into the dark of his eyes and saw the shape of her own face caught there, and felt the endless cold break over her from the depths of this warm summer evening. She realized that he wasn't daring her to use the gun, and that he was like the soldier who'd looked up at her in the old ballroom of that abandoned hotel. She realized that he was pleading.

She turned away from him, and heard his voice shout after her as she re-opened the gate. She walked down Plunkett Street and out along the Falls, past the barbed wire and the rubble-filled barrels and the big murals of the men in masks and the heroes of old, on toward the center of town, where there were still flowers in the parks and the buses and the taxis stopped, and the doors, even in this heat, were closed to the world. Nobody dreamed along Malone Avenue. It was solid and it was real. She sat down on a bench overlooking the lough as the sky darkened and a clear salt-and-heather tanged breeze blew in off the sea and the hills. After a while, as the streetlights came on and the blue darkness deepened, a shadow that might have been her father seemed to sit down beside her. Turning toward it, unsurprised, she opened her mouth to ask him a question, then shook her head and stood up from the bench.

Tossing her handbag over the railings toward the waters of the lough, Ellen O'Hara walked on down the street. ●



"MISS JENKINS, BRING ME A BLACK COFFEE AND TWO DAZED MAMMALS."

Curse of the Clone's Wife

Which one is he tonight?
The one she married or one of
a dozen others like him
who dwell on different tiers
of the arcology they inhabit?
One of scores of others who
may have just jaunted in from

London or Tokyo or Antarctica
merely for a change of scenery,
the taste of a different woman?
All his multiple simulacra are so
uniformly clever and handsome
(the prime reason his genotype
was chosen for mass replication)

if she dares to pose the question
that plagues her day and night,
he dismisses her doubts with
the charm of a disarming smile,
a facile claim of his authenticity.
Having fallen in love with a man
she knew as a distinct individual,

having sworn the vows of marriage
to a singular lover with whom she
hoped to share the sum of her life,
she has become instead a stationary
camp follower, an unwilling whore
to a company of identical soldiers
who lock step through her sheets

unendingly as the years progress,
a stray host of familiar strangers
with the same moves and faces,
the same expirations of passion,
yet total strangers nonetheless,
the implacable secret of their
impersonal identities intact.

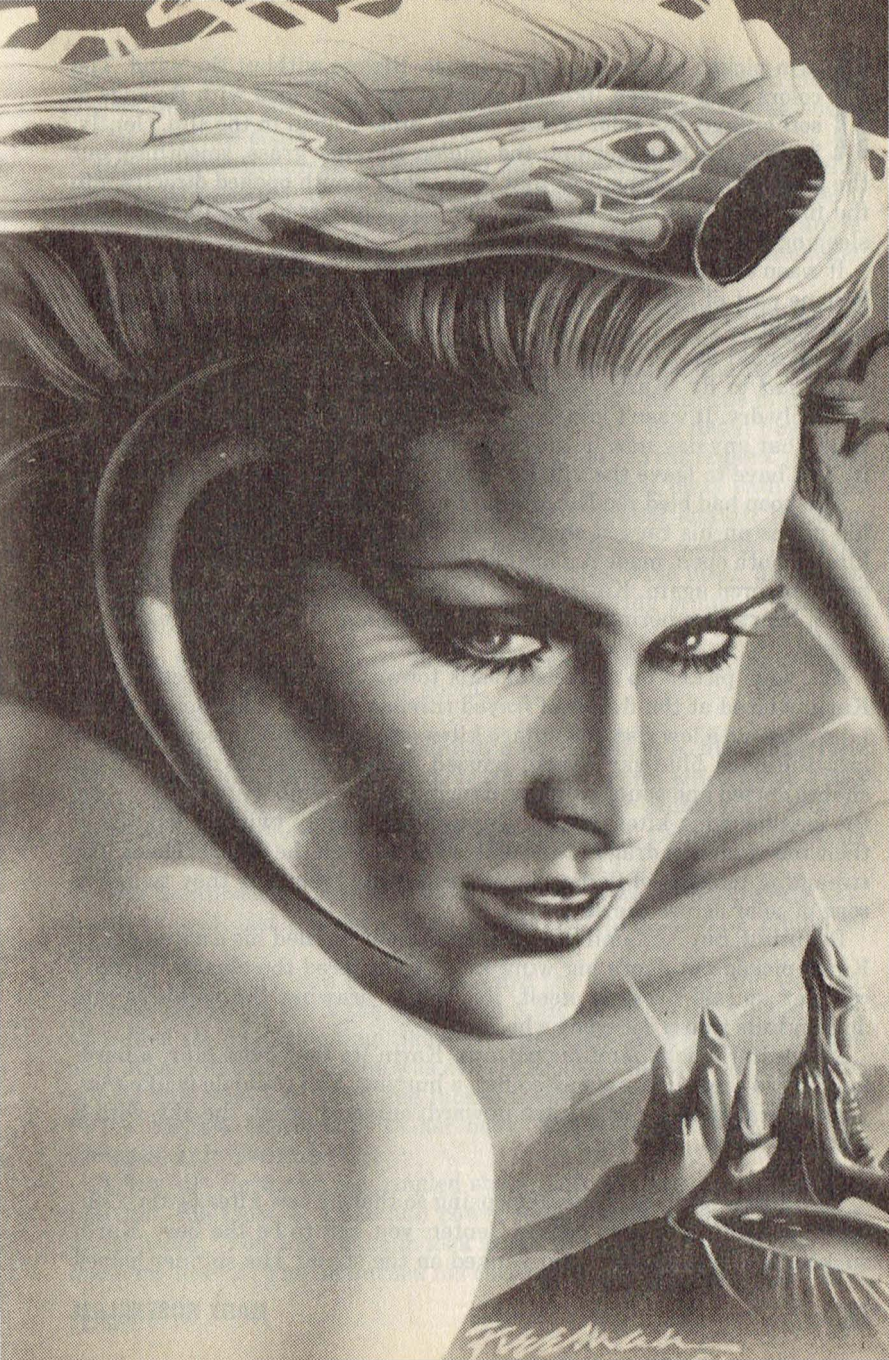
—Bruce Boston

Mary Rosenblum

FLIGHT

Mary Rosenblum tells us "Greg Abraham inspired this story. It is set in his far-future world of City, where his bio-engineered Signatures sometimes seem more human than their immortal human creators." Ms. Rosenblum and Mr. Abraham's collaborative story, "Mr. Sartorius," appeared in our Mid-December 1994 issue.

Illustration by Gary Freeman


Freeman

Karin picked up the kite; limp fabric, lifeless without the wind. The colors sang—green like the grass in spring striped with zig-zags of soft orange, the color of wild melon broken open in the sun. Gently, he laid the kite down on the golden summer grass, smoothing out the folds, straightening it so that the hooped mouth opened directly into the first breath of evening wind. The fabric shivered like the side of a sleeping fox, and his heart leaped.

It wasn't alive. Not yet. It would come alive when he flew it. It would become part of *him,* and they would blend with the other village kites in a flight.

If he could fly.

He *had* to fly. Karin swallowed, squeezed by that need, his throat suddenly dry. It wasn't just that he was fifteen. It wasn't just that it was time, that any day now he would be Invited to fly, and if he couldn't do it, he'd have to leave the village. Well, it *was* that, but . . . it was more.

The hoop had bled reddish traces of rust onto his skin. Karin scrubbed his palms on his ragged shorts. The circle of scavenged wire held the kite's mouth open, made it gape like a dying antelope. Its tubular tunnel-body shivered again. Karin got to his feet, brushing dust from his dark arms, heart hammering as he let the string slip through his fingers.

Soon.

The wind picked up as the sun sank toward the distant spires of City. Karin winced at the flutter of frayed threads along a main seam. Fix it later. Beyond a low rise, the village kites rose in colorful unison, climbing into the hard blue sky. Karin paused, heart leaping as the brilliant shapes darted and spun, twirling, dancing on the wind. Higher they rose, the smaller wing-kites darting through the stately twirling lengths of the wind-spinners, dragon-tails flickering through the orderly chaos like streaming tongues of flame. Karin caught his breath as they twined a rope of color across the sky.

Beautiful, but . . . familiar. Disappointment curdled his excitement as Karin picked out Joel's big wing kite. It Centered the cluster, turning complex spirals back on itself, its energy drawing the spinners and dragon-tails into a coherent whole.

A familiar whole, familiar pattern. Karin let the colors blur, a hardness in his chest like a clenched fist, a hurting. You could do it like *that,* yeah, spiral those dragon-kites upward, outward, slash the sky with a storm of Wings. Yes, *yes* . . . .

Maybe.

He blinked, blurred vision refocusing so that he saw kites again, Centered on Joel's wing. To be the Center, you had to be the best. Karin sucked in a harsh breath and yanked on the string. His spinner leaped

from the ground, shuddering as the evening wind filled its open mouth. For an instant it seemed to writhe with pain, and Karin's throat closed.

Not everyone could fly.

He swallowed, spun on his heel and ran. The string cut into his palm, brief weight jerking at his arm as the kite lifted. More string. He let it slide through his fingers, one part of his brain aware of the string angle, knowing without even having to look that the kite had caught the wind, was rising.

Suddenly, fiercely, it leapt skyward. The string burned through his fingers and Karin stumbled to a halt, turning back to face its rise. The kite hovered overhead, spinning brilliant color against the flat canvas of the sky, the taut string humming in his hand; umbilicus of energy, alive with the pulse of the sky. In a sudden rush, his touch flowed up the string—as if his arm had grown, as if he'd opened his fingers, painted a twirling hand of color across the blue. Karin gasped, dizzy with a sense of *control.* The wind shivered like a muscled animal against his skin, and he grinned, lips pulled back. God, he was *up there*, soaring, spinning slow circles with a hungry, open mouth, sluicing wind down his gullet. With a laugh, he spiraled the kite higher, scattering proud color across the heavens.

For an instant he *was* it all: sky, thin streak of cloud, the wind's sleek power. This is what flying was about.

But it wasn't . . . right.

The string went slack in his hand and he yanked at it, blinking as the sense of sky and space vanished, earthbound again, jerking the kite's mouth downward as he overreacted. His spinner plummeted, and he reeled in frantically, wincing as the string tangled. Come on! Catch the wind!

With a shuddering sideways twist, the kite nose-dived, arching skyward in one last violent spasm before crashing into a clump of greasewood.

Karin gave a cry, ran two steps toward the bright ruin, and stopped. Sairee stood at the top of the low rise that hid him from the village vans. Of course she'd be watching. She'd been born the same year as him, the only other kid that year. She was always around. The wind teased wisps of pale hair from her braid, and flicked them across her dark face, plastering her kite-fabric shift to her body. Karin looked away from the compassion in her gray eyes.

"I flew it!" He threw the tangled string onto the ground and stalked past her, his sense of space and power fading, blowing away like dust on the wind. "You don't have to look at me like that. I did just fine. *You* made me lose it!" The lie burned his cheeks, welled up in him like water

in one of the hot, bitter springs. "Don't you know better than to bother people when they're soloing?"

"I'm sorry."

She didn't have to be so damn nice about it. He stooped, gathered up his kite. He *had* flown it. And it was wonderful. Yeah. It *was.* Teeth clenched, Karin untangled string from the spiky greasewood, that instant of non-rightness stabbing him like a thorn. It would be better when he flew with the village, he told himself. When he was part of it. Maybe. It was like he had a hole inside him, an empty hungry space. He'd thought this flight would fill it up.

It hadn't.

A broken branch had torn a triangular rip in the melon-colored fabric. Karin smoothed the rip, sudden tears blurring his vision, horror squeezing him that they would spill over, that Sairee would see. She could fly like she'd been born doing it. Her mother, Dira, had nearly beat out Joel as Center, had become Mayor instead. Sairee already flew with the village, even though she hadn't been formally Invited, yet. And it worked for her. He'd watched her face, while she did it.

"Here." Sairee came up with the rest of the string coiled in her hand. "I got the tangles out for you."

The sympathy in her face hurt. She thought he was lying, that he hadn't flown it. Maybe . . . he hadn't. "Thanks." He took the string, walked away from her so that she wouldn't see his face, pretending that he'd noticed something interesting on the ground.

And there *was* something there. Karin stopped, arms full of kite, breath catching in his throat. A naked human leg stuck out from the greasewood shade, almost hidden by the tall grass. The skin was the same color as the golden blades, smooth, and without scars. "Sairee, come here. Quick!" Karin shoved branches aside.

A woman lay in the shaded dirt beneath the greasewood, stark naked, asleep or unconscious. Auburn curls tumbled over her shoulder and across her cheek. They didn't hide her full breasts. They didn't hide the polished curl of her horns, either. They grew from her temples, just above her ears, like some kind of strange hair ornament. Not *real,* Karin thought, but then her body came into focus all at once, and his eyes widened. Behind him, Sairee gasped.

The woman lay twisted slightly onto her side, one leg bent at the knee, the other stretched out straight. More horns sprouted from her flanks, a pair on each side, as if they grew from the hip joint. One curved up and a little forward, the other curved down to follow her buttock. The tiny grassland antelope had horns, and these didn't look like antelope horns at all. Spurs, he decided. Like on the roosters that scratched with the hens around the vans. They gleamed like polished bone or priceless

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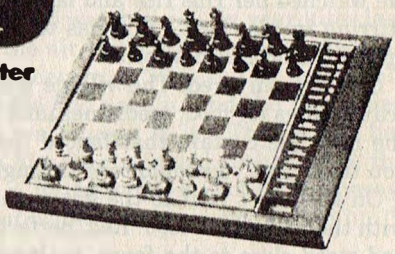

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ivory, and Karin's hands twitched with the desire to reach out and stroke those perfect curves. The tips looked sharp enough to draw blood.

"What *is* it?" Sairee stepped suddenly up against him, clutched his arm. "Karin, come on, let's get out of here! We've got to go tell Dira."

"Wait a minute. Maybe she's hurt."

"Don't *touch* her. Karin!"

He shook her off, knelt beside the woman. "She's alive," he said softly. He watched her ribs rise and fall beneath that perfect skin, excitement stirring in his chest. "She has to be City. Maybe she came down from one of the orbital platforms."

City. He shivered. The village traded at the gates, swapping oldcity scavengings for food, medicines, and hardware. You couldn't go through the invisible curtain that fenced the City from the grass, would die if you tried. But you could *look* through.

On their last visit to the gates, they had received fresh strawberries with their bartered food. Red, perfect, sweet as a song on his tongue. He had stood close to the fence, eating his share slowly, bite by tiny bite. The hair on his arms had stood up with the curtain's nearness, lost in the soaring spires and perfect sprawl of the City buildings. You heard stories about City things; about machines that controlled the weather itself, monsters brought back from the past. Aliens, maybe. All kinds of stories. Maybe some of them were true. No one from the village had ever been inside.

Why won't they let us in? He had asked Dira, because she was Mayor, and she knew everything. *Just to see?*

She had given him a strange look, blank and a little uneasy. *It's City,* she had said, as if that explained everything. And then she had walked away.

He dreamed about it, some nights—completed those imperfect glimpses of pastel towers built without angles or straight lines, twined them with flowering vines made of dark metal and captured light. He walked down wide streets full of huge strange animals, friendly as tame grass-cats, with human eyes.

Childhood stories, turned to night vision? Sometimes, the beauty of it woke him, and he'd sit up in the dark, a pain like hunger in his belly, visions shifting and dissolving in the darkness. He never told anyone about his City dreams—not even Sairee. It was a secret, between himself and—what? He wasn't sure, but he knew that it was something he couldn't talk about. Not in the village, anyway.

Karin laid his folded kite down very carefully. This woman might have walked down one of those dream streets. Her long lashes brushed her cheeks, and her forehead slanted back from the sweep of her nose. Dizzy with the remembered scent of strawberries, Karin touched the tip of the

small horn that curved from her temple. Smooth, cool, it had the feel of something old and beloved, polished for centuries. With a jolt, he realized that she had opened her eyes, was smiling at him.

"Hello." Her eyes were a shade between green and gold, like the late-spring grass, before the summer sun bleached it. "Who are you?"

As if he was the stranger, not she. "Karin," he blurted, startled by her direct speech. "You're beautiful. How did you *get* here?"

"I walked." She laughed with a sound like glass chimes in a gentle breeze. "Are you one of the kite people? I watched you fly your kites last night. It was lovely. Like music in the air." She nodded at his kite, the echo of her smile still shimmering in her eyes. "Will you fly it for me?"

"I . . . I don't really . . . do it yet." He *had* done it, and the lie scalded his cheeks. "But I will, and I'll be really good at it." The lie and her strangeness sucked the words from him in a tumbled rush. "I'll be the best, one day. The Center. Joel just . . . he doesn't do it. Not *right* anyway. I could do it better." And maybe *that* would fill the space inside him. "I will. One day."

"Ah, so you're a Creator?" She laughed and leaned forward to rumple his hair. As if he was a kid. Karin smoothed it, scowling, wondering what a Creator was, exactly.

"You're from City, aren't you?" He made it an accusation.

"Yes." Her smile disappeared, and she sat up quickly. "Has someone else come from City? Donai?" She scrambled to her knees, her hip-spur snagging in greasewood stems. "Is he looking for me?" She twisted free. "Is he *here?*"

She was afraid. It dulled her eyes, like the shadow of a storm sweeping across the grass.

"It's all right." Karin reached, unable to help himself, took her right hand in his. "He's not here. I wouldn't let him hurt you anyway. What's your name?" He was blushing again, struggled to control it.

Some of the shadow lifted from her eyes, and she smiled at him, but didn't laugh. "Yolanda." She squeezed his hand gently, released it. "Don't worry. He won't hurt me." Sadness threaded her words, and she reached for the folded kite. "This is pretty."

Her left hand, almost white, was made of some soft plastic-like material although it moved like flesh and bone. You could see the seam where flesh joined non-flesh, just above the wrist. "I made it," Karin said absently.

"Do you love it?"

The question caught him by surprise. "I . . . I don't know." Her eyes burned like molten gold, or reflected sunset. Love a *kite?* She looked serious, not like she was teasing him. "I think . . . maybe I do." He remembered that rush of *being* as he connected with his kite, that clench

of pride, that power. He shrugged, because there were no words for those feelings. "I . . . made it."

She bent her head, so that her hair fell forward around her face, hiding her expression. "I asked Donai if he loved me once. He said he did."

"Who's this Donai?" Karin stifled a twinge of jealousy. "I thought he was chasing you."

"He is." She stroked the kite gently, handed it to him. "He's a Creator. He made me."

"Made you?" Karin realized his mouth was hanging open, closed it.

"Like you made your kite." She smiled and sprang lightly to her feet. "Can I try this?"

Without waiting for an answer, she tossed it into the sky. You don't launch a spinner like that. Karin waited for it to crash, but it caught the wind instead, soared skyward, as if she had always flown kites. Head tilted back, sun gleaming on her polished spurs, she laughed. The clean line of her throat struck Karin like lightning, seared through his chest and into his groin, left him aching. Above him, the kite seemed to laugh with her, circling, soaring, finally settling to her outstretched hand like a tame grass-hawk.

"Thank you." She handed him back the kite, which was still quivering like a live thing.

You're better than me, he wanted to say, but the words stuck in his throat.

"Karin?" Sairee's voice, shrill and close. "Karin, are you all right?"

"Ka . . . rin!"

Dira's voice, too, not so close, overlaid by the rustle of feet in the tall grass. Sairee must have brought the whole damn village with her. Of course. Angry, Karin took his kite back, turned to face Sairee as she trotted around the end of the clump. Dira was right behind her, with Joel and only half the village.

"Hello." Yolanda smiled. "More kite people, right?"

Sairee halted abruptly, keeping a wary distance from Yolanda. Dira, however, stepped past her, only the hard line of her shoulders betraying her tension as she stopped in front of Yolanda. "Greetings, stranger." She bowed stiffly. "I'm Dira. Mayor. We offer you . . ."

"Hospitality? Welcome? Someone did classic nomad-culture, didn't they?" Yolanda smiled. "I don't really need it, because I'm not visiting you." She tilted her head, her grass-colored eyes on Dira's face. "I'm Yolanda." She stretched out a hand, stroked Dira's weathered cheek. "You're *beautiful*."

Karin watched Dira flinch, a little shocked by Yolanda's words. *Someone did classic nomad-culture, didn't they?* They made him uneasy and he wasn't sure why.

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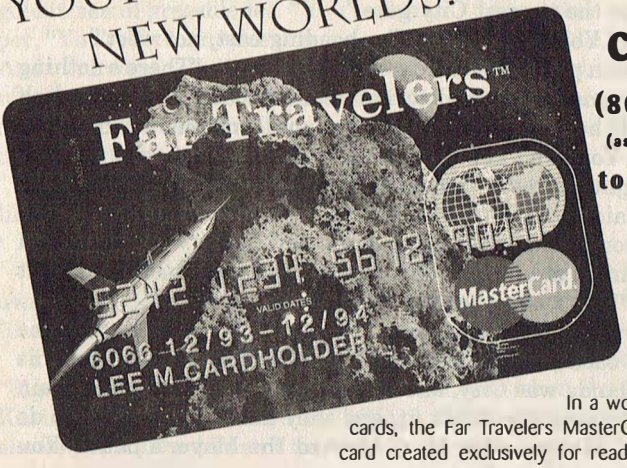

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Dira looked annoyed, and she was frowning. "If you wish welcome, we will offer it to you." She ran a hand through her short gray hair, gathering the fragments of her ritual welcome. "If you wish guidance, one of us can take you to the nearest City gate."

"No thank you." Yolanda smiled. "I'm heading east, not west."

"You *can't*." Karin pushed forward— forget manners. "There's nothing east of here but *grass*." He tried to ignore Dira's outraged eyes, half expecting the cuff he deserved. "I mean . . . you don't know where the good springs are. You don't know *anything*, and you're not even wearing clothes." He caught Sairee's *You noticed* smirk and gritted his teeth. "You'll die," he said.

"You mean I don't belong out here, don't you? Don't worry, Karin. I won't die." She smiled at him; a bright, sunlit smile that made him want to laugh or cry. "That's not what I'm made to do."

Dira, to his horror, was turning away. They were all going back to the village, glancing back over their shoulders. Afraid? Karin clenched his fists. Because Yolanda was City, and there wasn't any nice safe curtain between them? Because she didn't fit, and they didn't know what to do with her? "Wait!" He ran after Dira, blocked the Mayor's path. "You can't just leave her out here."

"She's a machine, Karin." Dira's face was as weathered and unreadable as the oldcity ruins. "She's not human, and this isn't our affair."

"No!" Not a machine. He'd *touched* her. "Dira, you can't!" But her face passed judgment, and she didn't look back as she walked on.

"Karin?" Hands tucked into her armpits, Sairee watched him, her eyes wide and for some reason hurt. "Come on, okay? Dira's right. She's City. She doesn't need our help."

"Crap." Karin threw her an angry glance. "Just because she's different, you don't want anything to do with her. Nobody takes any risks out here. You're *scared*." Comprehension struck him suddenly. "You're all scared of her. Why?"

"I'm not scared." Sairee's face didn't soften. "She isn't human, Karin."

Suddenly, he could see how she'd be when she was Dira's age, skin weathered and wrinkled. He looked quickly away. Yolanda was walking toward the horizon, her hip-spurs scything through the rippling golden grass. "Wait!" Karin ran after her, wind flicking his hair into his eyes, so that the landscape blurred and smeared. "Yolanda, don't!" He caught her arm; warm flesh, no machine. Stopped her.

She turned her head, looked down at him, her expression grave, not trying to pull free. "What do you want?"

"I want you to stay." The words came out a whisper. "For awhile. Please."

"Why?" Her profile was pristine in the level beams of the setting sun, neither angry nor curious. Just . . . waiting.

"Because . . . you aren't *this*." Karin jerked his head at the sweeping golden sea of grassblades. "You're from . . ." the words came out a whisper, "You're from my dreams . . . and how could that be? But . . . you are. And . . . I want to tell you about them." Because maybe she would know, maybe she would understand. Because no one else would answer his questions. "I want to talk to you about the City," he said desperately. "I need to talk to you about it."

"You sound a little like Donai." Warmth softened her voice. "He gets like this, when he thinks a Signature isn't working."

"Signature?"

"Like me." Sadness darkened her eyes again and she turned her face away. "His Signatures always work, but he doubts, and then . . . he gets like this."

"I thought you were afraid of this Donai." Angry, because she said "Signature" with the same tone Dira had used when she said "machine," Karin turned back toward the village. Sairee was waiting for him, her sleeveless shift a blaze of crimson in the rich light. Of course, she'd be waiting.

He jumped a little as Yolanda took his hand, because he really hadn't expected it. It was her artificial hand, warm as flesh but different, palm against his palm. She fell in beside him, walking a little aside so that her hip-spurs didn't gash him. "I'll tell you about City," she said, and the sadness was back in her voice. "I'll tell you what it's like to live there, what it's like for me, anyway. But you can't let Donai find me."

"I won't." He clutched her hand, drunk and dizzy with her nearness. "I promise."

Sairee was waiting for them. "You're staying, aren't you?" She spoke to Yolanda as if they were alone, as if Karin had turned to stone or had vanished.

"Yes, she is," he said too loudly.

"For awhile." Yolanda ignored him. "I think . . . I would like to learn to fly kites. Can you teach me?"

"I don't know." Sairee hesitated, one bare foot tucked behind the other, her eyes full of a strange shifting light. "You flew Karin's kite."

"Did I?" Yolanda nodded gravely.

"Yes." Sairee smiled, her expression shy. "I didn't know anyone could do that—except us. You can try my kite. It's a wing. Easier to fly than a spinner. Karin won't fly with me anymore." She held out a hand to Yolanda.

"Wait a minute," Karin yelled.

"I'd like to try it." Yolanda reached with her flesh hand, twined her fingers with Sairee's. "Thank you."

Crap. Karin stomped on ahead of them both, feeling as if Sairee had just stolen Yolanda from him. Although she wasn't a *thing,* to get stolen, he reminded himself irritably. Karin reached the top of the rise and stopped. The grass stretched out in a golden sea that broke on the dark cliffs of City to the west. To the east, it went on forever. The village vans stood in what Dira said had been a wide riverbed once upon a time, their kite-fabric canopies fluttering like bright wings in the dying wind. The river had moved a long time ago. Twisted beams and crumbling bits of oldcity walls jutted from the grass, stark outlines softened by clumps of broom ash and greasewood.

Seen from this distance, the wide bodies of the vans hidden by the grass, the village looked like a cluster of giant kites grounded on a golden sea. Suddenly the colors—crimson, neon green, yellow—looked too bright. They looked . . . alien. Like Yolanda. It struck Karin that those colors didn't belong to the grass any more than Yolanda did.

But the vans, the village, the *kites,* had always been part of the grass. Ever since the oldcity days.

So why did they look . . . wrong?

With a start, Karin realized that Sairee and Yolanda were halfway down to the village. He ran after them, his kite wadded in his arms, furious at both of them, because they had walked off and left him like he was some tag-along kid. Yolanda was *his* find. *He* had convinced her to stay, not Sairee. *Karin won't fly with me,* Sairee had said. That stung.

Yolanda had promised to tell him about City. He came panting into the center of the parked vans, stared at by everyone, which made him blush again, because from some of the smirks he got, at least a few people had watched the hillside abandonment and had been amused. Karin straightened his shoulders and molded his face—too late—into bored unconcern.

"You're treating your kite badly." Dira gave Karin a cold glare, then turned her attention back to Yolanda. "We are happy to offer you welcome." The polite words sounded choppy, their comfortable familiarity snagged and torn on Yolanda's polished spurs. "Strangers are always welcome."

Not that many strangers came wandering across the grass, Karin thought sullenly. Sairee was walking away with Yolanda, heading toward the family van. As if all kinds of things had been decided.

Wait a minute! Karin wanted to shout. He pressed his lips tightly together instead. "I thought you didn't want to have anything to do with City." He glared at Dira.

"She asked to stay. I can't say no." Dira was Mayor. She didn't have

to explain herself to him, or anyone, but beyond her irritation, she seemed . . . uncertain.

Sunrise was a certain thing. And sunset, and the wind that blew every morning and every evening. The gates were certain, and City, safe behind its curtain. Yolanda was . . . new.

An uncertainty.

And Dira was afraid. He could see it, like a shadow behind her Mayor's face. His kite still rumpled under his arm, Karin headed for the small van he shared with Jerry and Roan. The rest of the villagers were scattering to the evening ritual of eating, cleaning their finds from the day's digging, tending their kites. Comfortable routines. Invisible as the City curtain, and as impenetrable. Still pissed at Sairee, Karin scuffed through the trampled grass. What did she want with Yolanda? What did she care about City?

"That's one weird lady." Roan sidled through the scattering crowd, gawky and grinning, his shaggy red hair full of sand from digging in the ruins all day. "Risk your nuts in bed with *her,* eh?"

"Shut up!" Karin shouldered past, pretending not to hear Roan's retort. He headed for the rack to hang his kite, but the torn fabric fluttered in the wind, tweaking him with guilt. He wasn't treating it well, Dira was right. He had a sudden vision of Yolanda, string taut in her hand, face rapt as she watched the kite. She'd *flown* it, never mind that she wasn't a kiter, never mind that she was City.

Maybe that's what had scared Dira.

Karin changed direction, headed back to his van for the mending kit. To his relief, neither Roan nor Jerry was there. They had probably gone back to the dig until dark. They had gotten obsessed with their digging lately—so much so that he'd staked out a separate site. Digging was all they had, any more. For the thousandth time he wondered what value City found in their traded junk. Dira wouldn't answer that question either. Or couldn't.

The curtains of their van's green canopy swayed in the breeze. Karin looped the end panels open to let the breeze blow through, and brushed dust off the solar receptors that powered the van's wheels and cooktop. Last one up this morning, he'd left his mattress unrolled on the floor. With a grunt, he folded it roughly, shoved it back into the corner, and squatted in front of his locked drawer. It stuck.

Swearing under his breath, he yanked at it. They could have gotten the lock fixed, last trip to the City gates. They could have fixed the cooktop that didn't always work. But Jerry and Roan had refused to share the cost. They were going to leave soon, so they didn't care, said they didn't, anyway. Well, if he spent more time on his digs and less time daydreaming, he could pay for the repairs himself.

That thought came to him in Dira's voice. Karin yanked on the drawer, nearly tumbled over backward as it popped open. Rubbing a scraped knee, he rummaged quickly through tumbled clothes and scraps of bright cloth. His mending kit was there, orange plastic case still bright and new. Sairee had given it to him for his last birthday. Karin threw himself onto his rolled-up sleeping pad, hoping the night breeze would come up soon, ignoring his grumbling stomach.

There was food in the cupboards—traded at the gates for the bits of metal and plastic they dug from the ruins. It carried no flavor of City.

Those strawberries had tasted of City. Their sweetness came back to him when he dreamed of the towers.

Scowling, Karin examined the torn kite. Easy to fix, but it would show. Footsteps rustled in the grass outside. It would be Roan and Jerry, as restless and proddy as spikes in an antelope herd, come to pry about Yolanda. He picked up his tiny light-blade, sliced a neat square of melon-colored fabric from the scraps without looking up. "I don't know anything." He threaded a needle as someone climbed into the van. "If you got questions, go ask *her*."

"Ask who?" Yolanda pushed through the side-panels. The green fabric veiled her hair briefly, making it glow like dying embers.

Karin realized he was gaping, closed his mouth. "I . . . thought you were with Sairee." The accusation in his tone made him blush, and he concentrated on the kite in his lap.

"You wanted to talk about City." A curtain-panel had snagged on one of her spurs. She freed it with a fingertip, her tawny skin glowing in the filtered light. "What do you want to know?"

She laid her strange hand on his shoulder, her palm cool on his hot skin. Karin looked up and shivered, trapped by her grass-colored eyes. Framed by the looped-back panels, distant City spires soared black against the fading sunset. Shadow pooled at their feet; mystery as deep as the deepest pits in the oldcity ruins. He opened his mouth, but no questions would come—only visions of towers twined with living metal vines, and strange beautiful animals with human eyes. "Tell me about Donai," he whispered. "Why are you afraid of him?"

"I'm not afraid *of* him. He's a Creator." She stared down at her white, white hand on his dark skin. "He's very old. Everyone in City is old, but he's old, even compared to them. I win him awards." She looked up at him suddenly, her eyes the color of twilight on spring grass. "Because I'm unpredictable. The unpredictable is very precious."

Bitter words, and they made no sense. Every day was unpredictable.

"You don't understand." She sighed, moved as if to stand.

"Wait." Karin covered her hand with his, wanting to comfort her, because she seemed so sad. "The kites . . . they're everything, or they're

supposed to be. I *want* them to be, but I don't know." He faltered, groping for words. "Sometimes I think I know what I want . . . to be the best, to be Center. But then, I look out at the grass and the sky, and it squeezes me in a way the kites don't, and I want to touch it, to shape it somehow. And sometimes . . . I dream. And I think . . . the dreams are answers. Maybe." He gulped a quick breath. "What is City, Yolanda? I need to know. I think I need to go there."

"Do you?" She laughed softly, although her eyes were still dark and sad. Pulling her hand easily from his grasp, she reached for his light-blade, picked it up. "Are you sure, Karin?" She opened her flesh hand, palm up, fingers spread.

Karin stifled a gasp as she drew the blade across her palm. The flesh parted, and pinkish fluid welled up in thick beads, combined to spill over onto her pale skin. White bone gleamed, and Karin made a choked sound in his throat. She put the light-blade down with a gentle frown, ran one fingertip along the deep gash it had left. The pink fluid smeared beneath her fingertip, and, behind it, the skin closed smoothly, without blemish.

Sudden nausea clenched Karin's gut. "Crap." He swallowed, dry-mouthed. "*Are* you . . . a machine? Like Dira said?"

She laughed at him softly, leaned forward. "I'm *art,* Karin. Like your kite. You tell me what that makes me. Tell me what you want from City, Karin kite-flyer." Her breath, warm on his face, smelled faintly of cinnamon.

"I . . . don't know," he whispered. "Sometimes at night . . . dreaming . . . I think maybe I do. And then I wake up and I can't remember." He reached suddenly, hands closing on the sleek curves of her hip spurs. They felt like polished bone against his palm, hard and smooth, as he pulled her closer. Breathing hard, arms quivering, he tried to kiss her.

"I could want to stay with you." She turned her head, her lips brushing the corner of his mouth with each syllable, light as the touch of moth wings. "The kites, the sky, the grass; they fill me up with peace, until there's no more room inside."

"So stay."

"Stay?" She pulled gently away. "You can become whatever you choose to be, Karin. I can only be what Donai *made* me to be."

She was crying. Karin touched her cheek, touched his fingertip to his lips, tasting salt; salty human tears. He shivered and leaned forward again, his lips pressing against hers, the tip of her temple spur brushing his cheek. "Don't," he said softly.

Someone knocked on the side of the van. Karin straightened with a start, stomach clenching, hot pain spiking along his face.

"Dinner's ready." Sairee stuck her head through the curtains, shot him a quick, hard glance. "Dira sent me to tell you, Yolanda."

Yolanda rose lightly, careful of her spurs in the cramped interior. Without a backward glance, she brushed the curtains aside and leaped down the van's steps. Karin stared after them as they disappeared into the thickening twilight. They walked hand in hand. Like sisters. Like he and Sairee used to do, before she started flying with the village. It came to him suddenly that *he* had stopped spending time with her, and not the other way around. Karin touched his cheek, stared at his bloody fingertips. Yolanda's spur had left a long shallow scratch beneath his cheekbone. Accident? Uneasy, he wiped his fingers on his shorts. Jerry and Roan would be home any time. All of a sudden, he couldn't face them, didn't want to listen to their item-by-item tally of every scrap of plastic or metal junk they'd found today.

Neither Roan nor Jerry could fly. One of these days they'd leave the village. No one would tell them to do it—they would simply *go.* You didn't stay if you couldn't fly.

Why? he had asked Dira, once. *Why can't they stay?*

She hadn't answered him, had stared at him with that same uncomprehending expression she'd given him at the gates. As if he was speaking a different language. As if leaving was as unquestionable as the wind that blew every morning and every evening. *They want to go,* she had said finally. *You ask too many questions.*

Did they want to go? Karin stared into the gathering darkness. Nobody ever came back, not even for a visit.

His mother had waited for his father to return. Karin had known she was waiting, even if she wouldn't say so. He'd seen it in the way she searched the City horizon a dozen quick times a day. Her eyes had gotten a little sadder, a little older, each time she looked. Maybe that was the reason she had died so young.

Yolanda might know why Roan and Jerry would leave. She might know why they wouldn't come back. Tomorrow, he'd ask her. In the distance, Jerry's voice rose in a snatch of song, shrill and tired. Triumphant, so they'd found something good. Junk, all of it. City didn't need junk. But they took it, swapped it for packages of dehydrated stews and vegetables. Traded it for perfect strawberries. Another *why* for Dira to not answer. *You ask too many questions,* the wind whispered in Dira's voice.

