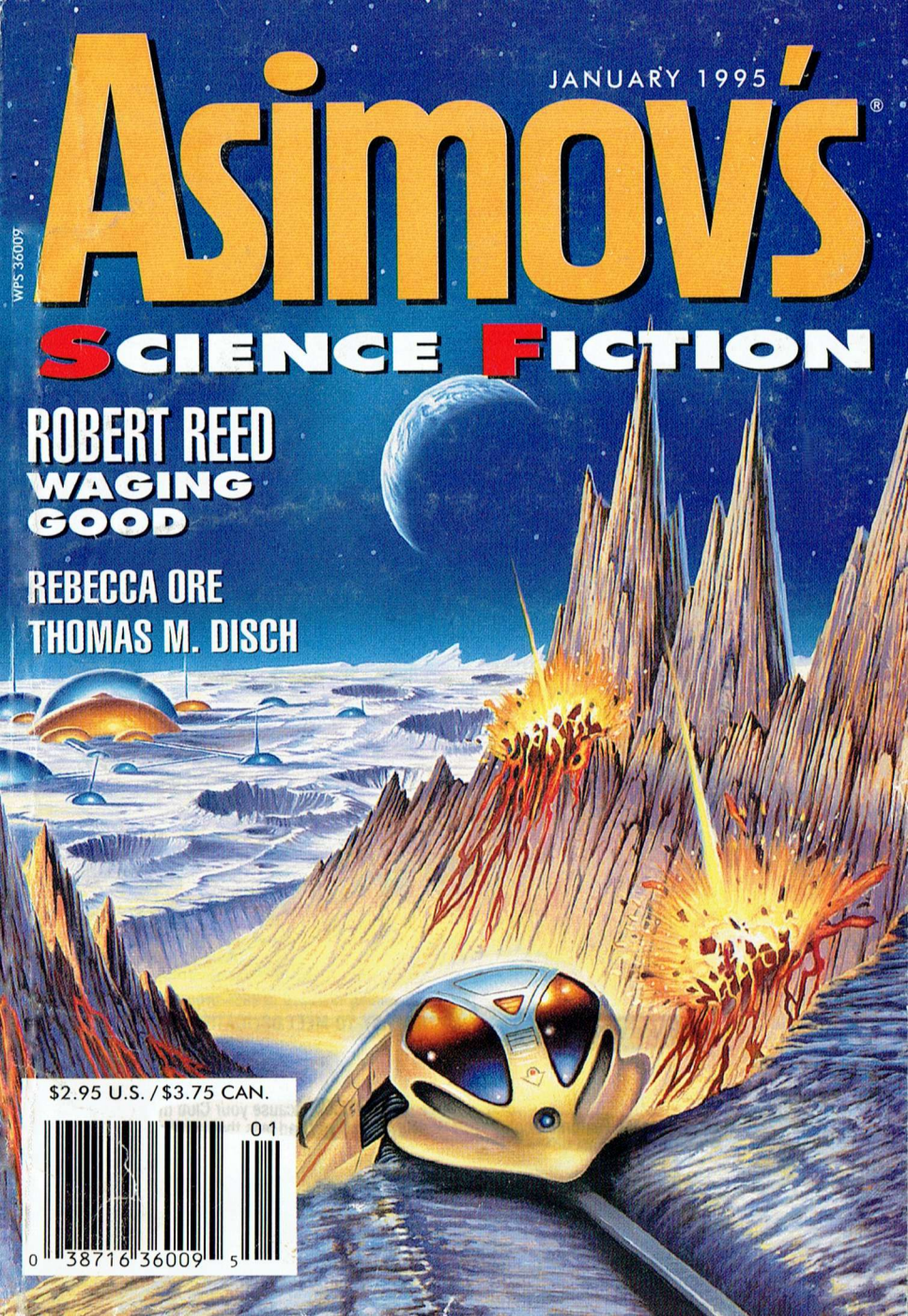
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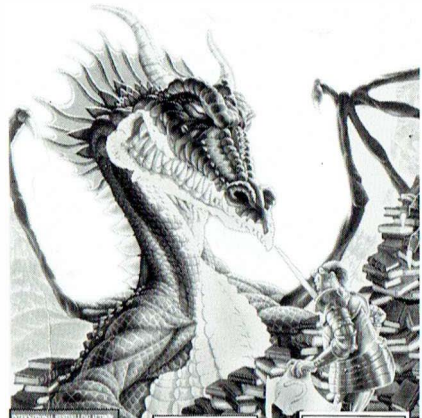

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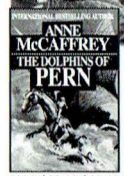

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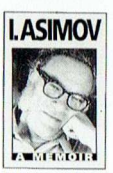

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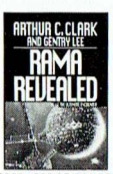

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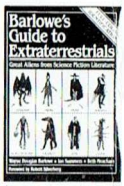

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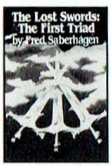

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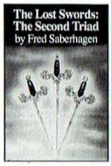

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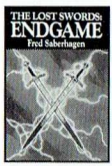

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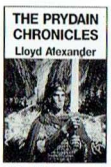

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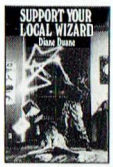

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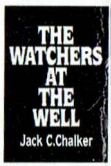

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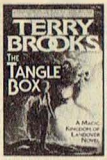

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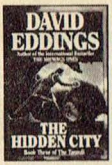

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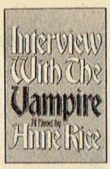

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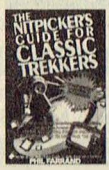

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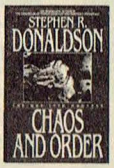

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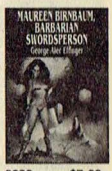

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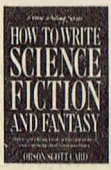

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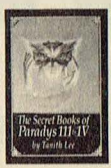

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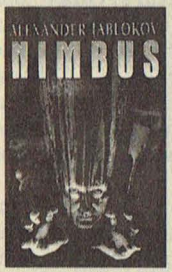

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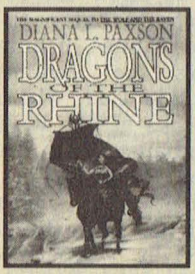

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THE LAST OF THE CODFISH

The kids are illiterate and toting semiautomatic weapons, all the nice soft jobs are being restructured out of existence, the ozone layer is giving out, frogs seem to be going the way of the dodo and the passenger pigeon, and now our fishing fleets are coming home with empty nets because the sea is running out of fish.

That's the bad news, folks. The good news is that all these twenty-first century horrors that are descending on us simultaneously in such terrible haste may simply be part of a normal cycle. In the natural course of events, the scientists are telling us, things tend to get bad for a while, and then they get better. Apparently it's been going on like this for millions of years. If we can only stay out of the line of fire long enough, that is, we may very well survive into a world where the little no-neck horrors all around us *aren't* pushing AK-47s into our faces.

Let's take a look at the fish problem first. Then we can try to soothe ourselves with the hope of rescue through inevitable cyclical upturn.

The news from the seas is definitely bad. More than half of the animal protein we consume comes in the form of seafood. The U.N. Food and Agriculture Office has broken down the 70 percent of this planet that is covered by ocean into seventeen main fisheries. Of these, four are now officially classified as "commercially depleted" and nine are described as being in "serious decline."

What this means, in more concrete terms, is that the Pacific Northwest fishermen whose livelihood depends on salmon may have to take the entire year off, because the salmon aren't there any longer in quantities worth going after.

In New England, where vast harvests of cod, haddock, and flounder have been reaped since the seventeenth century, the number of fish has dropped to such a low level that the Government has put in force a plan restricting fishing days, so as to allow the remaining fish to rebuild their populations, and has banned fishing altogether along the Georges Bank, east of Cape Cod, where once-plentiful stocks of fish have been virtually exhausted. On the Grand Banks of Newfoundland, cod fishing has also been banned—the cod has been designated "commercially extinct"—and thirty thousand people have lost their jobs.

The Chesapeake Bay oyster industry is largely a thing of the past. The grouper and red snapper that were taken in such great numbers in the Gulf of Mexico are pretty much history. In California, Monterey's Cannery Row is now a street lined with art galleries and restaurants and T-shirt shops, because the sardines that kept the canneries busy all during the first half of this century are no longer found in Monterey Bay.

What's going on? Are we facing a future in which the bagels will have no lox, the Caesar salads will lack anchovies, and shrimp cocktails will be available only on the third Tuesday of the month? Probably not, as a matter of fact. But the era of hunting seafood in the wild may very well be coming to an end.

Pollution and other environmental abuse—as in the case of the Pacific salmon, whose freshwater spawning grounds have been fouled or blocked by dams—is part of the problem. But it's a surprisingly small part. The draining of the wetlands and the dumping of toxic substances into estuaries and the breakup of huge oil tankers on the high seas have all had sorry consequences, of course; but the world's oceans are vast beyond even our capacity to fill them up with junk. The real villain seems to be something a lot more elementary: too many fishermen chasing a finite quantity of fish.

Gone are the days when little bands of plucky men went down to the sea in ships to wrest precarious livelihoods from the turbulent waves. They have been replaced, largely, by giant corporate trawlers, equipped with sonar and other

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sophisticated devices and employing satellite communications to track their prey, that swoop up whole marine populations in enormous gulps. The inhabitants of the sea, immense though their numbers may be, can tolerate only so much swooping before the rate of consumption begins to exceed that of reproduction. And the effects of a decade of steady overfishing are now being felt worldwide.

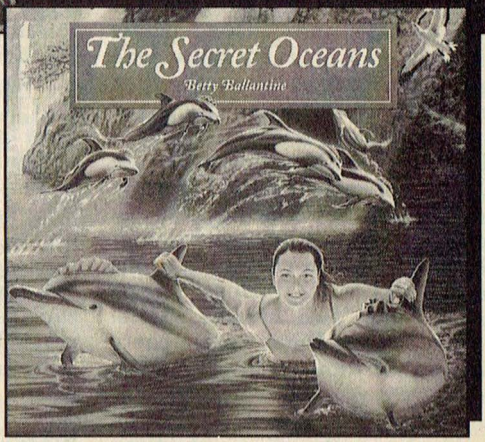
To some degree the seafood shortfall is being made up by farm-raised fish, grown in pens off the coast of Scandinavia and South America. (The easy availability of certain types of fish from these sources has, paradoxically, accelerated the destruction of the conventional fisheries; faced with the competition of cheap pen-grown fish, fishermen who harvest the seas have been making ever deeper inroads into the available fish schools in order to earn a living.)

And in places where conservation measures have ensured some degree of population balance, the fisheries are actually on the upturn. Salmon are far from extinct in Alaska, where a record two hundred million fish were caught in 1993. The size of the Alaskan salmon catch is carefully regulated, though, to allow a surplus of spawning over harvesting. In New England, the lobster industry is still doing well, and sea bass and mackerel are returning along the East Coast now that some degree of protection has been imposed. These are promising signs, and they may signal a trend. Even die-hard libertarians—and I incline in that direction myself—find themselves applauding government intervention where reckless and uncontrolled harvesting of the marine crop has begun to triumph even over the economic self-interest of the harvesters.

And then, from another quarter, comes the suggestion—of considerable philosophical interest, and possibly of economic value too—that large-scale fluctuations in animal populations may in fact be random events, the product of inherent instability in the natural world. It may, in fact, be quite normal for any animal species to undergo wild and unpredictable population swings over long periods of time, whether or not the trawlers have sonar.

This is not to say that the extinction of the dodo, say, was the result of a mere stochastic blip. The dodo was a slow-moving, defenseless bird, incapable of flight, that happened to live on a small and isolated island where it had no natural enemies, human or otherwise. Dutch explorers showed up there in 1598. They found dodo meat good to eat; their pet dogs developed a fondness for gobbling dodo chicks; and the rats that slipped ashore from the Dutch ships went after the dodo eggs in the unprotected nests. In less than a century there were no dodos left. That was no statistical event, though: it was simple genocide.

But larger animal populations, according to a study done at the University of California at Davis and published in *Science* some months back, appear to experience startling fluctuations in their numbers for reasons that seem to be wholly unconnected with the onslaughts of predators, environ-



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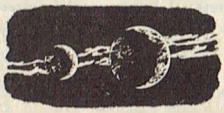
mental changes, climatic shifts, or any other apparent external cause.

Computer analysis of the life cycle of the Dungeness crab, extended over tens of thousands of generations, showed chaotic patterns of population size to be the norm. Environmental conditions were left entirely out of the model; the only factors for change in population that went into the equation were internal ones such as competition for food or living space. One might expect that in any one zone inhabited by crabs, the size of the crab population would fluctuate in direct homeostatic response to these two factors—a population explosion in times of easy food availability, followed by a population decline when the number of crabs along that coast increased to a point where food became scarce. Instead, the Davis researchers found that total population numbers might remain steady for thousands of generations, and then suddenly undergo a startling quantitative change—an immense boom, or an equally emphatic crash that seemingly is without rational explanation.

All of which is very disturbing to the pure Darwinian thinker. It introduces an unwelcome note of chaos into our understanding of how the natural world functions. As Dr. Simon Levin, the director of the Princeton Environmental Institute, puts it, "The recognition that systems are not at or very close to equilibrium certainly complicates the world view of some people who are trying to manage systems." Yet there are ample real-world examples of such volatility. History records any number of sudden pestiferous plagues of locusts or mice. Huge increases in bat populations are not uncommon; frogs, as we are seeing, now seem to be in worldwide decline; the sardines stopped coming to Monterey in 1947; the lobster population off Maine is some 50 percent higher now than it was a decade ago, a change that can't be accounted for simply by improved conservation policies.

Perhaps we can evoke chaos theory to console ourselves for more than one contemporary problem. The development of excessively efficient fish-harvesting technology, let us say, has coincided fortuitously but unfortunately (note the distinction!) with a random downward fluctuation in certain marine populations. What must be done now, therefore, is to cut back on commercial oceanic fishing, as much as is possible consonant with the nutritional needs of the world's human population, until the next random twitch of the reproductive cycle restocks our oceans. And all our current societal problems are, likewise, just a random disequilibrium event that will sooner or later undergo compensatory damping and go away.

It would be nice to think so, anyway. ●



LETTERS

Dear Sirs:

Last year I decided to start reading SF magazines again and took a subscription to *Asimov's*. My first issue was December 1993. I have read all the issues since then, and enjoyed them. I'm a little late in getting around to this, but I just wanted to tell you that I think your February 1994 issue was great —the best one so far. "A Martian Childhood" was excellent with "The Hole in the Hole" coming in second and "No Refunds" third. "A Bag of Custard" ranked last primarily because it's strictly fantasy, but it was still quite cute. "Whinin' Boy Blues" was next to last. It was interesting, but it had so much profanity and obscenity in it. I don't like that and I especially don't like stories based on sex such as "Big Guy" in the June 1994 issue.

The February 1994 issue also had a great editorial which I have put in a special file I have. Incidentally I read everything in the magazines except the poetry; I just can't get into it.

Keep up the good work.

Yours truly,

John Matlock
Dana Point, CA

Dear Editor,

I'm a big science fiction fan and I've been reading *Asimov's Science Fiction* for a long time. I'm glad this magazine is produced in braille, so that people with vision disabilities can read it. I like the magazine very much and I enjoy the wonderful stories. I just finished the February issue and the stories were great. My two favorites were, "The Hole in the Hole" by Terry Bisson and "A Martian Childhood" by Kim Stanley Robinson. I hope you publish more of their stories.

Sincerely Yours,

Anne Mauro
Beth Page, NY

Dear Sir,

I was a regular reader of *Asimov's* some years ago, but I must admit I haven't read an issue for a time. However I did read the January and February issues and found them quite interesting (though perhaps not always for the reasons you intended).

The January issue certainly had an eye-catching cover, which of course is the first necessity for a cover. I enjoyed the two short stories very much—Connie Willis's "Why the World Didn't End Last Tuesday" is as unusual as I expect from her, and good fun for all those familiar with the Book of Revelation. Michael Swanwick's "The Changeling's Tale" was a lovely

bittersweet fairy tale that reminds me it's over twenty years since I last read *Lord of the Rings*. . . .

The novelettes are a mixed bag in some ways. Attanasio's "Remains of Adam" is the closest to hard SF, with a plot that could have come from an old Edmond Hamilton story, but with a nineties denseness of texture. Purdom's "Legacies" isn't bad reading and is interesting for the way it uses different elements in theme (children of military families), plot (brainwashing to prevent trauma) and background (interplanetary terrorist crisis).

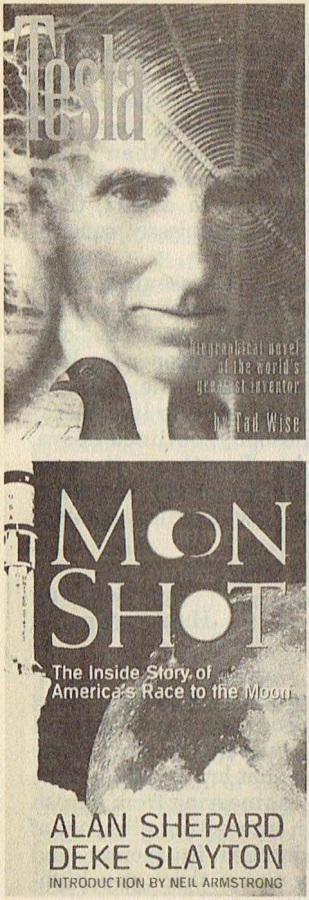
There are some problems with the other two novelettes. L.T. Duchamp's "Things of the Flesh" has a category problem in that it's about a woman doctor who contracts a sexually transmitted disease for which there's no cure. Now I can't really see that we can make this SF except for the (fictitious) disease. It could be told about AIDS in the modern day or about syphillis in a past century. There's also a plotting problem in that readers are not often keen on stories of futile and suicidal lives—if I'd been editing it, I would have asked for a re-write of the ending (*not* a "happy ending," but one which at least implied that some progress had been made in the struggle); as it is, one feels that one has read the first half of a two-part story.

Utley's "Edge of the Wind" has a similar problem in one way. This is what (back in the Sixties) I used to call "an *F&SF* story," meaning that while it was well written and intriguingly plotted there was no resolution or explanation at the end. Utley's story is beautifully written, certainly, but how many readers finished the last page and thought "What did *that* mean?" Food for thought, perhaps?

Moving on to the February issue, I was struck by the small amount of non-fiction in this issue—back in its early days, I seem to remember there was a *lot* of it in every issue. I have to side with the readers who say they buy magazines for stories, not articles, although there can be a balance struck. It was nice to see Kim Stanley Robinson's cover story (we're hoping to see him down here in 1995 for the first Tasmanian Convention), though usually I don't read excerpts from novels.

The short stories were an interesting lot. Mike Resnick's "Barnaby in Exile" may be uncomfortably close to being a realistic non-genre story, while Phyllis Eisenstein's "No Refunds" was good modern fantasy (wouldn't this have made a good *Twilight Zone* episode!). Allen Steele amused me with his yarn about the Feds planting bugs on drug dealers—real bugs! However I found Michael Payne's bag-of-custard story wasn't quite as wild and wacky as the author seemed to think it was (I would expect this story to turn up in a school magazine or a fanzine rather than *Asimov's*).

The two novelettes were both most diverting. Terry Bisson's "The Hole in the Hole" was fascinating, though I don't have the math to be convinced or otherwise by Bisson's equations when he tries to prove that the wild plot isn't as impossible as we might think. Likewise Kandis Elliot's



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"Laddie of the Lake" was also great fun, with its search for unknown fauna in the Wisconsin swamps pleasantly reminiscent of those great old Brigadier Fellowes stories that Sterling Lanier used to write for *F&SF*. It's intimated that both stories could become series, and I for one wouldn't mind at all if that came to pass.

So all in all I liked February slightly more than January. In fact I may go back to reading *Asimov's* every month again. . . .

Best wishes to all at Dell Magazines.

Yours sciencerely,

Michael O'Brien
New Town, Tasmania
Australia

Dear Editor,

Over the years, I've greatly enjoyed Mike Resnick's *Kirinyaga* stories (most recently, "A Little Knowledge" in the April 1994 issue). Not only are they well written and engaging, but (and this is the *sine qua non* of great SF) they make you think. (College "sosh profs" should assign them in their classes.) They might bring about some very interesting debates in your letter column.

I am an unreconstructed believer in linear history and cultural evolution (no postmodern bones in *this* body!). That is, I see history as a journey, not a random walk (though it does present us with a low signal-to-noise ratio). And I see culture as a human artifact—more or less a nonmaterialistic form of technology—and not a fit subject for reverence, or preservation beyond its usefulness. Like any technology, a culture should be judged by the ratio of benefit to cost and risk. Since it takes a certain "critical mass" of population to define a culture (in *The Stand,* Stephen King suggests three, but it's certainly greater than that), when individuals in a declining enclave culture try to depart, their rights are often ruthlessly squelched.

Kirinyaga is a museum created by the atavistic Koriba, and others, to live in. Now that the "others" are gone, is it proper for Koriba to insist that the younger generation continue to live there? In my philosophy, outlined above, it *might* be. To others, it could never be. I'm intensely curious to see if and how Resnick resolves this issue.

Yours very truly,

Jess Schilling
Huntington, PA

Dear Mr. Dozois:

I thoroughly enjoyed Greg Egan's "Cocoon" in your May 1994 issue. It's a well crafted story of the near future that brings up an issue of genetic engineering from a fresh angle, with interesting glimpses of positive changes in society and technology woven through a high-tech detective story.

The one mystery remaining is why you felt you had to label this particular story with a warning about "scenes that may be disturbing." The only violent scene is a non-fatal attack with baseball bats, and if that's disturbing then most of the stories in your magazine need the same warning. Or could it possibly have referred to the shockingly graphic sex scenes, one of which reads: "In bed that

night, we made love very slowly, at first just kissing and stroking each other's bodies for what seemed like hours"?

Sincerely,

Bob Kanafsky
Mountain View, CA

Asimov's Science Fiction
Editorial Staff:

In recent years, I have found the contents of your (and other) SF magazines disappointing but your May issue was, in my opinion, uniformly good, with the exception of Greg Egan's "Cocoon," which was absolutely superb. It was because of Egan that I was compelled to write to the editors, for the first time in fifty years of reading science fiction.

No doubt Mr. Egan's exposition on the causes of homosexuality is a currently accepted theory and as to its validity I cannot say. It sounds like a plausible alternative to me. But the treatment of homosexuals in an ethnic context was interesting to say the least: that the elimination of homosexuality would be construed as a form of genocide. Is it possible to commit genocide without killing? Obviously it is.

Of course homosexuality is not an "ethnicity" by any definition of that word, being in fact cross ethnic. A homosexual Serb is still a Serb. What is more, unlike any ethnicity, a homosexual subculture requires the constant influx of new members taken from the heterosexual part of society, which has a virtual monopoly on reproduction of the species. Which is not to denigrate the reproductive contributions made by homosexual women who are married or who choose to bear children while maintaining a monogamous homosexual relationship. But their effect is minimal. Moreover they do not appear to breed true.

There is good reason why heterosexual couples would choose to avoid the option of bearing homosexual children. The homosexual represents a loss of the genetic potential of the parents. The laws of natural reproduction are not repealed by humanity. The rule is that if you do not reproduce you will not be the mechanism that propels your genes into the future of the species. And this is (especially) true when a species is about to undergo a reproductive crash due to overpopulation as is ours.

Thus it may be that a diminution of the reproductive fervor of the species is generally good for it (at least in the short term), and many persons may choose to raise children who are unrelated to themselves entirely, based on the notion that any human child is equivalent to another. Note that in nature no such altruism exists.

No one can gainsay the contributions that homosexuals have made and continue to make for society in a general sense. But this contribution is made, in each case, at a cost to a particular pair of heterosexual parents who have their natural desire to continue themselves drained away by the reluctance of their costly offspring to reproduce. This would be particularly irksome if due to pollution and other factors the heterosexual siblings of the homosexual were also marginally reproductive. It has been noted (*Scientific American*) that sperm levels

and semen amounts have both been reduced by a third worldwide since 1947 (presumably by the androgen mimicking qualities of insecticides). The cost of raising a child to the parenting pair is measured both by emotional involvement and in scarce resources, expressed in dollars. Now I know that dollars are often considered a crass measure of value, but each dollar represents, for the vast majority of people, time taken from the conduct of life, doing what they would otherwise not do if they were not paid to do it: namely work.

Thus a homosexual subculture is in a sense genetically parasitic on the heterosexual portion of its community. A device such as is proposed in Egan's story would not eliminate homosexuality if homosexuals were to, by the application of the identical technology, assume the responsibility of producing and raising their own homosexual children thus becoming a true self-sustaining self-replicating ethnicity. Any technique that can prevent a condition can be altered to produce it. I can understand the anguish and anger of individuals who lose the ability to disport themselves unfettered by the requirement to expend their resources to get what was once free, but then, should they assume the responsibility of reproduction (which is the basis of marriage), no fair minded person could refuse them the right to complete parity with heterosexuals.

Leonard F. Giaccone
Poughkeepsie, NY

Dear *Asimov's:*

Just got my May issue and was absolutely delighted to read Greg Egan's "Cocoon." It's a great story with a great premise. I've read about the research he based the story on—the maternal cortisol/gay offspring connection—and found the story chillingly believable. I'm one of the "sympathetic straight females" Egan mentions, and as the mother of two young sons I know exactly what I would do if I could guarantee sexual orientation: I wouldn't touch it. Some of the finest minds in history have been gay and have added tremendously to the social and cultural growth of our species. Civilization needs the gay mind like bread needs yeast to rise. And not all members of mankind need to procreate to ensure the progress of civilization—there are plenty of us breeders already.

I was, however, annoyed at the disclaimer that some "brief scenes . . . may be disturbing to some readers." After seeing that, I braced myself for scenes of gruesome, torturous violence. Then, after finishing the story, I realized I was supposed to be shocked *(shocked!)* that a gay couple expresses love very much like a straight couple. Oh, please! You wouldn't dream of inserting such a disclaimer if the love scenes were really steamy and gratuitous, but hetero. In "Cocoon" the love scenes were very understated and obviously necessary to show the reader the vulnerability and normalness of the main character.

Well, I guess you may have a subscriber or two in the Bible Belt and you have to make sure their tender sensibilities aren't knocked about too much. I wish the evening news carried similar disclaimers.

I am very glad I just renewed *Asimov's* for another two years. Keep them coming!

Mary Albinson

Mr. Dozois,

Although I have been a silent consumer of your magazine for three or four years now, Greg Egan's story "Cocoon" in the May 1994 issue is the first story to prompt written comment from me. I want to express my thanks to you and your editorial staff for publishing "Cocoon" because the story's protagonist is a well-adjusted homosexual male, who has—gasp! —a conscience.