And you don't ask *enough,* Karin answered silently. You don't ask *any.* He gathered up his guilt, palmed two stale rolls from the cooktop, and went out to sleep in the rustling grass.

Sun on his face woke Karin next morning; sun and hunger. Stomach growling like a cornered grass-cat, he threw the tangled quilt aside, fumbling for the rolls he had knotted into one corner. The ants had

already found them. Grimacing, he tapped them together, dusting the quilt with frantic black insect-bodies. One crawled across his wrist and he shook it off impatiently, biting through the stone-hard crust of the stale roll. He'd slept late. The dawn wind had already eased to a fading breeze. The early flight was over. People would be eating breakfast, scattering to their digs to work until the noon wind rose.

Karin finished the last of the second roll, thirsty now. He wasn't far from his site, and he had a seep there to drink from. The wind rippled the summer grass into golden waves as he headed for the ruins, shadow streaming behind him. Buried and excavated by vanished floods, weathered chunks of crumbling concrete jutted through the broom ash like old stones. Twisted beams of metal arched skyward, eaten into a lacework of corrosion that broke off with the slightest tug, sometimes sharp as a knife-blade beneath the rust. The ruins looked no more *made* than the gray lava rock that jutted up through the thin soil like the earth's bones.

Sometimes, sitting on a rock, warm with afternoon sun, Karin imagined the grass rising like a sea to break across these cities. That grass-wave buried buildings, ground old highways into gravel-beds of black grit. Dira said once that the oldcity people had left because the rain had stopped, long before the platforms fixed the weather. When the rain started again, no one wanted to leave City, she said. Why would anyone want to leave City?

Good question. Karin scrambled around a thrust of cracked gray wall, dropped to his knees in front of his seep. The pipe he'd hammered into the soil trickled a tiny stream of clear water, and fresh green weeds sprouted in the mud. He cupped his hands beneath the water, waited for them to fill. Why had *they* left City to fly kites in the grass? Or had they never gone to City in the first place? He had asked Dira that, and she had simply said that there had always been kites and flyers.

Even before the oldcities dried up? She had shrugged when he'd asked that. Karin sighed and stood up, knees muddy, drying his cold hands on his shorts. Hadn't anyone ever wondered before? Didn't anyone remember?

Why *not?*

Sun hot on his back, he bent and pulled his pick out from under the lip of concrete where he'd stashed it yesterday. And let the head rest on the ground, the handle warm in his hands. Yolanda was running toward him from the bright wings of the parked village, brilliant against the distant horizon of City.

Sairee had dressed her in loose kite-fabric, magenta and orange. The folds billowed, flowing with the shape of the wind, as if she was a grounded kite straining to lift. Her hair gleamed, reflecting back the light of sun and the gold of the grass-blades. Warmth swelled in Karin's

chest and groin, turned suddenly cold. Someone was chasing her, following her, rather, slow and steady, like a van pushing through the grass. Not Sairee. The figure was too tall, wore a hooded cloak that shimmered with hints of opalescent color. No kite-fabric, that. Karin saw all colors from the corners of his eyes, only white if he stared straight at the cloth.

City man?

Donai. It had to be. Karin let his breath out in a soft hiss, his hands tightening on the pick handle. He had promised to keep Yolanda safe. The point quivered, dug into the matted grass roots.

"Karin!" Yolanda ran up to him, her kite-dress flowing behind her. "Karin, he's here!"

"It's all right." Afraid suddenly, Karin stretched out an arm, hugged her close. "I won't let him hurt you."

"He's not going to hurt me, Karin." Her voice was sad, but her eyes shone, as if the sun had filled them with light.

As if she were in love.

With him? Karin's arm tightened around her. That warmth unfolded like a sunflower in his chest, and he hefted the pick. It wasn't heavy, felt light, alive; a sharp tooth ready to leap at this Donai on its own.

"I never said he'd hurt me." Her hands were stroking his arm, making the pick tremble. "You don't understand." Her voice trembled, too, in spite of her soothing words. "It's all right, Karin."

Sad, excited words, urgent hands on his arms. The pick hesitated and sank, its point digging into the grass. Donai had stopped a few meters away, his face shadowed by his hood, his expression invisible. Armed? Karin wondered what kind of terrible weapons a City man might carry. The pick jerked up again.

"Don't!" Yolanda wrenched the pick away.

Karin stared at his empty hands, shocked by her strength. She flung the pick aside, her eyes hot as she glared at him, hot enough to burn his cheeks.

"I brought him to talk to you." She turned back to Donai, spread her hands. "He's a Creator, too, Donai. You can see it in his face. You can hear it. Talk to him. Even though he's not from City. Please?"

She was *pleading*. Angry suddenly, Karin stepped forward, but Donai lifted a hand, stopping him as abruptly as if he'd put a physical hand on Karin's chest.

"He can't be a Creator. Are you ready to leave, Yolanda?" The City man turned abruptly and walked away, his cloak hissing against the grass, shimmering with color.

For a moment, Yolanda looked at Karin, her eyes full of troubled light. Then she turned away.

"Wait!" Karin leaped after her, grabbed her by the arm. On his way

back to the village vans, Donai didn't pause, didn't look back. "Don't go with him!" Karin pulled her close, scorched by the heat of her flesh, careless of her hip spurs. "Why are you doing this?" he cried. "You were afraid of him."

"That was yesterday." Her tone was serene, her eyes were not. "I'm . . . unpredictable." She touched the scabbed-over scratch on his cheek. "Remember?" Her hip spur curved against his buttocks, smooth hardness of pointed bone, tip just pricking him.

"I need you to stay," he whispered.

"Need?" She frowned at that, and her eyes clouded. "Need is a *human* thing, and I'm not human. Donai didn't make me needy." She twisted her arm from his grasp, spun on her heel and ran after Donai.

"Wait!" He ran a few steps and stopped, stomach clenching. She was so *beautiful*; graceful, lithe, her spurs a counterpoint to the music of her running.

Beautiful, and a *thing*. Dira thought so. And so did she. So she would let Donai take her back to City. Like a thing. But she *wanted* to stay. Like Jerry and Roan wanted to stay. Cold inside, afraid and not sure why, Karin bent and retrieved his pick. The handle was warm from the sun, like a living thing in his palm. Slowly, shoulders held high, he started for the village.

Everyone was there, clustered in the center of the vans like ants crawling over a kicked anthill. Were they all afraid? Karin hesitated, his confidence faltering. Hidden by the fluttering blue curtains of Dira's van, he looked for Donai and Yolanda. A plane stood just beyond the circled vans, the grass-tips brushing its stubby, downcurving wings. Its clean paint, matte white like winter snow, looked alien out here.

As alien as the kites.

There they were. Karin edged toward the front of the van. Donai and Yolanda stood in the center, talking to Dira. At least Yolanda was talking to Dira. And to Joel, although the Center stood behind the Mayor, as if for protection. Two meters of clear space surrounded the foursome. As if the City man had brought his own personal curtain with him. He scared them. Because he was different? No one knew what to do with *different*. They could accept Yolanda, because she could fly a kite.

The cloaked Donai bowed at something Dira had said, held out his hand. Dira flinched.

Dira, who was afraid of no one and nothing.

Karin's lip curled. With a jerk of his shoulders, he strode forward, pushed through the ring of silent men and women. Yolanda never even looked at him.

"Karin!" Dira's tone cut like a rusty knifeblade.

Yeah, fear. Angry, truly rude now, Karin stepped between Dira and Donai, so that this silent, superior City man had to look at him or turn his face away. I'm not afraid of you. He hefted the pick. "You don't belong here." His voice sounded too loud, shrill in the sudden silence. "Go back to City. We don't want you!"

Shock rippled through the crowd like a dropped stone sent ripples through a puddle. The City man said nothing. His hood shadowed his face, but his shoulders hunched. It came to Karin suddenly that *he* was afraid, too. This *City* man. A sense of power swelled like a bubble inside Karin, heady as the beer Dira brewed. He hefted the pick gently. "You don't have to go with him," he said to Yolanda. "You can do whatever you want."

Yolanda turned her head slowly, light sliding across the curve of her cheek like spilled honey, making his heart skip. Then her grass-colored eyes met his. Cold, bright, terrible eyes.

"Silly child." She reached out, took Donai's hand. "I told you. You don't understand."

"You!" Dira's voice cracked like breaking glass. "Karin!"

That sense of power burst like a soap-bubble. Karin took a step backward, suddenly aware of the eyes staring at him, of Donai's cold stare.

"You are *rude*." Dira's rage dragged Karin around to face her, turned her eyes to gleaming bits of dark stone. "Go to your van and wait for me there. *Now!*"

Karin opened his mouth, but Yolanda's cold eyes dried up the words. She didn't want to stay. Had maybe never wanted to stay. She would leave with the City man, and his dreams of City would die with her leaving. Everything would go on just the way it always had. The City gates would never open for him and nothing would change. Karin pressed his lips together. Behind him, somebody snickered. Cheeks flaming, he turned his back on Dira, on Yolanda, nearly collided with Sairee.

"Karin?"

Tears in her eyes? For him, because he'd just made a damn fool of himself? He wrenched away from her hand, shoved roughly through the circle. No one spoke to him, or for him. No one reached out or tried to stop him.

"Karin, wait!"

He broke into a run, because it was Sairee calling him, not Yolanda, and he didn't want her comfort. He reached the van, slapped both hands down on the side and vaulted into it. Tangled in swaths of curtain, he tripped and fell hard onto the floor. Yolanda would go back to City and it would all go *on*—grass and kites and sky, forever. And maybe he'd become Center one day, and maybe he wouldn't, and did it really matter? His knee banged the bunk, numbing his leg, bringing tears to his eyes.

The tears wouldn't stop, mixed with sweat to sting the scratch on his cheek. Swallowing sobs, he crouched beside the bunk, forehead pressed against his knees.

Someone stopped by the van's door, a vague shadow beyond the gently moving curtains. "Karin?"

Donai's voice. Karin stopped breathing, listened to the thud of his pulse. Silence, except for the faint whisper of wind-stirred fabric. So what? Dira might be afraid of this man. Not *him*. With a shuddering gasp, Karin hauled himself to his feet. "All right." He unlatched the van's low door, flung it open. "So come in."

Donai climbed the three steps, pushed through the hanging curtains. "You must get wet when it rains." He looked upward, hood falling back from his pale face, his skin tinted green by the sun filtering through the fabric.

"Yeah, we get wet." Karin's shoulderblades bumped the side of Jerry's bunk, and he realized he'd been edging backward, away from the City man. With a scowl, he took a step closer. "We dry out again."

"Wonderful!" Donai stroked a curtain gently into place, sighed. "We've forgotten how to live in the weather. Sometimes I think I should build a hut on some mountainside and live there for a few years, just to remember it." He shed his cloak and folded it onto Roan's bed. "Your vans are very beautiful."

Karin didn't answer. Now he understood the circle of space around this man, that invisible Curtain that had walled him in and had awed Dira. Donai smiled at him, and Karin swallowed, his throat too dry for speech. The man's body was slender, muscled like a runner, solid and young. But his eyes . . . pale gray, the color of earliest dawn, they were windows opening into a vista of years that stretched on forever. Karin clutched the bunk, dizzy, as if he stood on the brink of a bottomless well. They had seen everything, those eyes, had passed judgment on everything long long ago. The only way to deal with this man was to turn your face away, stand back so that you didn't get sucked in, didn't have to see. Karin shuddered, struggled with the need to look away, breathing hard, sweating in the windless noon heat.

"I can see why you . . . interest Yolanda." Donai sighed and lowered his eyes, releasing him.

Karin stiffened. He talks like I'm a *thing*. And it came to him with sudden cold that Yolanda had talked about the village like that, when he'd found her in the grass. As if they were . . . things. "You think you *own* Yolanda." He groped for anger to banish the cold. "You *don't*. She doesn't belong to anyone!"

"Own her?" Donai looked startled. "I get the award points when the critics vote. I could trade her away I suppose; art for art." He shrugged.

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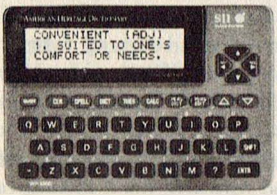

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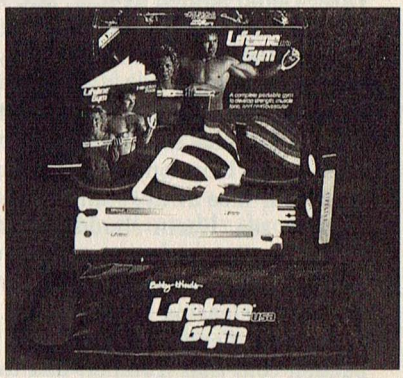

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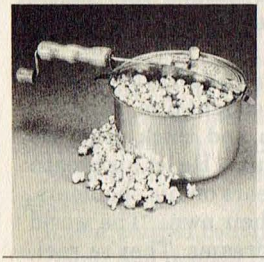

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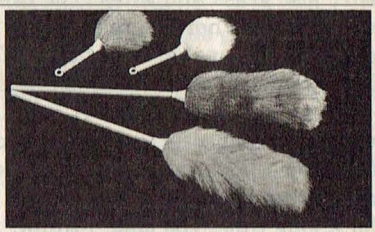

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"Do we ever really own a creation? I don't know. Maybe you can tell me." He bowed, lips curving with bitter irony. "She's not human, you know, although there's plenty of human material in her." One eyebrow arched. "You can make love with her, if you haven't already discovered that. You can't get her pregnant. She can die." A shadow that might have been sorrow swept across his face. "What does she mean to you?" he asked softly.

There was no reason to answer this man, none at all. Karin tried to shrug, groped for a nasty comeback, but those eyes caught him, windows into forever. So damn many years there . . . deep and thick, like the layers of grass and river sediment that buried the ruins. He let his breath out in a slow sigh, feeling the weight of all those years on his shoulders. "She's . . . different." The words stumbled out on their own. "The world isn't just grass and kites. The dreams aren't just dreams. They're real, when I touch her. As real as she is. As real as City. I believe in them, and . . . I can make them happen." The words ran out, leaving him hollow, filled with that familiar, aching emptiness. "I *can*," he whispered.

"You can't enter City." A look like pain shadowed Donai's eyes. "Not without a sponsor. Once upon a time . . . I felt what I hear in your voice. Could she be *right* about you? No, of course not." He had turned half away, was speaking softly, as if to himself. "I've been . . . creating things for a long time. Too long, I think." He gave a small, bitter laugh. "There has always been something to reach for, always a new concept to clothe in flesh, carve in metal, or shape in weather or emotion. Now . . . I know how to do it all. And I do it so *well*." He turned back to Karin, one eyebrow rising. "We live a long time, kite-flyer; theoretically forever. Not you, maybe." He gave Karin a pained half-apologetic look. "Although I suppose you might be able to, if you had access to the technology. Sometimes I wonder if mortality isn't an important part of being human. Death connects us directly to the unknown. Perhaps, without death, our universe becomes . . . finite. Knowable. Perhaps we've lost an important innocence."

The first breath of noon wind fluttered the curtains, and Yolanda climbed silently into the van. She was smiling, her eyes full of light, her tawny skin glowing.

"You are a poem." Donai nodded at Karin, his face twisted with something that could be either love, or pain, or maybe both. "I think you are a song of what we've lost; our youth, our innocence. We have neither anymore. We simply have knowlege and years. Thank you." He turned to Yolanda, opened his arms. "For bringing me out here."

She walked into his embrace, cradling him with the bone curl of her spurs, holding him gently. He leaned his face against her neck, eyes half closed, glazed with that mixture of love and pain.

"It's all right," Yolanda crooned. She stroked a dark wisp of hair back from his forehead, and her own eyes glittered with sparks of green fire in the dim light. "It's all right, Donai, it is." She bent her head slowly, cheek brushing his, the needle-tip of her temple spur hooking beneath the pale skin of his throat. Donai shivered and tilted his head back, cords in his throat tightening, so that Karin could see the bluish trace of the veins, the pulse of his heartbeat beneath the skin.

The spur tip dimpled the skin beside the carotid, pressed deeper . . . .

Dry-mouthed, heart thundering in his ears, Karin watched, crucified against the bunk, immobile.

A fist thumped on the side of the van. "Karin?" Sairee's voice. "Karin, where are you?"

Karin started convulsively. "Here," he rasped. "I'm in here."

Donai had opened his eyes. Yolanda grinned at Karin.

As if this had been a nice little show to make the locals gawk. Maybe it had been. Maybe it all been staged for his benefit. "What do you want?" he snapped as Sairee opened the door, angry, because his hands wanted to tremble.

"What's your problem?" She crossed her arms, but her eyes were uneasy as they flicked between Donai and Yolanda. "Don't you feel it? The noon wind? The village is about to fly and Dira says it's time. Joel's going to Invite you."

Why *now?*

"I . . . I don't know." He swallowed again, working his tongue in his dry mouth, trying to summon up enough saliva to grease the words. "This isn't . . . a good time."

"What do you mean, isn't a good *time?*" Her voice skidded up an octave and she grabbed his hands, pulling hard, as if she wanted to drag him bodily down the steps and out into the sunlight. "You can't say *no.* Karin!" She had gone pale. "If you say no, you have to leave. What are you *doing?*"

What *am* I doing? he asked himself. The rising wind fluttered the curtains, wakening a million whispering voices in the grass. *Thing* . . . they whispered. *Are you a thing?* "I don't know." He looked away. "I just don't know."

"Dira was right!" Sairee's voice cracked. "She said you'd back out. She said you wanted an excuse to walk away, so *go.*" She flung his hand away. "Go to the damn City! Do you think they'll let you in? Just because you're in love with *her?"* She didn't look at Yolanda. "She doesn't belong there any more than you do! Karin, you're so *stupid.*"

"Sairee, wait." Too late, she was gone. He stuck his head through the curtains, but she had vanished around the end of the van. "I can't," he whispered. Not now. Not with *him* here.

"What does that mean, this invitation?" Donai stepped forward.

Karin recoiled a step, skin crawling at the thought that Donai might touch him.

"It means he has to fly a kite." Yolanda lowered herself to Jerry's bunk, careful not to tear the mattress. "It's art, Donai. I saw it. They have some kind of telekinetic control and they fly the kites all together. I did it—It's like dancing in the sky." She smiled, a sad, remembering smile. "It's beautiful, Donai. I'd love to live out here and just do that."

"A test, right?" Donai frowned, his face thoughtful. "Tribe mentality. Initiation or ostracism. Quite the cliché, but sometimes the old forms still work." He gave Karin a sharp look. "I told you, no one gets into City."

Thing, the wind whispered.

"I didn't think they did," Karin said dully. He had known from the first time he had stood close to the curtain, hair prickling with static—that no one really got in. Maybe Jerry and Roan would just wander away into the grass, keep on going until they finally died.

"Why aren't you going to do this test, or rite?"

He looked so concerned. Like they were friends or something. Like he gave a damn. "Because you're here." Karin met those gray eyes, their age dragging the words out of him. "Because . . ." Because he might fail in front of this man? Or because he might not fail?

If he flew, if he *did* it, he wouldn't have to leave like Jerry and Roan were leaving. He would have a place here. Forever.

Donai looked away. "If you don't do this, it will haunt you," he said slowly. "You'll tell yourself you chose to walk away. That you didn't *fail,* that you didn't reach down into your soul and come up empty-handed. But you'll never be sure, will you? You'll never know."

Heavy words, full of pain and years. The curtains fluttered in a gust of wind, brushing Karin's face like impatient fingers. *You'll never know.* Karin turned his back on Donai, flung the curtains aside and leaped down from the van.

The heat outside seared him, burning away the cloying feel of Donai's presence. It fed his smoldering anger, fanned it into hot flames. So *do* it. Why not? What did he care? *Let* them all see, if he failed. Then everyone would know, right? No doubts. No mistakes. He ran after Sairee, caught up with her at the kite rack.

She was getting her kite down, shaking out the carefully coiled tail of her orange and magenta dragon. She looked up as he reached for his own kite, and smiled. "I'm glad," she said and reached for his hand.

Her fingers were warm on his skin; warmer than Yolanda's, with dirt engrained in the creases of her knuckles and beneath her nails. Strong hands. "Wish me luck," he said, and shut up as Joel walked over.

He was empty-handed, all stiff and formal, flanked by Dira who carried his big green and yellow wing, along with her own magenta one. Joel looked tense. Five steps from Karin, he stopped and bowed. "Would you like to fly with us?" His blue eyes looked worried in his dark face. "We're Inviting you."

"I would like that. Thank you, Center." Such silly, simple words to mean so much.

Only they *didn't* really mean that much. It came to him as he handed his kite to Joel; like a burst of sunlight, or the rush of evening wind after a still, hot day. So what if he failed? So what if he couldn't get through the City gates?

It wasn't the kites that mattered, or City.

It was *him*. His talent, to discover, to use. He would find a way.

"I am not a thing," he whispered.

Joel either didn't hear him or didn't let on. He frowned at the bright zig-zags of color, touched the patched tear, then handed the spinner back to Karin. "Very nice." He jerked his head, and started for the open ground beyond the ruins, obviously relieved to get that bit of necessary ceremony over with.

I am not a *thing*. Heart full, reciting words like a litany, Karin followed him. The entire village was there with their kites, except for the few children, and Jerry and Roan, who never came out to watch and would head for the City gates one of these days to not get in and not come back.

There was no rule they had to leave. They just *would*—like his father had. Can't you ask *why?* Karin swallowed, looked away. Can't you ask why the wind blows three times a day, or why there are so few kids born, or why people leave? If they asked, maybe Jerry and Roan could decide to stay.

And maybe . . . they couldn't ask.

A sudden chill tickled his spine, but the first kites were going up, climbing the wind, veering and darting like brilliant birds. No time for thinking . . . Joel's went up; his huge bright wing, then Dira's. Karin spared a quick glance for Sairee, spotted the flickering tail of her dragon on the far edge of the flight. Keeping her distance? Worrying in private? The kites circled, seemed to hover. He felt it, like a held breath.

They were waiting for him.

So. Karin tossed his spinner into the air; a challenge, because it was tough to get it airborne that way. Or maybe he did it this way because that's how Yolanda had done it, yesterday. He ran a few steps, yanking on the spinner's halter, daring the wind to let him down. It didn't. The kite's mouth gaped, sucking in the wind, gulping it as it leaped skyward. Yes! He slowed, stopped, began to play out his string as the kite soared. It was so damn beautiful up there. The other kites were slowly coalescing,

picking up Joel's pattern, gathering themselves. Red, green, teal, iridescent, the kites twirled across the hard sky.

Karin laughed harshly, and suddenly . . . was flying.

Wind. String quivering, tight across flesh. Fabric-skin rippling, spinning, riding the wind's power . . . The dance filled him, *was* him, or he was it. Joel's pattern was his blood, his pulse, his song. He moved into the twining spiral, circling slowly higher, ducking beneath a red wing, darting upward toward the edge of the flock so that his spinning stripes would catch the sun. Part of the whole.

And that whole was there, inside his head, inside Dira's, and Sairee's, and Joel's.

Pulse. Song.

Right here, right now, earth and sky, and wind and flesh, it was everything.

Only it wasn't. Karin faltered, kite faltering with him, wind losing power beneath him. Do it like *this,* he thought and saw it, in his head—how to make it perfect, kites topping the spiral, exploding outward, scattering shards of light and beauty across the sky. He saw it so damn *clearly.*

And, for an instant, the whole flight wavered. Confusion echoed in his head, and then Joel's pattern solidified once more, crashing into his brain like a rush of water from a breaking dam as the Center took control again. Stunned, shocked by what he had nearly done, Karin let the pattern fade from his mind.

For the space of a few heartbeats, he had nearly taken the Center away from Joel. And Joel knew it. Karin had felt the brief flash of his anger and his pain.

His spinner was sinking, drifting out of the pattern like a falling leaf, blending in with it so well that it didn't disrupt the flight. Carefully, Karin drew it in, easing it to earth, landing it neatly on a patch of bare ground where it wouldn't snag on anything. Above him, color twined, formed, broke, and reformed in the bright midday sky.

He had flown with the village. He could stay, be Center one day, send the kites skyward on the wind that always blew at the same times every day, the way it always did. And it suddenly came to him why this invitation, now, today. Because Dira had thought he'd leave, go with Yolanda to the gates. And now he wouldn't go, because he had flown. Because that was the way it always happened. Unchangably *always,* and no one ever questioned it. Karin's earlier tickle of chill intensified, raising the hair at the base of his skull. High above, brilliant kites painted color and motion across a hard sky.

Who was watching, in City?

He shivered, looked around the empty village. No sign of either Donai

or Yolanda. Karin reached up and touched the scratch on his cheek, remembering Donai's face in the van, remembering the bright glitter in Yolanda's eyes as she dug the tip of her spur into his throat.

You can become whatever you want, Yolanda had said, out there in the grass and the shadows of the ruins. *I can only be what I'm made to be.*

Unpredictable? Was that what Donai had made her?

Maybe not.

Clutching his kite, Karin raced between the vans, ducking the fluttering curtains. They could be anywhere. He ran past the empty kite rack, past the grounded plane, which, a glance through the windscreen told him, was empty. The grass rustled all around him, pierced by ancient oldcity bones, hiding its secrets. "Yolanda!" He cupped his hands around his mouth.

I can only be what I'm made to be.

And Donai had created her to be . . . what? Karin stumbled to a halt beside a lacework of twisted girders that might have belonged to a bridge or a fallen tower. Panting, he closed his eyes, seeing Donai's pale face against the screen of his eyelids, rapt beneath that polished, deadly curve of bone.

Karin opened his eyes, eyes stinging with sweat, vision blurring. Orange flowers bloomed among the grass stems, almost the color of the kite tucked under his arm. Unpredictable, Yolanda had called herself. Because she had run away from Donai? *I'm not afraid* of *him,* she had said. Karin sobbed once, shading his eyes with his hand, knowing that he couldn't find them in time, that it was too late.

And saw them.

They lay naked in the bottom of a hollow, shaded by the oldcity bones, nestled in summer grass. Yolanda knelt beside Donai. The Creator lay on his back, one pale arm stretched out, face turned to the sky, motionless. Karin's heart lurched, but then Donai lifted his head, levering himself onto one elbow, back arching as Yolanda leaned forward to kiss him.

Her spine curved, sleek muscle sliding beneath tawny skin, the polished ivory of her spurs gilded by sunlight. Her auburn hair tumbled forward around her face, hiding their kiss. Slowly she stretched out, one leg half bent and resting lightly across his naked thighs.

Too far away to hear sigh, or moan, or whispered words, Karin stood frozen as she lifted herself slightly, poised above him, still locked in their kiss. Her buttock dipped and the deadly curve of her spur dipped with it. In a moment, it would happen. He saw it in his head, as if a window had opened into the future, saw her thrust downward, forward, entering

him in a dark reversal of *lover,* spitting him on that polished curve of bone that Donai himself had created.

For this purpose.

To kill him.

And Yolanda?

She can die, Donai had said, and Karin wondered if he had meant that to happen, too? It would happen anyway, because she loved him. Karin stumbled forward, but he was too far away. "No!" he screamed, but they didn't hear, or didn't want to hear. He stopped, tears blinding him, hair whipped back by the fading noon wind. Wind! With a cry, he tossed his spinner skyward, groping for loft.

It was easy this time. He soared the kite upward along the sleek flank of the wind, full of power, gaining height. The kite was his hand, one long reach toward sky and cloud and the bright blaze of the sun. If he *reached,* if he grabbed, he'd seize it . . . . With a wrench, Karin forced his attention back to the moment.

High enough.

Tightening his control he flung his spinner downward, throwing it like a stone, zig-zagging down the slope of the wind. There! It pounced like a hawk, snagging curved bone and thrashing limbs in a net of green and orange. Donai cried out as Karin broke into a run. Death cry or surprise? The grass stems snagged his ankles, trying to trip him. In the bottom of the hollow, Yolanda and Donai struggled with kite-fabric.

Panting, Karin stumbled to his knees beside them, yanked the kite free. Yolanda's spurs had torn it, left gaping irreparable rents along its length. She lunged to her feet, face pale, eyes as wild and empty as the sea of grass around them.

"What are you doing?" Donai's voice was angry, but there was no anger in his eyes. Just years, in endless layers, sterile and gray like dust in an oldcity ruin. He was unscratched, no trace of blood.

"Why?" Karin's voice cracked, and he clutched the destroyed kite to him. "Why have *her* do it? Why not just do it yourself?"

"She *is* myself." Donai looked away. "And . . . I can't." The words came out a whisper. "We live too long. After enough time, you fear death too much. I'm . . . afraid."

Afraid. Karin looked at Yolanda. She stood a little apart, profiled by the setting sun, staring out at the distant horizon. "She loves you," he said to Donai. Softly.

"Love." He turned his face away. "I didn't create her to *love.*"

Yes, she was unpredictable after all. Karin looked at Yolanda again, a knot tightening his throat. The dress Sairee had made for her lay tumbled at her feet in a bright chaos of magenta and orange. Inhuman or human? *Art,* she had said. *You tell me.* "You said it all, didn't you?

In that van." Bitterness twisted his lips. "You're going to choose, huh? Decide to die. Only you're going to let *her* do the paying. How come?" The bitterness was filling him up, burning like acid. "Because *you're* afraid of failing? Can you fail just like us, City man?" He turned away, took a half step toward Yolanda and stopped. "You belong here," he said softly. "Sairee's right. You're not City."

She didn't answer, didn't look at him. Unpredictable? Maybe, and maybe not. Karin bowed his head, started through the grass toward the distant village. The torn rags of his kite whispered against the grass stems.

"Wait." Donai's voice stopped him, harsh and full of pain.

Karin looked back over his shoulder, but the Creator's eyes were on Yolanda.

"I'm sorry," he said.

"Why?" Yolanda half turned, auburn hair blowing across her eyes, the tips of her forehead spurs gleaming in the afternoon light. "Because you created me to be your death?"

"Yes," Donai whispered. He turned to face Karin, his eyes full of pain, full of light. "You can come with me. I'll open the gates for you, kite-flyer. You'll get your City."

"Why?" The word came out a croak. "What makes you think I'm going to do anything you say? What are you offering, City man?"

"I'm the best, kite-flyer." Donai bent, picked up his tunic. "I'm no failure. I wouldn't be out here if I was a failure." He laughed a razor-edged note. "I don't expect you to understand that. I moved the moon, so that the tides would dance to my rhythm. I shaped mountains to paint flowers across a desert. You think you're a Creator? Yolanda does." He paused, shadow and light moving in his gray eyes. "I doubt it . . . but you have guts. You deserve the chance to fail spectacularly." He began to dress. "I would rather like to watch you fail. If you don't, you'll have to be better than I. And then, you'll understand." He laughed very softly, lips pulling back from his perfect teeth. "Oh yes, kite-flyer. You'll understand."

Entrance to City. Karin caught his breath, afraid, filled with an excitement like lust. Donai's smile was cold, but the light in his eyes caught at Karin. It was like the hot flicker of a torch in a dark ruin, revealing vast unexpected spaces. "I will be better than you," he whispered.

"You think so?" The light brightened in Donai's eyes. "You had better *try*, kite-flyer. Yolanda?"

She was walking back toward the village, Sairee's bright dress trailing from one hand, spurs shining like polished bone. She paused at his call, looked back over her shoulder.

"Will you . . . come back with us?" Donai asked softly.

"To kill you?" She brushed hair from her face. "Do you really want that, Donai?"

"I thought I did." He looked at Karin, eyes touching Karin's briefly, sliding away. "Maybe . . . not yet."

"I'm going to stay here." She plucked a single stem of grass, frowned at it. "I think Sairee would like a sister, and I can fly the kites. I think she was right. I don't belong in City. When you want me, Donai, I'll be here. Waiting." She dropped the grass stem. "I could wish you hadn't made me what I am."

Donai bent his head. "I'm not sure *what* I made," he murmured. "Maybe I made you to bring me out here. So that I could find . . . ." His words trailed away and he glanced sideways at Karin. "To find what, kite-flyer? Innocence? The childhood I can't even remember anymore? What *are* you, anyway?"

"I don't know yet." Karin met his eyes, looked into that endless landscape of years. "I'll tell you when I do," he said.

"You do that." Donai laughed softly, started for the village. "Let's go, kite-flyer. If you're coming."

Had those been tears in Donai's eyes? Karin followed slowly, his tattered kite tucked under one arm. He hoped they were tears. He hoped Donai's tears hurt like hell. Sairee was waiting for them. He saw her break into a run—to Yolanda, not to him—and swallowed sharp, unexpected pain. Yes, Yolanda belonged here, like the village belonged here, like the kites belonged. Alien and . . . appropriate. That tiny chill walked his spine again. He caught up with Donai. "Did someone . . .?" He shook his head.

"Did someone *what?*" Donai raised one eyebrow.

Karin stared at the van canopies fluttering in the wind like bright, grounded kites. Had someone *created* the village, like Donai had created Yolanda? Had someone turned them out in the grass to fly their kites in the unchanging wind, to love and live and die and never ask why? He turned his hand palm up, brushed a fingertip across its folded grimy surface. He drew a slow breath, tasting dust on his tongue, the tang of heat and summer grass. "Never mind," he said.

In his mind, he saw towers twined with vines of living metal, saw wonderful animals with human eyes. Maybe City wasn't really like that.

Maybe, then, he'd *make* it so. ●

CURSE OF BRUCE BOSTON'S WIFE

Here's a stanza from my latest, honey
From "Curse of the Tau Cetian's Wife"
Ahem:

—She's tired of cleaning ectoplasm
from the shower, and fights a wave
of revulsion as his vein-filled
eyes undress her. She left every-
thing: friends, family, Earth . . .
all on advice from her therapist
who suggested "a little variety."
When he gropes for her in the night
with writhing tentacles, she wishes
she'd stayed with her last boyfriend
Spaz, drummer for the "Rhino Humpers"—

Pretty good, huh?
How about *this* one, from
"Curse of the Mannequin's Wife"

—Her friends say how lucky she is,
"after all, he doesn't argue, doesn't
make demands, he's not sexist, and
never goes soft in bed." But truth
crushes her at night when she asks
if he likes the chicken she made, or
what he thinks about silicone breast
implants. When she loses her temper
and stabs him with her new set of
steak knives (all six of them), he
just stares at her and smiles—

Did you like that one?
This *next* one . . .

She cuts him off with a curt gesture.
"Lay off," she says through grinded teeth,
"I don't criticize *your* friends."

(for Bruce Boston and his wife!)

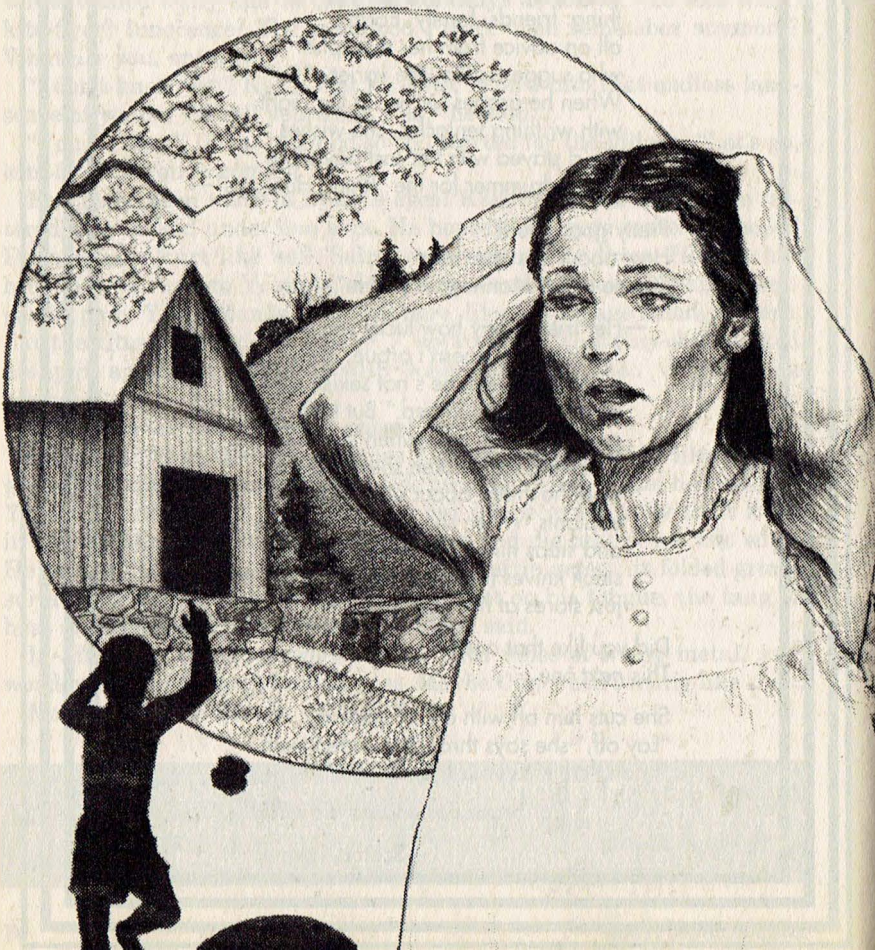
—Scott L. Towner

Michael Swanwick

WALKING OUT

The author tells us "'Walking Out' was originally conceived as a collaboration with a Certain Science Fiction writer who shall remain nameless. Although this writer bailed out of the project—hence the title—we parted without rancor. It is only when My Unidentified Friend reads this issue of *Asimov's* that he'll learn what name I finally gave the protagonist."

Illustration by Laurie Harden



Terry Bissel woke up one morning knowing he had to get out of the city. Take a jitney up Broadway and keep on going forever. Travel so far and so fast that if someone were to shine a flashlight after him, by the time the beam caught up it would've dissipated to nothingness. "I don't want to live here anymore," he said aloud without opening his eyes. It was true. For a long time he lay motionless, simply savoring the thought. A strange elation dawned within him. "I want to live in the country."

His wife was in the kitchen, humming to herself. The blender growled briefly. She was grinding beans for coffee. There was the sizzle of eggs and ham in the skillet. Kris was a lark. Eight months pregnant, and she still got up first.

He pulled on his slacks and rolled up the futon. In the doorway, he paused briefly to watch Kris waft lightly from sink to counter. Then he said, "Let's move to New England."

Kris stood very still at the counter. She didn't turn around.

"C'mon, babe, you know you hate it here. Too much noise, too many people, hardly enough room to fucking turn around in. I want to live in Connecticut—no, Vermont! I want a big, rambling house where you can see meadows out the kitchen window and woods beyond them. And mountains! Snow in the winter and fresh apples in the fall. I want the kind of place where sometimes you get up before dawn to watch the deer crossing the lawn."

"Terry," Kris said warningly.

Down on the street, the recyclers were rattling the bins of cans and bottles, slamming bales of paper and bags of digestibles into the various bellies of their truck. They were in a good mood, to judge by the loud, yakyakking sound of their voices. "Yo, Nee-C! You still seeing that old fool, Benjy?" And: "He got better stuff than you do, Maaaalcolm." And: "You don't know till you try, babe! I got stuff I ain't never used." The crew were laughing uproariously at this exchange. "I heard that," said the woman. "Fact is, I heard you ain't had the opportunity to use none of it!"

"Listen to that." Terry snorted. "That's exactly the kind of crap I'm talking about. Hey—you ever seen a moose?"

"No."

"I did once when I was young. My folks took us kids to this little bed-and-breakfast outside of Montpelier and—hey, the woman that runs it must be getting pretty old by now. Maybe she'd like to sell. What do you think? Wanna run a B and B? It couldn't hurt to ask."

Kris whirled abruptly. "We need more coffee," she said in a choked voice, "We're out."

"I thought I heard the grinder."

"That was . . . decaffeinated. I put it in by accident." With harsh, choppy motions, she unscrewed the grinder and slammed its contents into the disposal. "Go across the street, why don't you, and get us some beans?"

"You're the boss." He grabbed up Kris in both arms, lifted her to the ceiling and whirled her around. "You and the little Creature from the Black Lagoon." He kissed her belly, set her down, and ducked into the cubby to throw on robe and slippers. Then he headed out, leaving his wife weeping behind him.

It was a wonderful morning!

On the elevator, Mrs. Jacinto from two floors up smiled and said hello. Her husband, Herb, was a municipal gardener, as tall as she was fat, and a dab hand at cribbage. Terry had played him a few times and the man was definitely a shark. "How are you doing this lovely morning, Mr. Bissel?"

"Couldn't be better—we're going to move."

"Well, isn't that nice? I expected you children would, now that you have the little one on the way. Oh, and that reminds me. Tell that pretty wife of yours I have some morning sickness tea that I'm bringing up later on; I know you'll think it's foolishness, but tell her to give it a try, it really does work. Are you moving Downtown?"

"We're leaving the city altogether, Mrs. Jacinto. We're moving to the country."

The smile froze on her face. "Well," she said. "Well, well."

The doors opened for the ground floor and she skittered away.

It was a quick hop-skip-and-jump across the street to The Java Tree. On the way back, Terry plucked a daisy—perhaps one of Herb's—from the street turf. He opened the top of the coffee sack and buried the stem in the beans.

"You'll be going to the Housing Authority today, won't you?" Kris asked when he got back. She accepted the coffee, filled a glass with water for the daisy, and put it up on the window sill without comment. Ignoring their earlier conversation entirely, pretending it had never happened. "Like you promised?"

Well, getting out was a new idea. It would probably take her a while to adjust to it. "Why not?" Terry said, playing along. "If we want a bigger apartment, we'll have to move, right? And if we want to move, one of us is going to have to go stand in line. That's just the way it is. Doesn't matter what you want, you've got to stand in line." He winked jauntily.

"I'd go myself," Kris said in a strained voice. "I don't mind. It's just that—" She looked down at the Creature.

"Hey, hey. I didn't say I wouldn't, did I?"

Tight-lipped, she shook her head.

"Then it's settled." Terry ducked into the bedroom and opened the closet. Silk jacket, snakeclone shoes. On the way out, he paused in the doorway. "Hey. What about Maine? Maybe we could find a place outside of Portland, nice and convenient to your mom, wouldn't that be nice?"

As he left, he heard Kris beginning to cry again. Pregnant women were emotional. He understood that.

Their flat was in the heart of Midtown, at the foot of one of the giant condensor stacks that drew current out of the flux and into the power grid. The building was wrapped around the tower's anchor pier, and even though the engineers swore it was perfectly shielded from any harmful radiation, this fact had kept the rents low. No question but a new flat was going to give them sticker shock. Maybe that was all to the good, though. When Krissie saw the bottom line, she might well change her mind about New England. The law gave them a three-month cooling off period; it would be easy to break the lease.

Kris wanted to move Downtown to be closer to her sister. Maybe he could talk Robin into moving as well. They could get adjacent farms and raise llamas.

It was another beautiful morning. The Municipal Weather Authority had programmed a crisp autumnal tang into the air. Light breezes stirred the little trees on the building tops. They looked just fine outlined against the dome.

A paper bag blew past Terry's feet and automatically he started after it. But then a street urchin appeared out of nowhere, a skinny black kid in an oversized basketball jersey, and snatched it up. He leaped high, tucking in his knees for a double somersault, and slam-dunked the bag into a recycling can. With a flourish, he swiped his bank card through the slot to pick up the credit.

Terry applauded lightly.

"Watches!" the shabby man sang. He was only a step away from being a beggar. His jacket was shiny and his shoes weren't. One side of his face was scarred from old radiation burns. That and a blackwork Luna Rangers tattoo marked him as a vet. The watches flew in great loops and figure-eights, blinking and goggling whimsically.

"This sort of post-capitalist consumer faddism is only a form of denial, you know," Terry told him.

"Hah? What're you talking about?"

"Think about it. Your devices consume three times their own weight in time and labor for their design, manufacture, and—now—sales. But

what do they accomplish? A moment's diversion from the sad fact of existence. It's a measure of our desperation that we'd devote so much energy in order to generate a respite, however brief, from our very real problems."

"What are you, some kinda nut? Get out of here!" the vendor said angrily.

Terry stuck his hands in his pockets. "The truth hurts, eh?"

Without answering, the shabby man called his watches in. They came swooping down on him, finding safe harbor in his many pockets. He turned and hobbled away.

"It's called denial!" Terry shouted after him. "Therapists have known about it for centuries!"

It was rush hour in the subway. The crowds were so thick that people were constantly losing their hold on the platform grab bars and being jostled up in the air. If it weren't for friendly hands to pull them down, they'd be in serious trouble.

The peoplemover "Spirit of Leningrad" pulled in. Seats filled up fast, and there were six or seven people left standing when it left the station. A teenager in an orange leather jacket studded with video pins sat down next to Terry, then offered his chair to an old woman. A dozen pop songs clashed faintly from his pins. The crone smiled at him, sat down, adjusted her seat.

"I'm moving to New England," Terry told her. "Maybe this month."

She glared at him and turned her chair away.

City dwellers were rude. Terry was used to it. He sighed, and flicked on his paper.

HOUSING SHORTAGE SHAKES CITY, said the *Times*. Just another reason to get out. WORST SITUATION SINCE WAR. There were people, it seemed, who'd been waiting weeks for a suitable upgrade. Of course the *Times* was an opposition paper—it had to put a bad face on everything. JOBLESS RATE HITS 35%, said the *News*. The *News* was an establishment rag; somewhere in the article would be statistics justifying the situation. But the way Terry saw it the figures spoke for themselves. With a third of the working population on sabbatical at any given time, that meant almost three percent were between jobs, pounding the pavement, making do with three-quarters normal salary and benefits. Times were tough.

Terry hit Midtown before the Authority office opened, so he stopped in a diner for brunch. It was a Polynesian joint with thatched roofs over the tables and white sand covering the floor. He ordered the papaya-breadfruit surprise and two eggs that had never been inside a chicken. He didn't bother with the orange juice. It never tasted like the stuff he

used to drink when he was a kid. The way he figured it, if they didn't have it down by now, they never would. You simply couldn't get oranges like they had back then anymore.

He picked at his food, thinking about Krissie. Pregnancy was tough. Kris had less than a year's leave for it. And the neighborhood maternity center—well, he guessed it was okay. Just last night the nurse-midwife had come by for the weekly and she'd said Krissie was doing fine. Still, you couldn't help but worry.

What kind of a place was this to bring up a kid in, anyway? Children needed to run wild, enough room so they could stretch out and grow, woods they could disappear into for hours and days at a time.

"A penny for your thoughts," the waitress said when she brought the bill and thumbpad.

Terry waved a hand toward the dugout canoe that hung from the rafters in the back of the diner over a small turquoise waterfall. "That thing's Malaysian, you know that? This whole place is about as Polynesian as I am. I mean, you can talk about cultural preservation all you want, but let's be honest here. It's pointless to pretend you can preserve a culture you've never experienced first-hand. You wind up with the MGM-Disney fantasy version of something that never existed in the first place. You get where I'm coming from?"

He jabbed his thumb on the pad and left without even picking up his complimentary breath mint.

Downtown wasn't so bad as Midtown if you had kids. But of course—all this urban bureaucracy!—you couldn't do anything so simple as just *move* there. You had to stand in line. Flats were assigned according to a complicated formula. So many points from the monthly lottery (one ticket for paying rent; extra for civic service or orbital work), and so many for need (about one room per family member, plus kitchen and bath). Plug in the neighborhood stats—quality-of-life, environmental health, access to schools, clinics, entertainment—and out pops the number. They'd drawn a high number last month, thanks in part to the Black Lagooner being on its way, so they'd decided it was now or never.

He spent half an hour sitting on a gut-sprung sofa before the government lady called him in. She rose to shake his hand. "Mr. Bissel. Thank you for your patience." He took a chair and she sank back down behind her desk. "Where exactly were you thinking of moving?"

"New Hampshire."

She looked up.

Terry laughed. "Just a joke. Right now, today, I'm interested in something Downtown. Quiet. Spacious. Suitable for a newborn."

"I—see." The government lady touched three spots on her desk and it

spat out a hardcopy of three addresses. But she didn't hand them over. "Mr. Bissel, I note that you're monolingual."

"Yeah? So?"

"No crafts or hobbies. You don't play any musical instruments." She frowned. "Your cultural preservation ratings are distinctly below the mean."

"Aw, c'mon, you know as well as I do, that stuff's all bullshit."

The woman's eyes flared. "I most certainly do *not!* Multidiversity—"

"—is a crock. Look, if you want to preserve our goddamn priceless ethnic and cultural heritages, then just hand out rifles. What do you think ethnicity is all about, if it's not hating the people in the next county? Molotov cocktails for everybody in the bar! Kill the lot and let God sort 'em out! The plain and simple truth is that instead of trying to preserve our tribal identifications, we ought to be doing everything we can to obliterate them. You want to prevent the next war? Burn the family albums!"

Her mouth opened and shut. She said nothing.

Terry picked up the hardcopy. On the way out, he grinned and said, "Never mind me. I'm Irish on my mother's side, and 'tis like me Mither always sez: The only thing the Irish like better than an argument is a good fight."

The first apartment was in Chinatown, overlooking the Canal. There were some kids jigging crabs on the stairs out front. Little goats were running around on the roof. Terry liked water well enough, but he didn't like sky goats all that much. Supposedly they helped keep the city clean by eating trash. He couldn't see it.

The manager of the building was a fat Mongolian who was more interested in his saxophone than in showing the flat. Terry stood, hands behind his back, looking at the Buddhist woodcuts on the wall while the man finished a snatch from *Rhapsody in Blue.* Then he sighed and put down his instrument. Lumbering, he led the way to the fourth floor.

The present tenant was, according to the hardcopy, a high-wire artist who was joining an Uptown circus. He squatted on the floor, greasing parts of a disassembled unicycle. He didn't even look up, but just grunted.

"Most of building is squatters," the super said, with an expansive gesture. "Only this guy is movers. No face canal, si? No face canal."

"No face canal is right," Terry muttered. He stared out the window into a filthy airshaft with a few vegetable gardens down below. Some kids were playing wall ball. They had those garish knee and elbow grips that were all the craze nowadays, and were swarming up the walls three and four floors. One of them made a face at him.

He smiled back at her. *I'm leaving the city, little girl, and you're not.*

One look was enough, though. The super was glad to get back to his

music. He called an absentminded "Adios, good buddy amigo," after Terry. There was a strong Hispanic component in this neighborhood; he probably thought he was speaking English.

Off to prospect number two in Little America.

Little America was as motley a place as its namesake. The prospect was a two bedroom flat that had been created by knocking out the walls between two pre-War flats. It faced the street, and between the clash of bicycle bells and street musicians, fishmongers, vegetable-carvers, poetry slammings (Terry had signed a petition against slamming once, but the Street Poets Union had power, and a popular argument that they were a "humanizing influence" on the city) and people laughing, he would never've gotten any sleep.

The super was ethnic Kenyan, with skin as purple as a plum. She had an overprecise New Oxford accent and said she was working on an interactive software history cycle. "You and half the universe," Terry said, and she cheerily agreed. But when he suggested she look into some place outside the city, where rents were cheaper, her expression changed to one of offended *hauteur*. "Look at the apartment. Rent it or don't," she snapped. "Be quick about it. I haven't the time for any nonsense from the likes of you."

In the actual case, there wasn't any real choice. The baby would never get any sleep in this bedlam. And Krissie might like this sort of neighborhood, but as far as Terry was concerned it was exactly the sort of overcrowded chaos that he wanted to get away from.

"I'll pass," he said.

Third time was the charm. The apartment was on the top floor, windows on three sides, with solid oak floors. They hadn't learned how to grow oak by the plank until ten years ago, so he could only imagine how much it had cost new. There was a modern kitchen with a tap-line to the local shops so he wouldn't have to be trotting all the way across the street whenever the wife got one of her cravings. There were kids playing wall ball outside, but they weren't going any higher than the third floor, so the noise was tolerable.

The clincher was that the surrounding buildings opened up in a way that gave him a completely unobstructed view of Jupiter through the city dome. Terry was a sucker for cloudgazing. He could sit and watch the planet's slow-swirling weather fronts endlessly shifting from pattern to pattern for hours.

It was evening when Terry finally went home, and all the city lights were blue-shifting into twilight. He felt weary but virtuous. Krissie, he knew, would be pleased, and that was all that really mattered.

There were two strangers in the flat when he came in. A slender woman and a real bruiser of a man. From the quiet neutrality of their dress, Terry guessed they were counselors or therapists of some sort.

"Hello," he said pleasantly. "What's going on?"

"Terry," his wife said. "A woman called from the Housing Authority. She told me how you behaved and I—" She looked helplessly about her. "And I—"

"Mr. Bissel," the woman said. "You've been telling people that you plan to move out of the city."

"Yeah, so? That's not a crime. I mean, look around you. It's a perfectly rational response to an intolerable situation." Krissie was crying again.

"You want to move to . . . New England, is it?"

"Look." He spread his hands in bafflement. "What is all this?"

Kris stepped close to him. Through angry tears she said, "The War, Terry—remember the War? There *is* no New England, not anymore. Three weeks the asteroids fell. Three weeks! The clouds covered the skies for years!" She was hysterical now, babbling. "Everything was destroyed—Earth, Mars, all the colonies. The cities. My mother. All of them." She began punching him on the chest. "My brother Allen! Mrs. Kressner! Jamal Hardessy! Angela Hughes!"

The burly man slid himself between them. Gently he placed his enormous hands on Terry's arms. It was like being gripped by a mountain. "Don't bother, Mrs. Bissel," he said. "We get a lot of these cases. More every year. They never listen."

The woman opened the door. "He'll be taken care of," she said.

"Where are you taking him?" Kris asked fearfully.

"Someplace pleasant," the man said. "You'll be informed when he's ready for visitors."

"But you can't. I need him here. My God, there's a baby on the way!"

"Mrs. Bissel. We cannot allow your husband to wander about loose. His illness—it's like a virus. It could infect others. He's a threat to the survival of the city."

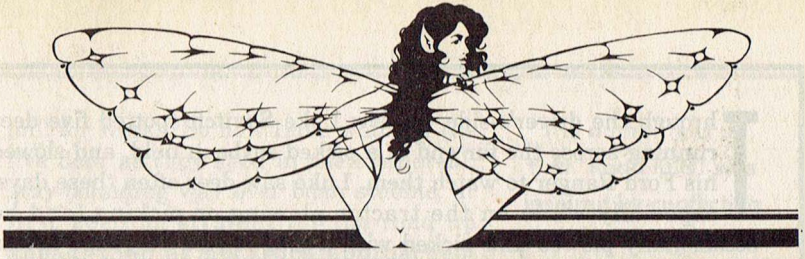
"Oh, not my husband. You don't know Terry. He's a good man. He—"

Harshly the woman said, "It may not show ordinarily. But we're all precariously balanced. This exaggerated kindness we show each other, our horror of conflict, the cult of preservation—these are signs of denial. All our society is an extreme reaction to . . . to what happened. We're none of us totally sane, you know. We're all of us at risk."

They escorted him into the hall.

"Terry!" his wife cried. "Try to concentrate. Try to concentrate. You can't leave the city. We're the only surviving colony—the last habitat that humanity has left. There is nowhere else to go."

"Oh no," Terry said happily as they shut the door behind him. "I know where I'm going. I'm going to the country!" ●



NEXT ISSUE

Critically acclaimed new writer **Nicola Griffith,** winner of the prestigious James Tiptree, Jr., Award last year for her well-received first novel, *Ammonite,* makes a compelling *Asimov's* debut in these pages next month with a big new novella, our March cover story, "Yaguara"—taking us to one of the remotest and most inaccessable places on Earth, the steaming, tangled jungles of Belize, for a vivid, mysterious, passionate, frightening, sensuous, haunting, and erotically charged look at love, obsession, and transfiguration in a modern-day Heart of Darkness...

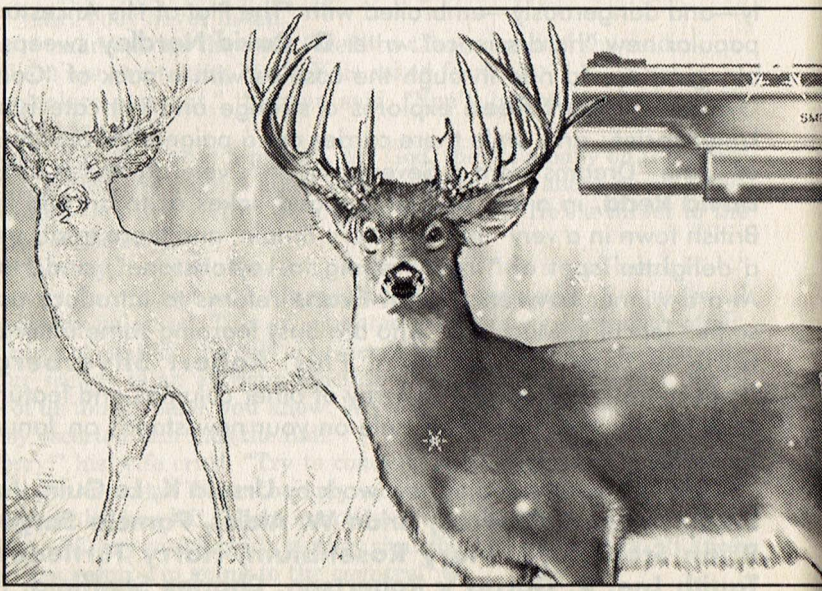
ALSO IN MARCH: Hugo Award-winner **John Brunner** returns with a sly and fascinating look at a man who becomes intricately—and dangerously—embroiled with "The Plot of His Ancestors"; popular new "hard science" writer **G. David Nordley** sweeps us along on a wild ride through the cosmos with a pack of "Comet Gypsies"; **Robert Reed** explores a strange and intricate future Lunar society, and while there carries out a poignant investigation of some "Dreams from a Severed Heart"; veteran Welsh author **David Redd,** in a wry and antic mood, takes us to an odd little British town in a *very* odd far-future Britain, and there treats us to a delightful spot of "Trout Fishing in Leytonstone"; and Hugo Award-winner **Lowrence Watt-Evans** returns to introduce us to some "Teaching Machines" who are busy learning some unforgettable lessons of their own. Plus, **Robert Silverberg's** "Reflections" column and an array of other columns and features. Look for our March issue on sale on your newsstands on January 31, 1995.

COMING SOON: major new work by **Ursula K. Le Guin, Jack Dann, Howard Waldrop, Brian W. Aldiss, Pamela Sargent, Brian Stableford, Mary Rosenblum, Harry Turtledove, Tanith Lee, R. Garcia y Robertson, Charles Sheffield, Pat Murphy,** and many more.

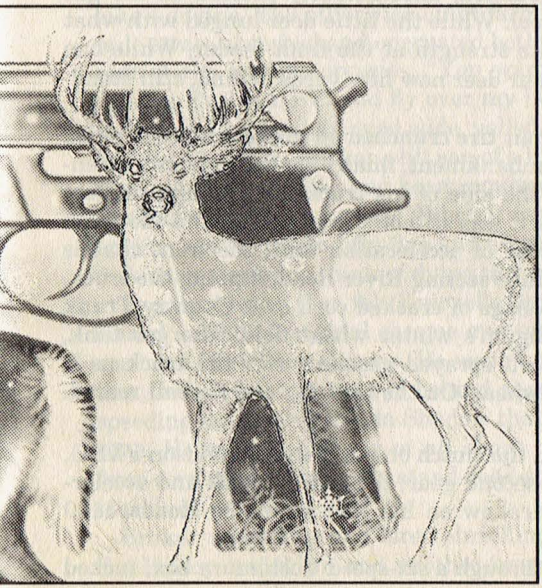
Through the driver's-side window Luke Savitch spotted five deer running across the far end of a picked soybean field, and slowed his Ford Ranger to watch them. Luke saw deer often these days, especially while on the tractor plowing or picking (and he occasionally plowed and picked with a slug-loaded 12-gauge across his knees); but he remembered years when seeing a deer in southern Wisconsin was rarer than seeing a UFO in Belleville, and dainty cloven-hoofed tracks in apple orchard snow generated talk at the

Kandis Elliot

ROAD KILLS



mill for weeks. So now Luke watched the five deer as they sped in their ethereal, gray-bounding way over bean stubble, at first heading straight for the road up ahead, then as his truck approached, turning to parallel the road from just within the barbed-wire fence edging the field. Their bobbing tails flared into white triangular flags. Catching up, Luke slowed a little more to pace the animals. He glanced up and down the traffic, saw none, and then marked the speedometer: thirty-five, with the deer keeping abreast just on the other side of the fence line, not ten paces from narrow County Trunk T, and all five perfect marks, the two doe, two pretty good six-pointers, one spike buck in the lead.



The author tells us that "Road Kills" was inspired by conflicting views of Wisconsin's white-tailed deer. The issue is a political battleground whose bitter borders are variously defended by sportsmen, farmers, the Department of Natural Resources, and animal rights' activists. "Add to the list botanists (for whom I draw pictures) who are appalled at how fast certain species of orchids are devoured. One can envision how that cute-as-hell Bambi will someday become venison bratwurst whose constituent molecules incorporate those of the last delicate *Calypso balbosa*. And so it goes."

Illustration by Kandis Elliot

Just starting to feel their rutting oats, Luke decided. As September wore on, the two bigger bucks would drive off the little one—maybe that's what was going on here, he thought, their being so oblivious to the truck—and then turn on each other. *Unless I bag one of'em first.* He chucked aloud in the pickup. "Wait'll I tell Zapatocny 'bout this!"

Luke had chores waiting, bags of feed in the pickup to unload, afternoon milking. Nonetheless, coursing with a herd of whitetails wasn't your everyday opportunity, and he kept with them down the length of the soyfield, nearly a quarter mile now, with the fenced hedgerow at the corner coming up, and the animals' mouths open with their hard breathing.

And then they abruptly stopped, nearly impelling Luke Savitch to do likewise; except the little spike buck kept on, digging in even harder, leaping the three-strand fence, clearing the roadside ditch like a winged creature, and darting onto the road.

Luke did a lot of things all at once. A glance in the side mirror showed no traffic and four blowing deer standing shock-still in the field, the fluffy white interior of their ears pricked forward, the bright black dots of their white-circled eyes watching. Next to the mirror surged a deer's head so close he could have patted it. So close that Luke turned the wheel to dodge the animal, which seemed intent on cutting in front of the truck. The speedometer had quivered up to forty, and then jumped as Luke, surprised and confounded, unconsciously pressed on the gas pedal. While he spun the wheel. While the little deer lunged with what must have been the last of its strength at the front fender. While one more impulsive glance saw four deer now fifty yards behind, still standing and watching.

The Ford Ranger's right front tire crunched on gravel and then skied down the grass of the ditch embankment, finally snapping Luke's attention away from the deer at the side of his truck and sending his foot hard down on the brake, only it was still on the gas pedal and the truck shot into the ditch with a roar of acceleration until the front chassis ripped up a culvert beneath intersecting River Road, flipping the truck, sending twenty-three burlap bags of cracked corn over Country Trunk T, River Road, and Tom Tjugum's winter wheat field. The gas tank, gouged by the sheared culvert, sprayed gasoline over the truck as it cartwheeled in the sprouted wheat. On the last skid the fireball roared.

Johnny Lazewski feathered the clutch on his Harley-Davidson FXDG, blasted up through first and second gear, twisted the wick and accelerated straight toward Greg Krakow on his Hog-wanna-be Honda 1100 Shadow.

The Honda in turn geared through a six-speed Yoshimura box, sucked

its fatbob gas tank and roared in ever-rising howls directly at Johnny Lazewski. The empty stretch of Creek Hollow Road closed up between them at one-twenty-plus. Greg's face drained bone-white behind the Honda's pullbacks, and Johnny grinned because he knew who'd be the first guy to bail. He held the Harley on a straight course that in three seconds intersected exactly the hot rubber path dug by the Shadow's twenty-one-inch wheels—path vacated by Greg's last-instant swerve, which Johnny could hear finishing behind in a squall of brakes.

Johnny popped down the Harley and let it shriek a doughnut over the gravel-impregnated old blacktop until he faced Greg again.

Waiting some forty yards away, between November-brown fields of tall dry corn and over a knotted snarl of black drag marks, Greg revved up the wanna-be, challenging yet again. His wind-blown blond hair stuck up like a rooster comb. A Live-to-Ride black T-shirt peeked white letters and the top of a skull from his half-zipped denim jacket.

"You fucking chicken shit," Johnny yelled, shaking his own long hair out of his eyes, "you gotta fucking death wish, man, or you just dig having *real* Hogs stomp your fucking Jap junk into cowshit?" Johnny knew that Greg actually wanted to be hot-shit-on-a-Brit, his eye on a Triumph 120V five-speed over at Midnight Auto's cycle and parts yard. Johnny's Harley would stomp him either way, because his was one Hog never had no front end wobble and because Greg was major chicken shit.

"Suck my dick, Lazewski, you peckerhead," Greg shouted over his bike's engine. The otherwise quiet farmland, nearest barn more than a mile away, absorbed and enervated both the command and the snapping roar of the two motorcycles. "You want my road, man, you turn into fucking Evel Knievel and fly over my head, you fucking asshole."

Johnny Lazewski grinned wide, yelled, "I'm coming right *through* your fucking head, you chicken-shit son of a bitch," engaged his suicide clutch from which the spring had been removed for speed shifting, and danced the Harley on its rear wheel. When it came down the 650cc displacement engine had her up to fifty-five and blasted off.

Johnny started to think of flying through a quarter mile in ten seconds at one-thirty-five, then felt Knievel's Harley XR750 under him and envisioned a flash of original chrome and twenty coats of hand-rubbed gold-spritzled Root Beer lacquer. He wasn't thinking much about Greg Krakow, whose face glowed red behind shades and handlebars now, or the speeding on-coming Honda Shadow that wasn't going to flinch first this time. He wasn't thinking *at all* about the deer that delicately stepped from corn rows to suddenly stand dead-still between the two accelerating machines.

Brakes squealing and tires shrieking and an impact and guts and the Harley laid down and another impact of two lying-down bikes still

traveling at fifty miles per hour and graveled asphalt raining with pieces of bike and bloody splinters of bone and denim jacket and gray-brown fur. And then Johnny Lazewski wasn't thinking about anything at all. No.

Earl and Henrietta Zapatocny watched the winter-dark December evening speed past through the windows of their sort-of-new LTD. The highway cut through farmland patches of bare swamp-oaks and silver maple; between woodlots, roadsides loomed with crisp walls of dry field corn. Headlight beams attenuated into nothingness a hundred yards up the road, under glorious, icy stars. Occasional yard lights like fallen stars marred the perfect shadow of former prairies.

Henrietta squinted at the white stripe on the edge of the asphalt. The headlights caught other eyes glowing back from short-mowed roadsides. At least once every mile, she saw an amorphous mound of hair mixed with other grim stuff heaped on the road or gravel shoulder. "Lot of animals moving for this time of year," she observed.

"Varmints'll wander till snow comes," her spouse informed her. "Picking still got the deer kicked up."

Henrietta didn't like thinking of the deer. Dodge County had too many deer. "All these woods," she said. "Deer can run right out. You'd never see them coming."

Earl snorted. "DNR will up the quota through the roof next hunting season. Bring up damned cityboy hunters out shooting punkins in the field—" He snorted again. "Just one of my cows get shot, I'm doing a little hunting of my own, I'll tell you."

Henrietta pursed her lips. She knew better than to get into deer and deer-hunting arguments with Earl. She recognized the lit-up farmyard at the top of the hill ahead, and seized the opportunity to change the subject. "Looks like the Jacobsons are still doing chores."

Earl eyed a dairy barn situated close to the highway. Lights glowed warmly from the lower stanchion area, offering a glimpse of black and white Holsteins as the LTD sped past. "Heard Paul's doing three-a-day milkings now, with the boy growed. I sure as hell wouldn't come out and milk, nine, ten at night."

"I hope our girls got the chores done okay," Henrietta said quietly, immediately wishing she hadn't

Earl scowled and gripped the wheel tighter. "They by-God better got that barn done two hours ago, they know what's good for 'em." The car's engine gradually purred into a low roar as the LTD accelerated through the night.

"Earl, slow down. Could be cows through the fence someplace up ahead.

I don't know these days, leaving kids to home, country overrun with maniacs." But then, she considered, kids had to learn responsibility. And the girls had Snowballs for protection. "I'm sure they done fine. These last few months since the school counselor started with 'em—"

"They better got that barn done, that's all I say."

"I'm sure they done fi—Oh! Earl! Look out! *Deer!*"

Her scream jolted Earl Zapatocny upright. "Jesus Christ!" His foot left the gas pedal, but without braking the car he glanced quickly right and left at the roadside shadows. A small woodlot rose dark and impenetrable on the driver's side of the highway. On the other side stretched a cattail-clotted ditch. "You're dreaming," he muttered. "I don't see nothing." He kept looking, but stepped on the gas once again and sent his wife a disgusted glare. "You always gotta go berserk, for chrissake? Scare a man half to death."

Henrietta did not reply. Her heart still pounded. She continued to search the roadside; she'd seen deer, all right, at least three, maybe four or five, that had popped out of cattails right when the car was passing by. It seemed as though they were trying to run right *at* the car. The stupid things. No wonder there were so many car-deer accidents.

Charles D. Farnsworth steered the Zoology department's Suburban into the farmyard, one of few habited areas on the globe ample enough for him to easily maneuver the sun-faded blue station-wagon-on-steroids. "Heave to and drop anchor, Mister Christian," he muttered, cutting the engine. He looked through his window at a barking farm dog's saliva-coated fangs. The shepherd-mix, with enough frantic noise to alert the Fourth Cavalry thirty-some miles back in Madison, had escorted the Suburban from a roadside mailbox all the way up the snowy gravel drive.

Another dog, a black Lab mongrel, hedged back and forth a few yards distant, encouraging the bolder animal's din with an occasional timid yap of its own. Both dogs sent regular nervous glances toward the house or barn, and Farnsworth hoped the human residents would see his predicament and shoo their guardians away. If they could. Surely, he thought, beseeching the sprawling farmhouse's windows, they have chairs, whips, elephant guns. Abruptly the barking ceased. Farnsworth followed the dogs' pricked ears toward the barn. A barely-discernible white cat tiptoed over tracked snow. "Hello," shouted a man exiting the barn's attached milkhouse. He wore bib overalls, a ragged black-and-red-checked coat and rubber boots. As Farnsworth got out of the car, the farmer took off worn gloves and re-seated a baseball cap advertising Renk's Seeds. "Get outta here," he yelled with a kick at the shepherd-mix, which had resumed barking as soon as Farnsworth's hand touched the car's door latch. The black dog ran behind the house.

"Good morning, sir. Charles Farnsworth. From the University."

The fifty-ish man shook the offered hand. "Earl Zapatocny. You with the well testing?" A leery eye narrowed.

"Not at all. I am answering a summons." Farnsworth dug in his coat pocket and extracted a powder-blue envelope addressed to *Zoology Animal Scientist, The University, Madison, Wisconsin.*

Zapatocny snatched the envelope and pulled out a single pink sheet illuminated with child-rendered deer drawings. Irked at the audacity, Farnsworth held his tongue and mentally read over the farmer's shoulder:

Dear Sir,

We need the expert of a animal scientist to help us solve a Problem. The Problem is with the deer here in Dodge County. And maybe other Countys too, but our farm is in Dodge. We are in a project of our own to study the deer and we have amazing discoveries. We would like very much a animal scientist to answer us some questions about deer. If you come visit we will show you many deer on our farm. You can see for yourself what they are up to.

Come on Saterday of December 9 we will have fresh cookies.

Very truly yours,
Sheila
Sheena
Shirley
Zapatocny
Farm 3552, River Road Rte 3, Dodge County, Wisconsin, U.S.A.

Earl Zapatocny lowered the pink stationery and sent his suspicious gaze toward the farmhouse. "Damn. Starting that crap again," he muttered, then said to Farnsworth, "So that's why they had to bake cookies all morning. Well, I sure hate to think them girls made you waste your day like this, Mister. I'm real sorry. They're going to be, too."

"It's no bother, sir. If nothing else, the day is splendid for an outing." Actually, the letter had filtered down from the departmental secretary's desk, through several layers of mammologists, taxonomists, and ecologists, and after maximum entertainment value had been extracted, finally sank to Farnsworth's massive oak desk. He found the little blue envelope tucked in the lacquered hands of a mounted pygmy chimpanzee that squatted between an inflatable allosaur and a tank of newly hatched *Xenopus* tadpoles.

Farnsworth decided to follow up the odd summons, mainly to show certain unwashed colonists that Oxford gentlemen and scholars do not joke at the expense of taxpayers' children. Moreover, he'd been strangely piqued about what the deer "were up to."

"Well, you're here, might as well come in for a cup of coffee." Zapatocny

had hesitated for just a moment to eye up his guest, and Farnsworth could feel the scrutiny addressing the most vile of possibilities. Surely, he thought, taken aback, the man could see that even his youngest (or eldest) daughter was perfectly safe with such a tall, darkly handsome, well-turned out and obviously highly intelligent academician, radiating British charm, culture, sophistication, and integrity. Surely.

The farmhouse kitchen's radiant warmth and aroma of fresh bakery erected a pleasant wall against the cold blast from the door and the yard's pervasive smell of cattle. Zapatocny silenced the deafening radio carols which had out-competed dog barking. An institution-sized table was strewn with baking sheets and platters of naked sugar cookies. Stars, bells, Santa Clauses, and unrecognizable beasts queued before bowls of pink, blue, yellow, and green frosting. At one end of the table sat a small girl with long brown bangs and longer ringlets, which sported terminal streaks of the green frosting lavished on at least two dozen Christmas-tree cookies. The girl's bright, amazingly clear gray eyes fixed on Farnsworth. Wide surprise quickly transmuted to excitement at the sight of the blue envelope in his hand. Her mouth began to form words that he next heard coming from an entirely different direction:

"Wow! You're the scientist from the University we sent for!"