I was born a gay man in Alabama, where for obvious reasons my carefully closeted sexual identity caused me perpetual emotional strife; I felt as though I were the only person ever born who was attracted to members of the same sex, not to mention the self-hate I felt as a direct result of local religious teachings on the matter. If there had been more decent, mature gay role models like Mr. Egan's appearing in fictional literature in those days, I daresay I would not have felt as lonely or hated myself as much after reading such stories.

The value of *any* reasonably happy portrait of homosexual life is immeasurable to gay and lesbian young people. I applaud Greg Egan and all those at *Asimov's* who helped bring "Cocoon" to the public.

Philip Nolen
Orlando, FL

To the Editor:

I eagerly await the arrival of each new *Asimov's,* especially with stories like "Cocoon" by Greg Egan (May 1994), and "A Little Knowledge" by Mike Resnick (April 1994). When people derisively ask why I read SF, I lend them my latest *Asimov's.* The blend of hard science and harder ethical questions in the stories you choose is answer enough.

Sincerely,

Debra Coenisch
Lincoln Park, NY

To the Editors:

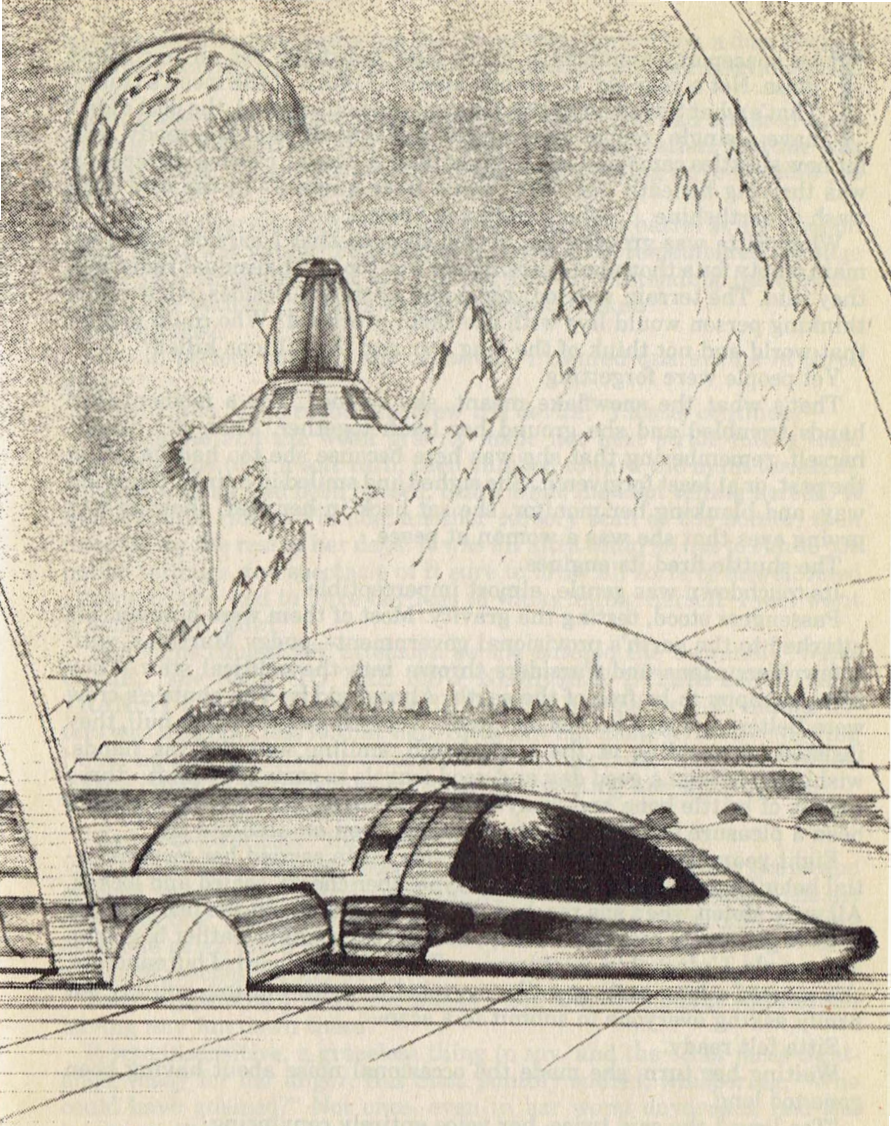
I really enjoyed Mary Rosenblum's "The Mermaid's Comb," but it was rather surprising to me that there didn't seem to be any people standing up for the extension of full human rights to the selkies and dolphs, or at least not any visible ones. It seems rather surprising, considering how many people right now are arguing that we should extend the rights of life, liberty, and the pursuit of happiness to non-sapient creatures. Or, have all such people somehow been crushed in that future world? I certainly hope that I would have the courage to be one of the loudest pro-freedom demonstrators, at least until the cops came to haul my butt and my stereo off to jail (or cut my Internet access off, if I were still living inland and had to carry out my beliefs via the Information Superhighway).

Sincerely,

Leigh Kimmel
New Lenox, IL

Robert Reed

WAGING GOOD



"Waging Good" belongs to the same cycle of stories as "Sister Alice" (*Asimov's,* November 1993), though its events take place much closer to our present time. Mr. Reed's latest novel, *Beyond the Veil of Stars,* has just been taken by the Science Fiction Book Club. The author recently sold a new book, *An Exaltation of Larks,* to Tor.

Illustration by Peter Peeples

The spaceport resembled a giant jade snowflake set on burnished glass. Not a year old, it already absorbed much of the moon's traffic. That's what Sitta had heard. Unarmored and exposed, the port didn't have a single combat laser or any fighting ships at the ready. The fat new shuttles came and left without fear. A casual, careless prosperity was thriving beneath her. Who would have guessed? In the cold gray wash of earthshine . . . who could have known. . . ?

When Sitta was growing up, people claimed that Nearside would remain empty for a thousand years. There was too much residual radiation, they said. The terrain was too young and unstable. Besides, what right-thinking person would live with the earth overhead? Who could look at that world and not think of the long war and the billions killed?

Yet people were forgetting.

That's what the snowflake meant, she decided. For a moment, her hands trembled and she ground her teeth together. Then she caught herself, remembering that she was here because she too had forgotten the past, or at least forgiven it. She sighed and smiled in a tired, forgiving way, and blanking her monitor, she sat back in her seat, showing any prying eyes that she was a woman at peace.

The shuttle fired its engines.

Its touchdown was gentle, almost imperceptible.

Passengers stood, testing the gravity. Most of them were bureaucrats attached to the earth's provisional government—pudgy Martians, with a few Mercurians and Farsiders thrown into the political stew. They seemed happy to be free of the earth. Almost giddy. The shuttle's crew were Belters, spidery-limbed and weak. Yet despite the moon's pull, they insisted on standing at the main hatch, smiling and shaking hands, wishing everyone a good day and good travels to come. The pilot—three meters of brittle bone and waxy skin—looked at Sitta, telling her, "It's been a pleasure serving you, my dear. It's been an absolute joy."

Eight years ago, banished from Farside, Sitta carried her most essential belongings in an assortment of hyperfiber chests, sealed and locked. All were stolen when she reached the earth, whereupon she learned how little is genuinely essential. Today, she carried a single leather bag, trim and simple. Unlockable, unobtrusive. Following the herd of bureaucrats, she entered a long curling walkway, robot sentries waiting, politely but firmly asking everyone to submit to a scan.

Sitta felt ready.

Waiting her turn, she made the occasional noise about having been gone too long.

"Too long," she said twice, her voice entirely convincing.

The earth had left its marks. Once pretty in a frail, pampered way, Sitta had built heavier bones and new muscle, fats and fluid added in just the last few months. Her face showed the abuse of weather, save around her thin mouth. Toxins and a certain odd fungus had left her skin blotchy, scarred. Prettiness had become a handsome strength. She

needed that strength, watching the robots turn toward her, a dozen sensitive instruments reaching inside her possessions and her body, no place to hide.

But these were routine precautions, of course. She had endured more thorough examinations in Athens and the orbiting station, and she was perfectly safe. There was nothing dangerous, nothing anyone could yet find—

—and the nearest robot hesitated, pointing a gray barrel at her swollen belly. What was wrong? Fear began to build. Sitta remembered the sage advice of a smuggler, and she hid her fear by pretending impatience, asking her accuser, "What's wrong? Are you broken?"

No response.

"I'm in perfect health," she declared. "I cleared quarantine in three days—"

"Thank you." The robot withdrew the device. "Please, continue."

Adrenaline and the weak gravity made her next stride into a leap. The walktube took a soft turn, then climbed toward the main terminal. Another barrier had been passed; that's what she kept telling herself. It was a simple ride to Farside, another cursory scan at the border, then freedom for the rest of her days. It was all Sitta could do not to run to the public railbugs, the spectacle of it sure to draw all sorts of unwelcomed attention. She had to force her legs to walk, telling herself: I just want it done. Now. Now!

Two signs caught her attention as she entered the terminal. "WELCOME," she read, "TO THE NEW NEARSIDE INTERPLANETARY TRANSIT FACILITY AND PEACE PARK." Beyond its tall, viscous letters was a second, less formal sign. Sitta saw her name written in flowing liquid-light script, then heard the shouts and applause, a tiny but enthusiastic crowd of wellwishers charging her, making her want to flee.

"Surprise!" they shouted.

"Are you surprised?" they asked.

Sitta looked at the nervous faces, and they examined her scars and general weathering, nobody wanting to out and out stare. Then she set down her bag, taking a breath and turning, showing her profile, making everyone gawk and giggle aloud.

Hands reached for her belly.

Pony, flippant as always, exclaimed, "Oh, and we thought you weren't having any fun down there!"

It was insensitive, a graceless thing to say, and the other faces tightened, ready for her anger. But Sitta politely smiled, whispering, "Who could have guessed?" Not once, even in her worst daydream, had she imagined that anyone would come to meet her. How could they even know she was here? With a voice that sounded just a little forced, Sitta said, "Hello. How are all of you?" She grasped the nearest hand and pressed it against herself. It was Varner's hand, large and masculine, and soft. When had she last felt a hand both free of callus and intact?

"No wonder you're home early," Varner observed, his tone effortlessly sarcastic. "What are you? Eight months along?"

"More than six," Sitta replied, by reflex.

Icenice, once her very best friend, came forward and demanded a hug. Still tall, still lovely, and still overdressed for the occasion, she put her thin long arms around Sitta and burst into tears. Wiping her face with the sleeve of her black-and-gold gown, she stepped back and sputtered, "We're sorry, darling. For everything. Please—"

Varner said, "Icenice," in warning.

"—accept our apologies. Please?"

"I came home, didn't I?" asked Sitta.

The question was interpreted as forgiveness. A second look told her this wasn't the same old gang. Where were Lean and Catchen? And Unnel? The Twins had made it, still indistinguishable from each other, and Vechel, silent as always. But there were several faces hanging in the background, wearing the suffering patience of strangers. Spouses, or spies?

Sitta found herself wondering if this was some elaborate scheme meant to keep tabs on her. Or perhaps it was a kind of slow, subtle torture, a prelude to things even worse.

Everybody was talking; nobody could listen.

Suddenly Varner—always their reasonable, self-appointed boss—pushed at people and declared, "We can chat on the rail." Turning to Sitta, he grinned and asked, "May I carry this lady's satchel?"

For an instant, in vivid detail, she remembered the last time she had seen him.

Varner took her hesitation as a refusal. "Well, you're twice my strength anyway." Probably true. "Out of our way, people! A mother needs room! Make way for us!"

They used slidewalks, giant potted jungles passing on both sides of them.

Staring at the luxurious foliage, unfruited and spendthrift, Sitta wondered how many people could be fed by crops grown in those pots, if only they could be transported to the earth.

Stop it, she warned herself.

Turning to Icenice, she examined the rich fabrics of her gown and the painted, always perfect breasts. With a voice intense and casual in equal measures, she asked, "How did you know I would be here?"

Icenice grinned and bent closer. "We had a tip."

Sitta was traveling under her own name, but she'd left the Plowsharers in mid-assignment. Besides, Plowsharers were suppose to enjoy a certain anonymity, what with the negative feelings toward them. "What kind of tip, darling?"

"I told one of your administrators about us. About the prank, about how sorry we felt." Her long hands meshed, making a single fist. "She knew your name. 'The famous Sitta,' she called you. 'One of our best.' "

Nodding, Sitta made no comment.

"Just yesterday, without warning, we were told that you'd been given a medical discharge, that you were coming here." Tears filled red-rimmed eyes. "I was scared for you, Sitta. We all were."

"I wasn't," said Varner. "A little cancer, a little virus. You're too smart to get yourself into real trouble."

Sitta made no comment.

"We took the risk, made a day of it," Icenice continued. She waited for Sitta's eyes to find hers, then asked, "Would you like to come to my house? We've planned a little celebration, if you're up to it."

She had no choice but to say, "All right."

The others closed in on her, touching the belly, begging for attention. Sitta found herself looking upward, hungry for privacy. Through the glass ceiling, she saw the gibbous gray face of the earth, featureless and chill; and after a long moment's anguish, she heard herself saying, "The last time I spoke to you—"

"Forget it," Varner advised, as if it was his place to forgive.

Icenice assured her, "That was eons ago."

It felt like it was minutes ago. If that.

Then Pony poked her in the side, saying, "We know you. You've never held a grudge for long."

"Pony," Varner growled, in warning.

Sitta made no sound, again glancing at the earth.

Again Varner touched her with his soft heavy hand, meaning to reassure her in some fashion. Suddenly his hand jumped back. "Quite a little kicker, isn't he?"

"She," Sitta corrected, eyes dropping.

"Six months along?"

"Almost seven." She held her leather bag in both hands. Why couldn't she just scream at them and run away? Because it would draw attention, and worse, because someone might ask why she would come here. Sitta had no family left on the moon, no property, nothing but some electronic money in a very portable bank account. "I guess I just don't understand . . . why you people even bothered—"

"Because," Icenice proclaimed, taking her best friend by the shoulders, "we knew you deserved a hero's welcome."

"Our hero," people muttered, something practiced in those words. "Our own little hero."

Now she was a hero, was she?

The irony made her want to laugh, for an instant. She had come to murder them, and she was heroic?

"Welcome home!" they shouted, in unison.

Sitta allowed herself another tired smile, letting them misunderstand the thought behind it. Then she glanced at the earth, longing in her gaze, that world's infinite miseries preferable to this world's tiny, thoughtless ones.

2

The war ended when Sitta was four years old, but for her and her friends it hadn't existed except as a theory, as a topic that interested adults, and as a pair of low-grade warnings when the earth fired its last shots. But they were never endangered. For all intents and purposes, the war was won decades before, the earth in no position to succeed, its enemies able to weather every blow, then take a certain warm pleasure in their final campaigns.

Victory was a good thing. The four-year-old Sitta could understand good and evil, winning and losing, and why winners deserved their laurels and losers earned their punishments. She also understood, in some wordless way, that Farside was a special place meant for the best people. Its border was protected by fortifications and energy barriers. Between its people and the enemy were several thousand kilometers of dead rock. Bombs and lasers could obliterate Nearside, melting it and throwing up new mountains; but on Farside, for more than a century, the people had suffered nothing worse than quakes and some accidental deaths, friendly bombs and crashing warships doing more damage than the earth could manage.

Other worlds were fighting for survival, every life endangered; but the back of the moon was safe, its citizens able to profit by their luck. Sitta's family made its fortune in genetic weapons—adaptive plagues and communicable cancers, plus a range of parasites. Following a Farside custom, her parents waited until retirement to have their child. It was the same for Icenice, for Varner. For everyone, it seemed. Sitta was shocked to learn as a youngster that near-youngsters could make babies. She had assumed that humans were like the salmon swimming up from the Central Sea, a lifetime of preparation followed by a minute of desperate spawning, then death. That's how it had been for Sitta's parents; both of them expired even before she reached puberty.

An aunt inherited her—an ancient, stern and incompetent creature—and when their relationship collapsed, Sitta lived with her friends' families, all pleasant and all indifferent toward her.

Growing up, she learned about the great war. Tutors spoke of its beginnings—and they lectured for hours about military tactics and the many famous battles. Yet the war always seemed unreal to Sitta. It was a giant and elaborate theory. She liked its battles for the visual records they left behind, colorful and modestly exciting, and she observed the dead with a clinical detachment. Sitta was undeniably bright—her genes had been tweaked to ensure a quick, effortless intelligence—yet in some fundamental way, she had gaps. Flaws. Watching the destruction of Nearside and Hellas and dozens of other tragedies, she couldn't envision the suffering involved. The dead were so many theories. And what is more, they were dead because they deserved their fates, unworthy of living here, unworthy of Farside.

The earth began the war with ten billion citizens. It had skyhooks and

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enormous solar farms, every sort of industry and the finest scientists. The earth should have won. Sitta wrote the same paper for several tutors, pointing out moments when any decisive, coordinated assault would have crushed the colonies. Yet when chances came, the earth lost its nerve. Too squeamish to obliterate its enemies—too willing to show a partial mercy—it let the colonies breathe and grow strong again, ensuring its own demise.

For that failure, Sitta had shown nothing but scorn. And her tutors, to the machine, agreed with her, awarding good grades with each paper, the last tutor adding, "You have a gift with political science. Perhaps you'll enter government service, then work your way into a high office."

It was a ridiculous suggestion. Sitta didn't need a career, what with her fortune and her natural talents. If she ever wanted, for whatever the reason, any profession, she was certain that she would begin near the top, in some position of deserved authority.

She was an important child of important Farsiders.

How could she deserve anything less?

3

The railbug was ornate and familiar—an old-fashioned contraption with a passing resemblance to a fat, glass-skinned caterpillar—but it took Sitta a little while to remember where she had seen it. They were underway, free of the port and streaking across the smooth glass plain. Sitting on one of the stiff seats, she stroked the dark wood trim. There was a time when wood was a precious substance on Farside, organics scarce, even for the wealthy few. Remembering smaller hands on the trim, she looked at Varner and asked, "Did we play here?"

"A few times," he replied, grinning.

It had belonged to his family, too old to use and not fancy enough to refurbish. She remembered darkness and the scent of old flowers. "You brought me here—"

"—for sex, as I remember it." Varner laughed aloud, glancing at the others, seemingly asking them to laugh with him. "How old were we?"

Too young, she recalled. The experience had been clumsy, and except for the fear of being caught, she'd had little fun. Why did anyone bother with sex? she would ask herself for weeks. Even when she was old enough, screwing Varner and most of her other male friends, part of Sitta remained that doubtful child, the fun of it merely fun, just another little pleasure to be squeezed into long days and nights of busy idleness.

The railbug was for old-times sake, she assumed. But before she could ask, Icenice began serving refreshments, asking, "Who wants, who needs?" There was alcohol and more exotic fare. Sitta chose wine, sipping as she halfway listened to the jumbled conversations. People told childhood stories, pleasant memories dislodging more of the same. Nobody mentioned the earth or the war. If Sitta didn't know better, she would

assume that nothing had changed in these last years, that these careless lives had been held in a kind of stasis. Maybe that was true, in a sense. But then, as Icenice strode past and the hem of her gown lifted, she noticed the gold bracelet worn on the woman's left ankle. Sitta remembered that bracelet; it had belonged to the girl's mother, and to her grandmother before. In a soft half-laugh, she asked:

"Are you married, girl?"

Their hostess paused for an instant, then straightened her back and smiled, her expression almost embarrassed. "I should have told you. Sorry, darling." A pause. "Almost three years married, yes."

The buzz of other conversations diminished. Sitta looked at the strangers, wondering which one of them was the husband.

"He's a Mercurian," said her one-time friend. "Named Bosson."

The old Icenice had adored men in the plural. The old Icenice gave herself sophisticated personality tests, then boasted of her inability to enjoy monogamy. Married? To a hundred men, perhaps. Sitta cleared her throat, then asked, "What sort of man is he?"

"Wait and see," Icenice advised. She adjusted the straps of her gown, pulling them one way, then back where they began. "Wait and see."

The strangers were staring at Sitta, at her face.

"Who are they?" she asked in a whisper.

And finally they were introduced, more apologies made for tardiness. Pony took the job for herself, prefacing it by saying, "We're all Farsiders here." Was that important? "They've heard about you, darling. They've wanted to meet you for a long, long while. . . !"

Shaking damp hands, Sitta consciously forgot every name. Were they friends to the old gang? Yet they didn't seem to fit that role. She found herself resurrecting that ridiculous theory about spies and a plot. There was some agenda here, something she could feel in the air. But why bring half a dozen government agents? Unless the plan was to be obvious, in which case they were succeeding.

A social pause. Turning her head, Sitta noticed a long ceramic rib or fin standing on the irradiated plain. For an instant, when the earthshine had the proper angle, she could make out the bulk of something buried in the glass, locked securely in place. A magma whale, she realized.

At the height of the war, when this basin was a red-hot sea stirred by thousand megaton warheads, Farsiders built a flotilla of robotic whales. Swimming in the molten rock, covering as much as a kilometer every day, they strained out metals and precious rare elements. The munition factories on Farside paid dearly for every gram of ore, and the earth, in ignorance or blind anger, kept up its useless bombardment, deepening the ocean, bringing up more treasures from below.

Sitta watched the rib vanish over the horizon; then with a quiet, respectful voice, Icenice asked, "Are you tired?"

She was sitting beside Sitta. Her gown's perfumes made the air close, uncomfortable.

"We haven't worn you out, have we?"

Sitta shook her head, honestly admitting, "I feel fine." It had been an easy pregnancy. With a certain care, she placed a hand on her belly, then lied. "I'm glad you came to meet me."

The tall woman hesitated, her expression impossible to read. With a certain gravity, she said, "It was Varner's idea."

"Was it?"

A sigh, a change of topics. "I like this place. I don't know why."

She meant the plain. Bleak and pure, the smoothest portions of the glass shone like black mirrors. Sitta allowed, "There is a beauty."

Icenice said, "It's sad."

Why? "What's sad?"

"They're going to tunnel and dome all of this."

"Next year," said an eavesdropping Twin.

"Tunnels here?" Sitta was dubious. "You can shield a spaceport and a rail line, but people can't *live* out here, can they?"

"Martians know how." Icenice glanced at the others, inviting them . . . to do what? "They've got a special way to clean the glass."

"Leaching," said Varner. "Chemical tricks combined with microchines. They developed the process when they rebuilt their own cities."

"People will live here?" Sitta wrestled with the concept. "I hadn't heard. I didn't know."

"That's why they built the port in the first place," Varner continued. "All of this will be settled. Cities. Farms. Parks. And industries."

"Huge cities," muttered Icenice.

"This ground was worthless," growled one of the strangers. "Five years ago, it was less than worthless."

Varner laughed without humor. "The Martians thought otherwise."

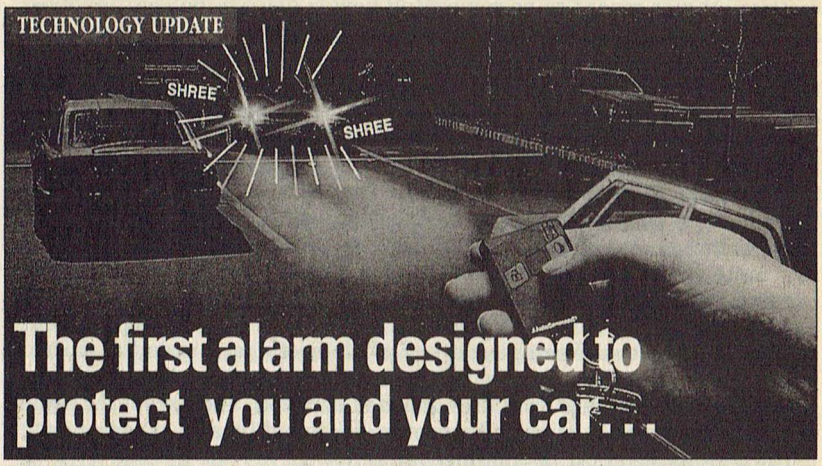
Everyone looked dour, self-involved. They shook their heads and whispered about the price of land and what they would do if they could try again. Sitta thought it unseemly and greedy. And pointless. "You know," said Pony, "it's the Martians who own and run the spaceport." Sitta did her best to ignore them, gazing back along the rail, the earth dropping for the horizon and no mountains to be seen. They were at the center of the young sea, the world appearing smooth and simple. Far out on the glass, in a school of a dozen or more, were magma whales. As their sea cooled, they must have congregated there, their own heat helping to keep the rock liquid for a little while longer.

Sitta felt a strange, vague pity. Then a fear.

Shutting her eyes, she tried to purge her mind of everything fearful and tentative, making herself strong enough, trying to become as pure as the most perfect glass.

4

Sitta couldn't recall when the prank had seemed fun or funny, though it must have been both at some time. She couldn't remember whose idea



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it was. Perhaps Varner's, except the criminality was more like the Twins or Pony. It was meant to be something new, a distraction that involved all of them, and it meant planning and practice and a measure of genuine courage. Sitta volunteered to tackle the largest target. Their goal was to quickly and irrevocably destroy an obscure species of beetle. How many people could boast that they'd pushed a species into oblivion? Rather few, they had assumed. The crime would lend them a kind of notoriety, distinctive yet benign. Or so they had assumed.

The ark system was built early in the war. It protected biostocks brought from the earth in finer days; some twenty million species were in cold storage and DNA libraries. Some of the stocks had been used as raw material for genetic weapons. Sitta's parents built their lab beside the main ark; she had visited both the lab and ark as a little girl. Little had changed since, including the security systems. She entered without fuss, destroying tissue samples, every whole beetle, and even the partial sequencing maps. Her friends did the same work at the other facilities. It was a tiny black bug from the vanished Amazon, and except for some ancient videos and a cursory description of its habits and canopy home, nothing remained of it, as planned.

Sitta would have escaped undetected but for the miserable luck of a human guard who got lost, making a series of wrong turns. He came upon her moments after she had sent the beetle into nothingness. Caught sooner, her crimes would have been simple burglary and vandalism. As it was, she was charged under an old law meant to protect wartime resources.

The mandatory penalty was death. Gray-haired prosecutors with calm gray voices told her, "Your generation needs to behave." They said, "You're going to serve as an example, Sitta." Shaking ancient heads, they said, "You're a spoiled and wealthy child, contemptible and vulgar, and we have no pity for you. We feel nothing but scorn."

Sitta demanded to see her friends. She wanted them crammed into her hyperfiber cell, to have them see how she was living. Instead she got Icenice and Varner inside a spacious conference room, a phalanx of lawyers behind them. Her best friend wept. Her first lover said, "Listen. Just listen. Stop screaming now and hear us out."

He told her that behind the scenes, behind the legal façades, semi-official negotiations were underway. Of course the Farside government knew she'd had accomplices, and a lot of officials were afraid that the scandal would spread. Friends with pull were being contacted, he assured her. Money was flowing from account to account. What Sitta needed to do, he claimed, was to plead guilty, to absorb all blame, then promise to pay any fine.

The judge would find for clemency, using some semi-legal technicality, then demand a staggering penalty. "Which we will pay," Varner promised, his voice earnest and strong. "We won't let you spend a single digit of your own money."

What were her choices? She had to nod, glaring at the lawyers while saying, "Agreed. Good-bye."

"Poor Sitta," Icenice moaned, hugging her friend but weeping less. She was relieved that she wouldn't be turned in to the authorities, that she was perfectly safe. Stepping back, the tall girl straightened her gown with a practiced flourish, adding, "And we'll see you soon. Very soon, darling."

But the promised judge wasn't compliant. After accepting bribes and hearing a few inelegant threats, he slammed together the Hammers of Justice and announced, "You're guilty. But since the beetle is missing, and since the prosecution cannot prove its true worth, I cannot, in good conscience, find for the death penalty."

Sitta stood with her eyes shut. She had heard the word "clemency" and opened her eyes, realizing that nobody but her had spoken.

The judge delivered a hard, withering stare. In a voice that Sitta would hear for years, syllable by syllable, he said, "I sentence you to three years of involuntary servitude." Again he struck the Hammers together. "Those three years will be served as a member of the Plowsharers. You'll be stationed on the earth, young lady, at a post of my approval, and I just hope you learn something worthwhile from this experience."

The Plowsharers? she thought. They were those stupid people who volunteered to work and die on the earth, and this had to be a mistake, and how could she have misunderstood so many words at one time. . . ?

Her friends looked as if they were in shock. All wept and bowed their heads, and she glared at them, waiting for even one of them to step forward and share the blame. But they didn't. Wouldn't. When they looked at Sitta, it was as if they knew she would die. Everyone knew the attrition rate among the Plowsharers. Had Varner and the others tricked her into confessing, knowing her fate all along? Probably not, no. They were genuinely surprised; she thought it then and thought it for the next eight years. But if they had come forward, en masse . . . if another eight families had embraced this ugly business . . . there might have been a reevaluation . . . an orphan's crime would have been diluted, if only they'd acted with a dose of courage . . . the shits. . . !

The earth was hell.

A weak Farsider would die in an afternoon, slain by some nameless disease or embittered Terran.

Yet not one good friend raised a hand, asking to be heard. Not even when Sitta screamed at them. Not even when she slipped away from her guard, springing over the railing and grabbing Varner, trying to shake him into honesty, cursing and kicking him, fighting to shame him into the only possible good deed.

More guards grabbed the criminal, doing their own cursing and kicking, finally binding her arms and legs behind her.

The judge grinned ear-to-ear. "Wage good," he called out, in the end. "Wage plenty of good, Sitta."

It was a Plowsharers' motto: *Waging Good*. And Sitta would remember

that moment with a hyperclarity, her body being pulled away from Varner as Varner's face grew cold and certain, one of his hands reaching, pressing at her chest as if helping the guards restrain her, and his tired thick voice said, "You'll be back," without a shred of confidence. Then, "You'll do fine." Then with a whisper, in despair, "This is for the best, darling. For the best."

5

The mountains were high and sharp, every young peak named for some little hero of the war. Titanic blasts had built them, then waves of plasma had broken against them, fed by the earth's weapons and meant to pour through any gaps, the enemy hoping to flood Farside with the superheated material. But the waves had cooled and dissipated too quickly. The mountains were left brittle, and in the decades since, at irregular intervals, different slopes would collapse, aprons of debris fanning across the plain. The old railbug skirted one apron, crossed another, then rose into a valley created by an avalanche, a blur of rocks on both sides and Varner's calm voice explaining how the Martians—who else?—had buried hyperfiber threads, buttressing the mountains, making them safer than mounds of cold butter.

Then they left the valley, passing into the open again, an abandoned fort showing as a series of rectangular depressions. Its barrier generators and potent lasers had been pulled and sold as scrap. There was no more earthshine and no sun yet, but Sitta could make out the sloping wall of an ancient crater and a rolling, boulder-strewn floor. The border post was in the hard black shadows; the railbug was shunted to a secondary line. Little gold domes passed on their right. They slowed and stopped beside a large green dome, fingers of light stabbing at them. "Why do we have to stop?" asked one of the strangers. And Pony said, "Because," and gracelessly pointed toward Sitta. And Varner added, "It should only take a minute or two," while winking at her, the picture of calm.

A walktube was spliced into the bug's hatch, and with a rush of humid air, guards entered. Human, not robotic. And armed, too. But what made it most remarkable were the three gigantic hounds, Sitta recognizing the breed in the same instant she realized this was no ordinary inspection.

She remained calm, in a fashion. It was Varner who jumped to his feet, muttering, "By what right—?"

"Hello," shouted the hounds. "Be still. We bite!"

They were broad and hairless, pink as tongues and free of all scent. Their minds and throats had been surgically augmented, and their nostrils were the best in the solar system. The provisional government used them, and if smugglers were found with weapons or contraband, they were executed, the hounds given that work as a reward.

"We bite," the hounds repeated. "Out of our way!"

A Belter walked into the railbug, her long limbs wearing grav-assist

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braces. Her bearing and the indigo uniform implied a great rank. Next to her, the hounds appeared docile. She glowered, glared. Facing her, Varner lost his nerve, slumping at the shoulders, whimpering, "How can we help?"

"You can't help," she snapped. Then, speaking to the guards and hounds, she said, "Hunt!"

Sensors and noses were put to work, scouring the floor and corners and the old fixtures, then the passengers and their belongings. One hound descended on Sitta's bag, letting out a piercing wail.

"Whose is this?" asked the Belter.

Sitta remained composed. If this woman knew her plan, she reasoned, then they wouldn't bother with this little drama. She'd be placed under arrest. Everyone she knew or had been near would be detained, then interrogated . . . *if they even suspected*. . . .

"It's my bag," Sitta allowed.

"Open it for me. Now."

Unfastening the simple latches, she worked with cool deliberation. The bag sprang open, and she retreated, watching the heavy pink snouts descend, probing and snorting and pulling at her neatly folded clothes. Like the bulky trousers and shirt Sitta wore, they were simple items made with rough, undyed and inorganic fabrics; the hounds could be hunting for persistent viruses and boobytrapped motes of dust. Except a dozen mechanical searches had found her clean. Had someone recently tried to smuggle something dangerous into Farside? But why send a Belter? Nothing made sense, she realized; and the hounds said, "Clean, clean, clean," with loud, disappointed voices.

The official offered a grim nod.

Again Varner straightened, his skin damp, glistening. "I have never, ever seen such a . . . such a . . . what do you want. . . ?"

No answer was offered. The Belter approached Sitta, her braces humming, lending her an unexpected vigor. With the mildest of voices, she asked, "How are the Plowsharers doing, miss? Are you waging all the good you can?"

"Always," Sitta replied.

"Well, good for you." The official waved a long arm. Two guards grabbed Sitta and carried her to the back of the bug, into the cramped toilet, then stood beside the doorway as the official looked over their shoulders, telling their captive, "Piss into the bowl, miss. And don't flush."

Sitta felt like old, weakened glass. A thousand fractures met, and she nearly collapsed, catching herself on the tiny sink and then, using her free hand, unfastening her trousers. Her expansive brown belly seemed to glow. She sat with all the dignity she could muster. Pissing took concentration, courage. Then she rose again, barely able to pull up her trousers when the Belter shouted, "Hunt," and the hounds pushed past her, heads filling the elegant wooden bowl.

If so much as a single molecule was out of place, they would find it. If just one cell had thrown off its camouflage—

—and Sitta stopped thinking, retreating into a trance that she had mastered on the earth. Her hands finished securing her trousers. A big wagging tail bruised her leg. Then came three voices, in a chorus, saying, "Yes, yes, yes."

Yes? What did *yes* mean?

The official genuinely smiled, giving Sitta an odd little sideways glance. Then there wasn't any smile, a stern unapologetic voice saying, "I am sorry for the delay, miss."

What had the hounds smelled? she kept asking herself.

"Welcome home, Miss Sitta."

The intruders retreated, vanished. The walktube was detached, and the railbug accelerated, Sitta walking against the strong tug of it. Varner and the others watched her in silent astonishment, nothing in their experience to match this assault. She almost screamed, "This happens on the earth, every day!" But she didn't speak, taking an enormous breath, then kneeling, wiping her hands against her shirt, then calmly beginning to refold and repack her belongings.

The others were embarrassed. Dumbfounded. Intrigued.

It was Pony who noticed the sock under the seat, bringing it to her and touching the bag for a moment, commenting, "It's beautiful leather." She wanted to sound at ease and trivial, adding, "What kind of leather is it?"

Sitta was thinking: *What if someone knows?*

Months ago, when this plan presented itself, she had assumed that one of the security apparatuses would discover her, then execute her. She'd given herself a 10 percent chance of surviving to this point. But what if there were people—powerful, like-minded people—who thought she was right? No government could sanction what Sitta was doing, much less make it happen. But they might allow it to happen—*that woman smiled at me!*— while checking on her from time to time. . . .

"Are they culturing leather on the earth?" asked Pony, unhappy to be ignored. Stroking the simple bag with both hands, she commented, "It has a nice texture. Very smooth."

"It's not cultured," Sitta responded. "Terrans can't own biosynthetic equipment."

"It's from an animal then." The girl's hand lifted, a vague disgust showing on her face. "Is it?"

"Yes," said the retired Plowsharer.

"What kind of animal?"

"Human kinds."

Every eye was fixed on her.

"The other kinds are scarce," Sitta explained. "And precious. Even rat skins go into the pot."

No one breathed; no one dared to move.

"This bag is laminated human flesh," she told them, fastening the

latches. *Click, click.* "You have to understand. On the earth, it's an honor to be used after death. You want to stay behind and help your family."

Icenice gave a low moan.

Sitta set the bag aside, watching the staring faces, then adding, "I knew some of these people. I did."

6

The Plowsharers were founded and fueled by idealists who never actually worked on the earth. A wealthy Farsider donated her estate as an administrative headquarters. Plowsharers were to be volunteers with purposeful skills that would help the earth and its suffering people. That was the intent, at least. The trouble came in finding volunteers worth accepting. A hundred thousand vigorous young teachers and doctors and ecological technicians could have done miracles. But the norm was to creak along with ten or fifteen thousand ill-trained, emotionally questionable semi-volunteers. Who in her right mind joined a service with 50 percent mortality? Along the bell-shaped curve, Sitta was one of the blue-chip recruits. She had youth and a quality education. Yes, she was spoiled. Yes, she was naïve. But she was in perfect health and could be made even healthier. "We're always improving our techniques," the doctors explained, standing before her in the orbital station. "What we'll do is teach your flesh how to resist its biological enemies, because they're the worst hazards. Diseases and toxins kill more Plowsharers than do bombs, old or new."

A body that had never left the soft climate of Farside was transformed. Her immune system was bolstered, then a second, superior system was built on top of it. She was fed tailored bacteria that proceeded to attack her native flora, destroying them and bringing their withering firepower to her defense. As an experiment, Sitta was fed cyanides and dioxins, cholera and rabies. Headaches were her worst reaction. Then fullerenes stuffed full of procrustean bugs were injected straight into her heart. What should have killed her in minutes made her nauseous, nothing more. The invaders were obliterated, their toxic parts encased in plastic granules, then jettisoned in the morning's bowel movement.

Meanwhile, bones and muscles had to be strengthened. Calcium slurries were ingested, herculian steroids were administered along with hard exercise, and her liver succumbed as a consequence, her posting delayed. Her three year sentence didn't begin until she set foot on the planet, yet Sitta was happy for the free time. It gave her a chance to compose long, elaborate letters to her old friends, telling them in clear terms to fuck themselves and each other and fuck Farside and would they please die soon and horribly, please?

A new liver was grown and implanted. At last, Sitta was posted. With an education rich in biology—a legacy of her parents—she was awarded a physician's field diploma, then given to a remote city on the cratered

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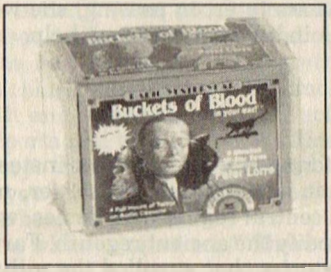

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rock of northern America. Her hyperfiber chests were stolen in Athens. With nothing but the clothes she had worn for three days straight, she boarded the winged shuttle that would take her across the poisoned Atlantic. Her mood couldn't have been lower, she believed; then she discovered a new depth of spirit, gazing out a tiny porthole, gray ocean giving way to a blasted lunar surface. It was like the moon of old, save for the thick acidic haze and the occasional dab of green, both serving to heighten the bleakness, the lack of all hope.

She decided to throw herself from the shuttle. Placing a hand on the emergency latch, she waited for the courage; and one of the crew saw her and came over to her, kneeling to say, "Don't." His smile was charming, his eyes angry. "If you need to jump," he said, "use the rear hatch. And seal the inner door behind you, will you?"

Sitta stared at him, unable to speak.

"Consideration," he cautioned. "At this altitude and at these speeds, you might hurt innocent people."

In the end, she killed no one. Embarrassed to be found out, to be so transparent, she kept on living; and years later, in passing, she would wonder who to write and thank for his indifferent, precious help.

7

Farside, like every place, was transformed by the war. But instead of world-shaking explosions and lasers, it was sculpted by slower, more graceful events. Prosperity covered its central region with domes, warm air and manmade rains beginning to modify the ancient regolith. Farther out were the factories and vast laboratories that supplied the military and the allied worlds. Profits came as electronic cash, water and organics. A world that had been dry for four billion years was suddenly rich with moisture. Ponds became lakes. Comet ice and pieces of distant moons were brought to pay for necessities like medicines and sophisticated machinery. And when there was too much water for the surface area—Farside isn't a large place—the excess was put underground, flooding the old mines and caverns and outdated bunkers. This became the Central Sea. Only in small places, usually on the best estates, would the Sea show on the surface. Icenice had lived beside one of those pond-sized faces, the water bottomless and blue, lovely beyond words.

It was too bad that Sitta wouldn't see it now.

Looking about the railbug, at the morose, downslung faces, she decided that she was doomed to be uninvited to the celebration. That incident with the bag had spoiled the mood. Would it be Varner or Icenice who would say, "Maybe some other time, darling. Where can we leave you?"

Except they surprised her. Instead of making excuses, they began to have the most banal conversation imaginable. Who remembered what from last year's spinball season? What team won the tournament? Who could recall the most obscure statistic? It was a safe, bloodless collection

of noises, and Sitta ignored it, leaning back against her seat, her travels and the pregnancy finally catching up with her. She drifted into sleep, no time passing, then woke to find the glass walls opaque, the sun up and needing to be shielded. It was like riding inside a glass of milk or a cloudbank, and sometimes, holding her head at the proper angle, she could just make out the blocky shapes of factories streaking past.

Nobody was speaking; furtive glances were thrown her way.

"What do they do?" asked Sitta.

Silence.

"The factories," she added. "Aren't they being turned over to civilian industries?"

"Some have been," said Varner.

"Why bother?" growled one of the strangers.

"Bosson uses some of them." Icenice spoke with a flat, emotionless voice. "The equipment is old, he says. And he has trouble selling what he makes."

Bosson is your husband, thought Sitta. Right?

She asked, "What does he make?"

"Laser drills. They're retooled old weapons, I guess."

Sitta had assumed that everything and everyone would follow the grand plan. Farside's wealth and infrastructure would generate new wealth and opportunities . . . if not with their factories, then with new spaceports and beautiful new cities. . . .

Except those wonders belonged to the Martians, she recalled.

"If you want to sleep," Varner advised, "we'll make up the long seat in the back. If you'd like."

On a whim, she asked, "Where are Lean and Catchen?"

Silence.

"Are they still angry with me?"

"Nobody's angry with you," Icenice protested.

"Lean is living on Titan," Pony replied. "Catchen . . . I don't know . . . she's somewhere in the Belt."

"They're not together?" Sitta had never known two people more perfectly linked, save for the Twins. "What happened?"

Shrugs. Embarrassed, even pained expressions. Then Varner summed it up by saying, "Crap finds you."

What did that mean?

Varner rose to his feet, looking the length of the bug.

Sitta asked, "What about Unnel?"

"We don't have any idea." Indeed, he seemed entirely helpless, eyes dropping, gazing at his own hands for a few baffled moments. "Do you want to sleep, or not?"

She voted for sleep. A pillow was found and placed where her head would lay, and she was down and hard asleep in minutes, waking once to hear soft conversation—distant, unintelligible—then again to hear nothing at all. The third time brought bright light and whispers, and she sat upright, discovering that their railbug had stopped, its walls once

again transparent. Surrounding them was a tall, delicate jungle and a soft blue-tinted sky of glass, the lunar noon as brilliant as she remembered. Through an open hatch, she could smell water and the vigorous stink of orchids.

Icenice was coming for her. "Oh," she exclaimed, "I was just going to shake you."

The others stood behind her, lined up like the best little children; and Sitta thought:

You want something.

That's why they had come to greet her and bring her here. That's why they had endured searches and why they had risked any grudges that she still might feel toward them.

You want something important, and no one else can give it to you.

Sitta would refuse them. She had come here to destroy these people and devastate their world, and seeing the desire on their hopeful, desperate faces, she felt secretly pleased. Even blessed. Rising to her feet, she asked, "Would someone carry my bag? I'm still very tired."

A cold pause, then motion.

Varner and one of the strangers picked the bag up by different straps, eyeing one another, the stranger relinquishing the distasteful chore with a forced chuckle and bow, stepping back and glancing at Sitta, hoping she would notice his attempted kindness.

8

Artificial volcanoes girdled the earth's equator, fusion reactors sunk into their throats, helping them push millions of tons of acid and ash into the stratosphere. They maintained the gray-black clouds that helped block the sunlight. Those clouds were vital. Decades of bombardment had burned away forests, soil and even great volumes of carbonate rock. There was so much carbon dioxide in the atmosphere that full sunshine would have brought a runaway greenhouse event. A temporary second Venus would be born, and the world would be baked until dead. "Not a bad plan," Sitta's parents would claim, perhaps as a black joke. "That world is all one grave anyway. Why do we pretend?"

The earthly climate was hot and humid despite the perpetual gloom. It would be an ideal home for orchids and food crops, if not for the lack of soil, its poisoned water, and the endless plant diseases. Terrans, by custom, lived inside bunkers. Even in surface homes built after the war, there was a strength of walls and ceilings, everything drab and massive, every opening able to be sealed tight. Sitta was given her own concrete monstrosity when she arrived at her post. It had no plumbing. She'd been promised normal facilities, but assuming that she was being slighted by the Terrans, she refused to complain. Indeed, she tried to avoid all conversation. On her first morning, in the dim purple light, she put on a breathing mask to protect her lungs from acids and explosive dust,

then left her new house, shuffling up a rocky hill, finding a depression where she felt unwatched, doing the essential chore and covering her mess with loose stones, then slinking off to work a full day in the farm fields.

A hospital was promised; every government official in Athens had said so. But on the earth, she was learning, promises were no stronger than the wind that makes them. For the time being, she was a laborer, and a poor one. Sitta could barely lift her tools, much less swing them with authority. Yet nobody seemed to mind, their public focus on a thousand greater outrages.

That was the greatest surprise for the new Plowsharer. It wasn't the poverty, which was endless, or the clinging filth, or even the constant spectre of death. It was the ceaselessly supportive nature of the Terrans, particularly toward her. Wasn't she one of the brutal conquerors? Not to their way of thinking, no. The moon and Mars and the rest of the worlds were theories, unobserved and almost unimaginable. Yes, they honestly hated the provisional government, particularly the security agencies that enforced the harsh laws. But toward Sitta, their Plowsharer, they showed smiles, saying, "We're thrilled to have you here. If you need anything, ask. We won't have it, but ask anyway. We like to apologize all the same."

Humor was a shock, set against the misery. Despite every awful story told by Farsiders, and despite the grueling training digitals, the reality proved a hundred times more wicked, cruel, and thoughtless than anything she could envision. Yet meanwhile, amid the carnage, the people of her city told jokes, laughed, and loved with a kind of maniacal vigor, perhaps because of the stakes involved, pleasures needing to be taken as they were found.

Tens of thousands lived in the city, few of whom could be called *old* by Farside standards. Children outnumbered adults, except they weren't genuine children. They reminded Sitta of five- and six-year-old adults, working in the fields and tiny factories, worldly in all things, including their play. The most popular game was a pretend funeral. They used wild rats, skinning them just as human bodies were skinned, sometimes pulling out organs to be transplanted into other rats, just as humans harvested whatever they could use from their own dead, implanting body parts with the help of primitive autodocs, dull knives and weak laser beams.

By law, each district in the city had one funeral each day. One or fifty bodies—skinned, and if clean enough, emptied of livers, kidneys and hearts—were buried in a single ceremony, always at dusk, always as the blister-colored sun touched the remote horizon. There was never more than one hole to dig and refill. Terrans were wonders at digging graves. They always knew where to sink them and how deep, then just what words to say over the departed, and the best ways to comfort a woman from Farside who insisted on taking death personally.

Despite her hyperactive immune system, Sitta became ill. For all she

knew, she had caught some mutant strain of an ailment devised by her parents, the circumstances thick with irony. After three days of fever, she ran out of the useless medicines in her personal kit, then fell into a delirium, waking at one point to find women caring for her, smiling with sloppy toothless mouths, their ugly faces lending her encouragement, a credible strength.

Sitta recovered after a week of near-death. Weaker than any time since birth, she shuffled up the hillside to defecate, and in the middle of the act she saw a nine-year-old sitting nearby, watching without a hint of shame. She finished and went to him. And he skipped toward her, carrying a small bucket and spade. Was he there to clean up after her? She asked, then added, "I bet you want it for the fields, don't you?"

The boy gave an odd look, then proclaimed, "We wouldn't waste it on the crops!"

"Then why. . . ?" She hesitated, realizing that she'd seen him on other mornings. "You've done this other times, haven't you?"

"It's my job," he confessed, smiling behind his transparent breathing mask.

She tried to find her other stone piles. "But why?"

"I'm not suppose to tell you."

Sitta offered a wan smile. "I won't tell that you did. Just explain what you want with it."

As if nothing could be more natural, he said, "We put it in our food."

She moaned, bending as if punched.

"You've got bugs in you," said the boy. "Bugs that keep you alive. If we eat them and if they take hold—"

Rarely, she guessed.

"—then we'll feel better. Right?"

On occasion, perhaps. But the bacteria were designed for her body, her chemistry. It would take mutations and enormous luck . . . then yes, some of those people might benefit in many ways. At least it was possible.

She asked, "Why is this a secret?"

"People like you can be funny," the boy warned her. "About all kinds of stuff. They thought you wouldn't like knowing."

Sitta was disgusted, yet oddly pleased, too.

"Why do you hide your shit?" he asked. "Is that what you do on the moon? Do you bury it under rocks?"

"No," she replied, "we pipe it into the Sea."

"Into your water?" His nose crinkled up. "That doesn't sound very smart, I think."

"Perhaps you're right," she agreed. Then she pointed at the bucket, saying, "Let me keep it. How about if I set it outside my door every morning?"

"It would save me a walk," the boy agreed.

"It would help both of us."

He nodded, smiling up at her. "My name is Thomas."

"Mine is Sitta."

A big, long laugh. "I know *that*."

For that instant, in the face and voice, Thomas seemed like a genuine nine-year-old boy, wise only in the details.

9

Icenice's home and grounds were exactly as Sitta remembered them, and it was as if she had never been there, as if the scenery had been shown to her in holos while she was a young and impressionable girl. "Privilege," said the property. "Order." "Comfort." She looked down a long green slope, eyes resting on the blue pond-sized face of the Sea, flocks of swift birds flying around it and drinking from it and lighting on its shore. After a minute, she turned and focused on the tall house, thinking of all the rooms and elegant balconies and baths and holoplazas. On the earth, two hundred people would reside inside it and feel blessed. And what would they do with this yard? With everyone staring, Sitta dropped to her knees, hands digging into the freshly watered sod, nails cutting through sweet grass and exuberant roots, reaching soil blacker than tar. The skins of old comets went into this soil, brought in exchange for critical war goods. And for what good? Pulling up a great lump of the stuff, she placed it against her nose and sniffed once, then again.

The silence was broken by someone clearing his throat.

"Ah-hem!"

Icenice jumped half a meter into the air, turning in flight and blurting, "Honey? Hello."

The husband stood on the end of a stone porch, between stone lions. In no way, save for a general maleness, did he match Sitta's expectations. Plain and stocky, Bosson was twenty years older than the rest of them, and a little fat. Dressed like a low-grade functionary, there seemed nothing memorable about him.

"So," he shouted, "does my dirt smell good?"

Sitta emptied her hands and rose. "Lovely."

"Better than anything you've tasted for a while. Am I right?"

She knew him. The words; the voice. His general attitude. She had seen hundreds of men like him on earth, all members of the government. All middle-aged and embittered by whatever had placed them where they didn't want to be. Sitta offered a thin smile, telling Bosson, "I'm glad to meet you, finally."

The man grinned, turned. To his wife, he said, "Come here."

Icenice nearly ran to him, wrapping both arms around his chest and squealing, "We've had a gorgeous time, darling."

No one else in their group greeted him, even in passing.

Sitta climbed the long stairs two at a time, offering her hand and remarking, "I've heard a lot about you."

"Have you?" Bosson laughed, reaching past her hand and patting her swollen belly. "Is this why you quit being the Good Samaritan?"

"Honey?" said Icenice, her voice cracking.

"Who's the father? Another Plow?"

Sitta waited for a long moment, trying to read the man's stony face. Then, with a quiet, stolid voice, she replied, "He was Terran."

"Was?" asked Icenice, fearfully.

"He's dead," Bosson answered. Unimpressed; unchastened. "Am I right, Miss Sitta?"

She didn't respond, maintaining her glacial calm.

"Darling, let me show you the room." Icenice physically moved between them, sharp features tightening and a sheen of perspiration on her face and breasts. "We thought we'd give you your old room. That is, I mean, if you want to stay . . . for a little while. . . ."

"I hope you remember how to eat," Bosson called after them. "This house has been cooking all day, getting ready."

Sitta didn't ask about him.

Yet Icenice felt compelled to explain, saying, "He's just in a bad mood. Work isn't going well."

"Making laser drills, right?"

The girl hesitated on the stairs, sunshine falling from a high skylight, the heat of it making her perfumes flood into the golden air. "He's a Mercurian, darling. You know how bleak they can be."

Were they?