He turned and saw duplicate brown tresses and gray eyes staring at him from a hall doorway.

"My word! Twins!" He looked back and forth between the two girls.

"That's Sheila. That's Shirley. And you ain't seen the half yet," said Earl Zapatocny, taking his guest's coat and waving him into a chair. "Ma," he yelled at the hallway, "fix us some coffee out here. We got company."

Henrietta Zapatocny, a mousy-haired, thin woman with the girls' gray eyes, filled a huge enameled pot with ground coffee and water while the children closed on Farnsworth faster than the shepherd-mix dog, both girls talking in the same voice: "What's your name?—You study animals?—You cut up their guts?—You got a laboratory of your very own?—I'm Sheila, I made the Christmas trees, here, eat one—I'm Shirley and I did the blue stars, eat one of mine—Can you tell us apart? Where's Sheena?" Without warning, the pair shrieked together, "Here comes Sheena!"

Three seconds later, Sheena—an exact clone of her two sisters, as Farnsworth had begun to suspect—pushed the kitchen door back with a bang, yelling, "Hi and don't start talking till I get my coat off I was just looking at the new calf and here's the cream." On the table she plunked a quart-sized stainless steel, spring-lid pail that reminded Farnsworth of the cans he'd fetched full of bitter for his own father, half a world and thirty-five years away.

He fielded questions as to his identity, his studies, Oxford. His perfect enunciation might as well have been accented tones from the Andromeda galaxy. Several telling photographs, carried for occasions involving children, showed Farnsworth holding an egg supposedly laid by the Loch Ness Monster, Farnsworth petting a rare Sri Lankan black tiger, Farnsworth shaking the governor's hand. That impressed Earl Zapatocny. ("You mean *you're* the guy helped the Guv get that big walleye? Finally whipped Illinois after all these years?") Farnsworth hadn't been so much impressed by Midwestern chief executives indulging in fishing contests, as by the intensity of the annual competition. For state politicians, evidently, raising taxes, cutting Welfare, or even encouraging dog-track gambling were sins nowhere near as contemptible as failure to land a Wisconsin fish bigger than an Illinois fish.

Just when the time seemed ripe to broach the subject of Dodge County deer, a sudden, three-girl chorus announced, "Snowballs!"

Farnsworth stiffened, preparing to duck. The kitchen door was thrown wide again; in sauntered a huge white cat. "This is Snowballs," one of the triplets said, struggling to lift the animal by its armpits. The cat dangled in limp complacency in the girl's grasp, hind legs and tail dragging the floor.

Heavy cheeks and war-torn ears identified the beast as male even before a whiff of tomcat invaded Christmas-cookie air. New gouges and old scars nicked a dark pink nose; some past slashing drooped one eyelid. Nonetheless the round muzzle arched in a magnificently contented grin, the bliss of a farm animal given a moment's attention in a warm kitchen on a cold winter day.

Bright yellow-green eyes within that battered/happy face looked at Farnsworth with unslaking intensity.

Farnsworth diplomatically crooned, "Puss, puss, puss," and scratched the cat's wide head. Its fur felt like scouring cloth. He took the animal onto his knee to rescue it from what seemed an awfully uncomfortable position. The creature weighed at least twenty pounds. It made a gravelly sound combining a rumbling purr with some basso version of "miaow."

"Snowballs *likes* him," yelled three identical girls' voices.

"Congratulations, Mister," said Earl Zapatocny. "Ol' Snowballs don't take readily to man *or* beast."

"Snow *balls?*"

The farmer grinned slyly. He grabbed the cat's tail and hiked up its hindquarters. The cat appeared willing to tolerate any and all indignities from its humans. "Bet you thought the saying 'hornier'n a three-balled tomcat' was just a saying."

"Dad!" the triplets admonished.

"I say—"

"Downright supernatural. Cat come in a litter the exact same day as

when the girls come. Three babies. Three balls. Ain't that supernatural? Ten years ago last August."

"Don't forget Tjugum's three-headed calf," the mother added. "When it rains, it pours."

"Damn tomcat even terrorizes the dogs. Better guard dog than any of 'em."

"And he knows about the deer, too," said the green-frosting triplet, Sheila.

"Girls." The mother's voice hissed with warning. As she poured coffee, Farnsworth noted the look that passed between parents and offspring, suggesting some sore issue lurking here. *Starting that crap again.* He gave the triplets a surreptitious study. They were small for ten. He'd guessed seven or eight. Either way, obviously a late-life surprise for Mum and Dad.

"Girls," echoed the father, sternly, "Professor Farnsworth came all the way from the University because of your letter. Why didn't you tell Dad about this before you wasted the man's time?"

Blue-frosting Shirley whispered the obvious answer to the linoleum. "Because you wouldn't let us write otherwise, Dad."

"It's quite all right," Farnsworth said hastily, selecting a cookie. "And these biscuits are excellent." He tried to encourage Snowballs, still on his lap, to go search the house for mice, but the big white cat draped itself over his knees like a dead animal. "Well then, shall we discuss this letter?" The triplets had settled side by side in front of glasses of milk, and he looked at each in turn. "Sheila? Shirley? Sheena?"

"You can tell us *apart?*" they gasped in unison.

"I should be quite rude otherwise, wouldn't you say?"

"Even Mister Mueller can't, not yet," said the frosting-free Sheena.

"How terrible for you." A teacher, he supposed. "And so. What are the deer up to?"

Three little mouths opened to reply.

"Girls! What did Mister Mueller say about lies and dreams?—Their school counselor," the mother explained. "Professor Farnsworth, please don't fault my girls. We do have a deer problem in the county—"

Earl Zapatocny interrupted loudly. "Spread brain worm to cattle. Awful crop damage. And they just strip the hell out of apple orchards, nip the buds all winter—"

"Earl—"

"Got us a monster buck this part of the county. Been seeing him for years, rack like a elk. Disappears every season, bow or gun—"

"That's the deer *boss,* Dad—"

"Earl, forget the buck and the crop damage. It's affecting the girls. This letter business." Henrietta Zapatocny turned back to the guest. "Early this fall our neighbor died when his truck rolled over in a ditch. Horrible thing. He swerved to avoid hitting a deer. Last month, two young men from up the road hit a deer on their motorcycles and were killed. Just a week ago—" She paused, evidently realizing when the pink letter had been sent, "—Earl and I were driving home from a church meeting when we almost hit a herd of deer coming out of nowhere."

"*She* saw 'em. *I* didn't see nothing."

Henrietta glared at her spouse. "The girls are frightened, Professor Farnsworth. Kids think the deer are doing it on purpose. But with this many deer, there's bound to be a lot of accidents. Perhaps," she ventured, "you could speak to the state fish and game people?"

"They *are* doing it on purpose!" Sheena's shrieked protest made even Snowballs flinch. All three sisters erupted with long-withheld assertions. "They're *naughty*. We *seen* them run out in front of cars just to make them go in the ditch! The big buck is their leader, and he tells the rest what to do!"

"And how do you know this?" Farnsworth asked.

In a breath, before parents could stifle it: "We hear them talking!"

Charles D. Farnsworth pulled the creaking, counter-weighted milk-house door open and wandered through the steamy bulk cooler room. Fresh-washed rubber milker cups hung from drying racks. He heard dry rustles and teeth-torturing scrapes from beyond the short entryway to the cow barn, where milk smell gave way to air thick with hay dust and the heat of recently vacated cattle. One girl—Sheena—broke bales and

forked yellow straw in the empty stanchions. Sheila pushed a wide scraper at wayward cow dung along the central alley; Shirley followed behind, sprinkling handfuls of white lime from a heaped shovel pan that seemed too heavy and awkward for a small ten-year-old. The triplets were just finishing the chores to which they'd been banished.

The mother had explained about the girls' "talking to the animals," how Doctor Doolittle had become too real in their fantasies, or so warned school counselor Mueller. That wretched fellow even suggested putting Snowballs to sleep, to eliminate the cat as an imagined collaborator. At least the parents had drawn the line there.

It hadn't taken Farnsworth long to convince Earl and Henrietta Zapatocny that perhaps the girls were not fantasizing at all. Perhaps, like many people unfamiliar with the habits of wild creatures, they merely misinterpreted something they'd actually seen. And perhaps, if a reputable and, ahem, renowned zoological expert such as himself were to accompany the girls on a nature hike and teach them some elementary biology (he'd worded the suggestion exceedingly carefully), well, then, surely fantasy would be replaced with reality, knowledge, and perhaps A's in class. If they would grant him leave to go see the deer as the triplets suggested—?

The parents, anxious to prove their lovely daughters were normal, bright and good, readily agreed. (Without a qualm, oddly enough, for after all, Farnsworth *was* a total stranger.) "As long as Snowballs goes with you." Farnsworth himself was quietly relieved. He still wanted to know what the deer were up to.

"Ladies," he called, snapping the girls' distracted silence, "do please drop what you are doing and come along." He held up a bag of cookies and a thermos of cocoa. "We are overdue for our zoological study of the deer of Dodge County."

Straw bale, scraper, and shovel bounced on the concrete floor.

The deer appeared as mousy motes in the fields below.

Crouched on a snowy slope, Farnsworth glanced left and right at the trio of identical faces peering over a fallen oak trunk with him. The triplets never stopped watching the deer, even while mittened hands reached for intermittent cookies.

They'd left the barn confidently, and Snowballs had gamely followed them down the cowpath to the pasture. Once the snow got deeper, the cat lagged behind, then vanished, white-on-white. Farnsworth had never believed the girls could really lead him to deer, and hoped at best for tracks to estimate numbers; yet within a mile of the farm he found himself behind a hillside log and observing seven deer moving in and

out of valley marsh grass, unpicked corn and bushy hedgerows, always closer to a narrow county road fenced from the wickerwork of farmland.

The girls had pointed out an eighth-deer, a buck possessing a rack visibly trophy-sized even across twenty acres, standing motionless at the crest of the opposite rise. Perfectly silhouetted to Farnsworth and the Zapatocny triplets, the animal stood behind field rock piled at an intersection of a fencerow and the country road.

"He's the boss of all of them," whispered Shirley. "Now he's talking to them."

The buck moved slightly to look down toward the seven others, by then in a patch of tall viburnums where the road bridged a creek and ran straight through the valley. At the look, the seven stopped their slow milling and looked back.

One left the viburnums and jumped the fence. The deer sank nearly out of sight in tall weeds and marsh grass in the roadside ditch.

A car crested the hill, passed the buck's hiding place, accelerated down onto the flat.

The single deer started running, pushed to top speed, then sprang out of the ditch weeds just as the car caught up and passed. Its driver evidently not seeing the animal, the car raced on, tailwind knocking the deer akimbo. Long legs wobbled back in control, and the animal eventually rejoined the others. They had not moved. Only watched.

"They think he did pretty good," Sheila whispered. "Almost got the car."

Sheena hissed. "Another car!"

They looked up. The buck on the hill again nodded toward the herd, and all seven heads below glanced back. Another deer started out, jumped the fenceline, descended into the concealing ditch and started an all-out run. A station wagon crested the hill and descended to the flat stretch. It traveled more slowly than the first car. The deer in the ditch made its revealing leap before the vehicle had drawn abreast. This driver saw the deer, pulled the wheel, stomped on brakes. The shriek of rubber on cold asphalt rose all the way up to the human watchers on the hillside.

The station wagon swerved, missing the deer, and fishtailed for nearly sixty yards before stopping in the middle of the road. By then the deer had re-hidden itself in the ditch. The station wagon rolled very slowly away.

"Oh gosh, Professor, that was close!" Shirley whispered through mittens over her mouth.

He couldn't believe it. He had to believe it. Were the deer truly baiting cars? Coming-of-age hazing ritual? Balmy with brain worms, or responding to odd subliminal stimuli?

"It still wasn't right, though." Sheena's gaze riveted to the lookout buck across the valley. "The boss wants the car to run off the road and die."

"Bloody bugger—er, sorry, ladies."

"For what?"

"Car coming," Sheena warned. The big buck had canted its gaze once again. "He's telling them to jump in front of the car and just stand—*oh!*"

Farnsworth saw the distant buck and seven deer below snap their attention to the human spies, just as a third car crested the hill and all three girls abruptly about-faced. He heard a wet snort somewhere in the vicinity of his heels.

A fork-horn whitetail stood not two strides behind them. Its young, large brown eyes stared with the innocent dewiness of Disney's Bambi. It snorted again. A sharp forehoof pawed the snow. Four polished, eight-inch tines lowered.

The triplets gasped.

Farnsworth knew that rutting males of the deer family were damned dangerous animals, and Bambi was sizing up his chest organs for shish kebab. He slowly rose, estimating the young animal's weight and seeking potential battle holds, when an ungodly sound wailed through the woodlot.

"AaaarrrrroooOOOOOOWWAGH!"

The fork-horn's hair bristled. So did Farnsworth's.

"Aaarrrrrhh*sst! Ssst! Ssst!"*

The small buck stared transfixed at a snow hump that had sprouted a furiously lashing tail. The snow hump flew up, buzzsawed the deer's face, returned to its exact stance and place, nearly too fast for human eyes to follow. The fork-horn suddenly switched end-for-end, white flag flaring, and crashed away through the woodlot.

Farnsworth turned. No more deer in the valley, either.

Grinning and drooling, Snowballs tolerated triplet hugs and kisses without a flinch, leading Farnsworth to suspect a Jekyll-Hyde, panther-cum-dirty-old-man personality. No gratitude on Earth would bring his face that close to the creature.

They trudged back through the woodlots and fields and snow, Farnsworth taking the hands of two girls who alternated with a third carrying the heavy feline upside-down like a baby doll. The cat, limp with its usual bliss, fell asleep.

"Why do the deer want to hurt us, Professor?" Sheila asked.

"Well, cripes," Shirley replied, "all we humans do is *shoot* them. And *eat* them."

Sheena was not to be left out. "We shoot and eat ducks. We shoot and *poison* rats. *Those* animals don't try to kill us."

"A rat'll kill a human if it could."

"Not."

"Uh-huh! They bite the faces off babies. And that box they stuck on with the guy's head in one side and a starving, mean rat in the other, and then they lift the little door—"

"Gross. And what about cats," asked the current carrier of same, "cats lay on babies' faces and suffocate them."

"Doesn't count. That's not on purpose, like when a pit bull grabs a baby and rips its arms off."

Farnsworth edged into the conversation. "Ladies, not that the various forms of mutilative infanticide isn't a fascinating topic, but let us be a little stringent with our working suppositions."

Even Snowballs opened an eye and stared at him.

"That is to say, we really can't know what animals 'want,' so to speak. Of course we understand and empathize with kindred experiences such as pain, hunger, fright, affection—" he spoke to himself more than to his audience—"but to ascribe higher motives? A wreaking of vengeance? And its complement, the granting of forgiveness? How does one test that hypothesis?"

"Mmmuhhhowwer."

The triplets laughed. "Snowballs says go ask that mean Bambi if he'd like another chance to fight you."

Farnsworth paused. The illusion of telepathy was common among identical siblings—familiarity breeding an intimate knowledge of body language and predictable responses. Yet it'd been nearly impossible not to believe that the triplets had been calling the lookout buck's shots. Hadn't they testified to such an ability? So much so as to profoundly trouble parents and school officials?

He said calmly, "Ladies, tell me what it's like to hear the deer talking."

They stopped and looked up with a mix of incredulity and suspicion. Did he really believe? No one else ever did.

"We are research colleagues here," he reminded them.

Hesitation vanished; one voice toppled over another in a single statement. "They get an idea, see, and we hear what it is—Not like *hearing,* exactly—It's like if I want to see the new calf, so I think, there's the barn and here's the calf pen, I can kind of see it in my head—We see what the deer say and in my head it all *turns* into words."

He studied them thoughtfully. "Is that how Snowballs talks, too?"

"Snowballs? He's just a *cat.*" Still deserving of yet another kiss on his scarred nose.

Farnsworth's turn to pause. "Are you saying you don't hear the minds of *all* animals? Can't you read *my* mind?"

"Of *course* not," rang the three-voiced, exasperated reply. "Nobody *listens* to us. We kept saying the *deer,* not all animals. Not *people*. Nobody *listened*."

For the first time he felt a chill crawl up his backbone, and not from the cold seeping through his tweeds and galoshes. *It isn't a fantasy.*

They climbed the last fence into the field below the farmstead. House and barn resided on a domed hill, and somewhere near the summit, dogs barked. The yelping commenced suddenly, frantic and maddened—very much like when the shepherd-mix had him trapped in the Suburban, Farnsworth thought uneasily. He turned to track the sound, dearly hoping the dogs weren't setting on him again, or if so, the triplets could control them. The shepherd-mix had been chained up when they'd left the house earlier, Snowballs at their heels. The black dog had tucked tail and slunk away at the sight of the cat.

"Noise is what the deer hate most," Sheena remarked. "Barking dogs. Noisy cars. Guns. Dad says deer never make a sound their whole lives."

The dog duet split into an unhappy yelping up near the farmhouse, and louder, excited outbursts moving swiftly away, still out of sight around the hill.

"That's Blackie," announced Sheena. "Mister Savitch's dog. Dad took him when the deer killed him. We got his barn cats and six of his cows, too."

"Sounds like he's chasing a rabbit," Shirley suggested. "No, wait—" Her face clouded with concentration.

The barking waxed and waned for a minute, then grew ever nearer, finally coursing in the lane down from the barn, the chase hidden by a small plot of unpicked field corn.

"Look," yelled Sheila, putting the cat down and pointing a mitten. "There's a deer!"

An antlerless deer stood at the opposite end of the fenceline they'd just crossed. It cocked one ear to the barking as it studied the human entourage.

They whirled to an eruption of thudding hooves and snapping corn stalks. Three deer thundered out of the standing corn and raced down the hill to the fenceline, cutting diagonally across the field. Just as the whitetails bounded over the barbed wire and vanished behind fencerow scrub oaks, the adopted black-Lab mongrel charged out of the corn. Hot on the trail, yelping maniacally, it dashed past Farnsworth and the girls, blind to all except the chase.

Just as it drew up to the place where the three deer cleared the fence,

the solitary doe waiting at the distant corner of the field leapt conspicuously over the far fence and headed across an open, snow-covered hay field. The dog never hesitated.

"Blackie! Blackie, come back!" The girls' entreaties rang unheeded. "*Bad* dog!"

Farnsworth half expected Snowballs to enter the chase and fetch the dog, now circling back around the farm hill and out of sight again. The tomcat still stood where he'd been unceremoniously dumped. He flicked one foot after another to rid it of snow. His eyes, dilated nearly to black, followed the barking for a moment. As Farnsworth watched with growing fascination, the cat began turning its head slowly around as though tracking some other sound *ahead* of the chase. The searching yellow-green gaze finally halted on some invisibility on nearly the opposite side of the fields where the yelps now distantly rang.

"Come on, ladies," Farnsworth yelled, running toward the cow lane. The triplets caught up and ran beside him. Past the unpicked corn plot, not quite fifty yards from the barn at the top, he reached a spot with a clear view down the far side of the hill—to the highway he'd arrived on just hours ago.

In a snowy, clean-picked field next to the highway, right where the cat had been looking as though seeing straight through the solid mound of the hill, stood another doe. Although the zig-zagging, invisible chase raged somewhere beyond the farmstead now and already across the road, the doe's head was turned away from the din and aimed up to where the highway crested a rise. Had Farnsworth binoculars, he knew he'd see another deer up there.

"*Blackie!* Professor, *stop* him! The boss deer wants to—"

A semi-trailer truck appeared atop the rise. December afternoon sun cut weakly through the haze and dully gleamed on the eighteen-wheeler's wind deflector. The truck rolled down the hill with a stepping series of roars as its driver shifted through gears, the distant sounds late arriving to Farnsworth's ears, so that he could not quite judge the speed of the truck's acceleration. The watching doe by the roadside was in a much better position for that.

The dog's distant barking, slowed with weariness, grew louder as the chase circled back to approach the highway from the other side. The fleeing deer had coursed through open fields to a marsh, thence through an empty pasture gone to weeds and scrub bordering the highway. Farnsworth spotted a big rack bounding above the weeds. The dog now chased a buck.

The deer was fresh and the dog exhausted by this time, yet the barking belled clearly, immediately behind the buck. The semi sped down the

road between the picked field and the weedy pasture. An air horn blasted: the driver had seen the doe standing in the open field.

Then a huge buck broke from the other side and flew across the road in a bound, escaping the oncoming 18-wheeler by a split-second.

At its heels a split-second behind, blind to all but the quarry, raced Luke Savitch's deer-chasing black Lab mongrel.

The triplets screamed in unison.

"It's just your average, everyday *Odocoileus virginianus,* Charley. Besides a terrible waste of venison." The young veterinary student waved a scalpel over a hundred pounds of yearling doe, one of three area road kills reported to the State Police last night. "What did you expect me to find?"

Charles D. Farnsworth leaned against the animal morgue's antiseptic wall and scowled at the whitetail. What guts hadn't remained on the highway now spilled over several stainless steel dissecting trays. A flash of impressive collection permits had netted Farnsworth all the macerated venison he needed.

"I am seeking a manifestation of intelligence, my dear Emmet. Man-induced."

"So you said. And I still don't know what that means."

"We humans deliberately select for intelligence in the animals we associate with, true?"

"Maybe. Maybe we just mistake 'tame' for 'smart.' "

"Are dogs smarter than wolves? Lab rats smarter than barn rats?"

The student wiped his scalpel on a piece of deer hair and paced a few thoughtful steps. He was built and colored like the lions with which he would work after graduation. "Depends who's doing the test, who's being tested, and how. Wolf isn't going to dance on its hind legs when Kal-Kan commercials air, but on the other hand, my poodle wouldn't last one night in the backyard, much less in a boreal forest. Rat, now, that's a little different. White rat raised in a cage is dumber'n fuck, excuse my French. You let that same rat out and running free in a busy lab, in a month he'll be making cute for the guy whose lunch pail has the Twinkie." The student chuckled at some memory. Then he cocked an eyebrow at Farnsworth. "Take a barn rat now. Did you know that wild rats will delegate one individual to sample a new food, then watch him for three days for signs of sickness before the rest of the gang takes so much as a lick? You can't believe how hard it is to formulate rat poisons. For *barn* rats. Something like a harmless little wood rat, you'd take out the whole population overnight."

"Aha. So when we seek to destroy a certain species by technologically

outsmarting it, we *de facto* assure that only the smartest survive. *Persecution* by humans is the driving force."

"Bingo, Charley Dickens." The young man laughed again. "So now you know. Most brilliant critter on the face of the Earth is the cockroach."

Farnsworth grinned. "Tell me, Emmet, are these deer truly voiceless?"

Emmet shrugged. "Well, they snort a lot. A hunter told me they sometimes make a bleating sound as their throats are cut."

"So. An animal of silence." Farnsworth selected a pair of surgical gloves from a wall dispenser and snapped them on. "Toss that brain here, lad." He moved to a microscope counter occupied by trays of blood-seeped tissue.

The student placed a whitish mass on a fresh tray and carried it over. "Brain's in good shape, at least," he observed. "Head wasn't damaged on this doe."

Carefully slicing thin sections from the mass, Farnsworth murmured, "Rather amazing how the convolutions of mammalian brains resemble walnut meats. The mind reels with evolutionary implications."

Emmet returned a crooked grin. "Nuts to that. And you won't find brain worm, Charley. Our local deer are pretty clean."

"A ten-year-old whitetail, Emmet. Give me a profile."

"End of prime, still strong but heading for a quick trip downhill. Southern Wisconsin, lots of browse, easy winters—doe would go maybe one-ninety and dropped a dozen, possibly twenty fawns. Any buck that old is smarter'n hell, might go three hundred pounds. Probably still numero uno in the rut, which means he sired those twenty fawns. But he's wearing the biggest rack he'll ever have. Three, four years, it'll be all over. Teeth go to hell."

Farnsworth sliced all the way through the cerebral commissure, parting the brain into its halves, then cut each half crossways. The tray pooled to overflowing with blood-clotted cerebrospinal fluid. "This was the only Dodge County specimen?" He positioned a thin sliver under a microscope. "Quite large vessels," he noted.

"They're going to be bloody, Charley. Their hearts just stop after that kind of impact. If it doesn't explode. I really can't see anything here you won't find in pickled deer brains from a century ago. Why don't you get some live deer and have 'em run mazes or something?" Emmet watched a moment of studious dissection. "Even if you *did* find something, what could you do about it? You can't just pen 'em all up and start 'em on computers."

"Creation of a Dodge County preserve shouldn't be difficult." Farnsworth paused, grinning. "Our redoubtable governor owes me, as you say, big time."

The student nodded respectfully. "Sure was a monster walleye, Charley. He's got re-election in the bag."

"And hopefully I'll be able to present sufficient evidence of a rare mutation to the fish and game people, which by law mandates protected species status. As to the nature of that evidence, let us not forget what the great neurophysiologist Clinton Woolsey discovered upon the dissection of Einstein's brain. An organ of moderate size, perhaps tending even to the small—yet the most highly vascularized of any he'd examined. That mind was *nourished*."

"Neurotransmitter efficiency would be more indicative of higher mental function. I still don't think you'd see much difference in a species' gross brain anatomy, even if they are smarter these days."

"Conjecture of a wise student." Farnsworth stuck the scalpel in the detached cerebellum and spun slowly on the lab stool. "After all, Neanderthal man had a brain significantly larger than Cro-Magnon Man, considered to be modern *Homo sapiens*. Where is our brainy cave cousin today, eh?"

"Who the hell knows? I'd guess in all our genes. Cro-Magnon handsome horny hunk runs cute and bouncy Dolly Parton Neanderthal down the corn row, certain socially responsible precautions are not taken—"

"Indeed. Or could it be that those of the smaller brain persuasion crawled insidiously into Neanderthal cradles in the dark of the night, and chewed off their infants' faces?"

The veterinary student turned back to his road kill. "Slasher movie stuff, Charley. You been hanging out with kids?"

He'd never been a big-game hunter, and in fact Charles D. Farnsworth loathed taking the life of any animal, large or small, for any senseless purpose. Nonetheless, there were times when he'd had to use his Rigby .416 and he'd seen what a properly-placed 400-grain Barnes soft nose could do. He also knew that one equally well-placed 250-grain hollow point out of his Smith & Wesson .45 would drop any Wisconsin whitetail, no matter how bright. Moreover, the Smith & Wesson could be ensconced in his armpit holster, not that he needed subterfuge against local game authorities, what with his battery of firearm and collection permits; but it was something he'd rather not have Sheila, Sheena, and Shirley Zapatocny see.

They tried hard to be strong. Ten was an awkward age where one was simply too grown up to cry, but tears aplenty still waited their chance, sloshing in ducts and filling one's head with snot under the meanest provocation.

"But we're *research* colleagues," they protested. "Why *can't* we go along with you?"

"Because Ma and Dad *say* so, that's why," snapped Earl Zapatocny, looking angrily down at the triplets and Farnsworth crouching beside them on the kitchen linoleum. "You let the Professor do his science stuff without getting underfoot. He don't want no whining little kids tagging along."

"Ladies," Farnsworth soothed, squelching detestation for parents everywhere, "I want to get very close to the big buck. The one you say is boss. Watching from across the field is different. Getting close is going to be dangerous. I'm sure you quite understand."

Triple nods. Betrayed expressions.

Farnsworth sighed. "You remember what happened to Blackie. You remember our mean Bambi."

Oh yeah.

Shirley sniffed, "What are you going to do with the big buck?"

"I just want to talk to him." Farnsworth didn't dare glance up at Earl and Henrietta Zapatocny. "And I still need your help. Where do you think I might find him?"

The triplets hesitated, but this time not from fear of parental admonition. The fear on their flushed, delicate faces was for their research colleague.

"He likes the marsh back by the river. It's quiet there."

"Good lass, Sheila."

"What are you going to say to him?"

Farnsworth felt the weight of the Smith & Wesson on his ribs. "That depends on him, Sheena."

As he made to rise, all three girls grabbed his sleeves. "Professor," they cried, "Take Snowballs!"

"Of course." He carried far better protection, however. He'd outdistance the old cat within yards of the farmstead.

Seated comfortably on a dry grass hummock in the frozen marsh, Farnsworth contemplated what might have happened in Dodge County ten years ago. Some freak burst of cosmic radiation that, for a brief moment, touched and altered certain biochemical events? A miniature black hole speeding through dimensions, torquing specific currents of existence as it shot through this little plot in Wisconsin? An alien practical jokester, toying with the military, playing inertia tag with airliners, touching with wands of suspicious plasma a fetal cat, a splitting human ovum, a fawn developing in its mother's womb?

An alien, or coincidental force, or Muse, in love with the concept of three. Three testicles. Three infants. Three times the neural intricacy within the brain of a wild beast. Farnsworth envisioned a young buck

learning instantly, forgetting nothing, able to conceive of the relationship between past, present, and hence malleability of future events. True sentience in a non-human creature—siring a county-wide herd of descendants.

How had sentiency arisen so quickly, so uniquely, in Man?

"Muuuurrrruuuhh."

Farnsworth broke from his musing and searched irregular snowdrifts curling around sedge humps. Yellow-green eyes and a pink nose hovered above his boot tracks. The cat cast almost no shadow under the lowering, steel-gray sky.

"Here, puss." He patted his knee. Snowballs approached with neither haste nor hesitation and jumped onto his lap. They were two miles from the farmstead, and Farnsworth had pushed himself hard to discourage followers, two or four-footed.

The cat stretched out and purred silently, the rhythmic vibration felt through his gloves as Farnsworth stroked coarse white fur. He assumed he'd be carrying the old animal home, for what a disaster it would be for the triplets, should the cat falter or lose its way. Why had the children's pet followed *him?* Farnsworth carefully searched the area until convinced he was indeed the only "research colleague" in the vicinity. He also studied the sky: snow had been predicted, but it appeared he'd have less than the afternoon he'd planned to wait for the girls' "boss buck" to make contact.

And make contact it would. Highway accidents were one thing. Now the buck knew it'd been caught in the cradle, chewing the baby's face with motivation and purpose.

Though barely past noon, the short December day grew colorless and dark. Searching the sky for that telltale evenness of an approaching snow squall, Farnsworth lifted his head and took long, testing breaths of the air. The smell of snow hung on the wind. The clean scent seemed to open his nose to other smells he'd been unaware of: junipers upwind on a limestone outcropping, frozen traces of marsh loam, and birds, pheasants and ducks, that had shed a feather here and there. He could smell subtle differences between the frozen water and the old snow on top, and the newer snow on top of that. And growing thick and heady in his nostrils, the ammonia-musk of tomcat, and the disturbing, musty odor of man. Wet wool; leather cleaned with saddle soap; perfume of cologne, detergent, shampoo; trace of Christmas cookies, cow manure, milk; the lingering scent of young girls on his sleeves. Gun metal.

Snowballs' muted purr grew to an asthmatic groaning. Dry marsh grasses rustled as though ripping in the hurricane, yet the breeze had not picked up an iota, instead quieting as a wall of muffling snowfall *shish-shished* across the fields and slowly poured over the hills yet a

quarter mile off. A sharp *snap-crack* marked a meadow vole snatching at a seed, thirty yards behind. The *kreeee* of a vole-seeking kestrel whistled above, *far* above, and sitting shock-still with his hair rising and his hand poised motionless in mid-stroke of the cat, Farnsworth realized he wasn't hearing the call of the hawk but rather air flowing over the rim of its wings.

In an abrupt moment the marsh around him appeared in so-sharp so-clear images, each dry-brown blade of grass edged in perfect clarity, the slightest trembling of papery leaves on distant oaks calling his eye, and he dizzily realized he could see all around himself at once, the hillsides to left and right, the oncoming snow, the kestrel above and behind, gliding away to shelter as the first big snowflakes drifted down. He could see them as though he were in a crystal sphere filled with liquid, in which white particles swirled over a little marsh scene and he in the center of all, following a flake as it descended down, down, gently in the nearly calm air, until the flake landed.

—On a broad-shouldered, dark-haired man dressed in a heavy khaki field jacket and gray wool trousers, sitting on a distant sedge hump, holding a white cat in his lap and wearing an ashen expression of concentration and dismay.

And then he was back within himself. Looking at a deer behind a red-twigged screen of dogwood brush.

Snowballs' languor steeled; the cat bounded away unnoticed.

With grace and slow dignity, a magnificent whitetail buck stepped out of the brush and approached to within twenty paces, there halting, motionless and silent in the lightly falling snow.

Farnsworth marked the wide brisket bespeaking an animal of at least three hundred and fifty pounds, the neck engorged, powerfully swollen for rutting battles, the rack easily falling into the highest ranks of Boone-and-Crockett club records, the two main beams furrowed and buttoned, sprouting more points than could be immediately counted, the white-polished, sharp and deadly tines rising like Menorah candles. The deer's beautiful face seemed to scowl, the black forehead ruff thick and extending down between white eye patches. The dark nose was also ringed in white, with black stripes like shadow fangs curving from the mouth and down the chin. The agouti-brown muzzle was noticeably grizzled—the mark of an animal ten years old.

The buck's thoughts came as true imagery, the clearest concept of Idea, formulated as virtual projections involving all the senses equally, pictures and scents and sounds and feeling, creating a dialogue clipped from experiences and dreams, painting theory and plan and motivation and desire with abstracted sentences of symbolism and allegory. It was communication in its purest form, art, across a heretofore unbridgeable

gulf between Man and all other creatures. Farnsworth's own mind provided the translation to subvocalized speech.

We have come to battle, you and I, and my antlers shall pierce your heart, even should your gun lay me down in blood.

The message came in a complex series of disjointed physical and emotional impressions, with certain visual images quite literally interpretable. The buck saw Farnsworth as a mix of human and deer, an opponent challenging. It did not know how guns killed, only that they did. A wave of remembered pain accompanied the deer's concept of "gun."

"I did not come to harm you. I came to understand you," Farnsworth said, the sound of his voice splintering fear and hatred through the deer's mind, the concepts in his words at once comprehended.

You lay us down in blood. Your monsters on the road break us. Your dogs chase us to ground. During the season of carnage you come with guns and take us from the fields dead. For all those taken, that many lie upon the land. This killing is not the hawk taking the mouse. It is not the deer taking the grass of spring.

Farnsworth worked through several startling impressions. The deer seemed to accept natural predator and prey relationships. It even considered itself a predator, its prey the living plants it ate. It did not distinguish between plants and animals, recognizing a universality to life. And because of that, it understood death. Farnsworth received images of deer left dead in the woods, antlerless deer, spike bucks, fawns—targets either embarrassing, illegal, or slain wantonly.

It is time for your kind to be aggrieved and broken in the ditches. I teach my spawn and their spawn and theirs in turn. Those who have within them Thought will learn and remember. You and your four have espied our hunt of vengeance. We will not be careless again.

How soon before they ran cows and other farm animals out in front of traffic? Judge exactly when and where vehicles would pass in opposite directions by mathematically extrapolating relative speeds and trajectories, managing to get two at once? When would the death of cars no longer be sufficient retribution?

"You must stop this activity. You can't get away with it. I will help preserve and protect you and all of your special kind. There is no need for killing today." Farnsworth caught visions of sharp-antlered bucks surrounding the triplets and skewering them; moreover hiding the bodies so that deer could not be blamed. He re-ran "you and your four" and realized that the deer considered Snowballs an equal conspirator—although the buck had no murderous plans for the tomcat. Farnsworth understood why: the cat could not communicate. The deer realized the value, the absolute necessity of *communication* to understanding, coordination, success. Or failure.

His mind raced. He could not allow this remarkable evolution to remain unknown and unprotected. Nor could he turn his back on the clear threat to the girls.

The buck was ruminating over his suggestion. *Where would we go? Where could we hide? If I offered you my life, would you spare me?*

And Farnsworth could in truth think of no artificial place where deer might live free from the sights of a gun. As quickly as he dashed thoughts of cages, zoo bars, fenced parks, up would come images of trophy hunters stealing in the dead of night, dodging apathetic watchmen, collecting the head of a lifetime.

As I saw. You cannot stop from slaying me. To have you tell your world about us is to destroy our world. You must die. And then the others you now protect. The buck steeled itself. Swift images of the charge, the impact of antlers, of a khaki-clad body under sharp hooves whirled through its mind.

And Farnsworth's. His hand darted into his coat and came out with the Smith & Wesson, looking through falling snow at the kill point under the buck's black-striped chin.