"He'll be fine," Icenice promised, no hope in her voice. "A drink or two, and he'll be sugar."

Following the familiar route, she was taken to an enormous suite, its bed able to sleep twenty and the corners decorated with potted jungles. Bright gold and red monkeys came close, begging for any food that a human might be carrying. Sitta had nothing in her hands. A house robot had brought her bag, setting it on the bed and asking if she wished it unpacked. She didn't answer. Already sick of luxuries, she felt a revulsion building, her face hardening—

—and Icenice, misreading her expression, asked, "Are you disappointed with me?"

Sitta didn't care about the girl's life. But instead of honesty, she feigned interest. "Why did you marry him?"

Bleakness seemed to be a family trait. A shrug of the shoulders, then she said, "I had to do it."

"But why?"

"There wasn't any choice," she snapped, as if nothing could be more obvious. Then, "Can we go? I don't want to leave them alone for too long."

The robot was left to decide whether or not to unpack. Sitta and Icenice went downstairs, discovering everyone in the long dining room, Bosson sitting in a huge feather chair at one end, watching the guests congregating in the distance. His expression was both alert and bored. Sitta was reminded of an adult watching children, always counting the baubles.

As she arrived, whispers died.

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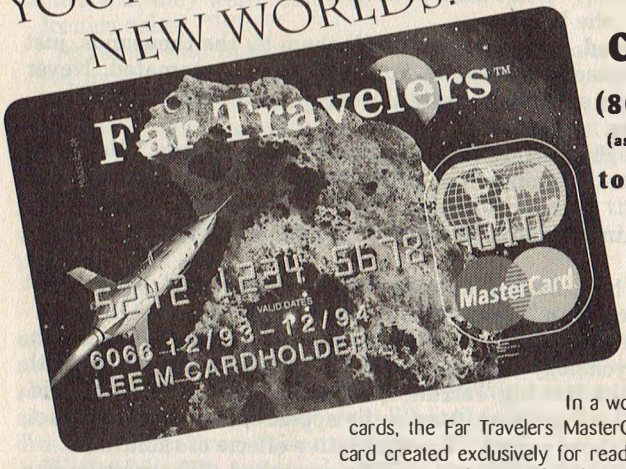

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It was Bosson who spoke to her, jumping up from his chair with a laugh. "So what was your job? What kind of good did you wage?"

Sitta offered a lean, unfriendly smile. "I ran a hospital."

Varner came closer. "What kind of hospital?"

"Prefabricated," she began.

Then Bosson added, "The Martians built them by the thousands, just in case we ever invaded the earth. Portable units. Automated. Never needed." He winked at Sitta, congratulating himself. "Am I right?"

She said nothing.

"Anyway, some Plow thought they could be used anyway." He shook his head, not quite laughing. "I'm not a fan of the Plows, in case you haven't noticed."

With a soft, plaintive voice, Icenice whispered, "Darling?"

To whom?

Sitta looked at him, finding no reason to be intimidated. "That's not exactly a unique opinion."

"I'm a harsh person," he said in explanation. "I believe in a harsh, cold universe. Psychology isn't my field, but maybe it has to do with surviving one of the last big Terran attacks. Not that my parents did. Or my brothers." A complex, shifting smile appeared, vanished. "In fact, I watched most of them expire. The cumulative effects of radiation. . . ."

Using her most reasonable voice, Sitta remarked, "The people who killed them have also died. Years ago."

He said, "Good."

He grinned and said, "The real good of the Plows, I think, is that they help prolong the general misery. People like you give hope, and what good is hope?"

His opinions weren't new, but the others appeared horrified. "Things are getting better!" Icenice argued. "I just heard . . . I don't remember where . . . that *their* lifespans are almost 20 percent longer than a few years ago. . . !"

"The average earthly lifespan," Sitta replied, "is eleven years."

The house itself seemed to hold its breath.

Then Pony, of all people, said, "That's sad." She seemed to mean it, hugging herself and shaking her head, repeating the words. "That's sad. That's sad."

"But you got your hospital," Varner offered. "Didn't it help?"

In some ways. Sitta explained, "It didn't weather its storage very well. Some systems never worked. Autodocs failed without warning. Of course, all the biosynthesizing gear had been ripped out on Mars. And I didn't have any real medical training, which meant I did a lot of guessing when there was no other choice . . . guessing wrong, more than not. . . ."

She couldn't breathe, couldn't speak.

Nobody liked the topic, save Bosson. Yet no one knew how to talk about anything else.

The Mercurian approached, hands reaching for her belly, then having

the good sense to hesitate. "Why carry the baby yourself? Your hospital must have had wombs—"

"They were stolen." He must know that for himself. "Before the hospital arrived, they were removed."

Icenice asked, "Why?"

"Terrans," said Bosson, "breed as they live. Like rats."

An incandescent rage was building inside Sitta, and she enjoyed it, relishing the clarity it afforded her. Almost smiling, she told them, "Biosynthetic machinery could do wonders for them. But of course we won't let them have anything sophisticated, since they might try to hurt us. And that means that if you want descendants, you've got to make as many babies as possible, as fast as possible, hoping that some of them will have the right combinations of genes for whatever happens in their unpredictable lives."

"Let them die," was Bosson's verdict.

Sitta didn't care about him. He was just another child of the war, unremarkable, virtually insignificant. What drew her rage were the innocent faces of the others. What made her want to explode was Varner's remote, schoolboy logic, his most pragmatic voice saying, "The provisional government is temporary. When it leaves, the earth can elect its own representatives, then make its own laws—"

"Never," Bosson promised. "Not in ten thousand years."

Sitta took a breath, held it, then slowly exhaled.

"What else did you do?" asked Icenice, desperate for good news. "Did you travel? You must have seen famous places."

As if she'd been on vacation. Sitta shook her head, then admitted, "I was picked as a jurist. Many times. Being a jurist is an honor."

"For trials?" asked Pony.

"Of a kind."

People fidgeted, recalling Sitta's trial.

"Jurists," she explained, "are trusted people who watch friends giving birth." She waited for a moment, then added, "I was doing that job before I had my hospital."

"But what did you do?" asked one of the Twins.

They didn't know. A glance told her as much, and Sitta enjoyed the suspense, allowing herself a malicious smile before saying, "We used all kinds of parasites in the war. Tailored ones. Some burrow into fetuses, using them as raw material for whatever purpose the allies could dream up."

No one blinked.

"The parasites are good at hiding. Genetically camouflaged, in essence. The jurist's job is to administer better tests after the birth, and if there's any problem, she has to kill the baby."

There was a soft, profound gasp.

"Jurists are armed," she continued, glancing at Bosson and realizing that even he was impressed. "Some parasites can remake the newborn, giving it claws and coordination."

The Mercurian showed a serene pleasure. "Ever see such a monster?"

"Several times," said the retired Plowsharer. "But most of the babies, the infected ones, just sit up and cough, then look at you. The worms are in their brains, in their motor and speech centers. 'Give up,' they say, 'You can't win,' they say. 'You can't fight us. Surrender.' "

She waited for an instant.

Then she added, "They usually can't say, 'Surrender.' It's too long, too complicated for their mouths. And besides, by then they're being swung against a table or a wall. By the legs. Like this. If you do it right, they're dead with one good blow." And now she was weeping, telling Icenice, "Give me one of your old dolls. I'll show you just how I did it."

10

Sitta expected to leave after her mandatory three years of service. To that end, she fashioned a calendar and counted the days, maintaining that ritual until early in her third year, sometime after the long-promised hospital arrived.

Expectations climbed with the new facility. At first, Sitta thought it was the city's expectations that made her work endless hours, patching wounds when the autodocs couldn't keep up, curing nameless diseases with old, legal medicines, and tinkering with software never before field tested. Then in her last month, in sight of freedom, it occurred to her that the Terrans were happy for any help, even ineffectual help, and if all she did was sit in the hospital's cramped office, making shit and keeping the power on, nobody would have complained, and nobody would have thought any less of her.

She applied for a second term on the stipulation that she could remain at her current post. This set off alarms in the provisional capital. Fearing insanity or some involvement in illegal operations, the government sent a representative from Athens. The Martian, a tiny and exhausted woman, made no secret of her suspicions. She inspected the hospital several times, hunting for biosynthetic equipment, then for any medicines too new to be legal. Most apparent was her hatred for Farsiders. "When I was a girl," she reported, "I heard about you people. I heard what you did to us, to all your 'allies' . . . and just because of profit. . . !"

Sitta remained silent, passive. She knew better than to risk an argument.

"I don't know who I hate worse," said the woman. "Terran rats, or Farside leeches."

In the calmest of voices, Sitta asked, "Will you let this leech stay with her rats? Please?"

It was allowed, and the Plowsharers were so pleased that they sent promises of two more hospitals that never materialized. It was Sitta who purchased and imported whatever new medical equipment she could find, most of it legal. The next three years passed in a blink. She slept three

hours on a good night, and she managed to lift lifespans in the city to an average of thirteen and half years. With her next reapplication, she asked Athens for permission to remain indefinitely. They sent a new Martian with the same reliable hatreds, but he found reasons to enjoy her circumstances. "Isn't it ironic?" he asked, laughing aloud. "Here you are, waging war against the monsters that your own parents developed. The monsters that made you rich in the first place. And according to import logs, you've been using that wealth to help the victims. Ironies wrapped in ironies, aren't they?"

She agreed, pretending that she'd never noticed any of it before.

"Stay as long as you want," the government man told her. "This looks like the perfect place for you."

Remaining on the earth, by her own choice, might be confused for forgiveness. It wasn't. It was just that the dimensions of her hatreds had become larger, more worldly. Instead of being betrayed by friends and wrongfully punished, Sitta had begun to think of herself as fortunate. Almost blessed. She felt wise and moral, at least in certain dangerous realms. Who else from Farside held pace with her accomplishments? No one she could imagine, a kind of pride making her smile, in private.

Free of Farside, Sitta heard every awful story about her homeland. Every Martian and Mercurian seemed to relish telling about the bombardment of Nearside, in those first horrible days, and how convoys of refugees had reached the border, only to be turned away. In those remote times, Farside was a collection of mining camps and telescopes, and there wasn't room for everyone. Only the wealthiest could immigrate. That was Sitta's family story. Every official she came across seemed to have lost some part of his or her family. On Nearside. Or Mars. Or Ganymede. Even on Triton. And why? Because Sitta's repulsive ancestors needed to build mansions and jungles for themselves. "We don't have room," Farsiders would complain. And who dared argue the point? During the war, which world could risk offending Farside, losing its portion of the weapons and other essentials?

None took the risk; yet none would forget.

The naïve, superficial girl who had murdered a helpless beetle was gone. The hardened woman in her stead felt an outrage and a burning, potent taste for anything that smacked of justice. Yet never, even in passing, did she think of vengeance. It never occurred to her that she would escape the battered plain. Some accident, some mutated bug, would destroy her, given time and the proper circumstances.

Then came an opportunity, a miraculous one, in the form of a woman traveling alone. Eight months into a pregnancy that was too perfect, if anything, she was discovered by a local health office and brought to the hospital for a mandatory examination. Sitta had help from her own fancy equipment, plus the boy who had once happily collected her morning stool. He was her protégé. He happened to find the telltale cell in the fetus. In a soft, astonished voice, he said, "God, we're lucky to have caught it. Just imagine that this one got free. . . !"

She heard nothing else that he said, nor the long silence afterward. Then Thomas touched her arm—they were lovers by then—and in a voice that couldn't have been more calm, Sitta told him, "It's time, I think. I think I need to go home."

11

Dinner was meat wrapped in luxurious vegetables and meat meant to stand alone, proud and spicy, and there were wines and chilled water from the Central Sea and milk too sweet to be more than sipped, plus great platters full of cakes and frosted biscuits and sour candies and crimson puddings. A hundred people could have eaten their fill at the long table, but as it turned out, no one except Bosson had an appetite. Partially dismantled carcasses were carried away by the kitchen's robots; goblets were drained just once in an hour's time. Perhaps it was related to the stories Sitta told at dinner. Perhaps her friends were a little perturbed by the recipes involving rats and spiders and other treasured vermin. For dessert, she described the incident with Thomas and her bodily wastes, adding that they'd become lovers when he was a well-worn fourteen. Only Bosson seemed appreciative of her tales, if only for their portrait of misery; and Sitta discovered a grudging half-fondness for the man, both of them outsiders, both educated in certain hard and uncompromising matters. Looking only at Bosson, Sitta explained how Thomas had carelessly inhaled a forty-year-old weapon, its robotic exterior cutting through an artery, allowing its explosive core to circumnavigate his body perhaps a hundred times before it detonated, liquifying his brain.

She began the story with a flat, matter-of-fact voice. It cracked once when Thomas collapsed, then again when she described—in precise, professional detail—how she had personally harvested the organs worth taking. The boy's skin was too old and weathered to make quality leather; it was left in place. Then the body was dropped into the day's grave, sixteen others beneath it, Sitta given the honor of the final words and the ceremonial first gout of splintered rock and sand.

She was weeping at the end of the story. She wasn't loud or undignified, and her grief had a manageable, endurable quality about it. Like any Terran, she knew that outliving your lover was the consequence of living too long. It was something to expect and endure. Yet even as she dried her face, she noticed the devastation and anger on the other faces. Save Bosson's. She had ruined the last pretense of a good time for them, and with that she thought: *Good. Perfect!*

But her dear friends remained at the table. No one slunk away. Not even the strangers invented excuses or appointments, begging to escape. Instead, Varner decided to take control to the best of his ability, coughing into a trembling fist, then whispering, "So." Another cough. "So," he began, "now that you're back, and safe . . . any ideas. . . ?"

What did he mean?

Reading the question on Sitta's face, he said, "I was thinking. We all were, actually . . . thinking of asking if you'd like to come in with us . . . in making an investment, or two. . . ."

Sitta sat back, hearing the delicious creaking of old wood. With a careful, unmeasurable voice, she said, "What kind of investment?"

Pony blurted, "There are fortunes to be made."

"If you have capital," said a stranger, shooing away a begging monkey.

Another stranger muttered something about courage, though the word he used was "balls."

Varner quieted them with a look, a gesture. Then he stared at Sitta, attempting charm but falling miserably short. "It's just . . . as it happens, just now . . . we have a possibility, love—"

"A dream opportunity," someone interrupted.

Sitta said, "It must be," and hesitated. Then she added, "Considering all the trouble that you've gone through, it must seem like a wondrous possibility."

Blank, uncertain faces.

Then Varner said, "I know this is fast. I know, and we aren't happy about that. We'd love to give you time to rest, to unwind . . . but it's such a tremendous undertaking—"

"Quick profits!" barked a Twin.

"—and you know, just now, listening to your stories . . . it occurred to me that you could put your profits back into that city where you were living, or back into the Plowsharers in general—"

"Hey, that's a great idea!" said another stranger.

"A fucking waste," Bosson grumbled.

"You could do all sorts of good," Varner promised, visibly pleased with his inspiration. "You could buy medicines. You could buy machinery. You could put a thousand robots down there—"

"Robots are illegal," said Bosson. "Too easy to misuse."

"Then hire people. Workers. Anyone you need!" Varner almost rose to his feet, eyes pleading with her. "What do you think, Sitta? You're back, but that doesn't mean you can't keep helping your friends."

"Yeah," said Pony, "what do you think?"

Sitta waited for an age, or an instant. Then, with a calm slow voice, she asked, "Exactly how much do you need?"

Varner swallowed, hesitated.

One of the Twins blurted an amount, then added, "Per share. This new corporation is going to sell shares. In just a few weeks."

"You came at the perfect time," said his brother, fingers tapping on the tabletop.

A stranger called out, "And there's more!"

Varner nodded, then admitted, "The deal is still sweeter. If you could loan us enough to purchase some of our own shares, then we will pay it back to you. How does twice the normal interest sound?"

Bosson whispered, "Idiotic."

Icenice was bending at the waist, gasping for breath.

"You can make enough to help millions." Varner offered a watery smile. "And we can make it possible for you."

Sitta crossed her legs, then asked, "What does a share buy?"

Silence.

"What does this corporation do?" she persisted.

Pony said, "They've got a wonderful scheme."

"They want to build big new lasers," said a Twin. "Similar to the old weapons, only safe."

Safe? Safe how?

"We'll build them at the earth's Lagrange points," Varner explained. "Enormous solar arrays will feed the lasers, millions of square kilometers absorbing sunlight—"

"Artificial suns," someone blurted.

"—and we'll be able to warm every cold world. For a substantial fee, of course." Varner grinned, his joy boyish. Fragile. "Those old war technologies, and our factories, can be put to good use."

"At last!" shouted the Twins, in one voice.

Bosson began to laugh, and Icenice, sitting opposite her husband, seemed to be willing herself to vanish.

"Whose scheme is this?" Sitta asked Varner. "Yours?"

"I wish it was," he responded.

"But Farsiders are in command," said Pony, fists lifted as if in victory. "All the big old families are pooling their resources, but since this project is so vast and complicated—"

"Too vast and complicated," Bosson interrupted.

Sitta looked at Icenice. "How about you, darling? How many shares have you purchased?"

The pretty face dropped, eyes fixed on the table's edge.

"Let's just say," her husband replied, "that their most generous offer has been rejected by this household. Isn't that what happened, love?"

Icenice gave a tiny, almost invisible nod.

Pony glared at both of them, then asked Sitta, "Are you interested?"

"Give her time," Varner snapped. Then he turned to Sitta, making certain that she noticed his smile. "Think it through, darling. Please just do that much for us, will you?"

What sane world would allow another world to build it a sun? she wondered. And after the long war, who could trust anyone with such enormous powers? Maybe there were safeguards and political guarantees, the full proposal rich with logic and vision. But those questions stood behind one great question. Clearing her throat, Sitta looked at the hopeful faces, then asked, "Just why do you need my money?"

No one spoke; the room was silent.

And Sitta knew why, in an instant, everything left transparent. Simple. They wanted her money because they had none, and they were desperate enough to risk whatever shred of pride they had kept from the old days. How had they become poor? What happened to the old estates

and the bottomless bank accounts? Sitta was curious, and she knew she could torture them with her questions; yet suddenly, without warning, she had no taste for that kind of vengeance. The joy was gone. Before even one weak excuse could be made, by Varner or anyone, she said with a calm and slow, almost gentle voice, "Because my money has been spent."

A chill gripped her audience.

"I used it to help my hospital. Some of the equipment was illegal, and that means bribes." A pause. "I couldn't buy ten shares for just me. I'm afraid that you've wasted your time, friends."

The faces were past misery. All the careful hopes and earnest plans had evaporated, no salvation waiting, the audience too exhausted to move, too unsure of itself to speak.

Finally, with a mixture of rage and agony, one of the strangers climbed to her feet, saying, "Thank you for the miserable dinner, Icenice."

She and the other strangers escaped from the room and house.

Then the Twins spun a lie about a party, leaving and taking Vechel with them. Had Vechel spoken a single word today? Sitta couldn't remember. She looked at Pony, and Pony asked, "Why did you come home?"

For an instant, Sitta didn't know why.

"You hate us," the girl observed. "It's obvious how much you hate this place. Don't deny it!"

How could she?

"Fucking bitch. . . !"

Then Pony was gone. There was no other guest but Varner, and he sat with his eyes fixed on his unfinished meal, his face pale and somehow indifferent. It was as if he still didn't understand what had happened. Finally, Icenice rose and went to Varner, taking him in her arms and whispering something, the words or her touch giving him reason to stand. From where she sat, Sitta could watch the two of them walk out on the stone porch. She kept hugging him, always whispering, then wished him good-bye, waiting for him to move out of her sight. Bosson watched his wife, his face remote. Unreadable. Then Icenice returned, sitting in the most distant chair, staring at some concoction of mints and cultured meat that had never been touched—

—and Bosson, with a shrill voice, remarked, "I warned you. I told you and your friends that she'd never be interested." A pause, a grin. "What did I tell you? Repeat it for me."

Icenice stood and took the platter of meat in both hands, flinging it at her husband.

Bosson was nothing but calm, confidently measuring the arc and knowing it would fall short. But the sculpted meat shattered, a greasy white sauce in its center, still hot and splattering like shrapnel. It struck Bosson's clothes and arms and face. He gave a flinch. Nothing more. Then, not bothering to wipe himself clean, he turned to Sitta, and with a voice that made robots sound emotional, said:

"Be the good guest. Run off to your room. Now. Please."

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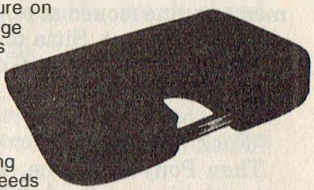

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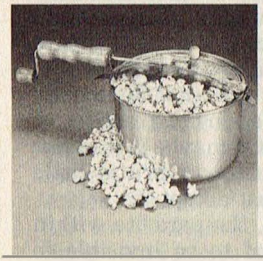

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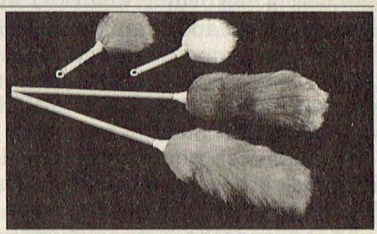

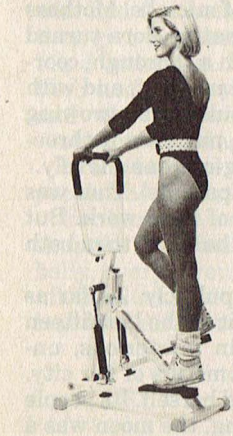

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Thomas' death was tragic, yet perfect.

Nobody else knew what Sitta was carrying. The original mother thought her baby had come early and died. The hospital's AI functions had been taken off-line, leaving them innocent. No one but Thomas could have betrayed her, and it was his horrible luck to inhale a killing mote of dust. By accident? Sometimes she asked herself if it was that simple. Toward the end, the boy would wonder aloud if this was what Sitta truly wanted, and if it was right. Maybe he became careless by distraction, or maybe it was so that he couldn't act on his doubts. Or maybe it was just what it had seemed to be at first glance. An accident. A brutal little residue of the endless war, and why couldn't she just accept it?

Constructed in the final years of official fighting, the parasite within her was a particularly wicked ensemble. Designed to be invisible to Terran jurists and their instruments, it carried its true self within just one in a million cells. But in the time between her first labor pains and the delivery, each of those cells would explode, invading their neighbors, implanting genetics in a transformation that would leave no outward sign of change, much less danger.

The monster would be born pale and irresistible. Perhaps the finest baby ever seen, people would think, wrapping it in a blanket and holding it close to their breasts.

That appearance was a fiction. Beneath the baby fat was a biosynthetic factory that would absorb and transmute every kind of microbe. Mothers and jurists would sicken in a few hours, their own native flora turned against them. No immune system could cope with such a thorough, coordinated assault. A village or city could be annihilated in a day, and with ample stocks of rotting, liquified meat, the monster would nurse, growing at an impossible pace, becoming for all intents and purposes a three-year-old girl, mobile enough to wander, mute and big-eyed and lovely.

It was a weapon made in many labs, including her parents'. That was no huge coincidence; Sitta had seen many examples of their work. But it helped her resolve. If justice was a simple matter of balance, then both were being achieved.

It was a weapon rarely used and never discussed publicly. As far as Sitta could determine, no medical authority had seen it in the last fifteen years, although several isolated villages had died in mysterious, unnamed epidemics, one of them within a thousand kilometers of her city. What would Farside do with such a monster? she asked herself. Its people had little experience with real disease, and if anything, the moon was a richer target for this kind of horror. Where the earth had few species and tiny populations, Farside had diversity and multitudes. Each beetle and orchid and monkey had its own family of microbes. A thousand parallel plagues would cause an ecological collapse, the domed air left poisoned, the Central Sea struck dead. Here was an ultimate, apocalyptic revenge, and sometimes Sitta was astonished by her hatreds, by the

depth of her feelings and the cold calculating passion she brought to this work.

Sometimes doubts made her awaken in the middle of the night, in a sweat. Then her habit was to walk under the seamless black sky, taking the wide road to the cemetery, reading the simple tombstones with her lamp, noting the dates and trying to recall who was below her feet. The earth itself was entombed in a grave, alone, and the heated air made Sitta think of ten billion bodies, and more, rotting in the useless ground. How could she feel weakness? she asked herself. By what right?

Given such a mandate, she had no choice but to continue, turning back with a resolve, feeling her way down to the city and along its narrow streets. That's what she did on her last night in the city, the shuttle for Athens scheduled for the morning. Her bag was packed. She was wearing her travel clothes. Approaching her bunkerlike home, lost in thought, Sitta didn't notice the children at work. She was almost past them when some sound, some little voice, caught her attention, making her turn and lift her lamp's beam, dozens of faces caught in mid-smile. What were these girls and boys doing here? She muttered, "You should be sleeping." Then she hesitated, lifting the beam higher still, every bunker festooned with long dirty ribbons and colored ropes and stiff old flags. "What is this?" she whispered, speaking to herself. "Why. . . ?"

Then she knew. An instant before her audience broke into song and a ragged cheer, she realized this was for her, all of it, and they hadn't expected her so soon. These were people unaccustomed to celebrations, who had few holidays, if any; and suddenly Sitta felt her legs tremble, then give way beneath her, knees into the foot-packed earth and her eyes blind with tears. Hundreds of children poured into the street, parents at their heels. Everyone was singing, no one competent and everyone loud, and what surprised Sitta more than anything was the realization —abrupt; amazing—that these were genuinely happy people.

In the hospital, she saw them wounded or ill, or dead. Those were the people she understood best.

Yet here she saw people more healthy than hurt, and more grateful than she could believe, everyone touching her, every hand on her swollen belly, every joyous shout giving her another dose of luck, the burden of all this luck and gratitude making it impossible for her to stand, much less turn and run for home.

13

Obeying Bosson, not caring what happened, Sitta climbed halfway up the staircase before she paused, standing beside sunlight, turning when she heard a whimper or moan. Was it Icenice? No, it was one of the begging monkeys. She looked past it, waiting for a long moment, telling herself that regardless of what she heard, she would do nothing. This wasn't her home, nor her world—she was here to destroy all of them—and

then she was walking, watching her shoes on the long steps, aware in a distant, dreamy way that she was walking downhill, reentering the dining room just as Bosson finished binding his wife's hands to one of the table's legs.

The Mercurian didn't notice his audience. With smooth, practiced deliberation, he lifted Icenice's gown over her hips and head, the girl motionless as stone, her naked back and rump shining in the reflected light. Then Bosson stood over the table, selecting tools. He decided on a spoon and a blunt knife. Then he moved behind the thin rump, wiping his face clean with a sleeve, coughing once, and placing the blade against the pucker of her rectum.

He was twenty years her senior and accustomed to the moon's gentle gravity, and he was taken by surprise. Sitta struck him on the side of the head, turning him, then struck his belly and kicked him twice, aiming for his testicles, earth-trained muscles making Bosson grunt, then collapse onto an elegant floor of colored tiles and pink mortar.

"Get up," she advised.

He tried to find his balance, halfway standing, Sitta driving her foot hard into his chin.

Again she said, "Get up."

"Sitta?" whispered Icenice.

Bosson grunted, rose.

She drew blood this time. A cheekbone shattered beneath her heel. Then the man lay still, hands limp around his bloody head, and Sitta screamed, "What's the matter with you? Can't you even stand up, you fuck?"

With the weakest of voices, Icenice asked, "What is happening?"

Sitta pulled the gown back where it belonged, then untied the napkins used to bind her hands. Her one-time friend looked at Bosson, then with genuine horror said, "You shouldn't have. . . !"

Knotting the napkins together, Sitta made a crude rope, then knelt and tied the groggy man's hands and feet behind him. When she stood again, she felt weak. Almost faint. When Icenice tried to clean Bosson's wounds, Sitta grabbed her and pulled her toward the stairs, panting as she asked, "Why? Why did you marry it?"

"I was in such debt. You don't know." Icenice swallowed, moaned. "He promised to help me—"

"How could you lose all that money? Where did it go?"

"Oh," she whimpered, "it seemed to go everywhere, really."

Reasons didn't matter. What mattered was bringing Icenice upstairs, the two of them moving through the shafts of sunlight.

"Everyone had debts," the girl was explaining. "I mean, we didn't know enough about modern business, and the Martians . . . they seemed very good at taking our money. . . !"

Sitta said, "Hurry up."

"Where are we going?"

"Hurry!"

Her bag was where the robot had set it, on the bed, still unopened. She unfastened the latches and threw its contents on the floor, then used a tiny cosmetic blade to cut into the thick bottom layers. What wouldn't appear in any scan were half a dozen lozenges of leather, their pores filled with hormones and odd chemicals that nobody would consider illegal. She had made them in her hospital. Hesitating for an instant, she looked at Icenice and tried to decide the best way to do this thing.

"Varner wanted your money," said the girl.

"Come on. Into the bath."

"Why?"

"Now! Hurry!" She was scared that someone was watching them. She thought of the Belter with the dogs, wondering if she had shadowed them all this way. Stripping as she walked, Sitta ended up naked, wading into the clear warm water, down to her chest before looking up at Icenice. "You have to climb in with me. Do it."

The girl asked, "Why?"

Sitta made the lozenges when she couldn't sleep one night. What if she found herself giving birth in the wrong place? The possibility had awakened her with a shudder. What if she found herself trapped on the earth, whatever the reason, and this monster of hers was threatening the people whom she loved most?

How could she protect the innocent ones?

"I don't understand." The girl was weeping, quietly devastated by the day's events. "Why are you taking a bath now?"

One by one, Sitta swallowed the lozenges, gulping bathwater to help get each of them down.

"Sitta?"

The whole process would take half an hour, maybe less. In minutes, the first of the drugs would cross into the fetus, crippling its genetic machinery—she hoped—giving her long enough to let the miscarriage run its course. The danger was that she would lose consciousness. The horror of horrors was that the monster would live long enough to outlast the anti-genetics, then somehow climb to the air and out of the bath, premature but coping regardless, its transformation happening despite her desperate best wishes. That would be the ironic, horrible end—

"Sitta?"

—and Sitta looked up at Icenice, then said, "In. Climb in."

The girl obeyed, still wearing her gown, the black fabrics blacker when soaked, billowing up around her waist, then covering her breasts.

"You're my jurist," said Sitta, looking straight into Icenice's eyes. "When it comes, drown it. Don't let it take a breath."

"What do you mean—?"

"Promise me!"

"Oh, my." Icenice straightened, as if stabbed by a needle.

"Promise?"

"I can try," she squeaked.

"You have to do it, darling. Or the world dies."

The words were believed. Sitta could see their impact and their slow digestion, the girl becoming thoughtful, alert. A minute passed. Several minutes passed. Then Icenice attempted a weak little smile, telling her friend, "I've never wanted your money."

A single red pain began in Sitta's pelvis, racing up her spine.

"And I've always wanted to tell you," the girl went on. "When you were sentenced, and only you would be going to the earth, I knew that was best for everyone, really."

Wincing, Sitta asked, "Why?"

"Nobody else could have survived. Not for three years!"

"And I was safe?"

"You did survive," Icenice responded, then again tried her smile. "You always had a toughness, a strength, that I've wanted. Even back when we were little girls."

Pain came twice, *boom* and *boom*.

"I'm not strong," Icenice said with conviction.

When was I strong? thought Sitta. What did the girl see in me?

Then more pain. *BOOM*.

And when it passed, she grabbed the ruined gown, pulling her friend in close to her, wrapping arms around her, and whispering with her most certain voice, "When the time comes, I'll kill it myself."

"Because I don't think I could," Icenice whimpered.

"But can you stay?"

"Here? With you?"

Sitta winced, then pleaded, "Don't leave me!"

"I won't. I promise."

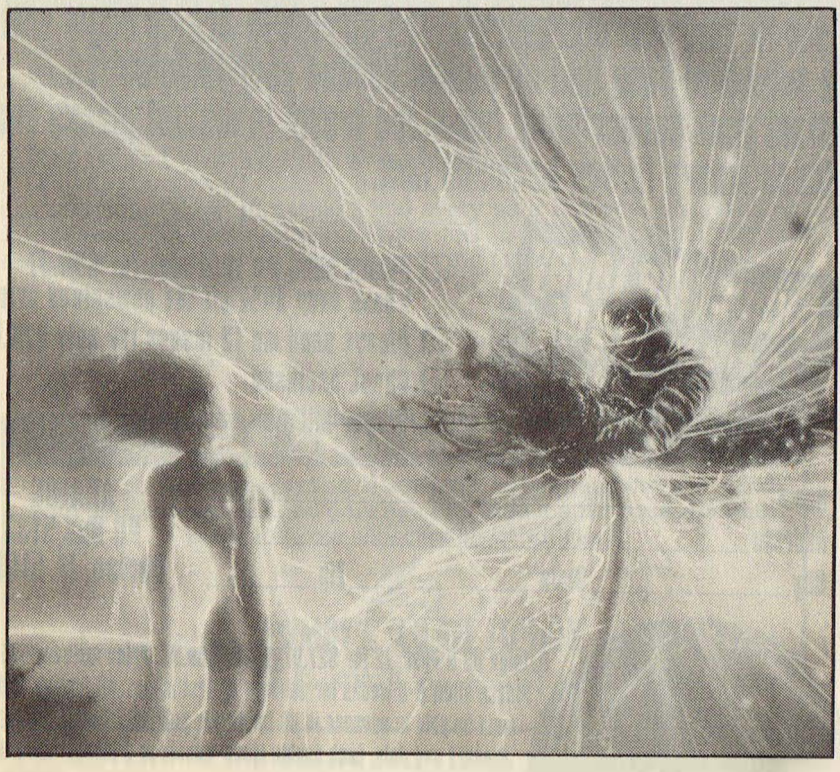
Then pains began in earnest, and every pain before them, reaching back through Sitta's entire life, were just careful preparation for the scorching white miseries inside her, trying to escape. ●

Stephen Baxter

HERO

Stephen Baxter's new short story, "Hero," is part of his "Xeelee-Sequence" future history. The tale is set against the background of his novel *Flux,* which is due out from HarperPrism. Mr. Baxter's last American publication, *Anti-Ice,* was HarperPrism's lead November 1994 title.

Illustration by Bob Eggleton



When Thea wore the Hero's suit, Waving became *extraordinary*. Breathless, she swept from the leafy fringe of the Crust forest and down, down through the Mantle's vortex lines, until it seemed she could plunge deep into the bruised-purple heart of the Quantum Sea itself!

Was this how life had been, before the Core Wars? Oh, how she wished she had been born into the era of her grandparents—before the Wars—instead of these dreary, starving times.

She turned her face toward the South Pole, that place where all the vortex lines converged in a pink, misty infinity. She surged on through the Air, drowning her wistfulness and doubt in motion. . . .

But there was something in the way.

Everyone had heard of the Hero, of course. The Hero myth was somehow more vivid to Thea than, say, the legends of the Ur-humans, who (it was said) had come from beyond the Star to build people to live here in the Mantle—and who then, after the Core Wars, had abandoned them. Perhaps it was because the Hero was of her own world, not of some misty, remote past.

Even as she grew older—and she came to understand how dull and without prospect her parents' world really was—Thea longed for the Hero, in his suit of silver, to come floating up through the sky to take her away from the endless, drudging poverty of this life of hunting and scavenging at the fringe of the Crust forest.

But by the time she reached the age of fifteen she'd come to doubt that the Hero really existed: in the struggle to survive amid the endless debris of the Core Wars, the Hero was just too convenient a wish-fulfilling myth to be credible.

She certainly never expected to *meet* him.

"Thea! *Thea!*"

Snug inside her cocoon of woven spin-spider webbing, Thea kept her eyecups clamped closed. Her sister, Lur, was eighteen—three years older than Thea—and yet, Thea thought sourly, she still had the thin, grating tones of an adolescent. Just like a kid, especially when she was scared—

Scared.

The thought jolted Thea awake. She struggled to free her arms of the cocoon's clinging webbing, and pushed her face out into the cool Air. She shook her head to clear clouded Air out of her sleep-rimmed eyecups.

Thea cast brisk, efficient glances around the treacherous sky. Lur was still calling her name. Danger was approaching, then. But from where?

Thea's world was the Mantle of the Star—a neutron star—an immense cavern of yellow-white Air bounded above by the Crust and below by

the Quantum Sea. The Crust itself was a rich, matted ceiling, purple-streaked with krypton grass and the graceful curves of tree trunks. Far below Thea, the Sea formed a floor to the world, mist-shrouded and indistinct. All around her, filling the Air between Crust and Sea, the vortex lines were an electric-blue cage. The lines filled space in a hexagonal array spaced about ten mansheights apart; they swept around the Star from the far upflux—the North—and arced past her like the trajectories of immense, graceful animals, converging at last into the soft red blur that was the South Pole, millions of mansheights away.

Thea's people lived at the lower, leafy fringe of the Crust forest. Their cocoons were suspended from the trees' outer branches, soft forms among the shiny, neutrino-opaque leaves; and as the humans emerged they looked—Thea thought with a contempt that surprised her—like bizarre animals: metamorphosing creatures of the forest, not human at all. But the cries of children, the frightened, angry shouts of adults, were far *too* human. . . . The tribe's small herd of Air-pigs, too, were squealing in unison, thrashing inside the loose net that bound them together, and staining the Air green with their jetfarts.

But where was the danger?

She held her fingers up before her face, trying to judge the spacing and pattern of the vortex lines. Were they drifting, becoming unstable?

Twice already in Thea's short life, the Star had been struck by Glitches—starquakes. During a Glitch, the vortex lines would come sliding up through the Air, infinite and deadly, scything through the soft matter of the Crust forest—and humans, and their belongings—as if they were no more substantial than spoiled Air-pig meat. . . .

But today the lines of quantized spin looked stable: only the regular cycles of bunching that humans used to measure time marred the lines' stately progress.

Then what? A spin-spider, perhaps? But spiders lived in the open Air, building their webs across the vortex lines; they wouldn't venture into the forest.

She saw Lur, now; her sister was trying to Wave toward her, obviously panicking, her limbs uncoordinated, thrashing at the Magfield. Lur was pointing past Thea, still shouting something—

There was a breath of Air at Thea's back. A faint shadow.

She shifted her head to the right, feeling the lip of her cocoon scratch her bare skin.

A ray, no more than two mansheights away, slid softly toward her.

Thea froze. Rays were among the forest's deadliest predators. She couldn't possibly get out of the cocoon and away in time—her only hope was to stay still and pray that the ray didn't notice she was here. . . .

The ray was a translucent cloud a mansheight across. It was built

around a thin, cylindrical spine, and six tiny, spherical eyes ringed the babyish maw set into its sketch of a face. The fins were six wide, thin sheets spaced evenly around the body; the fins rippled as the ray moved, electron gas sparkling around their leading edges. The flesh was almost transparent, and Thea could see shadowy fragments of some meal passing along the ray's cylindrical gut.

The ray came within a mansheight of her. It slowed. She held her breath and willed her limbs into stillness.

I might live through this yet. . . .

Then—with ghastly, heart-stopping slowness—the ray swiveled its hexagon of eyes toward her, unmistakeably locking onto her face.

She closed her eyes. Perhaps if she didn't struggle it would be quicker. . . .

Then, *he came.*

There was a blue-white flash: a pillar of electron light that penetrated even her closed eyecups, and ripped through the encroaching silver-grey shadow of the ray.

She cried out. It was the first sound she had made since waking into this nightmare, she realized dully.

She opened her eyes. The ray had pulled away from her and was twisting in the air. *The ray was being attacked,* she saw, disbelieving: a bolt of electron light swept down through the Air and slanted into the ray's misty structure, leaving the broad fins in crudely torn shreds. The ray emitted a high, thin keening; it tried to twist its head around to tear into this light-demon—

No, Thea saw now; this was no bolt of light, no demon: this was a *man,* a man who had wrapped his arms around the thin torso of the ray and was squeezing it, crushing the life out of the creature even as she watched.

She hung in her cocoon, even her fear dissolving in wonder. It was a man, true, but like no man she'd seen before. Instead of ropes and ponchos of Air-pig leather, this stranger wore an enclosing suit of some supple, silver-black substance that crackled with electron gas as he moved. Even his head was enclosed, with a clear plate before his face. There was a blade—a sword, of the same gleaming substance as the suit—tucked into his belt.

The ray stopped struggling. Fragments of half-digested leaf matter spewed from its gaping mouth, and its eyestalks folded in toward the center of its face.

The man pushed the corpse away from him. For a moment his shoulders seemed to hunch, as if he were weary; with gloved hands he brushed at his suit, dislodging shreds of ray flesh which clung there.

Thea stared, still in her cocoon, unable to take her eyes from his shimmering movements.

Now the man turned to Thea. With a single, feathery beat of his legs he Waved to her. The suit was of some black material inlaid with silvery whirls and threads. Apart from a large seam down the front of the chest, the suit was an unbroken whole, complete as a spin-spider eggshell. Behind the half-reflective helmet plate she could see a face—surprisingly thin, with two dark eyecups. When he spoke, his voice was harsh, but sounded as natural as if he were one of her own people.

"Are you all right? Are you hurt?"

Before Thea could answer Lur came Waving clumsily out of the sky, her small breasts shaking. Lur grabbed at Thea's cocoon and clung to it, burying her face in Thea's neck, sobbing.

Thea saw the stranger's shadowed eyecups slide over Lur's body with dispassionate interest.

Thea encompassed Lur's shoulders in her arms. She kept her eyes fixed on the man's face. "Are you *real?* I mean—are you *him?* The Hero?"

Was it *possible?*

He looked at her and smiled obscurely, his face indistinct in the shadows of his suit.

She tried to analyze her feelings. As a child, when she'd envisaged this impossible moment—of the actual arrival of the Hero, from out of nowhere to help her—she'd always imagined a feeling of *safety:* that she would be able to immerse herself in the Hero's massive, comforting presence.

But it wasn't like that. With his face half-masked the Hero wasn't comforting at all. In fact he seemed barely human, she realized.

Behind the translucent pane, the Hero's eyes returned to Lur, calculating.

Her father wept.

Wesa's thin, tired face, under its thatch of prematurely yellowed hair-tubes, was twisted with anguish. "I couldn't reach you. I could see what was happening, but—"

Embarrassed, she submitted to his embrace. Wesa's thin voice, with its words of self-justification, had less to do with her safety than with working out his own shock and shame, she realized.

As soon as she could, she got away from her father's clinging grasp.

Her people were clustered around the Hero. The Hero ran a gloved thumb down the seam set in the suit's chest panel; the suit opened. He peeled it off whole, as if he were shedding a layer of skin. Under the suit he wore only grey undershorts, and his skin was quite sallow. He was

much thinner than he'd seemed inside the suit, although his muscles were hard knots.

Thea felt repelled. *Just a man, then. Is that all there is to it?* And an *old* man, too, with yellowed hair-tubes and sunken, wrinkled face—older than anyone in her tribe, she realized.

He passed the suit to Wesa. Thea's father took the ungainly thing and tied it carefully to a tree branch. Suspended there, its empty limbs dangling and its chest sunken and billowing, the suit looked still more grotesque and menacing—like a boned man, she thought.

Wesa—and Lur, and some of the others—clustered around the Hero again, bringing him food. Some of their prime food, too, the most recent of the Air-pig cuts.

The Hero crammed the food into his wizened mouth, grinning.

Later, the Hero donned his suit and went up into the forest, toward the root ceiling, alone. When he returned, he dragged a huge Air-pig after him.

The people—Lur and Wesa among them—clustered around again, patting at the fat Air-pig. The Air-pig's body was a rough cylinder; now, in its terror, its six eyestalks were fully extended, and its huge, basking maw was pursed up closed. Futile jetfarts clouded the Air around it.

It would have taken a team of men days to have a chance of returning with such a catch.

Even through his faceplate Thea could see the Hero's grin, as the people praised him.

She Waved away from the little encampment and perched in the thin outer branches of the forest. She snuggled against a branch, feeling the cold wood smooth against her skin, and nibbled at the young leaves which grew behind the wide, mature outer cups.

Then she curled into a ball against the branch, pushed more soft leaves into her mouth and tried to sleep.

A soft moan awoke her.

The smell of growing leaves was cloying in her nostrils. Blearily, she pushed her head out of the branches into the Air.

There was motion far below her, silhouetted against the deep purple of the Quantum Sea. It was the Hero and her sister, Lur; they spiraled languidly around the vortex lines. The Hero wore his shining suit, but it was open to the waist. Lur had wrapped her legs around his hips. She arched away from him, her eyes closed. The Hero's skin looked *old,* corrupted, against Lur's flesh.

Payment for the hunter. . . .

Thea ducked back into the forest and crammed her fists to her eyecups.

* * *

When she woke again, she felt depressed, listless.

She dropped out of the forest. She hovered in the Air, her knees tucked against her chest. With four or five brisk pushes she emptied her bowels. She watched the pale, odorless pellets of shit sail sparkling into the Air. Dense with neutrons, the waste would merge with the unbreathable underMantle and, perhaps, sink at last into the Quantum Sea.

The Hero was sleeping, tucked into a cocoon—her *father's* cocoon, she realized with disgust. The empty suit was suspended from its branch. There seemed to be nobody about; most of the tribe were at the Air-pigs' net, evidently preparing one of the animals for slaughter.

Suddenly she felt awake—alive, excited; capillaries opened across her face, tingling with superfluid Air. Silently, trying to hold her breath, she pushed herself away from her eyrie and Waved to the suit.

Its empty fingers and legs dangled before her, grisly but fascinating. She reached out a trembling hand. The fabric was finely worked, and the inlaid silver threads were smooth and cold.

The front of the suit gaped open. She pushed her hand inside; she found a soft, downy material that felt cool and comfortable. . . .

It would be the work of a moment to slip her own legs into these black-silver leggings.

The Hero groaned, his lips parting softly; he turned slightly in her father's cocoon.

He was still asleep. Perhaps, Thea thought with disgust, he was dreaming of her sister.

She had to do this *now*.

Briskly, but with trembling fingers, she untied the suit from its branch. She twisted in the Air, tucked her knees to her chest and dropped her legs into the opened-up suit.

The lining sighed over her skin, embracing her flesh. She wriggled her arms into the sleeves. The feeling of the gloves around each finger was extraordinary; she stared at her hands, seeing how the tubes of fabric—too long for her own fingers—dropped slightly over her fingertips.

She pulled closed the chest panel and, as she'd seen the Hero do, ran her gloved thumb along the seam. It sealed smoothly. She reached back over her shoulders and pulled the helmet forward, letting it drop over her head. Again a simple swipe of the thumb was sufficient to seal the helmet against the rest of the suit.

The suit was too big for her; the lower rim of the face plate was a dark line across her vision, cutting off half the world, and she could feel folds of loose material against her back and chest. But it encased her, just as it had the Hero, and—when she raised her arms—it moved as she moved.

Cautiously, experimentally, she tried to Wave. She arched her back and flexed her legs.

Electron gas crackled explosively around her limbs. She squirted clumsily across the tree-scape, branches and leaves battering at her skin.

She grabbed at the trees with her gloved hands, dragging herself to a halt.

She looked down at the suit, trembling afresh. It was as if the Magfield had picked her up and hurled her through the Air.

Such *power*.

She pushed down from the trees and out into the clear Air. She tried again—but much more cautiously this time, with barely a flex of her legs. She jolted upward through a few mansheights: still jarringly quickly, but this time under reasonable control.

She Waved again, moving in an awkward circle.

It ought to be simple enough to master, she told herself. After all, she was just *Waving*, as she had done from the moment she'd popped from her mother's womb. Waving meant dragging limbs—which were electrically charged—across the Magfield. The Star's powerful magnetic field induced electric currents in the limbs, which in turn pushed back at the Magfield.

Some part of this suit—perhaps the silver-gleaming inlays—must be a much better conductor than human flesh and bone. It was just a question of getting the *feel* of it.

She leaned back against the Magfield and thrust gently with her legs. Gradually she learned to build up the tempo of this assisted Waving, and wisps of electron gas curled about her thighs. The secret was not strength, really, but gentleness, suppleness, a sensitivity to the soft resistance of the Magfield.

The suit carried her gracefully, effortlessly, across the flux lines.

She sailed across the sky. The suit felt natural about her body, as if it had always been there—and she suspected that a small, inner part of her would always cling to the memory of this experience, utterly addicted. . . .

The Hero's face ballooned up before her. She cried out. He grinned through the face plate at her, the age-lines around his eyecups deep and shadowed. He grabbed her shoulders; she could feel his bony fingers dig into her flesh through the suit fabric.

"I came up under you," he said, his voice harsh. "I knew you couldn't see me. That damn helmet must be cutting off half your field of view."

Fright passed, and anger came to her. She raised her gloved hands and knocked his forearms away.

. . . *Easily*. He suppressed a cry and clutched his arms to his chest; rapidly he straightened up to face her, but not before she had seen the pain in his eyecups.

She reached out and grabbed the Hero's shoulders as he'd held hers. In this suit, not only could she Wave like a god—she was *strong,* stronger than she had ever imagined. She let her fingers dig into his bone. Laughing, she raised him above her head. He seemed to be trying to keep his face empty of expression; she saw little fear there, but there was something else: a *disquiet.*

"Who's the Hero now?" she spat.

"A suit of Corestuff doesn't make a hero."

"No," she said, thinking of Lur. "And heroes don't need to be *paid. . . .*"

He grinned, mocking her.

She thought over what he'd said. "What's *Corestuff?*"

"Let me go and I'll tell you."

She hesitated.

He snapped, "Let me *go,* damn you. What do you think I can do to you?"

Cautiously she let go of his shoulders and pushed him away from her.

He rubbed at the bulging bones of his shoulders. "You may as well understand what you're stealing. *Corestuff.* The inlay in the fabric; a superconducting thread mined from within the Quantum Sea." He sniffed. "From the old days, before the Core Wars, of course."

"Did the suit belong to an Ur-human?"

He laughed sourly. "Ur-humans couldn't survive here inside the Mantle. Even a savage child should know that."

She looked carefully at his yellowed hair-tubes, unwilling to betray more ignorance. How old *was* he? "Do you remember the old days—before the Core Wars? Is that how you got the suit?"

He looked at her with contempt—but, she saw, a contempt softened with pity. *Am I really such a savage?* she wondered.

"Kid, the Wars were over before I was born. All the technology—the cities, the wormhole paths across the Mantle—all of it had gone. There were just a few scraps left—like this suit, which my father had salvaged somehow." He grinned again, his face splitting like a skull. "It used to belong to the police, in one of the great cities. Do you know what that means?

"The suit kept us alive—my parents and I—for a while. Then, after they were dead—"

She tried to fill her voice with contempt. "You used it to fly around the Mantle being the Hero."

He looked angry. "Is that so terrible? At least I *helped* people. What will *you* do with it, little girl?"

She reached out for him, turning her hands into claws. In a moment, she could crush the life out of his bony neck—

He returned her stare calmly, unflinching.

She tipped backward and Waved away from him.

Thea surged along infinite corridors of vortex lines. Floating spin-spider eggs padded at her faceplate and legs. The Quantum Sea was a purple floor far below her, delimiting the yellow Air; the Crust was a complex, inverted landscape beneath which she soared.

Waving was *glorious.* She stared down at her silver-coated body; blue highlights from the corridors of vortex lines and the soft purple glow of the Sea cast complex shadows across her chest. Already she was moving faster than she'd ever moved in her life, and she knew she was far from exhausting the possibilities of this magical suit.

She opened her mouth and yelled, her own voice loud inside the helmet.

She flew, spiraling, around the arcing vortex lines, her suited limbs crackling with blue electron gas; breathless, she swept from the leafy fringe of the Crust forest and down, down through the Mantle, until it seemed as if she could plunge deep into the bruised-purple heart of the Quantum Sea itself.

She turned her face toward the South Pole, that place where all the vortex lines converged. She surged on through the Air, drowning her doubts—and the image of the Hero's disquieted face—in motion.

. . . But there was something in her path.

Spin-web.

The web was fixed to the vortex line array by small, tight rings of webbing which encircled, without quite touching, the glowing spin-singularities. The web's threads were almost invisible individually, but the dense mats caught the yellow and purple glow of the Mantle, so that lines of light formed a complex tapestry.

It was really very beautiful, Thea thought abstractedly. But it was a wall across the sky.

The spin-spider itself was a dark mass in the upper corner of her vision. She wondered if it had already started moving toward the point where she would impact the net—or if it would wait until she was embedded in its sticky threads.

The spider looked like an expanded, splayed-open version of an Air-pig. Each of its six legs was a mansheight long, and its open maw would be wide enough to enfold her torso.

Even the suit wouldn't protect her.

She swiveled her hips and beat at the Magfield with her legs, trying to shed her velocity. But she'd been going as rapidly as she could; she wouldn't be able to stop in time. She looked quickly around the sky. Perhaps she could divert rather than stop, fly safely around the trap.

But she couldn't even *see* the edges of the web: spin-spider webs could be hundreds of mansheights across.

The web exploded out of the sky. She could see thick knots at the intersection of the threads, the glistening stickiness of the lines themselves. She curled into a ball and tucked her suited arms over her head.

How could she have been so stupid as to fall into such a trap? Lur and Wesa, through their tears, would think her a fool, when they heard. She imagined her father's voice: "Always look up- and downflux. Always. If you scare an Air-piglet, which way does it move? Along the flux paths, because it can move quickest that way. And that's why predators set their traps across the flux paths, waiting for anything stupid enough to fly straight into an open mouth. . . ."