Terror. Infusing Farnsworth's mind, staggering him with the memory of a little gun in a man's hand and as his human mind expressed disbelief that men would hunt big game with handguns he simultaneously felt the impact of a hollow-point load crash through his midsection, mushroom through lung, diaphragm, liver, gut, blowing a hole out the other side; felt himself running in agony and breath not coming and laying down in blood

—and realizing on yet a different level that the buck had experienced dying through another deer and that was one of many lessons to control Thought, how to receive from another and send to another as the buck so *willed* it

—and even deeper: if the buck controlled the direction and recipients of its thoughts, why had it been *unaware* of the triplets' eavesdropping

—but his mind fought to regrasp its own identity as his eyes saw the gun from the deer's perspective and it was pointing at him with the memory of noise that brought death

—and closing against the animal's rioting brain, snapping back to control his own

—and seeing the Smith & Wesson drop into the snow where he'd thrown it in horrified loathing.

The buck's head lowered; its hindquarters dug in. Farnsworth reacted just in time to keep fifteen-inch tines from driving through his groin. He grabbed the brow tines on each beam as the massive rack ripped his coat open and jammed around his waist, its width fitting him easily.

The animal misjudged his weight. Not able to toss him off his feet, it

tried pushing him onto his back, sending along a hot image of impaling him as he flailed on the ground. Farnsworth gripped the antler tines like grim death. The buck spun and kicked and tossed its head furiously.

A sharp forehoof cracked down on a kneecap. Grunting with pain, Farnsworth tripped and fell, losing a grip on one antler. The buck gave a powerful snap of its head and the sudden twist broke his other grasp. The deer danced away as Farnsworth struggled desperately to get up. He looked right and left, trying to reorient. Snow fell thick, gently, obscuring. *Where was the bloody gun?*

The buck whirled in a second charge and Farnsworth couldn't match the speed of the wild animal. He took one beam's tines in the back, spinning away from the impact, still like the blow of a sledgehammer. He rolled to his feet in time to meet another pirouette. Off-balance, missing his hold. The left antler caught him in the side, three longest tines perforating the tight weave of the jacket. Fire gouged through his ribs.

The buck's shoulder hardly rose to Farnsworth's waist. He was in excellent shape, strong enough to bench-press his own weight, still capable of running the mile in six-something. Excellent shape. For a man. And never more acutely had he sensed the physical distinctions between man and a beast of the field, the animal's strength, agility and speed a harsh badge of survival, won daily in the wilderness. The buck poised at the apex of its prime, in the flush of its season for battle.

Farnsworth pressed a hand against his side. *Think, man! They've got brawn, but we've got the brains—*

And then he grinned tightly. He had memories, too. Lots of them.

Maddened elk charging. Raising the Rigby .416, deafening explosion, slap of a 400-grain slug striking fur and flesh with a ton of force, snapping bone, crumpling legs, a last bellow of pain drowned by upwelling blood.

The buck, already head-down and digging in, stopped as though roped from behind. Its front legs jammed against frozen hummocks of marsh grass. Its head raised in confusion.

Cape buffalo bellowing, massive black animal thundering across the veldt, horns ready, unstoppable. Spitting muzzle-flash turns evening gloom to day, the shot's thunder rings though still air. Buffalo hit by a tremendous impact, foreleg exploded, goes down. Gets up. Another flash, another hideous bang. The bull roars in final agony, the bullet reaming it throat to asshole.

Farnsworth's two hands holding the Smith & Wesson, aiming, pulling the trigger, ear-ripping explosion, imagining the bullet of death sailing from the gun barrel into the deer's face between its eyes, seeing it eat through bone, mushroom in brain ventricles, severing the base of the skull from the spine, pushing the back of the animal's head off and spraying red brains over white snow.

The buck hesitated another moment. But it was experienced in telepathic imagery, and shook its head in a very human gesture to rid its mind of unwanted visions. The deer stamped with fury. Snowflakes melted on red tines among the polished white. Farnsworth wasn't sure whether the animal sent the image, or if his own mind conjured the sight and sickening feel of an antler severing the aorta from his heart. Even as he threw himself to one side he knew he wasn't fast enough to avoid a tine through the belly—except the buck's rush suddenly changed from forward to straight up. Farnsworth plunged into a drift in a geyser of snow. Black hooves sailed over his shoulder.

At the bottom of the drift lay his Smith & Wesson. His fingers immediately curled on the stock and brought the gun to bear on his gyrating, bucking adversary.

For a full ten seconds Farnsworth stared uncomprehending at a white panther riding the panic-stricken deer. Claws like steel grappling hooks imbedded in venison shoulder steak; six-inch fangs stabbed again and again in the rut-swollen neck.

Another vision. Someone else's.

"Snowballs! Get off! I got him!" On one knee, with two hands Farnsworth trained the .45 semi-automatic on the whitetail's heart.

The cat bounded off, vanishing into the heavy fall of snow.

The great buck's flailings jerked to a stop. Its hard panting groaned in the sudden stillness, the only sound it had yet made. The animal looked about, confused. Then found Farnsworth and saw the death in his hands and his eyes.

And Charles D. Farnsworth hesitated. *He's a conscious, thinking creature, for the love of God. It would be murder.*

Snowballs interrupted paw-washing and stared toward the barn long enough to impel Farnsworth and the triplets to do likewise.

"Luke Savitch's ol' cats," Sheena pointed.

Six gray, yellow, or tri-color tabbies crouched at a pan by the milkhouse door. Snowballs began his neither-hurried-nor-hesitant stroll in their direction, tail aloft and proudly displaying his lordly endowment. The tabbies lifted milk-coated muzzles and watched him approach through the fluffy snow. Farnsworth tried to tell if their expressions were admiring, anticipatory, or what. Did their eyes open a little wider?

"Luke Savitch's tomcat come over here when they came, too." Sheila giggled. "He didn't stay long."

Snowballs might be ten years old, but Charles Farnsworth suspected the cat would barely be slowing down by the time Sheila, Sheena, and Shirley Zapatocny received advanced degrees in the new sciences of zoological ethics and communications. They certainly had a good start on such a unique

career, now that the entire county, and their farm particularly, formed the hurriedly created (and Fourth Cavalry patrolled) World Preserve for *Odocoileus virginianus sapiens,* the sentient whitetail.

He decided he'd rather not witness any further cat transactions. He held out a hand to Earl Zapatocny. "Farewell, sir, and thank you for all your help. You've been most gracious."

Zapatocny still looked at Farnsworth as though at an alien from Mars. "Take care 'a yourself, Professor." The farmer shook his head wonderingly. "Won't *never* forget you coming up here hanging on the back of that animal—and then it *talked* to me—"

"*Told* ya, Dad—"

Farnsworth smiled. "Fortunately, the fish-and-game people—and our governor—were equally impressed. As will the legislature be."

"Got a row to hoe, there, deciding whether or no that killing a smart-deer is murder." Zapatocny scratched under his Renk's Seeds cap. "Ol' Luke would've been fit to be tied."

"They will. They have to." Farnsworth wasn't worried. National Guard notwithstanding, the whitetails were secure behind the best wardens of all: Wisconsin farmers receiving a per-deer stipend, and their yard dogs, whose passion for trespasser-harassing far exceeded any love of deer-chasing. Wincing at a stitch pulling between his ribs, he eased himself behind the wheel of the Suburban and shoved keys in the ignition. The passenger seat held a grocery bag full of fresh-baked Rudolph-the-red-nosed-reindeer biscuits. ("They're *cookies!*" the triplets reminded him.)

"I never once thought Snowballs dreamed of anything but barn rats and girl kitties," Shirley said, shuffling in the show. "He *really* thinks he's a mountain lion that kills deers and elks and stuff?"

Even Snowballs knows about the deer. So the girls claimed, because the cat had borne witness while accompanying their spying sojourns—as just a cat, they'd thought. Little did the triplets know that they'd no more read the deer's carefully warded minds than had motorcycle riders, car drivers, or any other Dodge County human. A loving thief, whose kin and ancestors had been outsmarting hoofed beasts since time immemorial, had stolen the deer's thoughts, focusing them for the girls, to warn of the danger. He was, after all, their guardian. Fortunately, that impenetrable feline brain—as endowed as the other end of the cat—evidently decided that the triplets' new friend was also worthy of a little protection. Farnsworth chuckled, winced at the stitch again, and said, "He certainly had Boss Buck believing in sabertooth tigers."

"Lucky for you."

"Lucky for me." He winked fondly at the three pairs of clear gray eyes.

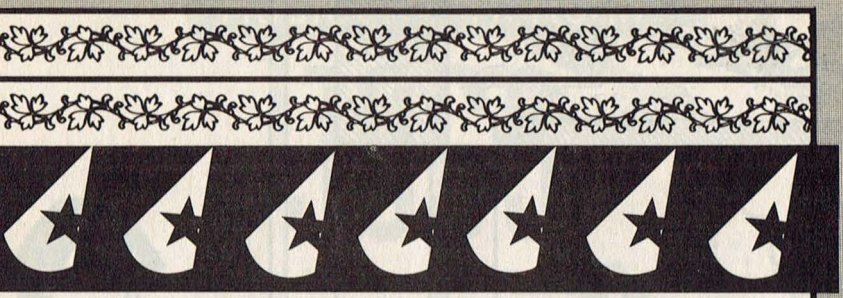
The triplets jammed into the car's open door to imprison Farnsworth in a six-handed hug. His long arms embraced them all. ●

THE PUNISHMENT OF NINIANE

"It is Morgan le Fay," the old wizard thinks,
"fogging my mind with forgetfulness
so I can't predict tomorrow's weather,
let alone what's coming for Camelot.

"Or her sister Morgawse, sapping my strength,
making me ache in bones that have never been broken
just because I used a little magic
to let Uther pump Arthur into their mother.
It wasn't me put Arthur on top of her making Mordred,
and even if *he* didn't know
they were brother and sister,
she did."

And all the time it is Niniane,
picking his brain for incantations
and trying them out on him,
because her sophomore's brain can't imagine
with less than revulsion
those liver spotted hands, skinny as chicken legs,
touching her G-spot like a rock & roll drummer,
and the thought
of him humped over her, or behind,
huffing in her ear some spell
that will make her enjoy it,
makes her skin crawl.

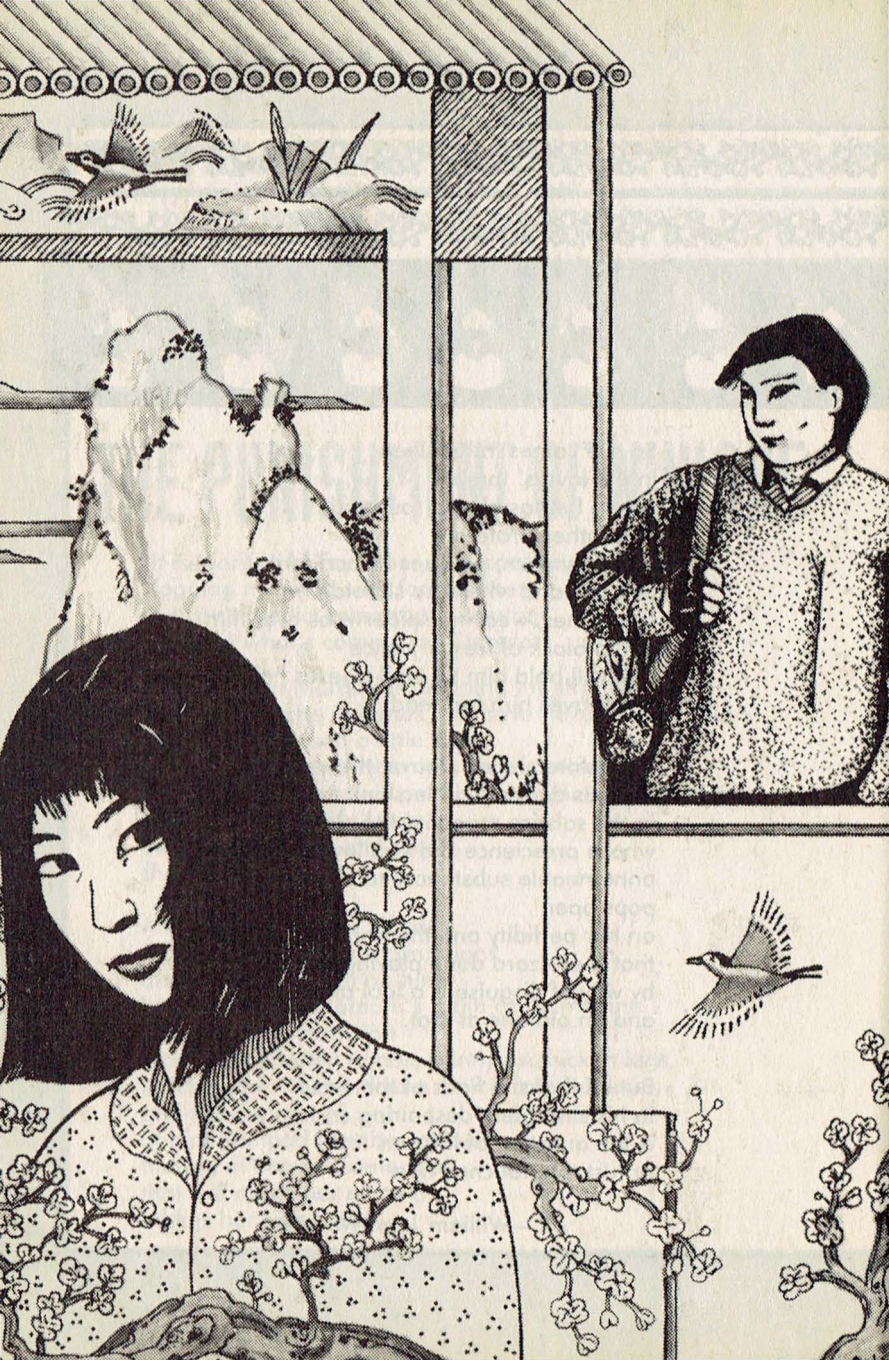


So she comes in his sleep
in the lovers' tomb
where he has played tourguide
and father/professor
and only once, perhaps by accident,
put his hand where he shouldn't,
she comes, weaving spiderwebs over him
and a block of ice for justice
that will hold him till God freezes hell
and leaves him for dead.

But before she can leave, the eye
she has danced widdershins naked
in the solstice moonlight to close,
whose prescience she swallowed
unnameable substances to obscure,
pops open
on her perfidity and the irony
that the wizard done playing the fool
by way of disguise is a fool after all,
and an old one at that.

But all that she finds of the curse
in his strangled, despairing cry,
is the question of if it was love,
or lust that touched her.

—William John Watkins

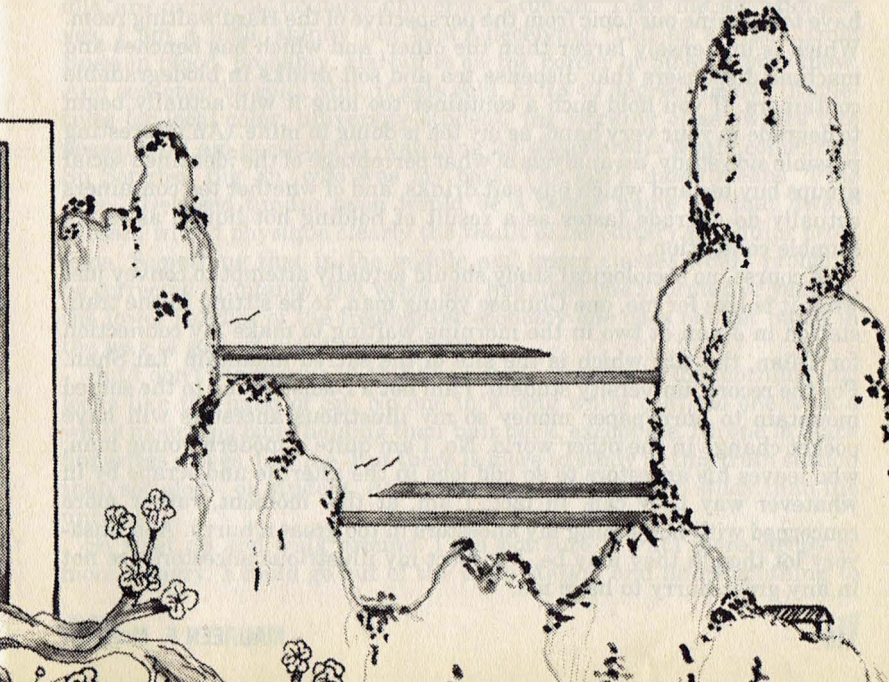


Maureen F. McHugh

JOSS

After an eventful year, Maureen F. McHugh and her family have begun to settle into their new home in a suburb of Cleveland, Ohio. Her new novel, *Half the Day Is Night,* was published in the fall by Tor Books, and she recently started Kung Fu classes. We hope Ms. McHugh will find some time in her busy schedule to accommodate us with as many new short stories as possible.

Illustration by Alfred Ramage



For the university student involved in the serious study of social stratification here in the Middle Kingdom, there is no finer opportunity than the train station. For example, as you know, there are four divisions—we are not to say classes even when talking about trains and ships because in the People's Republic of China we are dedicated to the eradication of classes, although we acknowledge that a less than perfect society will have them—and these divisions are from the most comfortable to least: 1) Soft Sleeper, 2) Soft Seat, 3) Hard Sleeper, 4) Hard Seat. Soft sleeper is four people to a compartment, upper and lower bunks. Soft Seat is comfortable seats, padded, no crowding. Hard Sleeper is racks, three bunks to a rack, eighteen racks back to back. And Hard Seat is benches, three people to a bench on one side, four on the other, plus standees. There are people who would disagree with my analysis, who would say that for a long journey Hard Sleeper is more comfortable than Soft Seat, if much less private. (There, oh fictional university student, is your thesis: An analysis of the importance of privilege over certain creature comforts.)

In any event there are two waiting rooms in the train station, the Hard Seat/Sleeper waiting room and the Soft Seat/Sleeper waiting room. The Soft waiting room is smaller and has couches and drinks are served from a counter in real glasses and cups. However, I have never actually sat in a Soft waiting room, so, oh fictional university student, we shall have to examine our topic from the perspective of the Hard waiting room. Which is immensely larger than the other, and which has benches and machine dispensers that dispense tea and soft drinks in biodegradable containers. If you hold such a container too long it will actually begin to degrade in your very hand, as my tea is doing in mine. (An interesting possible side study, an analysis of what percentage of the identified social groups buy tea and which buy soft drinks, and of whether tea containers actually do degrade faster as a result of holding hot liquid, as is my humble contention.)

Of course, no sociological study should actually attempt to convey just what it is like for me, one Chinese young man, to be sitting in the train station in Jinan at two in the morning waiting to make my connection for Taian, the city which is the site of the sacred mountain Tai Shan. For the record, university student, I am not a Daoist, going to the sacred mountain to burn paper money so my illustrious ancestors will have pocket change in the other world. No, I am quite a modern young man, who leaves his ancestors to do odd jobs in the afterlife and scrape by in whatever way they can. In fact, I am, at this moment, rather more concerned with not joining my ancestors in too great a hurry. And unsavory lot though they may be, I suspect my illustrious ancestors are not in any great hurry to have me.

I sit on the bench, my knees jiggling, bouncing up and down, riding a horse. Oh how I would like to be horseback riding right now, in some lovely girl's clean, SAFE room. Then I could stay the whole night, sleeping under a fresh quilt with my arms around her, and she would feed me breakfast. My stomach rumbles and I drink the rest of the tea, before the bulb disintegrates sufficiently that I have it all over my hands and lap. There, stomach, you have something in you, now hush.

Back to our sociological study of the waiting room filled with working men and women, the proletariat, and their offspring. The men are mostly asleep, heads tilted back, mouths open, some selfishly stretched across benches, bachelors propped against the wall. Often a sleeper gives off the strong odor of sorghum liquor. Anything to sleep. Sales people dressed in black and gray suits have their black lacquer sample cases to lean against. Children run and run and run. Two in the morning and they run; giggling, shrieking past sleepers. Their mothers open carry bags with animated images of fog moving through pine forests on the side and dole out cookies and the kids, hyper on sugar, chase through the station. Sociological student, note: the men sleep; the children throw away energy with the abandon of those who know that when they crash they'll be taken care of; the women endure and watch the bags and insure that everybody gets on the train.

Me, I watch for Harbin faces, familiar faces from home. We Harbin folk are hardy, oh fictional university student. Take me for example, yes, I am a little skinny but that's deceiving. Tall as a crane, from Russian blood, probably. Harbin is on the border of Siberia, you know. And seasoned by cold. Shit, it gets cold, 35 to 40 degrees below. (Expletives for local color, university student, the working class swears like peasants.) I am particularly watching for anyone who would come from Su Songlin. Big Su, who was my boss. The guy's name means "Pine Tree." Debased tundra bush would be a better name for that dwarf. Blessed with a physique clearly the result of hereditary glandular problems. Something that in the middle and upper classes would probably be corrected in infancy, but when one has lived one's formative years in the lower reaches of the freemarket economy one does not get much in the way of sophisticated medical care.

But I don't see anyone in this train station at two in the morning who looks like the hand of Su. No one in a long white coat, no one with a white mourning band holding their hair back, except me. No one in black fingerless gloves, like me. But there is more to study in this train station than sociology, oh student. And there are more places to study than the university.

So I get up and walk around. I am not sure if I am more sleepy or more hungry. I could go out of the train station and find something to

eat, my mag-lev is not due for another hour and a half, but I am too nervous. I haven't eaten or slept for over twenty-four hours and I took my last tall stimulant just before we got to Jinan; when it wears off I'm going to crash. The train from Jinan to Taian is overbooked and I have a standing ticket. It is an evil morning. I think I should have flown, but I thought Big Su might have someone at the airport and besides, you have to use a credit slip to buy a ticket. I don't think he knows anyone who works for the airlines but I don't know. I paid cash for the train ticket.

I just picked Taian off the trainboard, I was looking for a place I had never been to and never thought about going to, I figured that would be pretty safe. I could just stay in Jinan, I never thought about living there. Why would anyone think about living in Jinan? Got six weeks to live? Go to Jinan, it'll seem like six months. Shandong Province is such a hick province, at least Taian will have tourists and a stranger won't be obvious. Anyway, I'm at the point where I can't think so I should just stick with my original plan.

We finally get to stand out on the platform and freeze in the cold Shandong wind for fifteen minutes, then the meg-lev comes in with that real low whine they make and everybody goes nuts. There's a canopy over the tracks and on the ceiling of the canopy, huge faces of porters smilingly tell us, "Comrades, do not push." The train hasn't even settled on to the track and I watch three kids—two of them boost the third through a window and then pass luggage up so he can keep a seat for them. Middle-aged ladies are the worst, they shop all day and they know how to use an elbow in a crowd. I know I'm not going to get a seat so I just wait further back in line until we get shoved to the train, I feed my ticket in the mech and the light flashes and the people behind me shove me on.

The train car used to be nice. Now it's filthy and old, and all of the places where it was pale gray are dark with grime. The sound is down until we leave, but images dance on the flats above the windows except where they hit burnt out areas and disappear. I hope to get a place between cars but they're already full, so I move to the middle of the car, grab a seat back and spread my feet. Somebody tries to move me they're in for a surprise.

But people look at the way I'm dressed and figure I'm not worth messing with. Never know when a ruffian might carry a knife or be surgically wired for killer Gong-fu. (I am unarmed, but they don't need to know that. Actually, I'm an accountant when you get right down to it, I just work in the freest of free markets, but they don't need to know that, either.)

The train slides smoothly out of Jinan, out from under the bright

orange canopies that cover the platforms—in Harbin the trains embark from inside the building—and glides soundlessly past streets and dark complexes where sensible people sleep. I'm still too stretched to sleep, nothing to do but stand and wait the two hours it takes us to get to Taian. The sound comes on, the images flicker around the walls, cross-talk-comedy vids starring Huang Guangxu, who I usually think is really funny.

Sitting in the seat I'm hanging on to is a girl reading a novel. I try to read over her shoulder but I'm so tired that the characters jump around until "knife" radicals look like "people" radicals. She closes it with a sigh, then glances up at me. Our eyes meet and I smile nervously, no offense please, I was not really looking at you. She smiles reflexively and we both look away. She is so-so looking. Not pretty, but she does nice things with her hair and clothes. A little conservative in her embroidered jacket and cloisonné earrings, but the kind of girl that maybe if I work on her she'll feel sorry for me and let me sleep an hour in her seat.

"Where are you going?" I ask.

"Taian," she says.

"To climb the mountain?" I ask.

"Sure," she says, and adds quickly, "My mother's-elder-sister aunt and her husband live there." She's a Southerner, has a Hunan way of talking. 'Course, everybody seems like a southerner when you live on the Russian border. But she's a small town girl, knows all the terms for family relationships, "my father's-younger-brother uncle"and "my-grandmother's-age aunty." I can't keep all that shit straight.

I hope she'll talk a little more but she closes her eyes and pretends to sleep. And she does that almost all the way to Lingyuansi, half-way to Taian, except for once when she gets up to go to the bathroom.

"Hey, little sister," I say, "I'll keep your seat for you until you get back?"

"Thank you," she says, prettily.

I slide down on the bench and my thigh muscles quiver and ping with release and slam—I'm out. I don't even remember anything, just sitting down. I'd probably have slept all the way to Shanghai except she's back, shaking me crossly, "Wake up! Come on, wake up! Hey, wake up! I'm back."

I climb sleepily to my feet, and she sits down fast. Then she must feel a little guilty. "Thanks for saving my seat," she says.

I feel uncomfortable, my stomach full of bile and my head thick, so I just shrug. But now my body knows I've been holding out on it. It's clamoring and I'm thinking, "Just shut up, body, I'm doing the best I can."

Lingyuansi station at four in the morning. I reach in my pocket and

pull out a wadded up yuan note. "Hey, little sister," I say, "can you reach out the window and buy me a cup of tea?"

She asks the two guys sitting next to her, and the one on the inside opens the window and calls to one of the platform hawkers. They pass me my tea and I sip it. I'm not even hungry anymore, just tired. I try to watch the vid, but I haven't been paying attention to it. I saw it when it came out anyway, *Courageous*. Huang Guangxu plays a cop who works in Harbin, my home town, who ends up having to solve a crime in Shanghai, among all the fashion experts and vid stars. It was a lot funnier when I was awake.

At the end of the train car is the porter and a red-faced man. The porter is looking around the train car and the man is gesturing. I look down, no sense in attracting any attention. People think that if you're young and male you're guilty of everything.

Little sister looks up at me, smiling, "Hey," she says, "You look awfully tired, you want to sit down? I'll wake you when we get to Taian."

"Yeah, sure," I say, surprised. "I'm dog tired." A seat. I'm so grateful I figure I owe the Jade Emperor (the old god of the mountain) a couple of yuan if I ever get to Taian. Joss. Little Sister gets up and brushes past me, I collapse into the seat, drain my tea, and drift away, half hearing the noise from the vid and the people all around us, then I'm in a city somewhere, I think it's Taian and I haven't any idea where I am, but I'm lost and the city is real old-fashioned, tile roofs and gardens and narrow streets and I see a person—

"Hey! Wake up!"

I jerk awake, not sure where I am. Shit. I can't get myself together.

Someone is saying, "Leave him alone, he's trying to sleep!"

"Hey! Wake up you dog!"

I shake my head, seeing Little Sister and the porter and the red-faced man who is hauling me out of my seat. Dragging me up by my coat, which is not good for the coat, so I shout, "Hey!" and shove the man. Did Little Sister steal the seat? No, some sort of mix-up, got to be.

"Let go of me, old man!" I say, trying to get my feet under me and get my head clear at the same time.

"Search him!" the red-faced man is bellowing. The porter reaches in my pocket and pulls out a wad of money.

Money? I've got money in my boot, I wouldn't carry anything more than change in my pocket. "Where did that come from?" I say stupidly.

"See!" the red-faced man yells.

"Shut up!" someone calls, "People are trying to sleep."

"You thief!" the man shouts at me, spittle landing on my face. "You dogshit! Get on this train and rob working people!"

"Hey listen!" I shout, "I was just sleeping here!"

"Count it! I'll bet it's eight hundred and twenty yuan!" the man shouts at the porter. She doesn't get excited, but opens the bundle and starts counting the money, thumbing it carefully.

"I don't care," I say, "I didn't steal anything from you, you old fart! And you can't just come in here and start screaming at me and calling me a thief!"

The porter folds up the money without saying how much it is. "Let me see your ticket."

I hand her my ticket. Bought with cash, which makes me look like I don't want to be traced, which I don't but not because of a measly 820 yuan. "You aren't assigned a seat," she says suspiciously.

"I let him sit in mine," Little Sister says, unexpectedly chirping at my elbow. "He's my cousin, he got on in Jinan. We're going to Taian to see our mother's-elder-sister aunt and her husband." At least I think the "aunt" she said was "mother's-elder-sister."

"What's your name?" the porter asks me.

"Li Qinghai," I say, "from Harbin."

"Let me see your ticket," she says to Little Sister, studies it, reading off the name, "Han Lizi."

"Everybody calls me Little Han. Qinghai's my mother's-younger-brother's son, and he works at the Heilongjiang Turbine Factory Number 2, and he worked a twelve hour shift and then caught the train to Jinan without getting any sleep, so when he got on, after an hour we traded so he could get some sleep. He's been right here since, Jinan, hasn't he, comrades," she addresses this to the two who are sitting by the window.

"That's right," says the one on the inside, "he bought tea at Lingyuansi. You could see the poor boy was beat."

"Shut up and go away!" says a woman three rows back.

"Leave him alone!"

"He cashed his chit right before he bought his train ticket," Little Sister says. "Are you going to take his vacation money?"

"How much is it?" the red faced man shouts.

"Seven hundred and ten yuan," the porter says. "Sorry to bother you, comrade."

"No problem," I mutter and sink back down into my seat. If the police had hauled me off and searched me, how was I going to explain one hundred and forty ten thousand yuan notes in my boots? I could tell them that I didn't get it off any law-abiding citizen, that I skimmed it off Big Su's operation, but I suspect that that wouldn't generate any sympathy. Just as it wouldn't do any good to tell Big Su that he'd never miss it (if in fact, he had missed it, something of which I was not certain). Shaking in my seat. If Little Sister hadn't made up all that business

about me being her cousin and working in the turbine factory they'd probably have hauled me in just because of the way I'm dressed.

"Thanks," I say to Little Sister. "You really saved my neck."

She shrugs. "I knew you weren't guilty, you've been here all the time."

I smile and close my eyes. As I start to drift back to sleep, my overstimulated brain begins to finally turn things over. How did she know that the robbery happened between Jinan and here? It could have happened between Jinan and Beijing and the guy didn't notice until now. Or for all she knew, unless she saw the guy before, I could have robbed him in the Jinan train station.

She just assumed, I think. She hasn't been around many robberies, maybe they said something while I was trying to go to sleep. I put my hand in my pocket and feel the wad of money. Seven hundred yuan. Did I put seven hundred yuan in my pocket? I didn't think I had that much money out, but I'm so tired I can't remember how much I did put in my pocket.

"Give me my money back."

I open my eyes. Little Sister is leaning down next to me, smiling prettily. The innocent face, the one you never notice in a crowd, with her hair in little buns behind her ears in a style called butterfly wings.

"Your money?" I say, still too tired to figure things out.

"Yes, my money," she whispers, glancing over at the two guys between me and the window.

Why should I have her money? Then, stupid idiot that I am, it occurs to me. The seven hundred, she put it in my pocket? To dump it, and kept some for herself so the amount wouldn't be the same as the amount that the man lost. A pickpocket.

"Cousin," I say, "you wouldn't take my vacation money."

"I was afraid, when I saw the man so angry, that they would think it was me or something." She is hissing in my ear. "I put my money in your pocket. It is all my money. Give it back."

"When did you lift it, when you were heading back for the WC?"

She bites her lip.

"Hey, Little Sister," I say, "I'm the one who just got shaken down. You could have gotten me in real trouble."

"It's my money," she says. But she doesn't want to call attention to herself so she straightens up. I figure in Taian I'll split it with her, but for now I close my eyes, my hand in my coat pocket firmly clenching the wad of bills.

"Cousin," she shakes me, "Cousin, we're here."

Irritated, I open my eyes, thinking, I don't want to argue with her. I haven't been asleep, I'm sure, but we're pulling into Taian station. My hand is still clenched around the wad of bills. I manage to get up and

stagger down the aisle. Little Sister has to remind me to get my little bag off the overhead rack.

We both show our tickets to get out of the train station and then stop where the car service waits. "Do you really have family here?" I ask.

She shakes her head. "And I don't have any money."

"Why don't we split it," I say. "You worked for it, and I got shaken down. That's fair."

"Shhh. Come over here," she says, and we go sit on a bench. Taian by the train station looks just like every other boring city—I'd always heard it was ancient looking. The sacred mountain, Tai Shan, is the oldest place of continuous worship in the world, people have been climbing it for something like eight thousand years.

"Here," I say, and pull the money out of my pocket. I start to count it.

"Qinghai," she says.

I look up. Everybody calls me Tall Li, even so it sounds weird to have someone I know being so personal. She leans forward, putting her hand to my neck, and I think she's going to kiss me. Instead I feel something cold in her hand and my whole body goes numb. An acquaintance plate (because the words for "acquaintance" and "sleep" have the same first character). My eyes close. It must not be very powerful, or at least not set very high because I'm still breathing. I can't believe I'm so stupid; I'm too tired, that's got to be it.

Just don't search my boots, bitch.

I admit, I haven't done a hell of a lot of traveling, but if this is what it's like then I can't see why anyone would. A police officer wakes me up on the bench. The stun has worn off, the charge she gave me was light enough that it probably wouldn't have made me unconscious, but I was so tired coming off the tall stim that once I was still I just went to sleep, and once the charge wore off, twenty minutes later, I just slept on.

I'm so cold. Between that and the after effects, I can barely move. Everything hurts. I grit my teeth and assure the officer that I fell asleep waiting for my deadbeat cousin who was supposed to pick me up when I got off the train. "I'll go in, get a cup of tea and give the dog a call," I say.

The cop doesn't believe me, particularly watching me try to walk away, but she doesn't stop me. Every time I put my foot down, my rattled nerves send jarring little slivers of pain up my calves and hips and my head is splitting. I find a little tea shop down the street that's open at seven in the morning and sit down with all the care of a ninety-year-old man. Then, oh so slowly and gingerly I check my boots, reaching inside first the right then the left, feeling for the pouch. It opens for my fingers and I look down under the table—my frigging eyes hurt—there's money

in it. If Little Sister searched my boots, the amount scared her. Well, it should, I'm looking for Little Sister. Han Lizi. Plum Han. She is a plum all right.

I drink my tea and hog the console for twenty minutes, trying to find a cheap guesthouse. Nobody will let me check in until one o'clock, but I finally book a room at the Azure Clouds Guesthouse. The teahouse has background noises of birds, I guess to be historic, although there isn't a single old man with a bird cage in sight. All the twittering noise is driving me up a wall. The establishment seems torn between wanting me to spend my money and feeling that I look too disreputable to be allowed to stay. I don't have any place to go. So I buy pretty heavily, even though I don't eat much, and buy my waiter a cup of tea and they leave me alone.

Finally I get to go to the Azure Clouds Guesthouse and collapse. And that is all I can tell you about my first day in Taian.

After two weeks in Taian you wouldn't know me if you saw me, oh fictional university student. No more white coat and mourning band, no more fingerless gloves. Tights and a maroon tunic. A new haircut. I dress like you. And surgery, fuller faced, straight teeth (something I should have done years ago) and different eyes. See, you can take a bottom person and put them in good clothes and they still look bottom. You've got to make them look as if they've had middle class food and middle class dental care. So what if I look bland, that's the whole point. It's cost me 20,000 yuan, and the only time I miss my own face is when I'm not thinking about it when I pass the mirror.

I've got my old face on a rec, if I ever feel as if I can I'll go back to it. Maybe. I mean, everything except the teeth and maybe the eyes.

I'm at the Cypress Guesthouse now, just as cheap as the Azure Clouds, but there's no sense staying in a place where the staff can make before and after comparisons.

But now, oh fictional student, I am here, I'm alive, Big Su hasn't put a hand on me yet. I've still got over 110,000 yuan, which is a pretty fair chunk of money but not enough to set me up for life. I'm a good accountant, but I've got no official training, no references. And even if someone hired me, that would leave a record because I can't escape being Li Qinghai as long as my gene map is the same. They don't do surgery on gene maps. What do I do with the rest of my life? The only job open to someone like me is a bottom job, working for a noodle shop in the free market, dishing up noodles in chicken broth for twelve yuan an hour. I can't even set up my own business, I'd have to have an ID scan for the permit.

If I could find someone like Big Su to work with, he'd have the guanxi,

the strings, to clear my record, set me up new. But I really don't want to work for the Big Su's anymore.

I don't really know what to do, oh fictional student, although there are a number of possibilities—a front person to take out the permit; starting in a noodle shop until I establish myself and working my way up; buying someone else's permit—but the last would take every yuan I've got. It is truly hard, oh university student, to actually move up social stratification. Here I am, a disreputable person seeking to disentangle myself from my family business—for I trained to become an accountant for Big Su under my mother's elder brother (who I just called "uncle"). My family has done bookwork for the Big Su's of Harbin, well, probably since the invention of the abacus. I would like to be a regular member of society, productive and upright. In my family, even though accounting would seem like a safe occupation, we have this tendency to end up statistics on government charts, oh university student. And we do not ever go to university.