She wondered how long the spin-spider would take to clamber down to her. Would she still be conscious when it peeled open her Hero's suit as if unwrapping a leaf, and began its work on her body?

. . . A mass came hurtling from her peripheral vision, her left, toward the web. She flinched and looked up. Had the spider left its web and come for her already?

But it was *the Hero*. Somehow he'd chased her, kept track of her clumsy arrowing through the sky—and all without her realizing it, she thought ruefully. He carried his sword, his shining blade of Corestuff, in his bony hand.

. . . But he was too late; already the first strands of webbing were clutching at her suit, slowing her savagely.

In no more than a few heartbeats she came to rest, deep inside the web. Threads descended before her face and laid themselves across her shoulders, arms and face. She tried to move, but the webbing merely tightened around her limbs. It shimmered silver and purple all around her, a complex, three-dimensional mesh of light.

The web shuddered, rattling her body inside its gleaming suit. The spin-spider was approaching her, coming for its prize. . . .

"Thea! *Thea!*"

She tried to turn her head; thread clutched at her neck. The Hero was swinging his sword, hacking into the web. His muscles were knots under his leathery skin. Thea could see dangling threads brushing against the Hero's bare arms and shoulders, one by one growing taut and then slackening as he moved on, burrowing into the layers of web.

He was cutting through the web towards her.

"Open the suit! It's caught, but you aren't. Come on, girl—"

She managed to raise a trembling hand to her chest. It was awkward finding the seam, with the web constantly clutching at her; but at last the suit peeled open. The soft, warm stink of spin-spider web spilled into the opened suit.

She pushed away the helmet and drew her legs out of the suit.

The Hero, his crude web-tunnel already closing behind him, held out his hand. "Come on, Thea; take hold—"

She glanced back. "But the suit—" The ancient costume looked almost pathetic, empty of life and swathed in spider-webbing.

"Forget the damn suit. There isn't time. Come *on*—"

She reached out and took his hand; his palm was warm and hard. With a grunt he leaned backward and hauled her from the web; the last sticky threads clutched at her legs, stinging. When they were both clear she fell against him; breathing hard, capillaries dilated all over his thin face, the Hero wrapped his arms around her.

The tunnel in the web had already closed: all that remained of it was a dark, cylindrical path through the layers of webbing.

And, as she watched, the spin-spider's huge head closed over the shining suit.

"I always seem to be rescuing you, don't I?" the Hero said drily.

"You could have saved the suit."

He looked defensive. "Maybe. I don't know."

"You didn't even try. Why not?"

He brushed his stiff, yellowed hair out of his eyes. He looked old and tired. "I think I decided that the world had seen enough of that suit—enough of the Hero, in fact."

She frowned. "That's stupid."

"Is it?" He brought his face close to hers. His voice hard, he said, "It was that moment when I woke to find you inside the suit. I looked through that plate and into your eyecups, Thea, and I didn't like what I saw."

She remembered: *In a moment, she could crush the life out of his bony neck—*

"I saw myself, Thea."

She shivered suddenly, unwilling to think through the implications of his words.

"What will you do now?"

He shrugged thin shoulders. "I don't know." He looked at her cautiously. "I could stay with you people for a while. I'm not a bad hunter, even without the suit."

She frowned.

He scratched at one eyecup. "On the other hand . . ."

"What?"

He pointed to the South. "I hear the Parz tribe at the Pole are trying to build a city again."

Despite herself, she felt stirred—excited. "Like before the Core Wars?"

He looked wistful. "No. No, we'll never recapture those days. But still, it would be a great project to work on." He studied her appraisingly. "I hear the new city will be ten thousand mansheights, from side to side. Think of that. And that's not counting the Corestuff mine they're going to build from the base." He smiled, wrinkles gathering beneath his eyecups.

Thea stared into the South—into the far downflux, to the place where all the vortex lines converged.

Slowly, they began to Wave back to the Crust forest.

The Hero said, "Even the Ur-humans would have been impressed by ten thousand mansheights, I'll bet. Why, that's almost a centimeter. . . ." ●

SPONTANEOUS POEM FOR MARILYN

If every sun that burned in the sky
in the 18,024 days of my life
were a brand new star
exploding outward from the bang of my eyes,
then I would be lord
of a small galaxy,
but I must count only
those stars that were born
from the light you have brought
to my eyes in the 3,780 days
since you first dawned
from a warmer spectrum
into my solipsistic universe
which now grows brighter
brighter and larger each day
independent of my eyes
which close and open now
only on the light you bring.

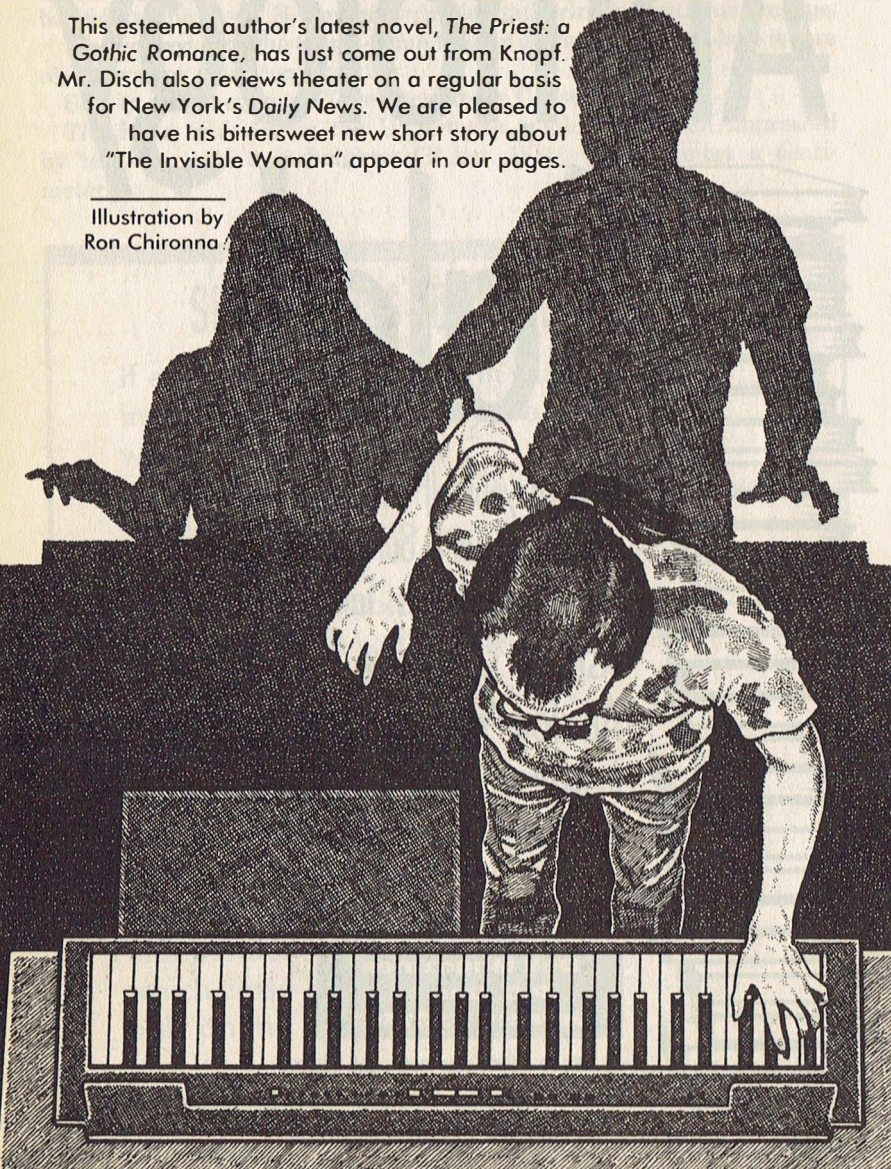
—David Lunde

Thomas M. Disch

THE INVISIBLE WOMAN

This esteemed author's latest novel, *The Priest: a Gothic Romance,* has just come out from Knopf. Mr. Disch also reviews theater on a regular basis for New York's *Daily News.* We are pleased to have his bittersweet new short story about "The Invisible Woman" appear in our pages.

Illustration by Ron Chironna



In some ways Clair Corwin thought of herself as having always been invisible. Or at least unnoticed, which in practical terms amounts to the same thing. She was a woman of unprepossessing features—not homely (homely, after all, is a form of interesting) but certainly not attractive. As a child, it had been just the same. No matter where she sat, she was the one student her teacher's eye didn't light on. She might be the only one with her hand up able to answer the question, but somehow the teacher wouldn't notice. When the high school yearbook came out, her picture wasn't in it. Already at that point in her life it didn't come as a surprise. She even savored it in a wry, wouldn't-you-know-it sort of way. Invisibility was the story of her life. She would be introduced to someone and a moment later the person would turn away and begin talking to someone else. And not out of deliberate rudeness but because they'd never seen her to begin with. No one ever remembered her name, and it wasn't as though Clair or Corwin were especially forgettable names. It was her they forgot, not her name. How can you remember what you've never taken in?

So when at last Clair became literally and not just metaphorically invisible, she wasn't really thrown for a loop. Wouldn't you know it? was still her basic reaction. She first became invisible (or first knew of it) on a hot Wednesday afternoon in July in the Milford Diner, four blocks from her house on North Elm. She'd stopped in for an iced tea after a trip to the Ready Access Cash Machine that had replaced the branch office of Key Bank two years ago. She took a seat in one of the booths and while she waited for the waitress, she spread open a copy of that morning's *Tri-State Examiner* and read about the problems tomatoes face in hot weather. Clair had a thriving vegetable garden in back of the house, fully half an acre, and she felt a certain satisfaction in noting that there was nothing in the newspaper article she wasn't already aware of, no precautions she hadn't taken.

The waitress this little while had been talking on the phone, a conversation that Clair, who had great powers of concentration, had scrupulously not been taking in. Then an older man in overalls came into the diner and without so much as a by-your-leave sat down in the same booth opposite Clair. Not two moments later, while Clair was still glowering ineffectually at this intruder, the waitress came bustling over with silverware, a menu, and a glass of water, which she set down in front of the man in the overalls.

She asked him, lifting up Clair's newspaper, "Want me to get rid of this?"

"Yeah," he said.

The waitress took the paper away, and the man studied the menu. Clair was so astonished it didn't occur to her to be indignant. Impossible

as it might seem, unprecedented though it might be, she knew there was only one explanation for what had just happened. From the lack of any sign of playfulness or malice or bad manners on the part of either the waitress or the man across from her, it was clear they were simply unaware that she was there. She was invisible to them.

Though not to herself. To herself—she held out her hands, palms up and then down—she was visible as she'd ever been. By squinting she could make out the faint violet Y of veins on the back of either hand. She could see the shadow of her hands on the mottled grey of the formica tabletop.

But perhaps the man, and the waitress, were only being weirdly rude. Perhaps it was a kind of practical joke.

Experimentally, she rapped on the formica tabletop.

The man looked up, startled, and the waitress covered the mouthpiece of the phone and called out, "I'll be there in a moment, hold your horses."

The man said, "I thought I heard something," but the waitress wasn't paying attention.

Very quietly Clair slid out of the booth. She felt an unaccustomed and unreasonable glow of pleasure, of morning sunlight gladness, the sort of feeling that comes to a mountain climber who's reached the first long vista of his ascent, to a prisoner at the moment of release. The strangeness of the situation and the possibility of danger only heightened the keenness of her sense of freedom.

The waitress came with her pad and took the man's order for a BLT and coffee. Clair, seeing the newspaper that the waitress had swept off the table, picked it up and held it in front of her at chest height where the waitress would have to notice it when she turned round.

But the waitress, noticing nothing, went to the grill and laid down four slices of bacon.

Apparently Clair's powers of invisibility were transferable to any object she held in her hands.

And (obviously) to anything she was wearing. Otherwise she would have presented the bizarre spectacle of an animated shirt and slacks and sandals. A wristwatch swinging back and forth some inches above her handbag. Perhaps a jaggedy Cheshire cat smile of fillings and gold caps. The idea was grotesque—and, fortunately, not germane to Clair's own form of invisibility.

She wondered if she were dead. But surely as a ghost one would remember having died. Besides, she didn't feel dead. She still was thirsty for a glass of iced tea. And the bacon frying on the grill smelled delectable.

While the waitress went back into the kitchen to get lettuce and a tomato from the refrigerator, Clair ducked behind the counter and took one of the slices of bacon from the grill, using a double-thickness of paper

napkin to keep from burning her fingers and to soak up the grease. While the waitress was spreading mayonnaise on the toast, Clair savored the slice of bacon with unghostly gusto. She'd swallowed the last bite before the waitress turned to the grill and did a double-take, glancing toward the man in the booth, and back at the three slices now beginning to smoke. She finished putting together the sandwich with just the three remaining slices.

Clair waited till there was no danger of collision with the waitress returning from the booth and then, when the waitress had her back turned to the door, she slipped out of the diner. Milford seemed all at once a much more interesting place to be, assuming she really was invisible and not—the next and more likely possibility—dreaming. But this was nothing like her usual dreams, which were drab as Salvation Army clothing. Last night's, for instance: her dead father insisting that she massage his medicated ointment over his rash-bespeckled back, a chore she'd always found tedious and slightly disgusting. Not even a nightmare really, just a slice of life from the stale end of the loaf. Her dreams were never as interesting as this.

So possibly she was mad.

A fat woman in junky K-Mart summer shorts and halter was coming down the sidewalk toward Clair, pushing a baby carriage filled with grocery bags. Closer and closer the carriage advanced on Clair without slowing down or changing course, until at the last moment Clair had to keep from being run down by grabbing hold of the frame and pushing back the other way. The fat woman let out an *Oof* of surprise and a *Shit* of annoyance and stooped down to check the baby carriage's braking mechanism. Clair got out of the path of the carriage, and the woman levered herself upright with another, profounder *Oof* and continued on her way.

She wasn't mad, and she wasn't dreaming, and she wasn't a ghost. She was invisible. *How nice*, she thought, but then, ever one to question the source or duration of any happiness, she wondered if her invisibility would be permanent, in which case it might not be nice at all.

As she returned home past the Ready Access Cash Machine it occurred to her that she might have already become invisible when she'd been making her withdrawal. The Cash Machine didn't need to see the people it processed. She tried then to think of the last time she had been provably visible. She never crossed Main Street except at the traffic light; indeed, she'd always dealt with cars on the road on the assumption that she was invisible to their drivers. She hadn't talked to anyone today, not even on the phone. And yesterday?

Yesterday she'd bought a package of Salems (she allowed herself three cigarettes a day) from the little newsstand around the corner from the

laundromat. But even that proved nothing because the man who sat behind the counter was blind. If she'd been invisible yesterday, he wouldn't have known the difference. There simply wasn't a specific time she could pin down in the last week when she could say without a doubt that someone had actually seen her.

Six hours later, after a lazy but gluttonous dinner of Mary Kitchen Corned Beef Hash with two eggs smooshed into it, Clair went into the front yard and stood on her lawn a few feet back from the sidewalk but still within greeting distance of anyone who might walk by. The first couple to pass before her were summer people and conceivably might have been the type not to respond to the smile and nod directed at them. But Mr. Gregory, who owned the nursery across the street and had been a friend of her father—surely he would not have walked by without at least a hello—assuming he'd seen her. She applied the same test to two more passersby, until the mosquitoes began to get at her. (She certainly wasn't invisible to *them*.) Then, persuaded, amazed, but not really distressed, she returned to the house.

She'd heard that people, directly after an accident, often act with an inappropriate calmness. It was the same now with her. She ought to have felt more upset.

But then she'd never been one to show her feelings, whatever they might be. Sometimes they just weren't there. After her father's death, six years ago, she'd not been able to work up anything resembling a proper show of grief. Fortunately, there'd been few other mourners. Clair was the only child of only children. Her nearest relative, a second cousin, lived in Tacoma, Washington, and they'd never met. After high school her friends had gone off to one city or another (there were no jobs in Milford) or drifted out of touch. There wasn't a single person in the town now with whom Clair was on a first-name basis. She didn't even have real neighbors, for the house to the north along North Elm had become a nursing home (it was a Victorian behemoth with over twenty rooms) and to the south the Meyers' old colonial had been on the market for two years without finding a buyer. Across the street was the display grounds of Mr. Gregory's nursery. You couldn't have asked for more privacy without going miles out into the country. 210 North Elm was made to order for someone who wanted to be invisible.

It dawned on her, as she pulled the drapes closed and undid the buckles of her sandals, that that was exactly what she did want and why she was feeling un-upset. It might have its drawbacks (she'd deal with them as they came up), but on the whole the prospect of a life of invisibility struck Clair as an improvement on the life she'd been leading. Excitement had never been one of her top priorities. Hers was a basically

cautious nature. But invisibility, like television, offered risk-free excitement, and that was irresistible.

Thanks to the layout of the house and to Clair's existing arrangement with Grand Union, groceries proved to be no problem. She would phone in her order in the morning, and before the Methodist Church's electric chimes had tinkled their noontime tune, the delivery van would have arrived with everything she'd asked for. She would leave the outer door of the vestibule ajar and keep the inner door locked. The groceries (and anything else she had delivered) were left there for her to retrieve as soon as the deliveryman had gone off with his tip, which was left on the bottom shelf of a knickknack shelf, in a ceramic dish that said "Thank You." After a while the arrangement came to seem as self-evidently convenient as paying bills by mail or having a schoolboy come to mow the lawn when it needed mowing or shovel the sidewalk. She felt like a fool for not having thought of it ages ago.

Problems might arise for which the vestibule would not serve as a solution. Should she need to see a dentist or, God forbid, come down with a severe illness, she would be helpless. The only remedy for those eventualities was an ounce of prevention. She flossed with greater regularity and, on the advice of *Readers' Digest*, saw to it that there was lots of fiber in her diet. She cut down on salt and saturated fats (but not on her daily ration of three cigarettes). For a while she even exercised, something she'd never done before, unless gardening counted as exercise, but as winter approached, and the lawns where she might have jogged were strewn with dry, dead (and therefore noisy) leaves, her good intentions in that area diminished to near zero. She relied on her basically sound constitution and the vague hope that whatever short circuit in the operation of the universe that had made her invisible would correct itself (as the lamp beside her bed had done) in its own sweet time.

Loneliness, on the other hand, posed no particular problem for Clair Corwin, or none that she hadn't come to terms with long ago. Churchgoing, yard sales, the to and fro of shopping—since her father's death these had been the extent of Clair Corwin's social life. In some respects, invisibility had actually offered her a larger social existence, as an eavesdropper. Theoretically, of course, she could not approve of spying and prying and poking into other people's business, but then in theory she also disapproved of smoking, even as she indulged in her three cigarettes a day. In the matter of snooping she exercised a similar restraint, never going into people's bedrooms and, when they became amorous unexpectedly (which is less often than one might suppose), beating a hasty retreat.

Except once. Once she was caught so much off-guard that the thing was happening before she knew it. It was on an afternoon in December,

at dusk, when people begin to turn on their lights. Clair had entered one of the nicer old houses on Independence Avenue, the home of Alan and Maya Sellars. Alan lived and worked in the city during the week, while Maya stayed home with not so much as a kitten to keep her company. It was a creaky Victorian monstrosity, and so Clair could move about without attracting Maya's attention, especially in winter, when the house (where Maya always kept a fire going) engaged in a constant soliloquy of squeaks and pings and wheezes. It was cozy to sit by the fire while Maya fussed in the kitchen, or to forage in the brimming refrigerator and cupboards when Maya had gone upstairs. Maya had a large appetite and loved to cook. She began tippling on jug wine at three in the afternoon. For Clair, who'd never bothered to learn to cook anything but essentials, a visit to the Sellars' kitchen was the equivalent of a smorgasbord dinner at Red Lobster.

Maya was good company as well as a good cook. She was on the phone for hours at a time, and though she rarely had any but second-hand gossip, she tended to take the dominant role in any conversation, so there were no long pauses while you had to wonder what the person on the other end of the line was saying. She was funny, too. Once she'd said something so irresistibly clever and quick-witted that Clair had laughed out loud. Fortunately Maya had been too sloshed to notice.

Maya also was teaching herself to weave on a 48-inch, 4-harness Gilmore loom, and Clair would stand for hours at a time in back of the bench while Maya worked the treadle and threw the shuttle. Clair liked to knit, but this was infinitely more interesting than knitting. The crash of the metal heddles and the whir of the thread unwinding from the bobbin were like music, and against the complex rhythms of the loom Maya would hum monotonous, lulling tunes. Sometimes when Clair had the house to herself she would experiment, dressing the loom as she'd seen Maya do, and winding the bobbin. Finally, using the address at the back of a magazine Maya subscribed to, Clair ordered a loom for herself through the mail. The ad advised her she should expect to wait six to eight weeks for delivery, and while she was waiting she continued to visit the house on Independence Avenue three or four times a week. Which was how, following Maya into her studio, she became a captive audience for an act of unwitting exhibitionism.

Maya had been tippling rather heavily that afternoon, and as usual when she overdid it, she settled down beside the phone and not at the loom. She dialed one number after another, getting no answers, only answering machines. And then, impatient and bleary-eyed, she'd called a 900-number and said she wanted to talk with Stark Newman. In the time before she was connected with the person she'd asked for, Maya took the opportunity to root in the cabinet that housed her extra bags

of yarn, and found a pink plastic cordless vibrator, which Clair mistook, at first, for a new model of razor, since Maya, in the first minute or so of talking with Stark Newman, applied the purring bullet-shaped tip only to the side and hollows of her neck. But then, as Maya's questions grew briefer and Stark's replies lengthier, the nature of the appliance in Maya's hand became unmistakably clear.

"How would you make me do that?" Maya asked her unseen ravisher at his 900-number, and as Stark explained the various ways by which he might enforce her compliance, the vibrator acted as his deputy. "And what would you do if I simply said no? If I refused to let you do that?" Again, the vibrator and Stark together showed Maya that she had no choice, that she must receive the whole, wild, impassioned thrust of his animal nature.

As Maya's resistance to Stark's demands diminished, as her questions gave way to brief exclamations, Clair looked on in a passion of embarrassment, curiosity, and dismay. She knew in a vague way that such things were done nowadays, and she remembered reading, as though it were yesterday, an article in *Cosmopolitan* that said that every woman had a natural right to pleasure herself. There had even been some practical suggestions as to the means that might be adopted. Clair couldn't imagine going into a drugstore and asking to purchase a machine that had no conceivable purpose but masturbation, and so, though she'd been convinced in theory, she'd never acted on the article's suggestions. And she had stopped reading *Cosmopolitan*.

After Maya finished her conversation with Stark Newman, she lay a moment on the sofa, eyes closed, arms limp, a smile on her lips. Then she got up with a sigh, shrugged off her bathrobe, and went into the bathroom. The vibrator had been left lying beside the telephone. Clair touched its bluntly rounded tip. It was slightly damp. And, in the hand, surprisingly lightweight.

Clair slipped the vibrator into the pocket of her down jacket and tiptoed down the shadowy staircase and was out of the back door before Maya even stepped into the shower. The darkness of the late December afternoon seemed the mirror image of her sin. This was first time since becoming invisible that Clair had taken anything from someone's house.

What would Maya suppose when she thought to put the vibrator back in the cabinet among the bags of yarn? Suddenly Clair was all of a flutter with panic. But really, what *could* Maya think—except that she'd mislaid it? Maya was often forgetful and her house was never in good order. Someone like that would always be losing things.

The flutter subsided, and Clair returned home, walking with particular care because in the five o'clock darkness, the sidewalks were especially

treacherous. "I'll return it," she told herself, "after I've had a chance to see how it works."

But she did not return to the house on Independence Avenue, and a few days later she canceled her order for the loom.

All the wise saws about the first step down the slippery path of sin proved, in the next weeks, to be quite correct. Clair, whose conscience had twinged when she'd pilfered so much as a grape from the Grand Union's produce department, found she could not resist the thrill of thieving. She never took anything its owner might be in dire need of. Seldom, indeed, anything that might be missed—except of course for Maya Sellars' vibrator, the disappearance of which must have registered as something of a puzzle. But that was water under the bridge. In the thefts that followed Clair was more circumspect, taking only objects of modest value that would have been difficult or embarrassing to have ordered by phone. A bottle of Kahlua from the liquor store, whose owner swore he was forbidden by state law to make deliveries, which Clair knew to be a lie, but what could she do? Fresh flowers—such a luxury in winter—from Mr. Gregory's greenhouse across the street. And from the rack at the Grand Union, a copy of the *National Enquirer*, which turned out (as she'd long suspected) to be both silly and disgusting and was promptly converted to kindling for the fireplace.

As a rule, Clair did not make off with items from the private residences she visited, except to nibble tidbits that were readily available. But the rule was not hard and fast, for she did borrow, overnight, a VCR tape of the movie *Emanuelle*. After witnessing Maya Sellars in the throes of whatever passion she had experienced in talking with Stark Newman, the temptation had been irresistible. But having yielded to the temptation, Clair had to wonder what all the fuss was about. You could see movies on Channel 13 almost as explicit as *Emanuelle*.

During the worst weather, when snow or slush made the sidewalks problematical (invisible people must be careful about walking on fresh snow), the telephone was an indispensable resource, not just for necessities like food that wasn't canned or frozen (with which her pantry and freezer were well stocked), but for that more immaterial need, a sense of being, still, part of the human race. Sometimes she phoned wrong numbers simply for the satisfaction of being told she'd misdialed. She phoned in, long distance, to radio talk shows to express her opinions on a variety of pressing issues. (As a result, she began to *have* opinions, and that made life more interesting, as well.) She called 800-numbers, making idle inquiries, and, when she was pressed for credit information, she hung up, with a sense of having won a small battle in her endless war with a vast enemy army invisible as herself.

Through her thieving she discovered that her invisibility was not a *physical* condition, not an actual transparency like the lenses in a pair of glasses, but a *mental* condition, a form of telepathy. She first came to understand this when she'd gone into the liquor store and stood beside the shelf of liqueurs, waiting for the store's single customer to look in another direction so she might take the Kahlua she'd come in for. She knew that once she held something in her hands it became invisible, but what would someone see if they were looking at an object the very moment she picked it up? Would it seem suddenly to pop out of existence? It was not an experiment she wanted to make, and so she was careful, whenever she took something, to be sure it was not, at that moment, under observation.

The customer had passed on down the aisle towards the store's meager offering of Imported Wines, and Clair had reached for the bottle of Kahlua. But her hand was stopped as though she'd turned into a statue. She looked around behind her (her head swiveled freely) and saw that the store manager was looking in her direction. Some part of her mind must have known. She could not have taken the Kahlua from the shelf at that moment if she had wanted to. Her invisibility had its own will power as well as its own radar.

There was one store in town from which Clair never took things —where, indeed, she was still able to pay cash—and that was the newsstand around the corner from the laundromat. The Vietnam vet who sat behind the cash register from seven in the morning till seven at night was blind, and so to him Clair was like any other customer. Larry Ruth was the one live human being in the whole town of Milford whom Clair could relate to in a direct, person-to-person way. There was always a danger, of course, that a customer might come in unexpectedly, and she would would have to slip away without a proper good-bye. But Clair had determined that few people ever went into the shop between two-thirty and four, so those became her visiting hours. She bought magazines and the *Examiner* at the newsstand, as well as her cigarettes (which she was now smoking at the rate of half a pack a day), but the greatest benefit of coming there was that Larry was obliging about changing the twenties dispensed by the Ready-Access Cash Machine.

"You're sure you don't mind?" she'd asked.

"Hey, half the people who come in here have just been at the Cash Machine. And half of *them* aren't buying anything, they just want me to break a bill."

"Do you mind if I ask a rather personal question?"

"If I can ask you one, too."

"How do you know when someone hands you a bill that it's what they say it is?"

"I don't."

"So you just . . . trust everyone?"

"I don't trust anyone. What I do is I put a five that someone gives me in one pocket, a ten in another, a twenty in another, and when the next person comes in I take out the bill and ask them what it is. If it's not what I was told then the next time the person who stiffed me comes in, I give him grief. It doesn't happen that often, and it never happens a second time. People here are basically pretty honest. Not kids, of course, kids will always try and steal candy bars and the men's magazines. But by now I know most of the kids who come in by their voices. They don't get away with much. I figure I'd be dead by now if I was doing this in New York or somewhere like that. When you're blind you have got to be able to trust other people. Which is just the opposite of what I said to start with, isn't it? But like the old saying, opposites attract. So now, let me ask *you*, what's this?" He took a ten-dollar bill out of his shirt pocket.

"That's a ten."

"And this?"

"Oh dear, that's a one. Shouldn't it be?"

"I don't know. Someone just left it lying on the counter. Maybe they took a magazine, maybe a candy bar. I don't know." He shrugged, and smiled, and rang open the register and tucked the two bills away. His eyes were hidden by the mirror lenses of his sunglasses, so that when you looked at his face you saw two little snapshots of yourself. Clair found the effect disquieting, as though the two little mirror-images were embodiments of the fact that she was invisible, that her image bounced away from other people's consciousness before it could register.

But she liked Larry Ruth. She liked having a person say something more to her than that she had the wrong number, and once the ice had been broken, Larry told her all sorts of interesting things about how he coped with being blind—how he'd had to memorize all the sidewalks and shopfronts of the downtown area, how everything in the shop, and in his room upstairs, had to be laid out just so, how he passed his time and kept from dying of boredom.

"I didn't used to be that much of a reader," he confided one afternoon in March. "Who is, in high school? Then it was the Army, and then it was too late. Now, I'll tell you, it kills me, it really does, to be sitting here, twiddling my thumbs, with all these magazines around me, and the papers, and the paperbacks, and I can't read a word. I got to ask the guy that brings in the papers what the headlines are."

"So how do you pass the time?"

"The radio. Tapes. I even got an old black and white TV I can catch the news on. And there's a few shows that make enough sense without

having to see what's happening. Leno, Letterman. I used to be crazy for baseball but that's a dead loss on TV. When I'm bored out of my skull I fool around with this Casio keyboard. Silent music, nobody hears it but me, and I don't think anybody would want to. I never had a teacher, and there's all these things I can hear other people doing, and I can't do it myself, so it's frustrating. But that's par for the course when you're blind."

"How long have you . . . ?"

"Since Nam."

Clair did the arithmetic in her head. "A long time."

"A very long time," he agreed.

She must have spent more time talking with Larry that afternoon than she'd realized, because suddenly the overcast sky began to release torrents of rain. "Oh dear," she said, as the water drummed on the newsstand's canvas awning.

"You didn't bring an umbrella?" Larry asked.

"It didn't look that threatening when I left the house."

"And I'll bet you're not wearing a coat."

"As a matter of fact, I'm not."

"I'll tell you what. Why don't I close up shop while the rain lasts and we go upstairs and have a cup of coffee?"

"Oh no, really, I couldn't."

"I've got decaffeinated."

Clair laughed. For the first time in how long? she wondered. And after all, why couldn't she? They would be more private in his room upstairs than here in the shop. She really wasn't dressed for this weather.

And Larry seemed nice.

"Well, just for a bit. Thank you."

Larry locked the front door and flipped the OPEN sign backwards so it said CLOSED. Then he led the way between the two revolving book racks and through a door and up a narrow staircase, each step as confident as if he could see everything around him. His hair streamed down his back, like Clair's, in a ponytail that flopped back and forth between his shoulderblades obscuring the map of Vietnam on his camouflage-patterned T-shirt. The front of the T-shirt was blank except for the amoebic interlacings of green and brown and black. Clair wondered if he'd put it on backwards. She wondered who picked out his clothes for him, and if he knew what he was advertising or proclaiming on his T-shirt on any particular day. For one giddy moment she could not believe that she—Clair Corwin, Milford's only virgin in the 35-50 age category—was following such a man up to his room. To his bedroom. If anyone could have seen them . . . .

And yet, if they could have, they'd have been quite mistaken in the

conclusions they might have drawn. Larry had a gentlemanly nature (never mind some of the T-shirts) and Clair trusted him implicitly, though that didn't keep her from feeling all pins and needles as she mounted the stairs. The room she entered combined elements of kitchen, living room, and home gymnasium. The oddest touch, considering that Larry was blind, was the full-length mirror on the door to the bathroom and a poster tacked up over the couch listing the repertory of the Hemlock Dinner Theater's last season of summer stock in Milford before going bankrupt in '78: *Arsenic and Old Lace, Guys and Dolls,* and *The Heiress.* Clair had seen all three plays and been overwhelmed by *The Heiress,* which was about a woman whose father keeps her from marrying a fortune hunter. To Clair, though she'd never been courted by a fortune hunter, or by anyone at all, the play was the story of her life as hostage to a pompous, over-protective father. Watching it had been a public humiliation and yet strangely exalting. It was a shock to be reminded of those feelings now, a decade later.

Feeling obliged to make conversation, Clair said, "Isn't that a coincidence, I saw all three of those plays." It turned out that Larry had no idea what she was talking about, that he'd left the poster on the wall all this time without knowing what was on it. One of the actors in the stock company must have been the last person to have rented this room before Larry. That would account for the mirror, as well.

While he made coffee, Larry explained how fortune had brought him to Milford, but Clair was more interested in watching his hands moving knowledgeably from sink to stove to cupboard to drawer, never erring by an inch in grasping the faucets, knobs, and handles. He observed all the punctilios of due form in performing the coffee ceremony—tray, sugar bowl, creamer, napkins—and placed the tray on the coffee table before the couch without spilling a drop from either cup.

Outside the rain was coming down harder than ever. The room's two windows offered a view of a maple's lower branches, their leaves still lividly young. The nearest branch brushed the rain-speckled panes when there was a gust of wind.

"Is it light enough in here?" Larry asked.

"Oh yes. Don't put the light on for me. The sky is very dramatic." She realized, as soon as the words were out of her mouth, that he might not have a light to put on. There were no lamps in the room, and the one gray bulb in the ceiling socket looked as old as the poster for the Hemlock Dinner Theater.

She felt obliged, having called the sky dramatic, to amplify. "There are flickers of heat lightning off in the distance, toward the river. I think we're in for a proper thunderstorm."

"I hope you're not afraid of lightning. I love lousy weather. When I

was a kid, the rain was my favorite entertainment. I loved to go out and get soaked. Want me to put on some music?"

"I'd rather hear you play something. If there's a way you can use your keyboard without the earphones." The keyboard rested atop a small pine desk, turning it into an instant spinet; a pair of speakers and a CD player occupied the shelf just above. It seemed reasonable to suppose speakers and keyboard were connectible, and in less than a minute Larry had them connected.

Then he became shy. "I don't know. I'm no Stevie Wonder. I just noodle around picking out the melody."

"Noodle," she said. "Please."

He sat down at his spinet with a thoughtful frown, and then he smiled and said, "All right then," and his right hand picked out, in a self-conscious music-box style, the melody of "Getting to Know You." At odd moments his left hand would introduce a gratuitous ornament (as the right hand paused), like someone asking to join in the fun and being constantly rebuffed.

"You see," he said, returning to the couch and taking up his cup of coffee. "What did I tell you?"

"That was fascinating. It has a more piano-y sound than I thought it would." A dreadful lie. She doubted that Liszt himself could have made the thing sound like a piano.

But Larry wasn't so particular. "Yeah, I know, it's amazing what those Japs are able to do with a few computer chips. You play the piano, don't you? I mean, I know you do, 'cause you told me. Would you mind playing something?"

"Oh goodness, I haven't played for ages." Which was not true either. Since she'd become invisible, her passion for the piano had been rejuvenated, and her technique was nearly up to what it had been when she'd stopped taking lessons in the mid-'60s.

"The thing is, I would love to hear the keyboard when someone who knows how to play *music* is using it. I've got no idea what the damned thing can do."

He stood up, and she took his place, trying to adjust in advance for the lopped-off bass and treble octaves. Through the first so many bars the keyboard imposed constraints that made her feel as though she were trying to run in high heels. But people do run in high heels, after all; they even dance.

She played as far as her memory would carry her and stopped.

"That's great. Don't stop."

"That's as far as I can go without the score."

"It's beautiful. The way you use your left hand. . . . " He tried to hum the bass figure and got lost after a few notes.

"That's called an Alberti bass. It goes like this." Her left hand played the bass line at a slower tempo. "Very simple. The same basic idea was used over and over by all sorts of composers."

"Play it again?"

When she'd finished, he heaved an exasperated sigh.

"If you want to learn to use your left hand, there are exercises for beginners. You just have to be systematic, and patient."

"Patience I got. You want to show me the system? Like, one particular exercise? Maybe just the first notes of what you were just playing?"

"The best place to start is probably with Bach. But here, I'll show you the Alberti bass. I'll play here—" She fingered the first four notes. "And you play an octave lower."

Larry put his left hand on the keyboard, and his right hand on Clair's shoulder. For the next fifteen minutes her left hand instructed his, and his right hand—shifting, tightening, smoothing, loosening—played *her* like an ocarina, like bongos, like an accordion. It was ridiculous and unheard-of to fall in love because someone was touching one's shoulder. It was a side-effect of all these months of solitude. It was cheap, and self-deluding, and (for an invisible woman) impossible.

As soon as the lesson was over and he'd removed his hand from her shoulder, the sensation of falling in love disappeared as suddenly as if he'd removed a plug from a socket. Larry seemed blithely unaware of the effect he'd been having on her. All his enthusiasm was focused on Mozart's Alberti bass.

"The coffee's cold," he said. "I'll make another couple cups. Unless you'd like a glass of wine. I got a jug of Gallo Chablis in the icebox."

She nodded compliance, forgetting he could not see her, but either she'd made some audible murmur of agreement or else he took her silence for assent. "Right," he said, and went to the icebox, took out a large green bottle, and poured. "No fancy wine glasses—they're treacherous even if you're not blind." He gave her the Daffy Duck glass, kept Petunia Pig.

They clinked glasses and sat down at either end of the couch.

"You know, you're a very mysterious person," he said.

Indeed, she did know. But of course she had to say, "I doubt that. I don't think anyone in Milford has much chance to be mysterious."

"I just mean to say your neighbors don't know hardly anything about you."

"You've been making inquiries?" She began to feel defensive.

"Not about your private life or anything like that. But I've asked a couple people what you look like, and no one has a straight answer on that score. Average height, average weight, average looks, not one concrete detail. They can tell me all sorts of things about your father, but with you it's as though you were invisible."

She had to laugh. "Sometimes I feel that way."

"It's strange. Because I figure you've got to be beautiful. That's what I hear in your voice. And in the music."

"The music was Mozart's."

"But you know what I mean." He raised his right hand, palm up, fingers spread. "Could I . . . ?"

"Could you what?"

"See your face."

She touched his wrist and guided his hand toward her cheek. His fingertips traced the curve of her upper lip, slipped down under her chin, pressed against her throat, then followed the rondure of her neck to where her hair was gathered at the nape of her neck and there came to rest. Before he had begun to readjust his weight on the couch, she knew he was going to kiss her. It seemed as natural and inevitable as the flicker of far-away lightning that coincided with the kiss.

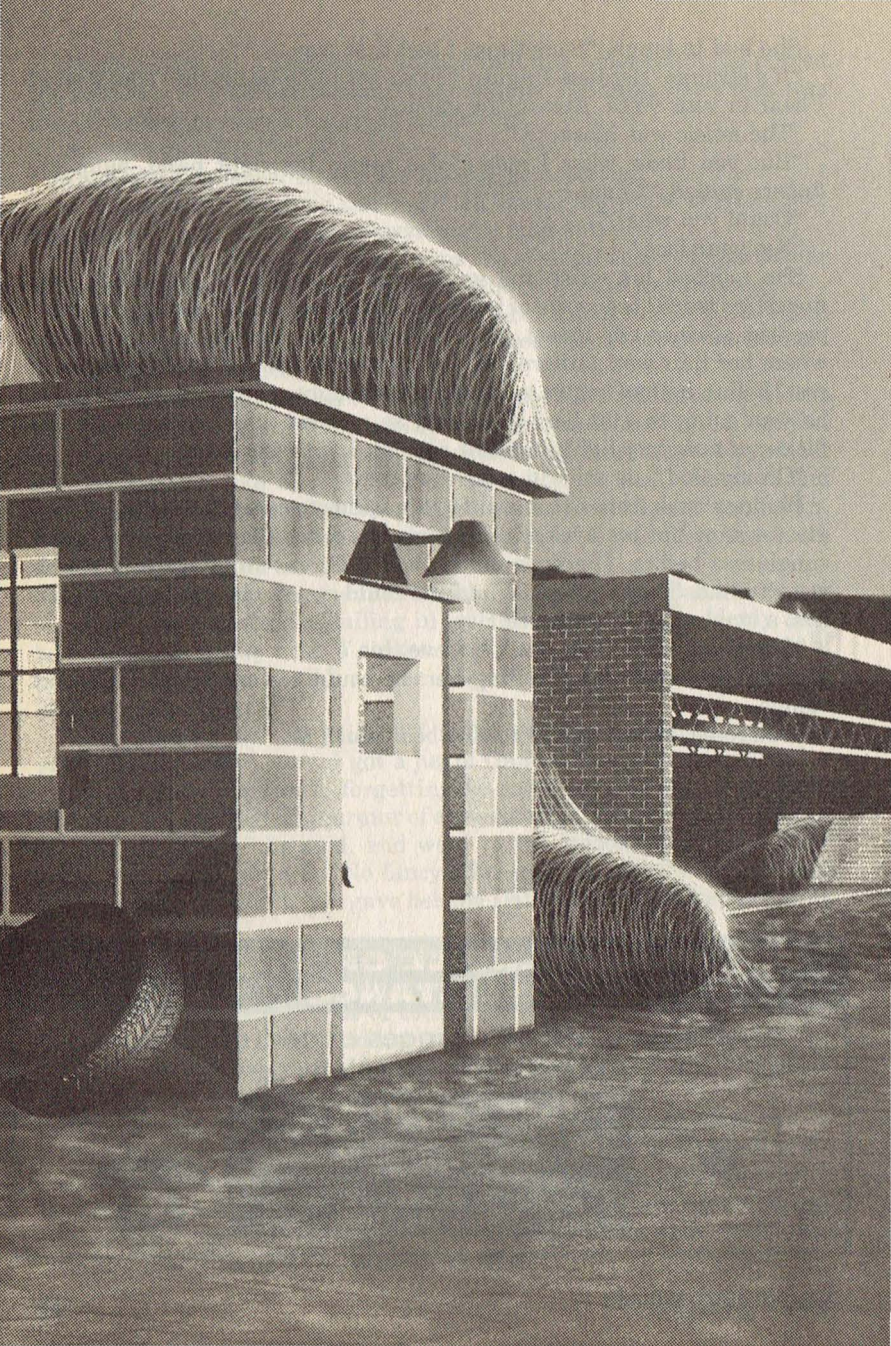
"Oh my God," he said, in a stricken tone.

He drew back from her and lifted his hands to remove the mirror-lens glasses that hid his eyes. He blinked. She'd not seen him without the sunglasses before. His eyes didn't look different from someone's who wasn't blind. They were blue, and she could see, in the darkness of each iris, a tiny reflection of herself.

"Clair," he said. "You won't believe this."

She knew without his telling her: he could see again. And she was visible.

"You're beautiful. You're totally beautiful." ●

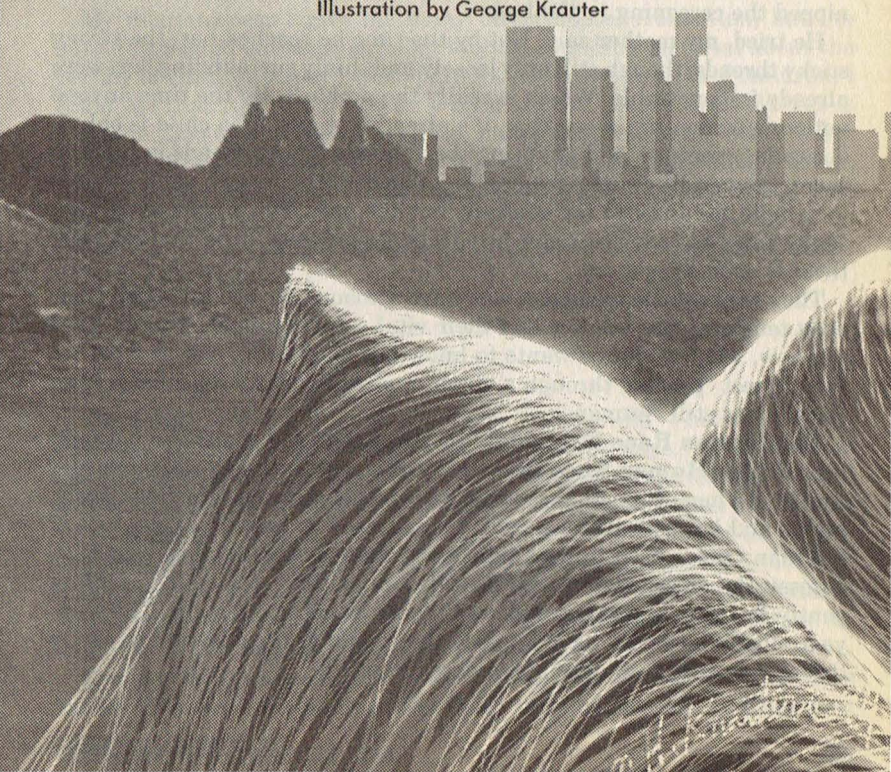


L. Timmel Duchamp

AND I MUST BAFFLE AT THE HINT

In L. Timmel Duchamp's brilliant first tale for *Asimov's*, "Things of the Flesh" (January 1994), change meant illness and death. In her new story change means a spectacular metamorphosis and tantalizing clues to what lies ahead...

Illustration by George Krauter



1.

Last night, when my mother called to tell me that my niece, after having gone missing for a few hours, had been discovered crouched on the roof of my brother's house, spinning and weaving a cocoon, I realized that the prevailing attitude, that cocooning was "just another teenaged fad of rebellion," couldn't be correct. Carmina just isn't the rebellious kind of kid; she's always been the "bookworm-type." (Or so I understand from my mother. I haven't seen her since she was four; Carmina's father and I haven't spoken more than twice in the last ten years.)

The news had me tossing and turning for hours. I kept imagining the girl in the most recent photos my mother'd sent me, crouched on gleaming orange tiles, hot and sizzling under the relentless Tampa sun, extruding "silk" from the "spinnerets" CNN telephoto lenses a few weeks back revealed in the folds between a cocooner's fingers. Couldn't Alan stop her? I asked my mother. Houses aren't very tall in Tampa. Surely Alan could have put a ladder against the side of his house and climbed up and nipped the cocooning in the bud.

He tried, my mother said. But by the time he reached her, the strong sticky threads, though still only loosely and thinly surrounding her, were already impenetrable. Which is really the problem. By the time anyone notices a cocoon-in-the-making, it's already too late. The child is oblivious to interference, and anything that touches those threads is stuck to them, forever, like super-Super Glue. Biochemists haven't yet been able to sample the threads for analysis, but the ones who'll talk on camera conjecture that they're some sort of super-polymer, like the powerful threads spun by spiders.

They say that the teenagers who have cocooned are alive, though their body temperatures are low and their vital signs minimal. What I want to know, what everyone wants to know but is afraid to ask, is whether they're just "passing through a stage" and will eventually emerge from the cocoons still "human."

The Human Race Evolving! proclaims the headline of one national tabloid. **The Human Race De-Evolving!** warns the headline of another. And in the meantime, thousands of cocoons are crowding the trees, roofs, attics, and jail cells of the world. I never used to look up at the tops of the many poles used to hold lights and flags and wires, but I do now, obsessively, to see the beautiful, iridescent glitter of the silk, rippling gently in the sun, rocking and cradling its sleeping occupant. Thirteen-year-olds! Who would have guessed they could act as one, and so easily throw the world into utter, bewildered turmoil.

* * *

2.

It's been two weeks since Carmina cocooned. My mother worries about her constantly—about the cocoon's exposure to heat and ultraviolet radiation, to humidity and rain, and even to smog. (Carmina was always asthmatic. Chemical presences of any kind always made her terribly, frighteningly sick.) My mother says that Alan refuses to build a special shelter on his roof, and sarcastically asks my mother whether she thinks it should be air-conditioned, too. His major reaction to the cocooning is rage. His daughter, he says, has rejected him. *Him,* who loved her more extravagantly and totally than any father has ever loved a daughter! Well, if *that's* how she feels about it, then she can just sleep in the bed she's made, alone.

Carmina's mother, Giselle, is threatening to go to court and tell the judge who awarded him custody that he's abusing their daughter through neglect. Go ahead, Alan scoffs, you can *have* custody. And you don't even have to bother to go to court to get it. You're welcome to move her cocoon to your roof anytime. Just don't ask me to help you do it.

My mother doesn't give me many direct quotes from Alan, but I'm sure he's trotted out some suitably biblical-sounding material about the perfidy of children toward their parents. Even before he had children, I could see that Alan would make a good Lear in his old age. "So this is Cordelia," I said when Giselle put the infant Carmina in my arms. Careless aunt, Giselle probably thought. But Alan guessed something, I know, for he shot me a sharp and-now-what's-she-up-to-look, considering, puzzled, and suspicious.

Poor man. Parenthood's a progressively powerless state. And Alan's only just realized it.

3.

The teenagers—the ones who've been "left behind"—are all rioting, even the "good" and "quiet" ones. Over the last few days, they've trashed every public secondary school in the city. The police are exhausted, and sick of wearing riot gear. The national guard has been called out, mostly to keep the city choking with tear gas fumes. The problem is, they're *everywhere!* Just as we didn't realize how many thirteen-year-olds we had, so we didn't imagine the havoc a totality of fourteen-fifteen-sixteen-and-seventeen-year-olds could wreak, when putting their minds (or whatever it is directing their activity) to it.

The experts on adolescent behavior presiding over CNN these days tell us that the older teens are enraged (and frightened) by their own

apparent inability to cocoon. It seems that as soon as the thirteen-year-olds started doing it, many of the others tried and—without "spinnerets" and "silk glands"—failed to do it, too. According to some of the experts, many of the older teens thought at first that these organs were artificially fabricated, the spinnerets wonderful little high-tech knobs somehow—mysteriously—grafted onto the skin between the fingers, and the silk glands pouches attached to the arms, feeding silk subcutaneously to the spinnerets. Imagine their shock at discovering that there was no technology involved, that the age of thirteen is just where it's *at*, and that no one any older can ever achieve the ultimate coolness.

Except for the tabloids' sensationalist "theorizing," people don't talk much publicly about possible future implications. If some new form of life does come out of these cocoons, the teenagers who missed the boat are going to be the ones to suffer the most. They're still young. They have their whole lives before them, but will be unable to escape the knowledge that *they're* creatures of the previous, soon-to-be-defunct evolutionary stage. Unless . . .

No. I can't think about the other, contrary possibility. It's just too depressing for words. But the tabloids are probably too, too hysterically wrong. Probably neither scenario is right. Probably this is just a passing stage, and the teenagers just taking time out from a world too stressful to grow up in without breaks for total rest.

4.

Like everyone else, I've taken to buying videos and books about butterflies. M.M. Douglas's *The Lives of Butterflies,* which has been at the top of every bestseller list in the country, has been given six printings in the last three months, and continues to sell like the proverbial "hot cakes." Hovering just slightly behind it is E. Berman's *The Butterfly in Fact and Fiction.* But though I'm a devoted reader, I still prefer to watch the many videos that have come out in the last two months, those depicting "cocooning" and speculating on it, and those giving instruction on the four stages of butterfly and moth life. And I spend hours surfing from one music video channel to the next, watching desperate and embittered teenagers trying to establish that life can still be cool and hip for the youngest of the generations to miss cocooning. I just don't seem to have the concentration these days for reading.

My friend Allegro is caught in the miserable middle. Jeremy, her seventeen-year-old, took off a few weeks back when the youth riots first started, and hasn't been home since. Like multitudes of other parents, she calls the Missing Youth hot-line three or four times a day, to see if

he's been arrested or admitted to a hospital. But if she's worried sick about Jeremy, she's almost hysterical about her twelve-year-old, Cybele. (I hadn't realized that Cybele was that old until Allegro mentioned it. Kids do grow like weeds, for sure.) Allegro is afraid to take her eyes off her daughter, thinking that if she can "nip it in the bud" at the instant it begins, Cybele will be "safe." But not even the parents who go to the extreme of keeping their children in restraint and under second-by-second supervision have been able to prevent cocooning when it starts.

So we talk on the phone, obsessively, glumly, and tearfully. Allegro won't take tranquilizers, and has just about given up sleep. What she really needs is to get roaring drunk with me, but she says that if she lets down her vigilance for even an hour, *that* will be the moment that Cybele starts. Cybele keeps trying to reassure her mother, says she's not the "type" to cocoon, because how, for instance, could she play the oboe if she did? Her chops, she says, would go all to hell if she took that much time off. And besides, she has a crush on her oboe teacher, and doesn't want to piss him off.

I tell Allegro that there is no reason to believe that *all* children will cocoon. I say that it's too early for her to assume that Cybele is automatically doomed. And, of course, she wants to believe me.

Allegro has scheduled a special exam with Cybele's pediatrician, to see if anything unusual is going on in her body. She doesn't say so, but I understand that she's thinking that "spinnerets" and "silk glands" don't just appear overnight. From everything I've heard, I think they *might.* But that's one opinion I'm not about to share with Allegro.