As I have said, I am not a daoist. I truly suspect that my ancestors are safely dead, not keeping account books for the Big Su's of the afterlife, but perhaps it is the perplexity of my position that makes me decide to climb the sacred mountain, Tai Shan. That and boredom. But perhaps I am wrong about my ancestors, perhaps they are looking down on this insignificant citizen among the almost two billion citizens of the Middle Kingdom, and they are urging me in the right way. For who can explain why I decide that I will climb the mountain on that particular day in November? And that I will not spend the night in a guesthouse at the top but rather, climb at night?

The tradition is to climb the mountain to see the dawn. Sometimes, if the climber is particularly lucky, there will be a layer of clouds, but the peak will rise above them and when the sun rises it does so in the famous Sunrise Over Sea of Clouds, which like everyone else I have seen on the vid so often that the real thing should be anti-climactic.

I decide to start my climb at about ten o'clock, which should get me to the top well before dawn. I buy a book that tells me about the famous sites along the climb. The first thing it tells me is that there are 7253 steps to the top. So I start, passing under Hongmen, the red gate where Confucius started his climb. (At the top, the venerable sage proclaimed, "The world is small.") At first there are a few steps surrounded by noodle shops and souvenir stands, then a wide graveled path between and under cypress trees. It's not lit, but once my eyes adjust it's not hard to see.

There are a lot of other people climbing, but mostly in couples and groups. I clutch my guidebook, and the climb quickly establishes a pattern; a flurry of steps and then a stretch of path. Climbing Tai Shan isn't like climbing Qomolangma Feng, the tallest mountain in Tibet. Tai Shan

is domesticated. Some of the people climbing around me are grannies, certainly I shouldn't have any problem. Besides, if I get lazy I can take the cable car at Zhongtianmen, the Middle Heavenly Gate. There are hundreds of rocks carved in calligraphy, most of it esoteric stuff in abstruse calligraphic styles using old-style complex characters. I'm not an art historian so I don't know what most of it means.

I pass the Monument to the Revolutionary Heroes. (Mao Zedong, the great statesman, climbed Tai Shan. From the top he watched the sunrise and proclaimed, "The East is red.") I rest at Horse Rest Ridge and pretend to be interested in calligraphy. Farther up there are more steps and The Palace Where The Horse Turned Back. Smart animal. When I started it was cold, but now my tunic sticks to my back. The steps come more frequently.

It's one in the morning when I get to Zhongtianmen, and I pass under the gate and beeline for a restaurant. The wind whistles off the mountain through a gap at Zhongtianmen and when I stop walking it's cold, particularly where my damp clothing sticks to my back. The restaurant is warm and I order pork dumplings and tea—I know, junk food; you can take the boy out of the gutter but you can't take the gutter out of the boy. I'm beginning to wonder if maybe it isn't a better idea to take the cable car. According to my guidebook, there are more than four thousand steps left. Maybe the grannies all jog.

I shovel in dumplings and slurp my tea, watching around the restaurant for Big Su's hand. Yes, I'm paranoid. I watch everywhere, even halfway up Tai Shan. Instead I see something delightful—Little Sister, paying for her food. I watch a moment to be certain, but it's my little Plum. She still has her hair done in butterfly wings—nice touch, that, makes her look a bit like a little girl.

Yeah, maybe the ancestors are looking out for me. Remind me to burn some cash at the summit; joss. Luck payments. I finish my dumplings and saunter over to her table. She looks up at me and smiles politely, she doesn't recognize me. I smile back and sit down. She goes back to her noodles and sesame paste, a good girl doesn't pay attention to strange men.

I lean back in my chair and smile wider and wait.

Finally she cannot stand it any longer and looks up again.

"Hi cousin," I say.

"I am afraid you have mistaken this one for someone else," she says.

"No, Little Sister," I say, "don't you remember me? Tall Li? Li Qinghai, your cousin from Harbin, Grandmother's brother's son? Worker in the Heilongjiang Turbine Factory Number 2? Who you left unconscious on a very cold bench outside the train station?"

Her eyes get very big then, and she looks around as if for help. I

suspect that she's working alone. Pickpockets sometimes have partners but she was working alone on the train, and once we got past the story about visiting family she admitted she didn't know anyone in Taian. "What do you want?" she hisses.

"You owe me money," I say.

"I don't owe you anything, it was my money."

"Listen," I say, "you involved me in that. The porter could just as easily have me hauled in to the local police station."

"I knew she wouldn't," she says, "not if I vouched for you."

"Like hell you did. And then you left me on that damn bench where I nearly froze my ass off and nearly got arrested for vagrancy."

"What could I do," she says, "I didn't hurt you. And anyway, I don't have seven hundred yuan."

"What do you have?"

"Not here," she says, "outside."

I really don't want to leave the warm restaurant, but I confess it's not the perfect place for a shakedown, so I grab her arm and we go outside. The story of my life—I'm an accountant, not a shakedown artist—as we hit the door we meet an incoming crowd of southern tourists, imagers around their necks, tour guide in the fore with her red flag glowing for them to follow. I tighten my grip on Little Sister's arm and we start to force our way through, when a sudden, excruciating pain in my foot makes me howl and I let go.

Little Sister takes off flickering through the crowd like a, well, like a pickpocket. I stumble after her like a wounded water buffalo, bellowing and blundering. Like a fish she's through Zhongtianmen and started up the mountain, and I'm right after her. My legs are twice as long as hers, but I'm hobbling and she's scared. But there are more than four thousand steps between us and the summit and I figure steady climbing will win in the end.

The ratio of path to steps is worse beyond the Zhongtianmen, now there are banks of switchbacks, about twelve steps to a flight. People move in little clumps, I concentrate on moving just fast enough to keep passing groups. Little Sister has disappeared, it's possible she's cut off the path, but there's not much off the path except rock and in the dark I think she's more likely to decide to try to disappear in the crowd. Mostly because I'm not going to cut off the path.

I decide my foot's not broken, just bruised, but I fully intend to take it all out of Little Sister's hide. An hour later I'm beginning to think I made a serious mistake. Switchback after switchback. If just climbing steps is this hard, why does anybody do real mountain climbing? Across the Cloud Bridge and past the Five Pine Pavilion where, according to my guidebook, the Emperor Qin Shi Huang ducked under five pine trees

to avoid a cloudburst. He was so grateful that he raised the pine trees to the 5th rank of minister. (I suspect that the five pine trees on the site today are not the original five—first, they are very spindly and wouldn't keep a small dog dry, second, the original pine trees provided shelter in 219 B.C. Are the present trees grateful to their venerable ancestors?)

Still no Little Sister. I wonder if she's been running up and down this mountain while I was having my face re-structured. Clearly she's in better shape than I am. I duck over to the Three Goddess Pavilion, even peek into one of the shrines of the Princess of the Azure Clouds. No sign of Little Sister, but for a moment I stop.

It's small, barely enough space in front of the altar for five people. The Princess is bright blue and smiling, watching me in the flicker of the lanterns. In front of her are thousands of tiny shoes. Baby shoes. They stop me because they are so astonishing, all those little shoes, small enough to fit in the palm of my hand, all handmade. Tiger shoes, dragon shoes. Silk embroidered shoes. Knitted shoes. Tiny scarlet shoes sewn with seed pearls. Gold lamé shoes. The fat goddess, the daughter of the God of the mountain sits serenely wreathed in incense and in front of her are thousands of hours of work by women desperate to have a child. I am a modern young man, as I have said, but even a modern young man must stop and take stock when he is faced with eight thousand years of history.

I think of tiny feet in those tiger shoes. Will I ever have a son who wears tiger shoes? Or a daughter in red silk shoes with seed pearls? I have always assumed in an abstract way that I would, but what have I done with my life to allow such a thing to happen?

I dig through my pockets and pull out a ten yuan note and stuff it in a pair of tiger shoes. Someone will probably steal it, I tell myself, but right now I don't care. For haven't I come to Tai Shan to ask how to lead my life? And isn't the answer right here? In a wife and a boy with tiger shoes? So, see, oh fictional student, and add that to your calculations.

But back outside, with my bruised foot aching, I start climbing again. I'm no longer certain I should be climbing after Little Sister. Doesn't revenge represent a continuation of my connections with that whole way of life? I must extricate myself, that happened to the old Li Qinghai, the boy in the white coat and fingerless gloves. But I'm close to the Archway of Immortality, and after that is the summit. I need to climb a little more. Maybe burn money for my ancestors this one night, before I go back to my modern life.

At three in the morning, having passed through the Archway of Immortality, I enter Heaven. (According to tradition, all of the tired, grubby people up here are now Celestial Beings—at least temporarily. If this is

what it feels like to be celestial, I am not looking forward to it.) I climb the last one hundred steps, pass through Nantianmen, the last celestial gate. This is the summit, an area of peaks, temples and stelae carved with calligraphy. I thought I was through climbing, but the summit is not flat. Up more steps to the Temple of the Azure Clouds, where I purchase hundreds of thousands in white funeral money for twenty yuan. Feeling more than a little foolish, I throw it in the furnace, catch the pieces blown out by the updraft and push them back in. The smoke and glowing wisps of paper curl up in the darkness.

I clamber up more steps to the Jade Emperor's Temple. It's the highest point of the mountain, the summit. Four girls are standing there, giggling, and one of them, clearly on a dare, kneels down on the cushion and kowtows three times before jumping back up. They are all laughing as the one stuffs money in the box in front of the Jade Emperor—it is only a game. I am embarrassed for them, and for myself, and I step back outside.

All right, I think, now Li Qinghai, what next? The sunrise, I suppose. I head for the Gongbei rock, and I'm surprised to find that in the darkness, perhaps a thousand, perhaps more people have gathered to wait. There is a murmur, the hum of a crowd. I am tired, and the walk down is still ahead of me. The guidebook says down is harder on the knees than up. But I can't very well have climbed all the way up here and miss the sunrise. So I rent a blanket and a cushion and find a place in the crowd to nap and wait.

The sunrise is all right. The sky is pink and clear, so we don't get The Sunrise Over Sea of Clouds. Then the crowd starts its scramble to get down. I stay on my cushion, wrapped in my blanket, and let them clear. Somewhere will be a place to get breakfast. Then, perhaps, if I feel like it, I'll even take the cable car down.

Not trusting my legs if I sit on the ground too long, I return my rented cushion and blanket and start looking for a breakfast. On the back side of the mountain is a modern area of shops and eating places. I don't really know what I want so I walk the length of the street. Through the window of one of the shops I see an altercation—and perhaps I should not be surprised that in the middle of it is Little Sister.

I hesitate, maybe I should leave her be. But it strikes me, looking back over the times that I have run into her, that Little Sister doesn't seem to be a very good thief. So I walk into the shop. "Little Sister!" I call. I look angry. A woman clutching a purse is shouting at her, and a man—the woman's husband I suspect—is holding her arm. "Little Sister!" I say, angry. "Comrades, I am sorry for any trouble she has caused you." I grab her arm and pull her away from the husband and shake her fiercely—perhaps a little more fiercely than I really need to, but my foot

still hurts. "You promised the doctor you would stay with the family! I have been all over this mountain looking for you!"

She looks up at me, her eyes shaped like laurel leaves. She has no crease for her eyelids. Like me before the face change, and it makes her look like one of the temple statues. Her hair is coming out of the butterfly wings, and wisps stray across her forehead. I shake her again. "I have been so worried! And wasn't I right? I told Mama that you should stay in treatment in Jinan!"

"Comrades," I turn to the couple. "I am sorry, my sister—" I shake my head. "She has this trouble. The doctors say she is improving, but every time that they think her body chemistry is balanced . . ."

"I caught her with her hand in my wife's purse," the man says, angry.

I turn back to Little Sister. "Is this true?" I let my shoulders slump in despair.

She looks from me to the people, not sure what to do.

I reach into my pocket, pull out my wad of yuan. "Comrades, if I can make it up to you—"

The woman, still angry, shakes her head. "I don't want your money, young man. You!" She shakes her finger in Little Sister's face. "You are a bad girl, worrying your elder brother this way."

"She is not bad," I protest, "she cannot help it. But please, let me at least pay for your breakfast to make up for your trouble." I toss thirty yuan on the counter, careful not to let go of Little Sister. To their protests, "No, really, I feel I must. But please, excuse me, I must find our mother, she will make herself ill with worry." I look at Little Sister. "I don't know how I'm going to tell her about this. She thought things were going so well, we were all watching the sunrise, and I looked around and you were gone."

I drag her out into the thin sunshine, tow her along with me to the end of the street and the stone wall that looks over the valley.

"You're hurting my arm," she says sullenly.

I put her between me and the wall before I let go of her.

"I don't have any money," she says, and starts to cry.

"You know," I say conversationally, "it has occurred to me that you are a lousy pickpocket."

She nods and fishes through her knapsack and pulls out a handkerchief. "I have terrible luck," she admits.

"I have some theories about luck," I say, "Why don't we discuss them over breakfast."

Well, oh fictional university student, perhaps this is not a good story for your thesis on social stratification. I am an accountant in the free market, the certificate for business is in my wife's name so my gene map

isn't on file. Big Su has yet to appear at my door. Business is so-so, but we have a modest living. My wife has a job as a tour guide up Tai Shan and we keep adding to the 110,000 yuan. Our son wore tiger shoes when he was an infant, but now he tends to wear sport shoes and next year he starts primary school. Maybe he will go to university.

We are the two of us free, Little Sister and I. It wasn't an easy relationship at first, and the fights we had were awful. But we have found out each other's ways and everything is good. Once a year, although Lizi considers it sentimental claptrap, we climb Tai Shan on the anniversary of our wedding and burn paper money for our ancestors. Joss, I tell her, luck. She says she just considers herself lucky that I didn't consult an astrologer about setting the correct date for our marriage.

Sometimes in private I still call her Little Sister.

If only I could convince her to stop shoplifting produce—just, she says, to keep her hand in. ●

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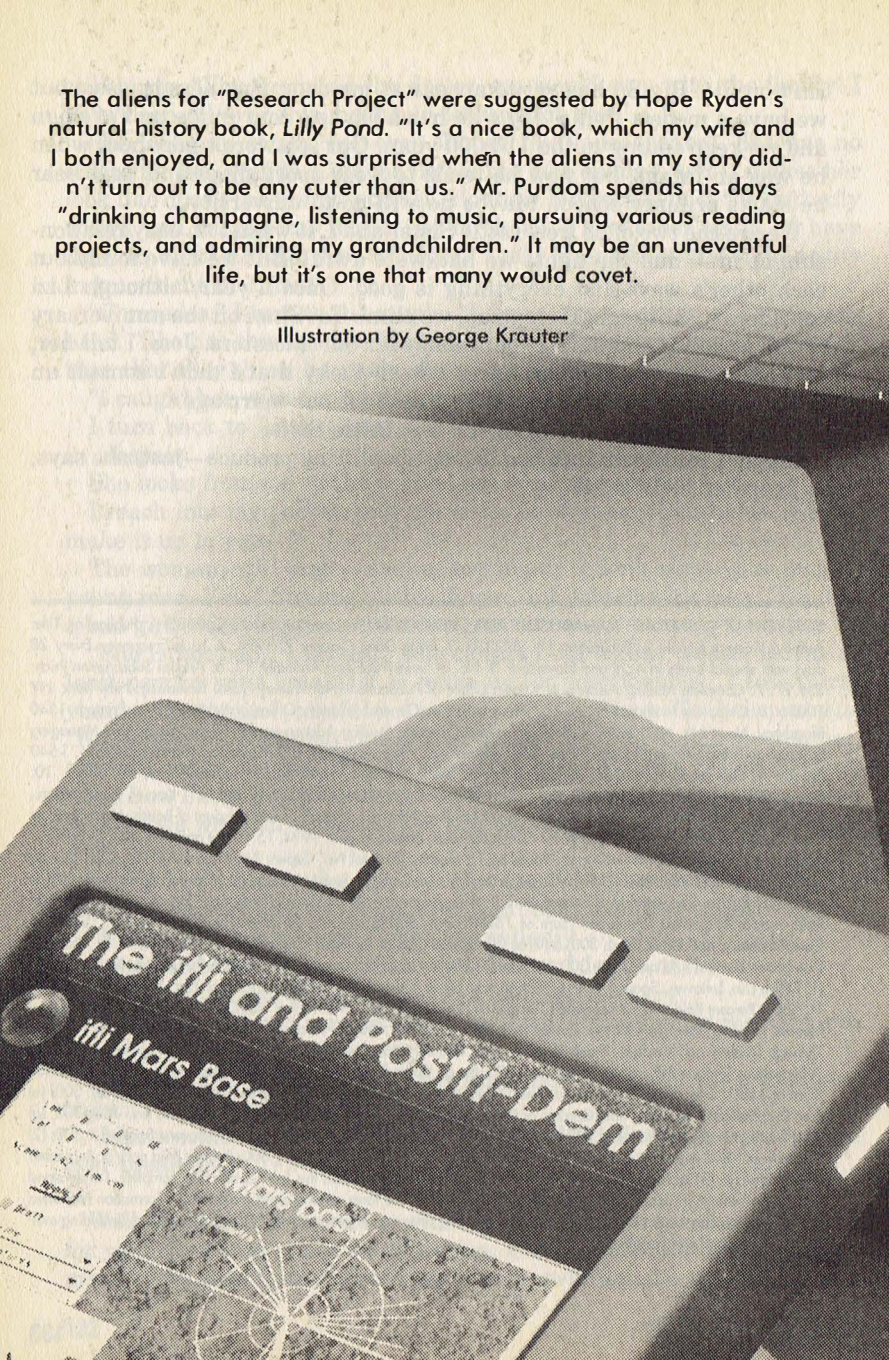
Fred Sabloff
Associate Publisher

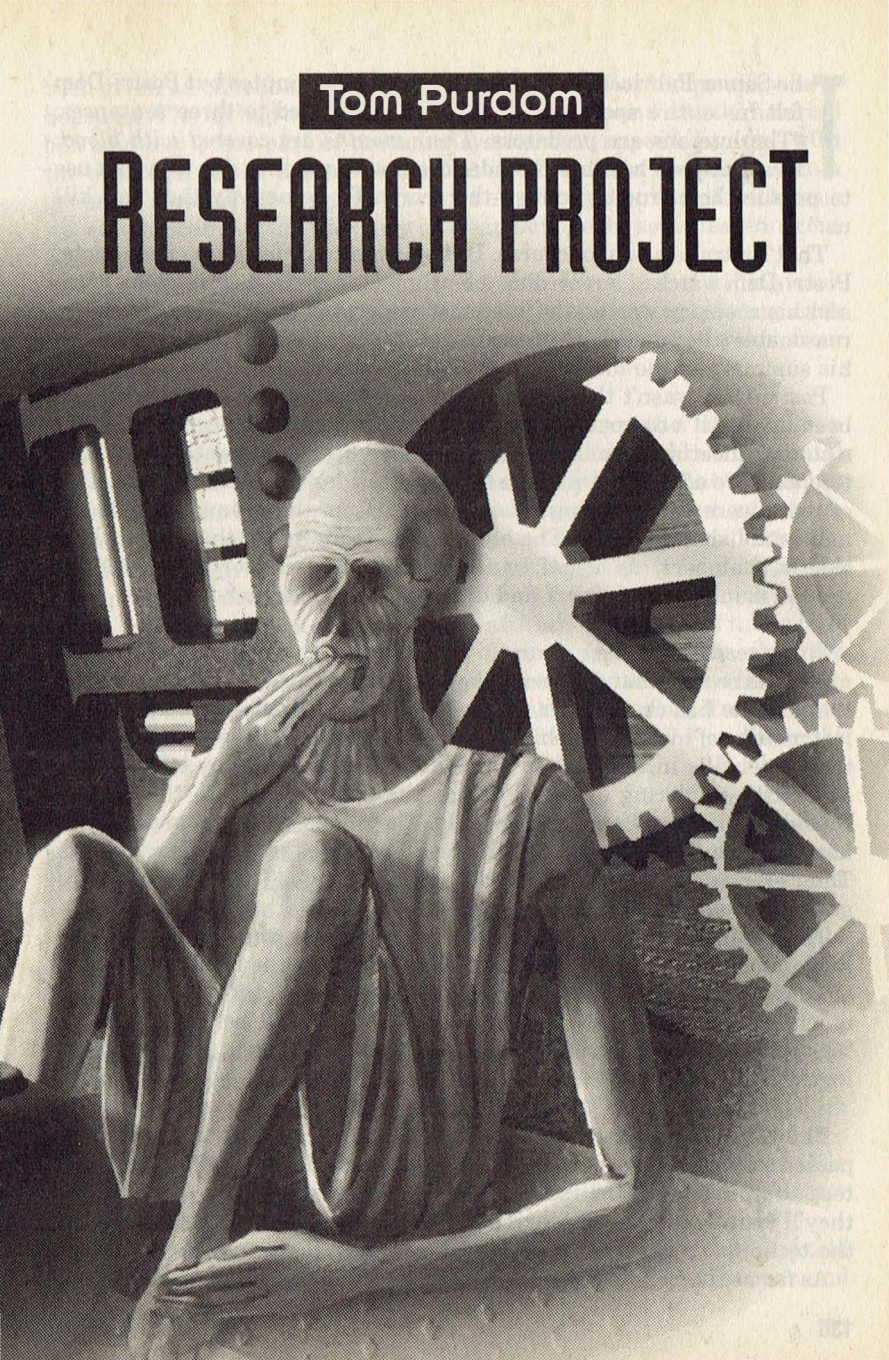
The aliens for "Research Project" were suggested by Hope Ryden's natural history book, *Lilly Pond*. "It's a nice book, which my wife and I both enjoyed, and I was surprised when the aliens in my story didn't turn out to be any cuter than us." Mr. Purdom spends his days "drinking champagne, listening to music, pursuing various reading projects, and admiring my grandchildren." It may be an uneventful life, but it's one that many would covet.

Illustration by George Krauter



Tom Purdom

RESEARCH PROJECT



The Senior Fabricator talked for almost forty minutes but Postri-Dem felt his entire speech could have been reduced to three sentences: "The humans are predators. *Their mouths are covered with blood.* Every day we hesitate provides them with another day they can use to pursue their true objective—the search for some way they can kill us."

That's a translation, of course. But you can consider it an exact quote. Postri-Dem watched a recording a few hours after the meeting took place and his memory was one of his most important assets. If you make a reasonable allowance for bitterness and despair, I think you can assume his summary of the meeting is essentially accurate.

Postri-Dem wasn't there himself for the same reason I wouldn't have been invited if a comparable group of homo-sapiens had been conducting a similar meeting. The individuals who had been summoned to the conference were all members of the Chosen Presider's power structure. Two of them were participating by screenlink, from the groundbase the ifli had established on Mars. The others were reclining in the Chosen Presider's chambers, as usual, with their fingers comfortably wrapped around drinking containers and different types of finger-food.

Jinny reads at a fifteen-year-old level but her reader knows she is only nine. On the right hand screen of her reader, she is being presented with the text she has chosen—Dr. Orlando Mazzeri's personal account of the last months of his relationship with Postri-Dem. On the left hand screen, the reader fills in the gaps in Dr. Mazzeri's description by offering her an artist's rendering of the meetings the ifli conducted in the Chosen Presider's chambers on their starship. The aliens lie in hammocks that hang from slender, transparent frames. Their faces are heavily wrinkled. Their skin is tinted blue. Their clothes look baggy. Their arms and fingers are unusually long, by human standards.

Jinny has picked Dr. Mazzeri's memoir because she thinks he looks like a nice man. He has a bald, oval head, just like the father in a group of stories her mother read her when she was a baby. His beard adds a touch of cozy furriness. She knows his memoir will be considered an "original source"—a designation that impresses the mentor she is working with this year.

The Chosen Presider had apparently learned a truth that had been passed on to me a few years after I had started chairing academic committees. If you let certain individuals say everything they want to say, they'll usually let you do everything you want to do. I had never applied the technique with any consistency, but Harap-If was a pro.

As far as the Senior Fabricator was concerned, the human species had

been given an offer that was a better bargain than it could possibly have hoped for. The ifli had agreed, after all, to help us expand into the asteroid belt and any other part of the solar system that appealed to us—with the exception of one useless desert planet. If we hadn't accepted such a generous proposal after eighty-six of our own days, shouldn't it be obvious we were probably using the delay as a camouflage for some less innocent activity?

"Is it our fault they're still sitting on their home planet killing each other?" the Senior Fabricator orated. "They'd still be murdering each other on their own planet if we had come here a hundred years from now."

Etc.

At one point, the Senior Fabricator even ordered the latest human news-collage from the information system and tried to add a little visual showmanship to his speech. Harap-If pressed the button that turned her hammock in the appropriate direction and stared with great intentness at scenes she had watched a hundred times. Save Mars demonstrators marched through the streets of Berlin and Tokyo. A New York media guru presented an update on the position of the Titanic.

For the Senior Fabricator it was our attitude toward the Titanic that provided the final proof we couldn't be trusted. All our newscasts made it clear we believed he and his colleagues would actually slam an artificial comet into Earth and kill the entire human population. If we thought *they* would do something like *that,* what kind of actions would *we* be willing to take against *them?*

The left hand screen offers Jinny a description of the ifli project the human news media had dubbed the "Titanic." An orbital diagram depicts the long spiral the giant mountain of ice was supposed to describe as it traveled around the sun on a path that connected the rings of Jupiter with the surface of Mars. Two arrows indicate the points where it would have intersected the orbit of the Earth. Jinny brushes the interruption away with an irritable wave of her left hand.

I think it's fair to say that Harap-If's attitude toward us wasn't much more benign than the Senior Fabricator's. From her viewpoint, there was something basically incomprehensible about beings who killed each other by the millions and became upset because someone was turning a cold, lifeless world into a place where living things could flourish. She probably wouldn't have hesitated for a minute if the Senior Fabricator and his colleagues had come up with something less devastating.

Postri-Dem always insisted she had been appalled when they had told her they wanted to build a gigantic broadband electronic jammer and

place it in Earth orbit. All her political instincts told her the Device would have consequences no one could imagine.

The Senior Fabricator wanted to launch the jammer toward Earth orbit as soon as the meeting ended. The Chosen Presider would have let us dither for another year if we'd wanted to, but she had to deal with the political realities. I don't know how she decided the committee would agree we could have another eight days, but everybody at the meeting accepted the figure as soon as she suggested it.

Did she think we should receive a warning? As far as I can tell, she didn't even consider the idea. The Senior Fabricator insisted he couldn't vouch for the safety of the Device if we learned about it before they placed it in position. And what would happen if they tried and failed? We might be weaker than they were technologically, but there were seven billion of us and we controlled the resources of an entire planet. Once we made up our minds to fight, we could probably overwhelm their electronic defense systems merely by throwing hundreds of missiles at them.

Stridi-If was one of the people who was attending the meeting by screenlink. Her final orders from the Chosen Presider were as contradictory as most diplomatic instructions. Every word Stridi-If uttered in our presence was supposed to underline the fact that her superiors were becoming dangerously impatient—but we must receive no indication our civilization would be reduced to a pre-electronic level if we didn't make up our minds in eight days. Postri-Dem was supposed to drop a few hints into his discussions with me, in addition—if they could convince someone like Postri-Dem he should forget his obsessions for a few moments.

The reader's programming is state-of-the-art but it retreats to a bit of cowardly evasiveness—Request Information If Necessary—when Jinny reaches the next few paragraphs. Fortunately, Jinny is one of those children who feels she understands sex as well as she needs to. She understands the mechanics, in other words, but she still hasn't learned *why* people do it.

The evening after the meeting, Postri-Dem spent most of his waking hours listening to three voices squealing and murmuring in the next room. The partitions in the living quarters in the Martian groundbase weren't much thicker than a pastry wafer.

Postri-Dem could have joined the trio in Kipi's room if he had wanted to. Kipi had made it clear she was in that kind of mood. Every time he heard one of those squeals, images of squirming bodies and happy faces pushed everything else out of his consciousness.

I won't claim they're the best quartet you could team up with, Stridi-If

had said when she had suggested he should fill out this particular Five. *They're not the kind of people you can entertain with a long lecture on the more fascinating aspects of the human economic system. But it's better than lying in a room all by yourself daydreaming about your last stroking.*

Postri-Dem was too old to be the "odd man" in a Five or Seven in which all the females already had children. His younger brother had been permanently committed to a Seven for almost six Homeyears. His brother had even fathered a child. Postri-Dem had belonged to six different Sevens since he had reached sexual maturity. His relationships with three of them had all ended with the same scene: a visit from one of the older women, and a gentle, carefully phrased announcement that he was a wonderful, *interesting* person, and they all liked him very much, but . . .

That wasn't the exact wording they had used, obviously. But it's a reasonable translation. Postri-Dem's relationships with his own species had been about as satisfying as a rejected thesis.

I once worked out a time line in which I compared events on the ifli starship with events on Earth. It was easy to say the Chosen Presider's culture-segment had crossed forty-eight light years in two hundred and six Earth years. But what did that mean when you tried to think about it as something that had happened to thousands of highly intelligent civilized beings as they lived out their lives in a ship that was essentially a miniature city? When they had left their home system over two centuries ago, it had been 1812 on Earth. Napoleon's soldiers had been suffering the agonies of the retreat from Moscow. Our most advanced communication system had been the semaphore telegraph.

They had been traveling for eighty-eight years—and they were still almost thirty light years from Earth—when the people of Europe and the Americas had greeted the first day of the twentieth century. They had been almost twenty light years away—and much of the human race had been involved in the second military holocaust of the twentieth century—when they had picked up the radio waves human civilization had emitted into space in the 1920s. Verdi . . . Pasteur . . . Einstein . . . Fermi . . . Hawking . . . they had all lived and died while the ship had been creeping toward the moment when we would suddenly realize that something odd seemed to be moving through the solar system.

Postri-Dem had been fascinated by my time line. When he had shown it to Stridi-If, her only reaction had been horror at the number of wars listed among the historical events.

Postri-Dem had been eleven when he had been snared by the questions that would turn him into a scholar who spent most of his waking hours immersed in databanks and analytical programs. He had been studying the basic facts about the evolution of his own species, with three other children his own age. Most of the video transmissions the ship had been

receiving from Earth had still been black and white. The adults had all been terrified when their screens had confronted them with films and documentaries that depicted the horrors that had taken place between September 1939 and August 1945.

Postri-Dem's best friend at that time had been a child he eventually addressed as Rapor-If. For her, their first views of the flickering images had been an occasion for displays of shrieks and wild hand waving. For him, it had been the beginning of the great adventure of his life. He realized immediately that the universe had presented him with a giant experiment in the relationship between biology and culture. On two worlds, forty-eight light years apart, the blind forces of chance had created two conscious, intelligent species—and one of them, contrary to all expectations, was apparently predatory and semi-carnivorous.

Jinny's reader includes a complete, illustrated children's encyclopedia. On her desk, there is an interactive forty-thousand volume children's library. She is fascinated by the results she gets when she touches "Semaphore telegraph" and "second military holocaust of the century" with her finger. The language of the second reference creates some problems for the encyclopedia but she manages to work it out and the reader eventually refers her to the library. She plugs the reader into the library box and spends another twenty minutes putting together an outline of the conflict the people of the twentieth century called the Second World War.

Dr. Mazzeri's reference to Giuseppe Verdi sends her back to the library once again. She has been "exposed" to opera but this is the first time she has wondered why human society has produced a form of theater in which the actors sing their lines. Her father knocks on the door just as she is succumbing to temptation and starting to query a reference to Chinese opera.

Jinny's father is a tall man with a frame that is so thin he looks almost frail. He is home today because he is attending a conference. He has spent the last three hours in his office nook, scanning presentations and exchanging comments and questions with the other participants. Jinny's mother usually works at home but today she's taking a look at two missile defense sites near Binghamton. Every month Jinny's mother is supposed to spend a day talking to "on-site personnel" and doing "hands-on" work with "honest hardware."

Jinny's father looks blank when she tells him she's writing a report on Postri-Dem.

"Postri-Dem?"

"The alien. The ifli."

Her father raises his eyebrows. "What made you pick him?"

Jinny frowns. It's the kind of question she never knows how to answer. Then she smiles. "I thought Dr. Mazzeri looked like you, Daddy. The scientist who went to Mars. I thought he looked nice."

Her father rubs her head. Jinny looks up at him, wide-eyed, and he presses her against his leg.

Our first discussion session after the meeting took place the next morning. Maria and I were eating our four hundred and forty-fourth snack bar breakfast and resolutely ignoring any visions of black coffee and fresh rolls that happened to wander into our minds. The brown spheres Postri-Dem was eating provided him with a combination of texture and flavor he had loved since he was a child—a mildly crunchy exterior, with a sweet, smooth cream in the middle. He had started stuffing them into his mouth three at a time long before we had finished the first hour of our session.

Postri-Dem spent most of our sessions lying in a hammock placed a few steps in front of our links. A communication unit built into the frame of the hammock connected him to the base information system. Three steps behind him, Stridi-If would stand against a wall, politely nibbling on a finger-food. Her favorite was a thin red stick that was almost as long as her arm.

The reader offers Jinny a standard artist's visualization of the two "links." They are essentially a pair of cylinders mounted on treads. Two jointed arms are attached to the sides of each cylinder. A "head" module, mounted on top, contains two cameras and a pair of microphones. The faces of the two human emissaries stare out of screens placed just below the head module.

An insert in the upper right hand corner of the screen contains a cutaway view of the cramped space vehicle in which Dr. Mazzeri and Ambassador Lott ate their snack bar breakfasts and didn't drink coffee. A caption explains that the vehicle orbited Mars at seven-hundred kilometers. Two small communications satellites created a network that kept the vehicle connected with the links as it circled the planet.

The figures in the drawing are wearing big helmets and gesturing with gloved hands. The treads on the links were controlled with pedals, but the arms and the head module were slaved to the motions of their bodies. The system looks clumsy to Jinny's eyes, but she knows it is a primitive version of the technology she uses when she takes electronic field trips.

For the last two days, we had been discussing three subjects: two All-Time Fascinaters and one Perennial Puzzle. The two Fascinaters were

mating customs (sex) and the patterns of intraspecies competition (violence in human terms, something else in Postri-Dem's terms). The Puzzle was sleep. On two worlds that were totally isolated from each other, the evolutionary process had produced intelligent species that slipped into unconsciousness for approximately 25 percent of each day. The ifli's knowledge of their biochemistry seemed to be more detailed than ours but Stridi-If had told us we would have to avoid discussions of chemical pathways for the time being. We could discuss patterns and customs, however, and the specialists on our consulting committee had told us they could use any information I could give them.

Sleeping habits got the first hour. For the second hour, we concentrated on the mating myths we had exchanged two days earlier. The anthropologist who had lobbied for the topic was one of my favorite people on the consulting committee and I did my best to fill every minute of the hour with something useful. I became so engrossed in the subject, in fact, that I actually felt irritated when the loudspeaker on the wall of the groundbase produced its standard polite murmur.

I shook my head. "The voice of Order and Proper Procedure seems to have spoken."

Postri-Dem countered with a wave of his hands and a slight roll of his shoulders—his best approximation of a human shrug. "I was running out of thoughts anyway. I'm certain your consultant will have a few dozen questions we can explore the next time we take up this topic."

Behind him, Stridi-If spoke to him in their own language—which I didn't understand at the time, of course. "This is your last opportunity for the day, Habut," Stridi-If said. "If you can't say something useful while you're discussing intraspecies competition, we may as well assume you're never going to give me anything I can work with."

Postri-Dem's full name was Postri Habut Luxerdi. His close acquaintances—when he had any—usually called him Hab or Habut. Stridi-If's full name was Stridi Ro Stridki but I'm confident Postri-Dem never called her Strid or Ki.

Stridi-If had interrupted Postri-Dem three times during the last hour and he had ignored her every time. As far as she was concerned, he had already missed several chances to let us know his species wasn't quite as harmless as its evolutionary history indicated. I had given him a perfect opportunity to make the point when I had leaped on the resemblance between our story of David and Bathsheba and their story of Gutara and Estrihar.

The legend of Gutara and Estrihar was one of the oldest stories Postri-Dem's species had created. Gutara was a legendary ruler—the "queen" (more or less) of a famous city state. Estrihar was an architect who already belonged to a Five that was dominated by a woman who managed

important construction projects. Gutara wanted Estrihar for herself, so she gave her rival a dangerous project—a bridge that crossed a ravine in the mountains. The other woman had died in a storm, Gutara's role in the death had been discovered, and Gutara had been clawed and expelled.

It was a minor coincidence in some ways but it was the kind of thing that fascinated both of us. Postri-Dem had realized he was looking at an alternative evolutionary history when he was still a child. I had realized it three weeks after we had started our conversations and I had reacted with the same naïve, babbling excitement that had overtaken him all those years before.

I have to confess, too, that the discovery had given both of us a more adolescent pleasure. It messed up one of the more plausible chains of logic our colleagues had produced.

On Postri-Dem's world, theorists had assumed that any intelligent aliens they encountered would have to be herbivores. Carnivores, they had reasoned, were specialized creatures who depended on their size and their speed. On Earth—with equally impeccable logic—many human exobiologists had argued that any intelligent aliens *we* met would have to be predators. Carnivores, they had argued, lived by their wits. They had to outmaneuver their prey. It was an agreeable idea and I suspect it had influenced most of our responses when we had discovered an alien ship had orbited Mars. As far as we were concerned, a group of people just like us had entered the solar system, made no attempt to communicate with us, and hit a robot probe with a blast of static that had put it out of business an hour after it had reached Mars.

Postri-Dem had been convinced his leaders were doing the wrong thing when they knocked out the probe. We were intelligent beings, after all. He had presented the Chosen Presider with a long document—the equivalent of twenty thousand words in International English—in which he listed all the evidence that indicated we could keep our violent proclivities to a minimum when we really tried. Harap-If even read it I gather. Apparently she had more patience than most of the human politicians I've encountered.

Jinny's library contains eleven books on evolution and paleoanthropology. In one of the books on human evolution—a treatise for twelve-year-olds entitled *How Did We All Get Here?*—there is a two-screen layout.

The first screen is dominated by a picture of naked proto-humans standing on the edge of a plain. Their hands hold pieces of chipped flint. They look across the grasslands at fat herbivores. A half-eaten carcass is surrounded by jackals who will have to be dispersed before the humans can grab their share.

On Earth, the text explains, the evolution of intelligence had begun with a creature which had slipped into a way of life that revolved around hunting and scavenging. A weak, unimpressive animal had begun to rely on its brain—on its ability to construct simple weapons and make predictions about the behavior of its prey. The hunters and gatherers with the best brains had tended to survive—and the human species had become more and more dependent, generation after generation, on its ability to think.

The second screen is illustrated with an artist's conception of the early ancestors of the ifli. The proto-ifli are naked, too. In the background there is a marsh. Some of them are widening a shallow ditch by scraping it with stones. Others are cutting thin saplings and bringing them to a pond, where a tangle of mud and wood is rising in the center.

On Postri-Dem's world, the text argues, the blind forces of chance apparently descended on herbivores—weak, unimpressive marsh creatures who had been crowded into the drier lands at the edge of their natural habitat. In the marshes, they had protected themselves from predators by building nests of mud and grass in the middle of ponds. In the borderlands, some of them responded to their plight by digging primitive canals and creating their own ponds. Like the ancestors of the first true humans, they created a way of life that favored individuals who used their brains. In their case, however, the survivors were individuals who could *build.*

Jinny read that book over fourteen months ago. *How Did We All Get Here?* was, in fact, the text in which she first learned of the existence of the ifli. She feels she's been interested in the ifli for a long time, of course—and she has, when you think of fourteen months as a percentage of nine years. She has read all the other books in her library that mention the ifli and she is now using her "Interlibrary Connection" and downloading material from public databases. She already knows, for example, that the sexual division of labor in Postri-Dem's culture-segment conformed to the standard division of labor in most ifli cultures. Ifli females tended to be politicians and administrators. Ifli males tended to be engineers and designers. Like most of the people who encounter that fact, she has wondered if the UN selection committee made a lucky guess when it sent a female diplomat and a male exobiologist to Mars. It didn't, but there seems to be a general agreement that the sexual composition of the human delegation may have influenced the Chosen Presider's decision to open discussions.

This was only the third time we had discussed intraspecies competition. It was obviously a delicate subject. I was still selecting my words with great care.

"Actually," I said, "I don't see why we can't go on discussing the story of Gutara and Estrihar. I think it raises important questions about the way our different species compete. As I understand the story—Gutara's city was erecting that bridge because of a rivalry with another city. They were creating a trade route to compete with a city that had already built a bridge over the same river."

"Trade isn't quite the correct word," Postri-Dem said. "The stream of information and certain kinds of . . . social intercourse . . . was just as important. But you've presented an accurate summary of the situation, other than that."

"But that brings up a question we can't seem to get away from. Didn't they at any time consider the possibility they might take *possession* of the other city's bridge? By engaging in violence?"

Postri-Dem waved his hands and engaged in another attempt to simulate a human shrug.

"I can only tell you what I've said before, Doctor Mazzeri. We do not seem to think of such things. If we do—there is no tradition that tells us how to go about it. You have specialists in violence. Techniques. We usually resolve conflicts by moving. If that isn't practical . . . there are places on our Home world where you'll see six bridges built within steps of each other."

He popped another pair of brown spheres into his mouth. From the way he described it to me, the spheres coated the cells of his tongue and cheeks with a flake-speckled cream that created a sensation comparable to the feeling we humans get when we eat something sweet.

"I think it's clear we are less violent by nature," Postri-Dem said. "As I've said before, we do engage in brawls and riots. But they tend to be disorganized short-term events by your standards. Even when we dealt with predators—even then, we relied on defensive structures. On walls. On water barriers. And ultimately, of course, on the modification of the predator's habitat that accompanies technological development. As your species is doing."

He paused and crunched his way through two more spheres while he arranged the phrases he had constructed the evening before. "I should tell you, however, that there have been occasions when members of our species used environmental modification as a competitive technique. The fact that we didn't institutionalize that kind of competition seems to support the idea that you can't institutionalize some things unless you are more naturally violent to begin with. Your species apparently developed organized violent competition shortly after you developed agriculture and started living in large scale social units. We didn't. But the fact that we've accumulated a few famous examples of aggressive environmental modification indicates the potential may be there."

"Very good, Habut," Stridi-If said in their language. "You took your time but you couldn't have done a better job if I'd written the script for you. You've planted the idea but you haven't over-emphasized it."

Maria's voice broke in on our private communications circuit. "I think we'd better talk, Orly. This might be a good place to put in another word about the Titanic."

I started to object and then shrugged. Postri-Dem told me to take all the time I needed and we blanked the screens on our links and broke the audio connection.

"They're probably thinking about some way they can bring up the Water Project," Stridi-If said. "That was perfect, Habut. Just be careful what you say if they want to talk about the Water Project. We have to make it clear we aren't referring to anything that would increase their panic over that."

Postri-Dem stuffed two more spheres into his mouth and choked back the impulse to tell Stridi-If he wasn't sure the humans would understand the difference between an artificial comet that wiped out their entire species and a Device that eliminated most of the gains they had made in the last two centuries. Postri-Dem's life had been unusually asocial, by the standards of his species, but he had learned one important fact about his relationship with the rest of society—he had a tendency to blurt out his thoughts without taking into account the responses they might provoke.

To Stridi-If—and most of the other members of his culture-segment—he was an odd, comic figure. Stridi-If was only five Homeyears older than Postri-Dem was, but she thought of him, he knew, as someone who was basically a child. She liked him—in the same way you would like a child—but she felt he had to be watched for his own good.

The most frustrating—and agonizing—period in Postri-Dem's life had been the three months that followed the moment when our links had come rolling across the Martian sands and paused outside the ifli base. There had been days, he claimed, when he had thought he would go mad if the Chosen Presider and her advisers didn't decide to open talks with us. Officially, Stridi-If had been his liaison with the power structure. Officially, she had been working with him because she had been the diplomat who would represent them if they decided to initiate a dialogue. In reality, she had been a caretaker who was supposed to save a valuable resource from self-destruction. There had been times when Postri-Dem had seriously believed he should bypass the standard political process and make impassioned speeches in the corridors. There had been other times when he composed long, angry messages to influential individuals who were opposing contact. Stridi-If had provided the patient, gentle voice that calmed him down before he made a fool of himself in public.

Stridi-If had been the sympathetic partner who convinced him his arguments would be more effective if he let a trained go-between do the talking.

I finished working out my wording with Maria and blinked on our screens.

"Ambassador Lott has raised a question I think I have to bring up," I said. "It's really a political and diplomatic issue, but I think it's something you and I can discuss. As you know, many people on our planet are concerned about your Water Project—to put it mildly. When they look at this discussion on Earth, many people are going to wonder if the effects of an artificial comet might be considered a form of environmental modification. . . ."

Postri-Dem reached for the bowl of spheres. He picked up three of them, then lowered his hand just before it reached his mouth.

"I think that can best be answered with a quote, Doctor Mazzeri. As your philosopher Machiavelli put it—"

He switched to Italian—a language Stridi-If didn't understand.

"Transmit this to Earth at once. In eight days, we are going to launch a high speed rocket equipped with a jammer that can interfere with most of the electronic activity on your planet indefinitely. The propulsion unit and the jammer will receive their energy from a very powerful fusion energy reactor. The missiles you have placed in orbit as a defense against the Water Project are your only hope. You must destroy the rocket while it is using the reactor to decelerate. The propulsion unit and the jammer cannot operate simultaneously. If your missiles approach it while it is in free fall, the jammer will probably stop them."

Journalists have often asked me how it feels to hear someone tell you the world is going to end. Fortunately, I didn't have to respond in any rational way. Maria hit the right buttons and Postri-Dem's message started winging directly to Earth.

I do know my link lurched forward a few inches and stopped with a jerk. I had apparently reacted to the message with a sudden, involuntary movement.

Postri-Dem's jaws crunched down on three spheres simultaneously. He found it hard to believe he had actually completed the entire message. He had spent hours arranging the wording. He had repeated it tens of times after he had memorized it but he had still been convinced he would forget something important if he actually decided to say it out loud.

The Lurch of the Link had reminded me this was no time to let Stridi-If see I was excited. I swallowed hard and tried to remember how I would react if he had actually quoted a passage from a Renaissance philosopher.

"That's very interesting, Postri-Dem. I never thought of that particular aspect of Machiavelli in just that way."

Behind Postri-Dem's back, Stridi-If was already murmuring into her communicator. Postri-Dem knew the information system could apply a translation program to his message and produce a reasonably accurate paraphrase in about twice the time it had taken him to deliver it.

The communications screen tells Jinny she has a call from her mother. She wants to keep on reading, but she knows she can't.

Jinny's mother looks very crisp and trim in her uniform. She wants to make sure Jinny is playing with her friends. She asks how a boy named Herbert is doing and Jinny assures her she's going to call Herbert before the day is up.

"That's very important, baby. You can't keep your nose stuck in a reader all the time."

"I'm writing a paper on Postri-Dem," Jinny says. "Did you know the ifli lived in families that had two mothers and three daddies? Some of them had three mothers and four daddies."

Her mother smiles. "Would you like that? Would you like having more than one mommy and daddy?"

"I just thought it was interesting. Did they have extra mommies and daddies because they didn't eat meat?"

"I'm afraid I don't know, dear. Are you making sure you're researching at least three sources?"

"I'm reading Dr. Mazzeri's own story. Then I'm going to see what else the library has."

"Dr. Mazzeri's own story? Isn't that a little long?

"It's just something he wrote about Postri-Dem. For a collection of articles on Postri-Dem. It's really interesting, Mommy. He really liked Postri-Dem. You can tell it from the way he writes about him."

Her mother smiles again. "I'll have to look at that when I get home. Make sure you pay attention to your paragraphing, baby. That mentor you've got this semester puts a lot of emphasis on paragraphing."

Stridi-If's hiss was so sharp and intense it made Postri-Dem's entire body turn warm—a sensation that characterized the ifli's response to high-level threat. He knew what he was going to see before he turned his head but he still cringed when he saw it. Stridi-If had dropped into a graceless, awkward crouch. She was still holding her communicator in her left hand but the fingers of her right hand had bent into stiff, curving claws.

This wasn't the first time Postri-Dem had been faced with someone who had fallen into that crouching, clawing position. There had been times, in his childhood, when he had found himself surrounded by ten or twelve children of both sexes.

Sometimes it was something he said. Once he had merely mentioned that the pictures he had seen of the Netherlands looked pleasanter to him than some of the more industrialized areas of Home. The landscape of Holland had apparently been shaped almost completely by human activity, but the humans had treated it with more respect, it seemed to him, than his species had treated Home. There were even places on Earth where the humans had set aside large areas of untouched wilderness. Did intelligent predators need some contact with the wilderness in which they had once stalked their food animals?

To him it had been an interesting idea—the kind of thing that kept running through his mind. He had known he was in trouble as soon as the other children started to react but he had still been surprised.

"Do you know what you've done?" Stridi-If screamed. "To yourself? To everyone?"

Postri-Dem rolled out of his crouch. He turned away from her, with his head cocked to one side, so she was shrieking at his left shoulder. He would have turned his back on her if he had let his instincts take control of his muscles.

Maria's link rolled forward with its arms waving. Her amplified voice boomed Stridi-If's name. She might have been half bored by the scholarly information I was exchanging with Postri-Dem, but she was used to situations in which she had to move from sleepy semi-attention to full, intense participation. She had cut her diplomatic teeth on the UN team that had defused the Thai-Taiwan naval confrontation. Some of the assignments that had followed had been even tougher.

Stridi-If didn't have Maria's experience but she was a professional, too. She rose out of her crouch and shrieked an order at Postri-Dem. He backed to one side and Stridi-If advanced on the barrier.

"I wish to point out that this situation is still fluid," Maria said. "The recording we have just transmitted is marked with a code that will take it directly to our ultimate superior—the Secretary General. No one else on Earth will know about this unless he chooses to tell them. He will have to inform two of our subcultures—the Japanese and the Americans—if you launch your missile. They control the missiles that orbit Earth. But right now you and I can still discuss this in private."

It was an astonishing performance. She had determined the exact nature of her negotiating stance and laid it out in sentences that sounded like they had been rehearsed for days. She had even made sure she omitted an important bit of information. We couldn't keep track of the ifli missile without help from the Japanese and the Americans. The equipment in the European Community couldn't do the job.

Later on she told me she had thought about situations in which we might be threatened with attack and worked out some of the possibilities.

She had never thought about a planetary jammer but that was the kind of unexpected development she had learned to allow for.

"Orlando and I were sent here because billions of human beings want to establish peaceful relations with you," Maria said. "But we can't control all the subcultures on our world. We've done our best to make that clear to you. If the Japanese and the Americans learn anything about this, we can't promise you we can control their response."

The I's were dotted. The important points were spelled out. I thought she had put too much emphasis on the danger posed by the Japanese and the Americans until I realized Stridi-If probably wasn't used to negotiations that included the threat of violence.

Stridi-If was standing in front of the barrier with her hands pressed against her legs. It occurred to me she was probably faced with a personal problem, in addition to the professional crisis Postri-Dem had forced on her. She should have demanded a translation as soon as Postri-Dem started using a language she didn't understand.

Maria had already thought of that. "Is there any way we can work this out between us, Stridi-If? Just the two of us?"

"You're asking us to reverse our decision—to tell our engineers they can't deploy the Device. Harap-If will have to bargain with you herself, Ambassa-Dor Lott."

Jinny feels a little niggle of curiosity when she scans the reference to the "Thai-Taiwan naval confrontation" but this time she lets it pass. She is surprised to learn that the Japanese and the Americans seemed to be working together in space during the period when all this happened.

Jinny's mother once tried to explain why she has to go away every month. One of the items she put on the screen was a map that showed how the world was divided into five "competitive zones."

Postri-Dem had never felt more isolated. Stridi-If glanced at him once or twice while she talked to the Chosen Presider on her communicator, but she acted, in general, as if he had disappeared.

When he had been invisibled in the past, Postri-Dem had always retained access to his databases. This time he wouldn't even have that. He would wander through the halls of the Marsbase, with every door shut against him, until he sank into a depression, stopped searching for food, and let himself drift into a coma. He could even be expelled. His species had been expelling troublemakers into inhospitable environments for as long as it had been keeping records.

Yet, even now, huddling in a corner of the conference room, he was fascinated by the way Maria was handling the situation. He had noted the way she had used the threat of violence as a negotiating tool even

as she insisted she represented a party that wanted to avoid violence. His people used threats, too, but they were essentially commercial bargainers. Maria was discussing a nightmare of death and maiming as if she were telling Stridi-If some of the members of her culture-segment might take their business somewhere else if they didn't get their way.

Stridi-If placed a communication screen in front of the links and the Chosen Presider began talking to Maria. No one paid any attention to Postri-Dem when he crept up to his hammock and picked up his food bowl. He started to put two spheres into his mouth at once, then stopped himself and dropped one into the bowl. They might be the last food he would ever eat.

Harap-If's amplified voice boomed through the conference room. "Postri-Dem! Come over here and get to work. I'm not going to let all the time you've spent studying these people go to waste now that we really need it."

Postri-Dem had already realized he was watching an exercise in futility. Intellectually, the Chosen Presider knew we were intelligent beings like her own people. Emotionally, she probably thought of the Device about the same way we would regard an electrified barrier that herded sharks away from a private beach.

Stridi-If and Maria were both people who thought in terms of power. For them, the whole discussion was a matter of threat and counter-threat—with Stridi-If hampered by the fact that she didn't know how to use the threat of violence. Sometimes she tried to indicate her people were willing to do things that were so savage they were clearly beyond their powers. Other times she shied away from threats that many human diplomats would have carried out without a flicker of remorse.

Postri-Dem listened for a full hour before he became so absorbed in his own thinking that he forgot he was a walking corpse. "I would like to make a suggestion, Harap-If."

"It's about time you did," Harap-If said.

"Doctor Mazzeri and I probably understand the differences between our species better than anyone in either group. Perhaps it would help if he and I talked about this in private. And tried to devise a plan Stridi-If and Ambassador Lott could then discuss."

Stridi-If was horrified, of course. He had already betrayed her once. What would he tell me if she left us alone now?

The Chosen Presider nibbled on her finger-food while she listened to Stridi-If's objections. They were speaking in their own language but Maria realized something important was happening and let me know the situation called for judicious silence.

"Everything will have to be recorded," the Chosen Presider said. "We'll

need to know what you said if anything more goes wrong. But you can talk without supervision."

The last time he had talked to me, Postri-Dem had been a full member of his culture, representing it in an honorable position—if I can translate his feelings into something that approximates human terms. Now he was an outcast—someone who might be dead within a few days. There would be no trial, no attempt at the kind of legal maneuvering we Westerners have inflicted on most of the human population. A high-level committee would consider his case. Its deliberations would be recorded and disseminated. And the members of his community would follow their natural inclinations and avoid contact with someone who had made it clear he didn't value their welfare and their good opinion.

Their history included many cases in which someone had been expelled or invisibled and later generations had decided the outcast had been right. They had their Galileos and Semmelweises, too. But none of their heroic dissenters had been out-and-out traitors.

I wasn't surprised when he immediately told me he already had a proposal that could lead the two diplomats out of their impasse. I was even less surprised when I discovered what it was.

The crux of our problem with the ifli's offer was the suggestion that they should move their starship into a low Earth orbit. They wanted to position themselves above our planet, take on two or three thousand human passengers, and transport our first interplanetary colonists to the asteroid belt. They apparently couldn't believe we would think they might bombard Earth—or engage in some other kind of violent action—if we let them place a massive ship, of unknown powers, in Earth orbit.

Now, of course, we had learned what they could do. Who knew what other tricks they had hidden in their baggy little sleeves?

Maria had already suggested one solution. We could place armed humans on their ship before it orbited Earth. Stridi-If had conveyed their rejection of the idea with waving arms and a general air of agitation. Hard as it is to believe, there wasn't one item on their ship that could be considered an anti-personnel weapon. Asking them to accept armed humans on board their ship was a little like telling beavers or prairie dogs they should let weasels into their lodges and tunnels.

The one thing we hadn't understood was the reasoning that had led to the offer. One of the biggest criticisms of my behavior has been the complaint that I didn't start discussing intraspecies competition until I had been exchanging information with Postri-Dem for over two months. If I had known they were working on something like the Device, I probably would have introduced the subject by the beginning of the second month. As it was, I thought we should avoid the matter until both sides

had acquired a good basic picture of the people they were dealing with. None of us realized that the ifli's offer was an example of a tactic that was their equivalent of arms control. Sometimes they would share a resource, like a road or a tunnel, and let two groups gradually merge into one. They deliberately created a situation in which both sides were dependent on the same resource. Then they let time do its work.

Harap-If had backed a proposal that required real courage. She had gambled that spacefaring humans and spacefaring ifli would eventually blend into a common society—in spite of their fundamental differences—as they built cities in the asteroid belt and engaged in trade.

My own opinion is that we probably would have. In spite of all the evidence to the contrary, I don't think human beings are fundamentally warlike. We are *willing* to fight when we want something. We'll fight back when someone tries to take something away from us. But most of us don't *like* fighting. We like thinking about it—and watching other people do it—but very few of us actually enjoy the experience.

Postri-Dem's proposal was less far reaching. He wanted to set up a research station in Mars orbit—a station in which ifli and humans would engage in the same kind of exchanges he and I were engaged in. We could send humans one way to Mars orbit and the ifli could build the research station. They might even turn Deimos or Phobos into the kind of habitat we would have built in the asteroids.

By the time he finished describing the idea, I had the feeling he had almost forgotten his personal situation. "It fits into our way of minimizing competition," he argued. "And you could think of it as the kind of arms control measure you've developed. You'll have permanent observers in Mars orbit. You can keep an eye on what we're doing and make sure we aren't launching anything at Earth."

Jinny already knows who Galileo is, so she ignores the one paragraph bio when it appears on the left screen. Semmelweis is another matter. So is "arms control." She finds the idea so intriguing she ends up skimming three different articles on the subject.

It was a self-serving proposal, of course. He and I were agreeing, in essence, that the world would be a far better place if the engineering and military types would get out of the way and let those of us who valued knowledge and learning go about our business.

Fortunately, Maria thought it was a good idea, too. She was a diplomat, not a scholar, but she had always understood the value of knowledge. "They'll learn more about us, too," Maria said, "but they're so far ahead of us in that area we're bound to gain more than we lose."

She even threw in an extra on her own. If they approved the plan, the

national governments on Earth wouldn't be told about the Device. Postri-Dem thought that sounded like a good idea, Maria's recommendation went back to Earth, and he let Stridi-If know he'd come up with a cheaper, less complicated proposal that seemed to meet with our approval.

Stridi-If sounded less enthusiastic. "I'll communicate the proposal to Harap-If, Ambassa-Dor Lott. Are you confident your officials will accept your recommendation?"

"Yes. I am."

There was nothing equivocal about Maria's response. She didn't hesitate. She didn't qualify her words in any way. By now I knew her well enough to know she wouldn't say something like that if she didn't mean it.

Postri-Dem never told me what happened during the next day and a half. I have no idea when they let him know they were leaving. It's quite possible they never *did* let him know.

He must have understood when their ground-to-orbit vehicle took off with half the population of the base on board. Did he wander around the base like a ghost? Did he find an empty apartment and huddle in a hammock? Did people mock him? There were some things even he couldn't chatter about.

I found him sitting on the floor in a corridor, with his back propped against the wall. He managed to pull himself erect when he saw the link but after that he just settled against the wall and stared at it as it rattled toward him.

There was no danger he would die in the near future. The microwave beam was still supplying the base with power. I knew it would probably shut down sooner or later, when a critical component finally failed, but for now he had all the air, heat, and light he needed. Our biggest immediate problem was the pressure we were getting from Earth. The Security Council governments all knew the starship had left Mars orbit. They all wanted to know—at once!—where it was going.

Jinny already knows that the Marsbase drew its energy from a solar powered microwave station the aliens had constructed from material they had taken from the Martian moon Phobos. The ifli had placed the station in an appropriate orbit before they had started working on the groundbase, so the ground crews would have all the power they needed from the moment they touched down.

She isn't quite sure how microwave beams work. She's already looked at a brief explanation and decided she may have to defer the topic for a while. Most of the material on microwaves in her encyclopedia discusses

cooking and communications devices. There is no indication any human had ever thought about building orbiting stations that transformed solar power into microwave energy and beamed it down to Earth.

A psychologist, the old saying goes, is a man who observes the reactions of the other people in the airplane when the pilot announces the right wing has just fallen off. An astronomer is a woman who starts estimating spectral categories when the man she's in love with draws her attention to the glories of a summer night. There's a whole roster of jokes about scientists and their preoccupation with their specialties. In a sense I was living one of those jokes. What kind of a person would shut himself in a closet, a hundred million kilometers from a doctor or a dentist, just so he could talk with a wrinkled, short-legged eccentric who happened to come from another star system? The news media had been impressed when two hundred exobiologists had applied for the job. Divide two hundred by the population of the Earth in 2026 and you'll understand why people like me feel we belong to a statistically insignificant minority. You'll also understand, I think, why the four thousand ifli in the Chosen Presider's culture-segment didn't produce more Postri-Dems.

It took me a week to get him to the point where we could resume our discussions. I did it, for the most part, by putting myself in his place and doing things that would have had the right effect on me. I dropped interesting facts about human society or human biology into discussions about practical matters such as the quality of the food he had available. I called him at odd hours and asked him to clarify things he had said during our discussions. I introduced topics that were related to the conversations Maria was having with New York.

It helped that he could still beam a record of our conversations at the ifli ship. The ship never gave him any indication it was receiving or recording but he could always hope. The information he was gathering could still become part of his species' knowledge-base—whether they appreciated it or not.

I think Maria's efforts had some effect on him, too. I listened in on some of her initial conversations with Earth and I know she made a real try.

It was Maria, in fact, who decided we should lobby for a full research base on the surface of Mars, with enough people on the ground to help Postri-Dem keep himself alive. She concentrated on the long term military advantages of a research effort when she talked to New York, but I don't think I misinterpreted the way her face lit up when she and I first discussed the idea. She tended to see everything we learned in terms of power conflicts, security arrangements, and military potential, but she cared about Postri-Dem, too. She couldn't hide the genuine *relief*

that broke through her emotional defenses when she decided there was a real possibility we could help him survive.

For me it was the most exciting eight months I have ever lived through. We had been talking for weeks but we had barely touched the surface of dozens of subjects. Brain chemistry, economic systems, meteorology—there were times when my consultants had to send me thirty screens of material just so I could acquire enough background to discuss one innocuous question.

Some topics were way beyond both of us. We couldn't handle anything that involved serious mathematics. Neither one of us knew his own system of mathematics that well. The questions that really excited us dealt with the kind of issues that fascinate specialists in sociobiology. There was a day—to give you just one example—when one of our consultants asked us to look at the social arrangements of the animals the ifli were related to. On Earth, we had studied primates like gorillas and baboons and speculated about the things their behavior could tell us about ourselves. On their world, some of their biologists had looked at the social behavior of the different kinds of marsh creatures they were related to and mapped the chemical pathways that influenced traits like sociability.

By the time we finished with that one, Postri-Dem was chattering away as if Stridi-If was still standing behind him and he still had a Five to return to when we stopped talking. If he had been a member of our own species, I think he could have become a figure comparable to Freud or Darwin. I have always been proud of my ability to understand a broad range of disciplines and see connections the specialists tend to overlook. Postri-Dem made me understand the difference between talent and genius.

Would his stature have been recognized if he had stayed in his own star system? The culture-segment he had been born into was essentially a backwoods, provincial society. In his own system, he would have been connected to an intellectual network that included thousands of individuals who could appreciate his potential.

The left screen offers Jinny pictures and capsule biographies of Sigmund Freud and Charles Darwin. There are also references to famous researchers who studied primates in their habitats. The program even presents her with two small indications it was designed by someone who had a sense of humor. The list of "possible additional readings" includes references to "John Dolittle, M.D." and a field worker who seems to have been a titled English aristocrat. Jinny smiles when she spots both of them. She read *The Story of Doctor Dolittle* when she was six, when she came across it while she was browsing through her library. She has

never read anything by Edgar Rice Burroughs but the library brought his existence to her attention when she offered it key words that staked out the general idea of stories that deal with communication between people and animals.

I hardly ever talked to the international bureaucrats in New York. Most of the time, I didn't even pay attention to the things they were saying to Maria. Sometimes she would ask for my thoughts on a topic that some assistant to a third under-secretary had dropped into the discussion. The rest of the time I tried to ignore everything they were saying to her.

An alien—an educated, intelligent, highly cooperative visitor from another star system!—was sitting on Mars. How could anyone feel we couldn't scrape up the resources to keep half a dozen people on the surface of the planet?

It's my personal opinion that Maria might have succeeded if the ifli ship had stayed in the solar system. The situation began to turn against us about the time we realized they weren't retreating to the asteroids after all.

Maria spent a big part of our last six weeks trying to convince our lords and masters we couldn't continue our conversations with Postri-Dem merely by establishing a communications center on Earth. I composed a special memo, with fifteen screens of attachments, which underlined the rather obvious fact that he came from a highly social species, and needed some form of on-the-spot companionship. Every consultant who had any connection with the social sciences signed the statement of concurrence that Maria circulated. The fact that we *might—possibly*—send him technical advice and spare parts couldn't help him deal with the unimaginable social isolation he was facing.

I was still exchanging information with Postri-Dem during the last hours we spent in Mars orbit. I had to help Maria with some of the final items on the pre-ignition checklist but I could still spend half my time connected to my link. The committee had given me a list of "pressing," "indispensable" topics that would have kept us busy for the next month, but I spent most of the time discussing the topics he chose.

He had become fascinated by children's games. As far as he knew, the children of his own species had never engaged in "hunting games" like hide and go seek. On the other hand, I had never really looked at the distribution of games like that on Earth. Did they play them in China and Japan? Or India? Were they less common in agricultural cultures?

"It seems to me, Orlando, that your species should have been affected by all the generations in which you were primarily farmers. Your agricultural phase seems to have been almost ten times as long as ours.

That's not long by evolutionary standards, but there should have been some selection in favor of personalities who were less violent."

"We always had robbers," I said. "Most of our societies have included a warrior class. The farmers could get robbed at random or they could have a regular, predictable arrangement with warriors they thought of as their rulers. In practice they never really had much choice. If one set of warriors didn't take control of them, another would."

"But did the farmers' children play tag? And hide and go seek?"

That may not seem like the kind of conversation you should engage in just before you're going to leave someone alone on an empty planet. Was he just keeping up a front? Was he concentrating on his intellectual concerns so he wouldn't have to think about the hopelessness of his situation?

I think he really cared about the questions we were discussing. He might have turned his attention to escape if there had been any hope he could do it. Since there wasn't, why shouldn't he surrender to the passion that had brought him to this moment?

The real parting came when we reached the point where we had to route our transmissions through Earth. By that time the communications lag was almost four minutes one way. We were still talking, but it was a form of voice mail, not a real conversation. When I started relaying through the big receivers and transmitters that had kept us in touch with Earth, the situation would become ludicrous. His messages would reach me in a few minutes. Mine would have to travel three quarters of an hour before they reached Mars.

He had set up a camera in his new quarters and we had continued to maintain visual contact. There was no indication he was exceptionally agitated. He was chewing on the brown spheres he had been eating the day he told us about the Device, but I had no reason to think he had selected them for psychological reasons. As far as I could tell, he had been eating exactly three types of food items since he had acquired absolute control over the food preparation equipment.

My last message before the rerouting was notable mostly for the things it didn't say. I had never thanked him for the terrible sacrifice he had made and I still didn't think he would want me to. Instead, I tried to let him know I wasn't the only member of the human species who thought our exchanges of information had been an incredible intellectual adventure. I spent most of our last few minutes blipping him the seventy million names—complete with their occupations, ages, and nationalities—that were appended to the message of support we had circulated.

Would the bureaucrats have financed a Mars station if they had known he was going to destroy the ifli base? I like to think they would have.

They might not have believed him, of course. But I think they would have given in if they had been convinced he meant it.

Did he wander around the base thinking about our talks as he tinkered with valves and electrical equipment? Did he consume information in the same way a gourmet might spend his last days drinking and devouring? Goethe is supposed to have died saying, "More light! More light!"—but Goethe didn't die by his own hand. Goethe hadn't betrayed his own species.

At our Institute we're still studying the recordings made from Earth-based interceptions of the messages he transmitted to the starship. They're one of the primary collections of data we use in our attempts to crack the language of his culture-segment. Our translations are still splotchy—and not very reliable—but many of them seem to contain little lectures that summarize his conversations with me and highlight ideas he considered important. I get the impression he was trying to justify his efforts by proving he was collecting knowledge that might be useful. In many of his summaries, he points out that certain aspects of the human personality might be common traits in all intelligent species descended from predators.

Out of all the communications in our files, however, the one I value the most is the last one he sent me. If you really want to understand Postri-Dem, it seems to me that last message tells you everything you need to know. I argued with Maria before she convinced me I had to add it to the public file, but I should have realized I didn't have to worry. In general, the news media have been interested in the aspects of the story that usually preoccupy them. In many cases, in fact, they have created portraits of Postri-Dem that are very similar to the picture the members of his own culture-segment probably developed. In one of the standard dramatizations of the story, he is seen as bumbling, good-hearted, and generally unworldly. Other popular treatments present him as a sacrificial, almost saintly being.

The producers of the first version interviewed me for several hours and I did my best to convince them they were on the wrong track. That was the last time I ever tried to argue with a media lord.

Call that last message up. Watch the way his hands move as he talks. Remember that he had grown up in a small town with a population of four thousand, light years from the center of his civilization.

I know his emotions were driven by an alien body chemistry. I know we'll never fully understand the culture that shaped his thinking. It doesn't matter. He wasn't just being polite when he told me the thing he valued most about our relationship was the chance to talk to someone just like himself.

No culture—no species—can produce large numbers of people who

spend their lives worrying about the nature of the stars or the mysteries of alien psychologies. Most of the individuals in any society have to concentrate on the tasks that keep their world functioning. Scientists and scholars may be the ultimate source of wealth and power, but they're probably considered misfits and oddities in every civilization in our galaxy.

Jinny already knows Orlando Mazzeri was the first director of the International Institute of Exobiology in Helsinki. Her encyclopedia tells her the Institute is a small, cost-conscious organization which is financed by modest grants from governments and private foundations. It also receives gifts from thousands of small donors all over the world. It is housed on two floors of an office highrise. Its eight Research Fellows spend most of their time studying the information collected during the fourteen months the human race actually engaged in direct conversations with another species.

As soon as she finishes reading Dr. Mazzeri's memoir, Jinny activates her interlibrary connection and enters the public sectors of the Institute's database. A thirty minute introductory video describes the translation techniques the Research Fellows apply to the conversations recorded during the contact period. Sixty percent of the material is still untranslated, the voiceover notes.

After she finishes watching the videos, Jinny asks for information on ifli children's games and spends another two hours exploring that subject. When her mother comes home the next day, Jinny has to admit she has just started writing her paper. The grade she receives from her mentor is so low it comes with a memo that goes directly to her parents. Jinny must learn she has to finish her work on time, the memo says. And she must improve her paragraphing. ●

ON BOOKS

by Paul Di Filippo

A long, long time ago in a genre far, far away, there lived three wise women named Catherine, Leigh, and Alice Mary. Although they were mostly happy in their work—they were respected tale-tellers all, laboring in the ancient sacred grove of Literature known as Nonmimetic Myopoetic Visionary Speculation—they grew sad from time to time at the lack of other women in their chosen field.

"Do you think," asked Leigh one day, "that there'll ever be so many women telling our kind of story that it will be hard to keep track of all of them? That they might even equal the number of *men* who do NMVS?"

"It seems hard to imagine," replied Catherine, "with just us three really making it so far. But maybe there's something extra we could do to bring such a day about. . . ."

"I think," said Alice Mary, "that if we just keep on telling the best stories we're capable of, setting an example for any bright young girl who wants to follow in our footsteps, that pretty soon we'll have dozens and dozens of heirs and daughters of our spirit, all doing different good things. Maybe even enough that some reviewer could fill up a whole column discussing just their tales."

Alice Mary's two friends nodded wisely, then buckled down to work.

And pretty soon, what Alice Mary had predicted came true.

Right down to that damn superfluous reviewer.

Caesar and Brutus Wore Skirts

Twenty years ago, Suzy McKee Charnas brought forth a novel steeped in the heady atmosphere and controversy of the times. *Walk to the End of the World* (1974) was a book whose "kitpit" siblings were Norman Spinrad's *The Men in the Jungle* (1967), Harlan Ellison's "A Boy and His Dog" (1969), and Piers Anthony's "In the Barn" (1972). Anti-establishment, rabidly satiric, vicious and brutal, it portrayed a world that was not so much an act of subcreation, in the Tolkien sense, as a Swiftian scaffolding upon which Charnas could string up ageist, sexist, racist facists all in a row. And a mighty bracing lynching it was! Although her world of the Holdfast, where the final remnant of male-dominated humanity had cobbled together an unlikely existence, was totally improbable (for one thing, humanity managed to flourish despite the purported absence of *any* insects, mammals, or reptiles!), it was vivid and gaudy and nasty enough to carry the reader along.

With echoes of Delany's *The Jewels of Aptor* (1962) (there's even a character named Servan D Layo!) and of Jack Vance's *The Dragon Masters* (1963), Charnas's book was a decidedly curious proto-feminist, even gnostic volume, granting three-quarters of its narrative to male viewpoint characters and seeming half the time to admire their cruel and ignorant egotism.

Its sequel, *Motherlines* (1978), came from a different compass heading, literally and figuratively. Alldera, an escaped slave introduced toward the end of *Walk,* finds herself in the Grasslands, the country of the Riding Women, the Mares, scattered tribes of self-sufficient warrior nomads who quicken their parthenogenetic daughters with the help of their stallions (the horses, of course, being a necessary if inexplicable addition in terms of the ecosystem described in the first volume). The culture of the Mares is rendered anthropologically deep, rich, and realistic, and the story of how Alldera progresses from slave to leader of a rescue mission back to the Holdfast is psychologically convincing and affecting.

The many years elapsing between *Motherlines* and its new sequel, *The Furies* ($22.95, Tor Books, hardcover, 383 pages) is somewhat indicative of the gulf between the two venues, I believe, and the trouble Charnas must have had in bridging them.

Furies picks up hard on the ending of the prior book, with Alldera and her party of armed Free Fems entering the Holdfast, intent on freeing all female slaves and taking vengeance on the men who oppressed them. Charnas reveals a complete familiarity with and affection for all her old characters, and the reader never gets the sense that these are tired ghosts hauled out for a consumer-mandated airing. All the Free Fems, the few Mares who show up for the big fight, and the newly freed "unslaves" are keenly depicted individuals.

Too keenly, perhaps. Trouble arises when the women set about demolishing the old order of male-dominated enclaves, which are already tottering, their jiggered parameters highly unsteady to begin with. Against the cardboard castles of the Holdfast, the women look like Bob Hoskins in Toon Town. Even Bek, the Endtendant of Endpath, the most fully realized male, is nothing more than a husk full of twitches. Perhaps realizing this, Charnas depicts only the Fems' first battle in realtime, relegating the rest of their easy conquests to secondhand accounts.

What Charnas instead concentrates on is "the central matter . . . the relations of the fems to each other." *Furies* soon becomes a kind of Norse myth or Elizabethan tragedy, with characters driven by obsessions and operatic emotions. Alldera, a reluctant Caesar, is betrayed by her own Brutus and Cassius, with a Gollum-like Shakespearean Fool named Setteo (a eunuch, and the only new male character of any significance) adding commentary.

This struggle for power and love is interesting, but was already conducted in miniature back in the Grasslands, as Alldera explicitly mentions at several points. The

other major issue—how the Free Fems can avoid falling into the worst habits of the very men they now enslave—is frequently raised, but never dealt with. In fact, the women revel in bloody vengeance, albeit understandably so. The revolution they conduct bears no resemblance to the colonial American or recent South African ones. Instead, it looks like that of the French, with its beheadings and terrors. At times, it seems a shame that this is the model of political upheaval Charnas chose to depict, if not actually endorse.

The artist Charnas most reminds me of is not a writer, but a film-maker, namely Lina Wertmuller. Both are experts at probing the buggy underside of male-female relations and political power hierarchies, while telling a captivating story. But whereas even Wertmuller's most doom-laden films such as *Seven Beauties* (1975) are leavened with humor and compassion, with a sharing of guilt and culpability among both sexes, Charnas neglects any such counterpoint, rendering her heartfelt novel a tad more programmatic than one could wish.

Home Is Where The Arth Is

The year 1992 saw the hardcover publication of Diana Wynne Jones's *A Sudden Wild Magic.* Two years later came the paperback ($4.99, AvoNova, 412 pages), with which I'm just now catching up. The book bears a wonderful cover by one Daniel Horne, whose name unfortunately is not to be found on the credits page, but can be read with a microscope on the cover itself.

Jones's novel is a well-done goofy romp that reminds me of the famous DeCamp-Pratt collaborations, a kind of throwback to the era of Campbell's *Unknown.* If anyone claims that such confections can't be—or simply aren't—written well nowadays, point them in the direction of Jones and stand back. This would, by the way, be a perfect book to hook a bright adolescent on fantasy, as it's never condescending and is mildly racy enough to compete with *Melrose Place.*

The premise: magic is real, and is practiced worldwide across our familiar globe. England in particular is watched over and protected by a circle of mages known as the Ring (Inner and Outer). Recently, these mages have come to realize that forces outside our universe have been warping Earth's history, setting us a series of challenges—"World War Two, the Cold War, AIDS, drugs"—in order to profit from our ingenuity. The mages, an endearingly eccentric lot, eventually detect an interdimensional platform from which the manipulations emanate. This artificial station is called Arth, and unbeknownst to the Inner Circle, another whole world lies beyond it.

This scenario having been sketched, the reader is now treated to quite a bit of slapstick—some tedious, but most agreeably comic—among the three worlds. Jones has no compunctions about tossing new and even contradictory elements into her stew when it needs flavoring. Two instances: travel among the dimensions is said at first to be one-way only, a return trip being fatal. But when the plot

calls for easy access among the worlds, it's done in a blink. And when late in the book head witch Gladys summons up the tutelary deities of the adjoining world to ask for advice, she suddenly remembers to mention those of Earth, who have never been hinted at once prior.

But none of this is really jarring, as the reader is swept along on Jones's fluent prose, which is laced with clever constructions by the score. ("His new uniform stood around him like a drainpipe he had got into by mistake.") Jones throws out sophisticatedly casual allusions to James Blish, E.M. Forster, Roger Zelazny, Jonathan Swift, and pocket universes without pausing for the reader to catch his breath. She delights in passing on vital information in clever ways: The first we hear of a wife's infidelity is when she complains, " 'Conferences, conferences!' she exploded to her lover."

Jones's world, however scatterbrained, is not without fairly realistic mortal consequences, although they are far from gory. Half of the team sent to assault Arth is killed. The witch Maureen finds herself permanently psychically bonded to a brutish and traitorish lover. Mostly, Jones makes the reader feel a twinge of genuine emotion at such moments, although the twinge is of a different sort when one of her centaurs says, " 'Go whistle! I'm paying her train fare because the damn gods will have my guts if I don't, but I'll be *raped* if I pay for you too!' "

On the whole, though, such missteps are rare, and Jones succeeds in propelling an energetic pinwheel of a book that would have done James Thurber proud.

A Magic College

One of my favorite fantasy writers—of the deceased variety—is James Branch Cabell. Master of the epigram, the corrosive sneer, the ironic jape, the world-weary sigh of resignation, and a thoroughly romantic cynic, Cabell left few heirs, save for the inimitable Jack Vance.

However, in Caroline Stevermer's *A College of Magics* ($22.95, Tor Books, hardcover, 380 pages), I find someone new who shares many of Cabell's qualities and gifts.

Stevermer's story takes place in a world curiously like ours, save for a few vital differences. The year is 1908 or thereabouts. Earth's history and culture and geography (barring the existence of several mythical duchies such as Ruritania, Graustark, and Galazon) is ostensibly familiar, save for this: Stevermer's world is literally suspended among the occult spheres of the cosmos by four magical anchors, north, south, east and west. One of these anchors, the north, has been damaged since 1848 (a symbolic reference to the political revolutions of that year, perhaps?). The setting-right of this imbalance becomes the task of young Faris Nallaneen, underage duchess of Galazon.

We meet Faris as she is about to reluctantly enter Greenlaw College, the institution that gives the book its title. Greenlaw is ostensibly a French finishing school for girls, occupying a tide-secluded island meant to evoke Mont Saint

Michel. In reality, it is an establishment for the training of witches, witches who will go forth and pull hidden political and domestic strings. Faris herself is a gawky and homely girl, willful and brainy, but somewhat uncertain of her place in the world.

At Greenlaw, she will grow and mature, becoming fit for the enormous task that awaits her. Faris's three years at the College occupy the first third of the book, and are the most resonant and evocative. The girl's confusion and delights, friendships and enmities are brilliantly portrayed. When she is finally "expelled" from the school for having revealed heretofore hidden dimensions of her character that mark her as the potential "warden of the north," one experiences a palpable sense of loss at her exile. And while the rest of the book is never less than enjoyable, this first portion remains the brightest.

For the rest of the book, accompanied by her collegiate friend Jane and her loyal bodyguard Tyrian, Faris will undergo high-society sniping, thrilling chases, and daring escapes (including a near "murder on the Orient Express"), before finally fulfilling—at immense cost—her appointed magical duty.

Stevermer's prose is compact, graceful, and cinematic, with just the right amount of floridity. Every word is weighted with precision, and she even uses a mannerism Cabell was fond of: the repetition of a key phrase at a pivotal moment. In Stevermer's case, it's "a small bubble of hilarity lodged at the base of her throat." But where Stevermer really excels is in her delicately honed dialogue. These characters are people for whom speech is a weapon and a ballet. They delight in indirection and subtle putdowns. Even Jane can't resist a dig now and then at Faris.

> "Ah, but what if someone joins you unexpectedly?" Jane inquired. "Suppose he hands you over to some henchman of his—a woodcutter, say, who leads you deep into the forest. . . ."
>
> "I'll leave a trail of crumbs."
>
> "You generally do," Jane murmured.

Determinedly old-fashioned in plot and tone (this has to be one of the few novels published in the last decade where a cuss word is represented by hyphens), *College* nonetheless remains a book capable of stirring deep and truthful feelings in the reader. Faris's sacrifice can be seen as emblematic of every individual's transition to adulthood, occuring as it does precisely when she reaches her majority.

Any reader who has enjoyed other Ruritanian novels of manners and intrigue such as Brian Aldiss's *The Malacia Tapestry* (1976) or Mary Gentle's *The Architecture of Desire* (1991) will find in Stevermer's book a worthy addition to the canon.

Who's In Charge Here?

In her new novel, *Strange Angels* ($19.95, Delacorte Press, hardcover, 227 pages), Kathe Koja continues her relentless and at times excruciating examination of

the deepest pits of the infinite skull-hells concealed behind the eyes of each and every one of us. For her characters, it's a deadly trip whose sole justification is the decisiveness and willpower and effort they expend in making it. As the narrator realizes early on in his obsessive quest, "the whole point was there was no end, only content on the journey they made together: farther in, that was all, that was everything and everything else would follow in its time."

Angels is the story of Grant Catto and his friendship with a schizophrenic artistic prodigy named Robin Tobias. When we first encounter Grant, he is languishing, having realized that he has neither the desire nor the talent to make art in his chosen medium of photography. Through his live-in lover, Johnna, an art therapist, he meets Robin. Seeing in the confused and reclusive visionary a key to tapping his own talents, Grant befriends him. But Grant's innocence, ignorance and self-concern soon initiate a destructive spiral. Under Grant's inexpert tutelage, Robin's condition swoops and plummets, reaching heights of artistic accomplishment and depths of catatonia and self-destruction.

The arrival of a third party, another schizophrenic, a woman named Saskia, is like a rogue star entering the Grant-and-Robin system, sending all three into new and eccentric orbits. Although things temporarily improve, matters soon reach their inevitable implosive climax, leaving Grant at book's end with the realization that the road of madness on which he's foolishly set foot still stretches infinitely ahead.

Koja loves working with duos, couples who engage in intricate follies of complicity and taunting, love and disgust. In her previous book, *Skin* (1993), the couple was Tess and Bibi. Grant and Robin are that pair here, and in the first two thirds of the book they are almost the only onstage characters. When Saskia, wildly herself and vitally demented, is introduced, the book acquires new energy, and one wishes she had made her appearance earlier.

For although Koja illustrates and illuminates the particularities of schizophrenia with deep insight and feeling, a certain sense of repetition creeps in prior to Saskia's arrival. Only two things help carry the reader through this stretch: Koja's brilliant linguistic constructions (she's particularly fond of noun/adjective reversal), which approach Faulknerian proportions ("they were artifacts of a time not ended but unbegun, placed in his sight with a cunning as useless as the gesture itself"); and her cascade of disturbing similes and metaphors ("hands in her pockets like suicide stones").

Who are the odd angels of the title? None other than the schizophrenic population of the world. Granted entrance to a dimension of light and voices and suprarational knowledge which the rest of are excluded from, they grace our existence with terror and beauty. As Saskia says, "Any one of us is better than ten of you. It's *hard* to live the way we do . . . but it's *beautiful*."

What Koja has done here, I believe, is to find a way to take one of

the most interesting tropes of SF and ground it in contemporary life. I'm referring to the story of encounters between humanity and an enticingly unintelligible alien or alien culture. Robert Silverberg (whom Koja frequently reminds me of, in her intensity and moral implacability) wrote many such tales, notably *Downward to the Earth* (1970). Damon Knight's "Stranger Station" (1956) also comes to mind.

In choosing to examine a philosophically and emotionally deep subject found right under our noses, yet one from which most people instinctively turn away in revulsion, Koja once again demonstrates her unflinching intensity and ambitious artistry.

Bren of the Atevi Rifles

Looking up from the latest C. J. Cherryh novel, *Foreigner* ($20.00, DAW Books, hardcover, 373 pages), I fall into reverie. Can it really be *nineteen years* since I read Cherryh's first book, *The Gate of Ivrel* (1976)? The answer, of course, is yes. Cherryh is no longer a startling new voice in the field, but one of the taken-for-granted pillars. Much the way Billy Crystal recently recounted suddenly awakening to the fact that he and his generation of fellow comedians had *become* Bob Hope, *et al.*, the writers of Cherryh's vintage who have lasted are now the redshifted core of the field.

Despite the occasional fantasy, Cherryh tends to write what critic Mark Kelly has usefully called "hardcore SF," the kind of tale which puts a new spin on familiar tropes. *Foreigner* is no exception. Subtitled "a novel of first contact," her book tells the story of the starship *Phoenix*. Having wandered far off course with no way home, the ship is forced to establish a colony on a world already inhabited by an alien race, the atevi. All this is economically told in the first fifty pages of the book. Then occurs a jump of two hundred years, and a different focus.

Bren Cameron is the paidhi, the lone human permitted to mingle with the atevi as he represents the interests of his four million human compatriots who are confined on an island ceded to them by the atevi after a disastrous interspecies war. Relatively new to his job, Bren is soon plunged neck-deep into atevi politics, which, in a race that possesses "fourteen different words for betrayal," are intricate and duplicitous. Subject to an assassination attempt, he is sent to an ancient fortress, ostensibly for his own safety. There, he learns the true depths of atevi culture, eventually discerning enough to enable him to perform properly when events reach a boiling point.

After the swift beginning of the book, the remainder is rather disconcertingly static. Bren is basically a passive and dithering figure, perhaps as he must be, given his age and inexperience. But this type of character makes for some frustrating moments. For instance, after two hundred pages, Bren is still berating himself for not making a certain phone call that might or might not have made a difference! It doesn't help that not much happens to Bren at the fortress except for a couple of suspicious power outages, an "accidental" poisoning and a few riding lessons. I

realize that Cherryh is concerned with a "thick" depiction of the atevi culture and its nuances, linguistic and otherwise, rather than slambang action, but this is one time when the natives don't particularly seem to merit it. Tall, jet-black enigmas, they (and their wild mounts) remind me of nothing so much as Burroughs's Martians (and their thoats), with Bren a reluctant John Carter, all of whom of course were sketched indelibly by Burroughs in many fewer pages.

Despite a few genuine SF speculations (for instance, how would aliens for whom numerology was a religion regard computers?), Cherryh's main concern here seems to be to replicate a kind of Kiplingesque tale featuring a European caught up in the machinations of an exotic foreign culture, playing the same kind of Great Game that was played in India by the British and their opponents. (The black atevi versus "pale" humans dichotomy reinforces this reading.) On this level, the book is satisfyingly Talbot-Mundyish. But one expects more of Cherryh.

A feature of Cherryh's writing that I was reminded of is a certain tendency she has to put her viewpoint characters through some really brutal and humiliating situations. One hesitates to call this a covert S&M strain in her writings, although the scene where Bren is wired up in a bondage harness for torture really approaches John Norman levels. Rather, I think she subscribes to the theory of "test to destruction" that Keith Laumer often exemplified, whereby a character's mettle appears only during the most violent physical challenges.

Luckily, given Cherryh's great talents and indefatigable energies, it's guaranteed she will soon produce another book which will no doubt integrate the varied strains of her writing in a more satisfying way.

You Can't Go Back To That Timeline Again

A spaceship governed by ancient preprogrammed cybernetics sets down on an unknown planet in the midst of a ruined spaceport never before seen by human eyes. The ship's helpless Terran passengers peer out nervously, wondering what awaits them. Ancient alien mechanisms suddenly come alive, and a serpentine device—weapon or fuel tube?—snakes out toward them from across the junk-laden field. . . .

This was the scene depicted on the cover of the Ace Books edition of Andre Norton's *Galactic Derelict* (1959), a scene that I replayed over and over in my mind some thirty years ago (long before Fred Pohl's Heechee series used a similar trope, by the way). That one passage had everything calculated to hook an impressionable youngster on SF: mystery, entropy, adventure, awe. It was a potent mix that Norton whipped up deftly in book after book, including the three companions to *Derelict: The Time Traders* (1958), *The Defiant Agents* (1962), and *Key out of Time* (1963).

Now we have *Firehand* ($19.95, Tor Books, hardcover, 220 pages), the first new book in the series in three decades, co-written with P.M. Griffin. I'm sorry to report

that it doesn't pack quite the punch of the earlier books, and that this failure is, I truly believe, not ascribable merely to the fact that I'm reading it with an adult's eyes.

After wrapping up a few loose threads from *Key* in its opening pages, *Firehand* transports the familiar trio of Ross Murdock, Gordon Ashe, and Eveleen Riordan to a new timespace venue, the feudal era of a planet called Dominion of the Virgin. Their mission there is to insure that a certain course of history—one that will bring about a defeat for their enemies, the alien Baldies—does eventually ensue. By introducing the concept and tactics of guerilla warfare to Dominion, Ross and his friends are indeed able to maintain the desired timeline.

The trouble with this plot is that it eliminates everything that made the earlier books so hypnotic. The Baldies themselves are mostly offstage, as is the native villain, Zanthor. The paradoxes of waging a Leiberian Changewar, of freewill versus determinism, are ignored. The mysteries of encountering alien technology are absent, as is much of the patented Norton mix of telepathy and human-animal empathy. All we are left with is a standard tale of medieval warfare, competently told but never deeply felt. In fact, the authors seem determined to tone down even the most exciting moments, recounting events with a curiously distant voice.

What does work in the book are two minor things: an understated feminist subtext (count how many times the word "rape" is used to describe martial events), and the slow unfolding of the love affair between Murdock and Riordan. But these items would have also been present in an old-line Norton book, along with the requisite wonder-producing tropes.

I hate to lay all the discredit on the shoulders of Griffin, whose solo work I'm not familiar with, but other recent unaccompanied Norton books, such as *The Mark of the Cat* (1992), showed Alice Mary alone still writing up to snuff. It seems a shame to have turned over this series to someone with lesser abilities than Norton herself.

I also wonder how the ten-year-olds of today are ever going to be able to purchase this hardcover. My not untypical weekly dollar allowance easily encompassed *two* Ace paperbacks, with money left over for four five-cent Zero bars!

To Kill a Sineater

That lineage of writers who produce sophisticated, elegant tales of primarily psychological horror (with or without supernatural elements), a line that includes Shirley Jackson, Thomas Disch, Ian McEwan, and T.E.D. Klein, now boasts a talented new member in the person of Elizabeth Massie, whose first novel is *Sineater* ($21.00, Carroll and Graf, hardcover, 337 pages), winner of the Bram Stoker Award.

Sineater takes place in the small backwoods town of Beacon Cove, in Ellison County, Virginia. (And it seems to me that county name is no accident, but rather a tribute to the kind of tales involving a stark examination of the nexus of evil, power and religion which Harlan Ellison trademarked in *Deathbird*

Stories [1975].) This community follows a strange old custom: one of its members is designated "sineater." His job is to consume a ritual meal off the chests of the dead, thereby assuming their sins so that they may enter heaven cleanly. Mostly, past sineaters have been unmarried hermits, shunned pariahs, necessary but tainted. The current sineater, however, one Avery Barker, has made the mistake of marrying and fathering three children. Massie's book is the tale of how the sineater's family—particularly the youngest son, Joel—confront a growing wave of hysterical prejudice—stoked by a fundamentalist zealot named Missy Campbell—that brings murder and mutilations to their town, threatening the once stable relationship of the sineater to his flock.

The sineater himself is notably—and effectively—absent from most of the novel, reflecting the community's tradition that to gaze directly on him is to go mad and die. As Joel thinks of his father, he is "a void that holds all of the vileness and evil that has ever been in Beacon Cove. A void not empty, but full in its blackness." His few appearances—at night in the woods, bending over a frightened, shuteyed Joel in bed, accosting his enemies from the shadows—are authentically creepy. Massie endows Avery with the mythic qualities of the Beast (as in *Beauty and),* Medusa and even Grendel, misunderstood monsters all. And like Frankenstein's monster, the sineater is doomed for, literally, assuming the sins of the community.

Most of the novel is told through Joel's eyes, and the characterization of the boy is superb. Although warped by his odd upbringing, he is remarkably unbitter, retaining a core of compassion and friendliness. He stands in contrast to David Burke Campbell, his older friend, who has let the hard knocks of his loveless environment bring out the worst in him. Yet even Dave is portrayed by Massie with empathy and understanding. All her characters, in fact, are believable individuals, although Massie throws one away by not using the viewpoint of teacher Earlie Grant more than twice, at opposite ends of the novel.

Massie's short chapters, hard-hitting sentences and unrelentingly vivid figurative language ("Her narrow eyes made him feel like a tick in a pair of tweezers") carry the reader along breathlessly, much as the Beacon River (another symbol for the sineater) "hurries along at a rapid clip, trailing on its skin a sundry collection of mountain debris. . . . It seems to have a purpose on its mind: to clean up the mountain." As events accelerate to their surprising conclusion (Massie convincingly offers several possible suspects for the harrowing assaults that plague the town), Massie's chapters become more compressed and suspenseful, sometimes shrinking to a single punchy page.

In its depiction of narrow-minded intolerance; its geographically solid creation of a small rural town and its mores; and its concentration on youthful protagonists, *Sineater* brings to mind a classic from outside the genre: Harper

Lee's *To Kill a Mockingbird* (1960). With luck, this fine book might someday reach as wide an audience as its illustrious ancestor.

A Mask for the Goddess

There's a strain of fantasy that stands as something of an antithesis to the heroic mode of Tolkien and his imitators. The same garments of swordplay, magic, and feudalism clothe a completely different body. More concerned with eerie effects and allegory, coolly urbane, populated by mortal gods and godlike mortals, this kind of fiction can best be recognized by pointing to its creators. E.R. Eddison, Lord Dunsany, M. John Harrison (his Viriconium series), and Michael Moorcock (Elric, partly, of course, but more importantly his singleton novel *Gloriana* [1978]).

This is the mode in which Lisa Goldstein has chosen to work in her new novel, *Summer King, Winter Fool* ($20.95, Tor Books, hardcover, 287 pages), and as we should expect from her previous work, she brings to the project high intelligence, skillful writing, and absorbingly clever plotting. If this book lacks the emotional resonance of Goldstein's earlier, more domestic works—an almost inevitable side-effect of having demigods as characters—it is never less than enthralling.

Whereas Goldstein's last book, *Strange Devices of the Sun and Moon* (1993), featured a meticulous reproduction of Shakespearean England, her latest is far removed from any familiar neighborhood. This new unnamed world is centered around the city of Etrara, where royal siblings plot and courtiers fawn. It's a world whose goddess creator, Sbona, is a living, active presence, not subject to doubt. Along with her two lusty sons—Callabrion, who represents the summer, and Scathiel, who stands for winter—Sbona plays a vital part on every page of the book, even when not physically present. Goldstein's characters are molded by this supernal closeness in a way utterly unlike anything we can truly experience in our mundane world, giving them a kind of dreamy, slightly abstracted dimension in their actions, emotions, and thoughts.

The main thrust of *Summer King* involves the desperate attempt to restore summer to the land (Callabrion has abdicated his duties) and the maturation of Valemar, unwitting heir to the throne of Etrara. When we first meet Val, he is an egotistical, innocent fop. War, betrayal, and sufferings soon intervene. Val grows worthy of his heritage, thanks in no small part to the assistance of the poet-mage Taja, who becomes his lover. His final ascension to the throne, purchased at no small cost, is aided by perhaps the only truly justifiable *deus ex machina* in recent literature.

Goldstein's writing in this book —aside from a few familiar touches such as the power of masks (recall *A Mask for the General* [1987])—is different from what she's ever done before. It's more incantatory and mythic, as if she and we were sitting far removed from the action, hearing a very old legend recounted. Certain phrases are invoked with regularity: "drove his sword to the man's heart" and "grasses . . . bent in the . . . wind"

are among the most prominent. This adds an element almost of oral recitation. The incorporation of bits and pieces of Frazer's *Golden Bough* also contribute to the sense that we are watching an ancient, dark drama in action, a feeling bolstered by Goldstein's frequent references to acting, right down to Val's realization in the midst of battle that he has merely donned a new role, that of king.

Goldstein's invented culture is sharp and coherent and ingeniously interlocking, and it's a pleasure to watch her unfold its secrets. Another pleasure is the Mercutio-like character called Narrion, whose machinations eventually backfire on him in a suitably ironic fashion.

The poet-mages of Etrara cast their spells by arranging solid "keystone" words into intricate webs of beauty that can bind and unbind the forces underlying reality. Goldstein herself is surely one of these mages.

Tripping Through Time

Algis Budrys once observed that just as the Depression and World War II were pivotal events and touchstones for a certain generation of writers, recurring in their art, so too would the 'Sixties become the core of a new generation's perceptions and writings. In a way, it's obvious to see how the experience of living through the 'Sixties informs both today's SF and the world at large, to such an extent that the influence is almost invisible. Feminism, ecology, the melding of high and low culture—these are just a few of the things we take for granted that had their birth in that exciting decade. But in one way, the equation between eras has not held: very few writers have made the 'Sixties their *explicit* subject matter. Subtext, yes, but not topic.

With Lisa Mason's *Summer of Love* ($12.95, Bantam Spectra, trade paper, 384 pages), the balance perhaps begins to swing toward a more overt examination of what that decade meant—and still portends—for our civilization.

We arrive in San Francisco during the summer of '67 with Susan Stein, alias Starbrite, a fourteen-year-old runaway. (Mason herself, one notes, was fourteen that year.) Susan has in mind only fleeing a stifling home in favor of the wild Haight-Ashbury scene. But she has not bargained on the fact that her life holds hidden potentials in which others are interested. For Starbrite, as we learn with the appearance of Chiron, a time traveler from 2467, is "the Axis," the individual on whom five hundred years of unborn future depends. Chiron's assignment is to see her safely through the Summer of Love, so that his world can continue/begin.

Eventually Chiron and Starbrite connect, through the agency of Ruby Maverick, owner of The Mystic Eye, an occult shop. Along with a strong cast of supporting characters (including real individuals as well as *roman à clef* stand-ins, such as Leo Gorgon for Digger Emmett Grogan), the trio live through practically every high- and low-point of their scene: the music, the spontaneous festivals, the pointless excursions "there and back again," the drugs good and bad. Mingled with the 'Sixties minu-

tiae, of course, is the distinctly SF motif of birthing the future through intervention in the past, including opposition from a host of nasty demons, "Demonic Entities Manifested from the Other Now," a burnt-out parallel timeline also struggling to be born.

Mason balances her two concerns nicely. Her replication of the Summer of Love, while not coming across as a first-hand account, is convincingly worked-up from various primary sources and her own empathetic imagination. I initially balked at her opening chapter, which attempts to utilize every bit of 'Sixties slang in the first few thousand words. But when Mason settles into her story, the dialogue becomes less overloaded. As with many deeply researched historical novels, there are a few undigested infodumps, but nothing really too damaging to the flow.

Where Mason excels, thanks to the glorious virtues of hindsight, is in detailing the once-hidden defects of the hippie lifestyle and philosophy. Mistreatment of women, buried class distinctions, mercenary exploitation masquerading as revolution, vulnerability to co-optation by the Establishment—Mason exposes these hidden seeds that led to the downfall of the Aquarians in meticulous detail.

As for Chiron's future, it's more whacked—in a good way—than the 'Sixties. After five centuries of battling pollution, disease, overpopulation, and other disasters, humanity has finally evolved a workable "cosmicist" philosophy and science that produces such trippy discoveries as "the ME3 event" and "the Save Betty Project." In daring to imagine that the kind of goofy dope logic and mysticism that flourished in the 'Sixties might have some relevance to the far future, Mason stands nearly alone in a field which values either cyberpunk cynicism or techno-nerd clarity, but seldom 'Sixties homegrown surrealism.

One thing that distinguishes Mason's book as a second-generation 'Sixties text and not a first-generation one is its linearity and lack of formal experimentation. Anyone dipping into, say, Judith Merril's *England Swings SF* (1968) would be struck by the willingness to discard conventional forms of storytelling in hopes of achieving breakthroughs consistent with new ways of seeing and living. Such boldness is almost totally lacking, of course, in today's SF.

With its recursive references to the SF of the 'Sixties (" 'Starbrite,' Ruby says. 'Life is not one big *Star Trek* metaphor.' "), *Summer of Love* is a refreshingly *engaged* book deeply embedded in both our field and the culture at large, a virtue which so many self-referential SF novels surprisingly lack.

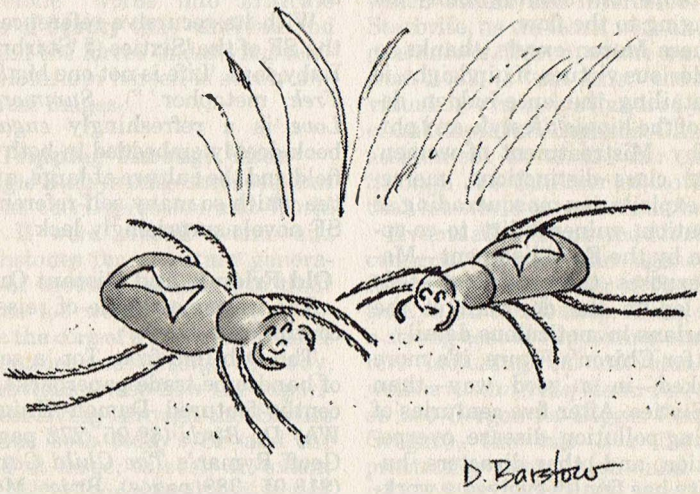
Old Friends and Distant Ones

The welcome trickle of reissues continues to flow.

The Orb line from Tor, a series of handsome trade paperbacks, recently featured Damon Knight's *Why Do Birds* ($9.95, 272 pages), Geoff Ryman's *The Child Garden* ($13.95, 388 pages), Bruce McAllister's *Dream Baby* ($13.95, 434 pages) and an omnibus volume from Sheri Tepper called *The Awakeners* ($14.95, 496 pages),

consisting of her two novels *Northshore* and *Southshore*. From Carroll and Graf come Theodore Sturgeon's *Some of Your Blood* ($3.95, paper, 143 pages) and Clifford Simak's *The Werewolf Principle* ($3.95, paper, 190 pages). Even more intriguing are the offerings from Masquerade Books, under their Rhinoc*eros* and Richard Kasak imprints. Concentrating on erotic SF, they have brought back pioneering works by Philip Jose Farmer and Samuel Delany. Respectively, *Image of the Beast* ($6.95, paper, 277 pages) and *Equinox* ($6.95, paper, 173 pages), formerly known as *The Tides of Lust*. An unexpurgated version of Delany's masterful autobiography, *The Motion of Light in Water* ($12.95, trade, 520 pages) supplements his novel nicely.

SF has two outstanding Japanese friends and critics in the persons of Takayuki Tatsumi and Mari Kotani, husband and wife scholars who can occasionally be met with on the U.S. convention circuit. Both have new books out—unfortunately for us monolinguists, available at this time only in Japanese. Takayuki's two are *Metafiction as Ideology* ($14.00, hardcover, Chikuma Publishers, Tokyo) and *A Manifesto for Japanoids* ($18.00, hardcover, Hayakawa Publishers, Tokyo), both of which deal with a gamut of SF authors Western and Eastern. Mari's entry is *Techno-Gynesis* ($29.00, hardcover, Keiso Publishers, Tokyo), intriguingly subtitled "The Political Unconscious of Feminist Science Fiction." ●



"Well, I'm sorry too, Myrna, but nobody made you eat him afterwards."

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SF CONVENTIONAL CALENDAR

Things are starting to pick up for the new year, so it's time to think ahead. Plan now for social weekends with your favorite SF authors, editors, artists, and fellow fans. For a longer, later list, an explanation of cons, a sample of SF folksongs, and info on clubs and fanzines, send me an SASE (self-addressed, stamped #10 [business] envelope) at 101 S. Whiting #700A, Alexandria VA 22304. The hot line is (703) 461-8645. If a machine answers (with a list of the week's cons), leave a message and I'll call back on my nickel. When writing cons, send an SASE. For free listings, tell me of your con 6 months out. Look for me at cons as Filthy Pierre.—Erwin S. Strauss

JANUARY 1995

6-8—**TropiCon.** For info, write: **Box 70143, Ft. Lauderdale FL 33307.** Or phone: **(305) 662-9426** (10 AM to 10 PM, not collect). Con will be held in: Palm Beach FL (if city omitted, same as in address) at the Hilton. Guests will include: Kristine Kathryn Rusch, artist Jael.

6-8—**Musicon. (615) 889-5951.** Quality Executive Plaza, Nashville TN. Middleton, Moonwulf. Music.

12-15—**Dreamation. (718) 881-4575.** Holiday Inn Jetport, Elizabeth NJ. Live-action role gaming.

13-15—**Arisia. (617) 371-6565.** Park Plaza Hotel, Boston MA. C. J. Cherryh, artist Jael.

13-15—**RustyCon. (206) 367-1150.** Seattle WA. Terry Brooks, and fan T. Bryan Wagner. $35 at door.

13-15—**Making Orbit. (408) 321-0154.** San Francisco CA. Promotion of a larger space program.

13-16—**RuneQuestCon. (510) 649-7467.** San Francisco CA. RuneQuest, Jorune and Ars Magica gaming.

20-22—**Oz Rendezvous, Box 31672, St. Louis MD 63131. (314) 271-2727.** Las Vegas, NV. Baum fans.

FEBRUARY 1995

3-5—**CremeCon, Box 37986, Milwaukee WI 53237.** Manchester East Hotel. E. Bergstrom, Kris Jensen.

3-5—**ClubCon, Box 3100, Kent OH 44240. (800) 529-3976 or (216) 673-2117.** Independence OH. Gaming.

3-5—**DOW, Box 1228, Boston MA 02130.** Day's Inn, Woburn MA. Fans of "Forever Knight" show.

3-5—**TranSept, 2 Westbrook Park Rd., Woodston, Peterborough PE2 9JG, UK.** An SF folksinging con.

3-5—**WinterFest, Box 1242, Claremont CA 91711. (800) 266-3111.** Victorville CA. Rocket-fly meet.

17-19—**KatsuCon, Box 11582, Blacksburg VA 24062.** Holiday Inn, Va. Beach VA. Japanese animation.

17-19—**Boskone, Box 809, Framingham MA 01701. (617) 625-2311.** Sheraton. D. W. Jones, Sanderson.

24-26—**ConCave, Box 3221, Kingsport TN 42135. (615) 239-3106.** Mammoth Resort, Park City KY.

JULY 1995

13-16—**DragonCon, Box 47696, Atlanta GA 30362. (404) 925-2813.** N. Amer. SF Con (NASFiC). $45.

AUGUST 1995

24-28—**Intersection, Box 15340, Washington DC 20003. (301) 345-5186.** Glasgow UK. WorldCon. $125.

AUGUST 1996

29-Sep. 2—**LACon III, Box 8442, Van Nuys CA 91409.** Anaheim CA. WorldCon. $90; $110 in July.

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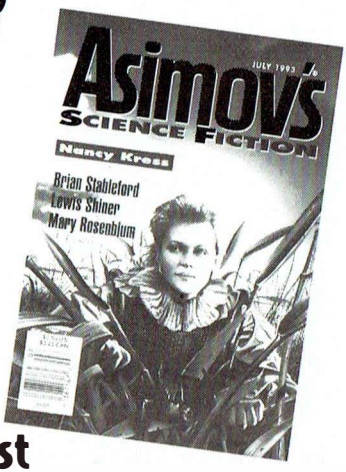

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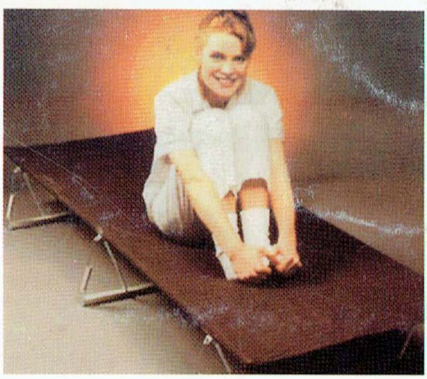

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