5.

The networks just broke into their regular programming to bring us a piece of "breaking news." It seems "scientists" have recently begun to observe that the temperature has risen in some of the oldest cocoons. The experts on-call, speculating, agree that "substantial metabolic or catabolic activity" has ensued. A second break then interrupted the first, and we were given raw footage of tape (made by an amateur, of course) of a cocoon on a rooftop gently oscillating, its prominent bulge perceptibly throbbing. The strands of silk gleamed eerily in the harsh light pouring up from a battery of flood lights that had been installed on the roof.

The CNN anchor conducted a phone interview with the man who had made the tape. "It's spooky to see, I can tell you *that,*" he said. "It's rocking like crazy, like it's about ready to split open. You know, the way eggs that are hatching rock. I've seen a time-lapse video of ducks hatching. And the thing is shimmying just like that." The anchor asked the

man if someone he knew was in that cocoon. "My boy," he said. "That was my boy who made that cocoon. But you know, nobody knows what happens to them once they cocoon. *Anything* could come out of that thing now, anything! And it's up there, on the roof of my home! Though what's in that thing was once my own flesh and blood, if it's a monster now, when it comes out, I'll do what *has* to be done. I wouldn't be a man if I didn't!"

But what does he mean by "man"? I wondered. The generic human being, or the male-gendered version thereof? No one on CNN bothered to ask him. I guess they thought it was obvious.

6.

This morning, I told Sarah and Ned that I couldn't keep them on the payroll any longer. They both said they'd guessed it was coming, since trade has been so slow. We sell every book on butterflies we order—the dumps I put near the door are always gone within a day or two. And we have certain regular customers who continue to buy romances and westerns, and some who continue to buy mysteries. But science fiction and fantasy are way down, and other sorts of fiction aren't selling at all. And except for books on butterflies and the work of Stephen Jay Gould, nonfiction is dead.

I'm hoping—feebly—that business will rebound. But for that to happen, people either must become blasé about the cocooning, or something positive must manifest itself (when the next phase—whatever it might be—comes).

Instead of opening the store, I went out for lattes with Ned and Sarah. Both of them are U-Dub students; Ned is nineteen and Sarah twenty-one. Though the social etiquette isn't established, I took the plunge and asked them point-blank what they thought about cocooning. Ned just shrugged, and said he hadn't thought much about it *per se*. He's seriously pissed-off at the rioting, and is upset at what's happening to the economy. "Can it really be this fragile, that a few teeny-boppers could destroy it all?" he asked. Sarah, on the other hand, was effusive. She thinks that the human species is mutating, embarking on a new stage of its development. "Mutations occur when the environment changes drastically. Though human beings are the ones who *changed* the environment, that doesn't mean they can't as biological organisms make radical responses when their own survival is threatened. Maybe those cocoons are a response to the environment. They sound super-tough, you know. My theory is that a radical adaptational mutation is in progress."

Even as she was speaking, I couldn't help recalling just how many

science fiction novels she had bought with her employee's discount. Rather than patronize her, though, I asked her whether, if her theory proved to be correct, she would resent not being among the generation to have been the first to mutate. Ned snorted, as though he thought it ridiculous even to posit such a thing. Sarah thought the question was silly, too—but for a different reason. She thought that such reasoning was as absurd as that characteristic of people obsessed with reproducing in order to pass on their genes. "As though my particular genes aren't *already* in the gene pool, as though the population was so small I'd have to worry about those genes never getting expressed! To resent a new phase of evolution because it didn't happen to *me* personally would be like resenting other members of my family for having children if it turned out *I* couldn't. My genes will be in their children, too, won't they?"

At which point, Ned hotly contested Sarah's scorn for people wanting to pass on their genes through their children, and the subject of cocooning dropped.

7.

I can't believe I didn't see it before! I don't understand how I could have missed it. I have no idea how long it's *been* there.

I was out in the yard this afternoon, ready to do some major pruning of the big cherry tree. I had the extension ladder out, and the pruning shears, and was surveying the branches to see which ones were shading the vegetable bed. It's such a damned big tree, I had my head thrown back and my arm over my forehead, and was squinting against the sun. When I first saw the glint of something up there, I remembered how for two or three years a silver valentine balloon had lodged in the upper branches, blown in from who knew where. But it caught my eye a second time, and I realized that it was too big to be an ordinary balloon. On further examination, it looked more like a small blimp. It shimmered between the leaves, sometimes silver, sometimes gray, sometimes green. Only slowly did I come to understand that the blimp was a *cocoon.*

I was flabbergasted. It never occurred to me—whose nearest teenaged relative lives a few thousand miles away—that someone might build a cocoon on *my* property. And the roof of my house, after all, is too high and steep. The tree itself would seem to make an unlikely prospect: I would have said that only squirrels and cats and raccoons could scale its trunk with ease. The first branching lies beyond the reach of my hands, even when I'm stretching on tippy-toes. So how did a thirteen-year-old get up there in the first place?

But what a supremely unimportant question! (The mind does love to

distract itself with irrelevancies.) No, the real point is, what I should *do* (if anything)?

Before I mention it to anyone, I suppose I'd better think about it first.

8.

I woke at around six this morning (as I usually do in the spring and summer seasons) with the sense that something important had happened or would be happening. And then I remembered, all at once, about the cocoon in the cherry tree, and opened my eyes to stare out at it. Now that I knew it was there, I could glimpse the cocoon through the thick, green, ever-flickering foliage. I saw that I had probably been interpreting (quite subliminally) the bits of silvery gray that showed through as a building in the background. (How vague one's usual awareness of one's surroundings tends to be!) And so I had never wondered what that blur behind—or rather among—the leaves was.

Last night, when I was trying to fall asleep, I kept wondering if the cocoon had damaged the tree. I don't see how not—considering the power of its adhesion. Well, perhaps the tree will survive. Who knows? The smaller, sweet cherry tree has lived through a great deal, even the case of rot that caused me to hack off much of one of its limbs.

I wonder what the birds make of the cocoon?

If the cocoon damages the tree, then all the other thousands—or should I say tens of thousands?—of cocoons will be damaging all sorts of things. Roofs, for one thing.

Perhaps I should suggest to Ned the next time I see him that he consider going into roofing, or tree surgery.

9.

Most of the time when I listen to media "news," I have no sense of emotional reaction. Sometimes, though, seemingly out of the blue, I cry violently and desolately, and discover a depth of feelings I never knew I had. That happened tonight, when I listened to Linda Wertheimer interviewing a witness to the destruction of a cocoon. We are all vulnerable to bullets, of course, especially from Uzis. But shooting at a cocoon strikes me as being like shooting a sleeping person, or an infant, or a blind person. The shooting took place in Houston, Texas. The cocoon was attached to a telephone pole. (Since he had to fire up into the air, it's a wonder none of the bullets rebounded to hit the shooter or anyone else.) The shooter, as he was being taken into custody, claimed that the police

have no reason to hold him, that there is no law against shooting at cocoons. No one is sure whether he can be charged with homicide. For the moment, they are holding him for discharging a weapon, a misdemeanor violation of a Houston city ordinance.

Later, I saw video footage of the remains. It seems that a camera crew from the Houston ABC affiliate got to the scene in time to show the police hacking at the telephone pole with an axe and felling the upper portion to which the cocoon was attached, then struggling with long poles to shift it onto a stretcher and carry it away. The picture wasn't very clear. Mostly one could see fluids oozing out of the holes in the silk.

This is the first (publicly acknowledged) opportunity for scientists to get a look at what is going on *inside* a cocoon. But it's easy to predict that the whole thing is sure to become an unbearable, sensationalist circus, in the true tradition of the "news" media. Though news people may make pro forma expressions of regret for the loss of "life," since they don't know who was in the cocoon and who his or her family and friends were and thus can't pester them for reactive footage, their emphasis is on our "need to know" what a look inside the cocoon can tell us.

Their second, minor focus is on how the reactionary radio talk-shows have been whipping up hatred against the cocoons. Apparently a lot of people think they should be destroyed, and many of them are organizing groups for lobbying their local governments to take the cocoons into custody, if not outright destroy them.

I feel so sick—and scared, too. Because that cocoon is in my own back yard, I feel an obligation to protect it. But if it ever came down *to* it, how would I *do* that? One woman, unarmed. . . . The best protection is camouflage. Since the tree is visible from one or two blocks away, let's just hope that the cocoon in it opens before fall.

10.

I've been spending hours on the phone lately with both my mother and Allegro. My mother is terrified by the hateful terrorist rhetoric that has, in the aftermath of the shooting, become audible in the mainstream media. And she's horribly anxious at the possibilities of revelations following the autopsy (or whatever one calls it). (It has been performed, but no results have yet been announced. The media have swarmed into Houston like scavengers circling over a dying mammal, just waiting to feast.) According to my mother, Alan is saying that the autopsy report will finally make it clear whether the occupants are in any way human. He claims to be prepared for the worst. He says he just wants to get it

over with, so that he can grieve the loss of Carmina decently, instead of being caught in a limbo of waiting.

Allegro is frantic, too, but with an entirely other set of concerns. She worries that not only will crazed vigilantes take to destroying cocoons on sight (especially if the Texas prosecutors decide that they have no grounds for charging the shooter with murder), but that they'll want to round up all children under thirteen and experiment on them—or something worse. She's rather vague, but totally ominous, as to what it is she dreads. One could ridicule her fears on that basis alone, but history, alas, is so full of examples of people doing unthinkable things out of potently mixed fear and hatred that I feel that my reassurances about common sense and "basic respect for life" and "family values" don't really wash.

"If these people claim that the cocoons are not human, and that they're not our children, then they're not going to think sanctity of life applies to *them,*" she said bitterly.

The problem is, just about *everyone* is hysterical. And hysteria, it's frighteningly clear, is contagious.

11.

Allegro asked me to go to Northgate with her, to look for Jeremy. I had been aware that different groups of teenagers have been occupying the big malls for the last month (at least), but hadn't considered that Jeremy might be in one of them. Those occupying Northgate share the stated goal of getting the government to sponsor research on inducing cocooning. The groups at the other malls are less goal-oriented. Those at Alderwood Mall claim to be building a "new culture into the future." Those at Southgate have declared the end of the world, and are embracing a doctrine of hedonism. Those at Bellevue Mall frighten me the most—threatening to kill themselves, collectively. Allegro got the idea that Jeremy might be at Northgate because the mother of a friend of Jeremy's said that her son came home to pick up his guitar and some books, and said that's where he'd been staying.

Allegro says that she could live with Jeremy's being a member of that group—she says it would put her mind at rest, to know that he's there (meaning that nothing worse has happened to him, and also, that he's with the group she thinks is the most "rational" of the bunch). She says that though he can't graduate from high school this year (his school having been burned to the ground in the riots), she still has hopes that he will pull himself together and decide to go on to the U-Dub after all. Poor Allegro. He was to have majored in Math. She was so proud of

him, so relieved that he hadn't gotten caught up in the terrible hazards threatening youth these days.

So we went to Northgate, but we couldn't get in the door. We made it past the police barricades surrounding the perimeter of the parking lot, because we said we had a child inside. Several trailers had been set up as food-distribution and medical facilities, under the aegis of the International Red Cross. But though we spoke to the people in the trailers and the youth patrols guarding the entrances, we were unable to get any information. Allegro settled for leaving a message, which one of the patrols said would reach Jeremy if he were in fact inside. "Why won't you tell me whether he's in there?" she asked the patrols at each entrance in turn. "Because knowledge is power, and secret knowledge is the greatest power," all replied, as if in response to a question from a catechism they had all memorized.

"These are the smartest, most serious kids," she said to me when we were trudging back across the huge parking lot to the car we had left on a side street. "Jeremy's bound to be with them. I feel it deep in my bones."

Perhaps. But parents have been surprised by their children's choices before.

12.

It's three A.M., and I'm up—the circumstances being just too damned perfect for insomnia. Though I did manage to fall asleep at around 11:30 (elbows and ankles aching even after three hits of ibuprofen), I woke at around 12:15 with a hot flash. By the time it had passed, I was wide awake, and my mind running like a program caught in an infinity loop. Or maybe more like a pool ball endlessly ricocheting in a frenetically repeated pattern. Foremost in my thoughts, of course, was the announcement that Houston's chief prosecutor and chief pathologist will be holding a press conference at ten A.M., Houston time (which makes it eight A.M. here. I have my alarm set. No doubt CNN will be carrying it live). I'm seriously worried about my mother's reaction to whatever they have to reveal about the cocoons. I don't think she's yet taken in the fact that Carmina, as we knew her, is likely gone. . . .

(Yes, I have been facing facts, as one can only in the middle of the night.)

Another item on my mind is the clip CNN played last night of some ranting Texas televangelist (who intends to make his presence felt at the scene of the press conference)—claiming that cocooning is either a work of the Devil or a punishment of God, and is in either case a sign

of the coming of the Apocalypse. (Millenarian fever, Allegro says of this kind of talk.) The televangelist says that the pathologist's report will make it clear whether cocoons are the work of the Devil or of God. If the former, the cocoons are to be extirpated by the faithful. If the latter, they are to be shunned. . . .

And finally, of course, my mind is ever on *my* cocoon (as I've come to think of it). Wondering if the person who made it was someone from the neighborhood, and what the fuck I'm going to *do* about it.

But what drove me out of bed was the tantalizing words of an Emily Dickinson poem, the first line of which—"My cocoon tightens, colors tease"—I remembered, but nothing more. It teased me so much there was nothing for it but to go downstairs and look it up. "So I must baffle at the hint," indeed, I do think. The "clew divine"—one almost believes the poet was prescient. For doesn't it seem that this is a baffling mystery, a "sign" to be "ciphered," of something beyond ordinary human comprehension (or control)?

13.

I thought I had myself prepared for bad news, but it seems not. My mother is in denial. And though I am always put off when she starts talking about "God's Plan" and "God's Will," I'm finding the truth so hard to take that I couldn't bring myself to try to make her stop avoiding facing it.

In addition to CNN, ABC, NBC, CBS and PBS carried the press conference live as well. (I suppose most of the world was watching.) The Houston prosecutor read a statement first, and then the pathologist read another, and then they both fielded questions from the media. The prosecutor said that she had been advised by both legal and medical experts, and that she had decided *not* to charge the suspect with murder in any degree, or even manslaughter. The charges already filed against him, namely, unlawful discharge of a weapon in a public place, would continue to hold. End of statement.

The pathologist's statement took considerably longer, and was full of technical terminology I can't say I really understood. The upshot: the cocoon held life, but not verifiably *human* life. It contained a brain and central nervous system and other vital organs, living tissue suspended in a sort of jelly of nourishing fluids that appeared to be in the process of developing into something that could not yet be identified. The tissue's DNA, the pathologist said, does not fall within the parameters of what could be considered human. Though from a philosophical standpoint it might be argued that the tissue is deserving of protection and respect

because it *originated* from a human being, he was not a philosopher or even a medical ethicist, but a scientist. The "contents of the cocoon," he concluded, were not human by any known definition of the term.

Open season on cocoons, then? Probably. In the meantime, the pathologist suggested, "cocooning" should be studied as a disease attacking pubescent humans. One of the screaming mob of media people who got his attention wanted to know if the "contents" of cocoons weren't human by virtue of an as yet unknown disease, at which point did they *cease* to be human? A good question, the pathologist acknowledged. And of course refused to answer it.

14.

Gunshots in the night. Nothing new in this city, but considering the torrent of reports of attacks on cocoons, it's not surprising I'm jumpy. I keep wishing I had a fence or a thorny hedge to keep people out of my yard. (Not that anyone has entered it. Not even the neighbors, I don't think, have noticed the cocoon in my tree. Or if they have, they aren't up in arms about it, since they'd probably rant at me about it if they were.) Between Houston's decision not to prosecute the shooter for murder and the televangelist's announcement that the cocoons were the Devil's work (based, he said, on the slides shown by the pathologist at the press conference, revealing the "jellied vital fluids" to be a vivid, iridescent green), the vigilantes have decided that now is the time to act, before the cocoons "mature" and release "their full-grown evil."

But then, fundies of *every* religion, the world over, are freaked out. The very idea of humans becoming something *else* outrages them. God would never permit the corruption of the human form, they say. And so if *God* hasn't done it, who else can be responsible, but Satan?

Allegro has called to say that *most* of Cybele's tests have turned up negative—but that the doctor says that she's concerned about one of the blood tests, and is having it done over again, with a fresh sample. I'm just going to have to start going over to her house, to spend time with her physically. My throat chokes up when we talk on the phone. I just don't know what to say. At least when I'm with her in person, I can hug her, and hold her hand. Which isn't much, but at least lets her know I care.

15.

Just before waking this morning, I dreamed that my cocoon opened,

and that a monster inside sucked in all the birds that were in the tree feasting on cherries, and devoured them—bones and feathers and guts—like a vacuum cleaner. I suppose that I heard in my sleep the racket the birds make as they strip the tree of cherries—hundreds of birds squawking and tweeting and chirping and ruffling and shaking the leaves—and assimilated it into my dream.

The image disturbs me. I suppose that it means that I, too, am afraid of what may be developing in the cocoons. It *will* be an alien form of life, no question. I suppose that's enough to make anyone scared. In the meantime, the media experts are now milking the concept of cocooning as disease.

Marvelous, the media. I don't know how we'd live without them.

16.

The president "addressed the Nation" tonight, and his speech sent a mishmash of mixed signals. "Remember," he said, "the occupants of these cocoons are our children. And scientists are still unable to say what exactly it is that the disease is doing to them. I beg of you not to write them off, before it is known what this disease is and what its outcome will be. We may yet be able to help those afflicted. But, by the same token, I can understand the fear many of you feel for the unknown. I have heard some of you say that the cocoons may eventually burst and broadcast the disease, communicating it to the rest of us; others believe that our afflicted children will metamorphose into monsters, threatening our very lives and property; while many parents are concerned that these very fears will lead to the premature death of their children. To all of you, I propose the following solution. A number of federal agencies have already, under my express direction, been working on various aspects of the disease. It is my belief that the time has come to take a further step in dealing with this public health crisis. I have directed the Surgeon General, who is our nation's chief public health officer, to set up a data collection hot-line. We ask that anyone who knows of a child who has cocooned to call the hot-line and identify the child and the location of the cocoon. We believe we will soon be in a position to collect the cocoons and place them in protective custody, both to care for them and to preclude the threat many of you feel they pose to public safety. And when the time comes that scientists have found a way to treat or even cure this disease, the cocoons placed in our care will benefit immediately."

So. Supposing they manage to "collect" these cocoons. Just where will they put them? In a concentration camp for cocoons? Surely not in a hospital, since there simply wouldn't be space for all of them. I suppose

that they think that this measure will calm everyone down, make the grieving parents feel that something might yet save their children, make the fundies feel that the government has the potential monsters under control, and, finally, give themselves the chance to destroy the cocoons if what emerges from them strikes them as at all threatening. (As well as, simply, removing them from public view.)

Will I report my cocoon? I think not. They asked only for cocoons whose occupants could be identified. They said nothing about reporting anonymous cocoons. As far as I can see, I've no legal obligation. And my moral obligation? That, I'm afraid, is still a mystery.

17.

And now, the moment we've all been waiting for: the Pope has Spoken. And what are his Words of Wisdom? It seems that whether the occupants of the cocoons are to be taken as human or not depends wholly on whether they are still "ensouled." Since the soul's physical location is a mystery known only to God, it is not yet clear whether any of the organs presumed to be contained within a given cocoon (presuming they can be identified as the same organs that were once human) seat the soul, or whether the soul has indeed been taken by God, and, if it has, *when*. The cocoons must be respected in any case, the Pope instructs us, whether as the earthly remains of human beings, or as living possessors of souls.

No help there. So, in other words, Stay tuned, Folks.

18.

The "collection process," a task with which the president has charged the Army Corps of Engineers, is apparently still not up and running. Today, the Corps suffered a major public relations embarrassment: ABC got wind of a trial run (one, we are told, of many already attempted) in Chicago this morning. The Corps has apparently devised a machine with special disposable grips that are intended to seize the cocoons and place them on thick slabs of concrete lining accompanying truck beds. But, as ABC's footage showed, the Corps has apparently overlooked an equally sticky problem with collection, namely, the cocoon's adhesion to rather substantial physical objects. To wit: by gripping the cocoon and attempting to hoist it off a telephone pole, they ended up ripping the pole out of its seating—and somehow, in the process, blowing out the nearest neighborhood transformer. An official of the Corps, confronted with a

camera and microphone in his face, said that according to their calculations, only a portion of the wood "should" have come away with the cocoon. And then he defensively pointed out that while that removal had failed, the Corps had earlier that day achieved success with a rooftop collection—leaving a big hole in the *roof*, to be sure, since the cocoon took not only the shingles but roof beams and insulation and dry wall *with* it—but that, as usual, the media were emphasizing the negative rather than the positive.

I wonder if the trees the cocoons have attached to are dying. I wonder again if my cherry tree is dying. I worry about it, but not enough to call a tree specialist.

19.

I've joined the Capital Hill Cocoon Protection Brigade. I'm a little uncomfortable with some of the rhetoric of certain members, but until we have a clearer understanding of what these cocoons represent and mean, surely we have an obligation to protect them. Because I'm still worried about my cocoon's being discovered, I've decided not to mention its existence even to my Brigade, which undertakes to give protection to all known cocoons (whether their occupants are identifiable or not). It's a little awkward, though, because business has picked up just enough at the store that I'm thinking of extending its curtailed hours. (Is it possible that the economy is going to *survive* this crisis? It's not clear. There are so many people out of work simply from the destruction of schools and the takeover of the malls that Seattle's economy has been devastated, for sure. And then to think of the cost—to be paid, presumably, in property taxes?—of rebuilding the schools. . . .)

However conflicted I am about the Brigade and what I really think and feel about these cocoons, I believe that, at the very least, this is one of those pivotal moments in history when what human beings have or have not achieved as moral creatures is made (usually painfully) obvious. And so I can't simply stand by and watch the cocoons being destroyed, human or not. Sometimes uncertainty is more of a reason to act than not.

20.

More unpleasant facts to be faced: I'm now one mortgage payment from being declared in default. It's obvious that I'm going to have to sell the bookstore if I'm going to keep my house. But who would want to buy

it now? And if I lose my house—what will happen to the cocoon (much less me)? Though I don't like to do it, particularly with the need to keep prying eyes away, I've decided to spread the word among Brigade members that I'm looking for tenants. And if that doesn't work, I suppose that I'll have to go public and take my chances with the cocoon's safety.

Of course, all this may be moot. The leaves are starting to turn and drop. Though more cocoons are being made each day, between the Corps's collection crews and the vigilantes, there aren't that many left for the Brigade to protect. We've lost many, and the ones we've saved have given us some damned hairy moments. God knows it makes me nervous being around firearms, which some of the Brigade members insist on carrying, since the vigilantes' second favorite method (after firebombing) is a spray of bullets. I'm so tired of it all. Well, everyone's sick of the subject of cocoons, but there's simply no escaping it. Though the postmodern attention span is notoriously short, every other subject is so . . . trivial and boring by comparison. And everything that is happening seems to tie in with the cocoons, anyway—the economy, crime, the problem of providing secondary education without school buildings (and with most of the students out of control). . . . These cocoons have even disrupted most of the *wars* going on around the globe. I mean, they're an equal opportunity problem.

21.

Cybele has been hospitalized. I don't know the story—Allegro is distraught and not saying—but I suppose that it has to do with the threatened onset of cocooning. The poor girl has had one blood chemistry test after another for the last three months. Allegro said that the doctor warned her that cocooning doesn't only happen to thirteen-year-olds, contrary to public perception, but has struck some twelve-year-olds, too. She says that it's now generally believed that the crisis is catalyzed by a certain hormonal event. And that it often occurs earlier in girls than in boys. (As for why any children older than thirteen have not gotten "the disease," it seems they haven't yet identified a perceptible difference—but, of course, are working on it.)

Hospitalization doesn't prevent cocooning. It just makes collection of cocoons easier. Surely, Allegro must realize that by hospitalizing Cybele she's making certain that the government will intern her cocoon in one of their big "cocoon collection facilities," the locations of which are kept secret. I've tried to talk to her about it, but she screams at me to shut up whenever I mention the possibility that Cybele might cocoon. "She

doesn't *want* to cocoon!" she says. "She's not like other teenagers! She's *serious.* She has *plans.* She has no problem with the world as it exists!"

Before cocooning changed everything, Allegro would never have said that *she* had no problem with the world that exists, much less that her children had none, as well. She would have said that any sane, thinking person could not *help* but struggle against the world as it exists. But then, that other world, that we used to know, must seem to Allegro now to have been a heaven.

22.

A cocoon has reportedly burst open! Few of the oldest ones haven't been collected or destroyed, so it is difficult to know if all the first cocoons are opening, but I have heard that in places where collection and destruction has not been so thorough, they are. (In British Columbia, for instance.) According to the one eyewitness (a Brigade member in Portland), the cocoon rocked violently for several hours. Then there was a great tearing sound. And then a shimmering green creature with wings burst forth. "It looked wet and green, like the colors of leaves, and had markings that looked a lot like mother-of-pearl. And it had antennae. And it was thin and sleek and streamlined. It made unearthly whistling sounds. And then it flew away, before I had a chance to do anything." (Though what he would have *done* if he'd had time, he never did say.)

Since then, thousands of people have reported seeing green winged creatures whizzing about the streets and yards, in every city in the country. The whole thing may well be a fantasy. No one yet has captured one of these things on film or videotape, and who would know even if some news organization did broadcast such images whether it wasn't faked?

Of course, the *government* must know, since they have most of the surviving cocoons in their custody—unless, that is, they've simply destroyed them.

23.

My brother has filed suit against the federal government. When they removed Carmina's cocoon, they hacked a hole in his expensive Mediterranean tile roof, opening his house to the humid Florida elements. FEMA does not consider the damage done by forced removals of cocoons to fall within the scope of emergency funding, and his insurance company is refusing to pay.

My mother tells me this news with the indifferent calm of one drugged to the eyeballs with tranqs. Since the government gave Carmina's cocoon a number and took it away, she's known that all hope is lost. My mother still says "Maybe, just maybe," voicing perfunctory hope that the government will cure her eldest grandchild's "disease." But new diseases, she knows, are not easily cured, at least not in time to help their first victims.

I offered to come stay with her, but she refused. "You have responsibilities," she said. But it's not hard to guess that the real reason is that seeing me will remind her of what she is trying to forget—that I could have given her a grandchild, one that would have been older than Carmina and thus escaped the disease, but did not.

24.

The surgeon general gave a press conference today. Yes, the cocoons in federal custody have been hatching. No, the creatures emerging were not human. Nor were they butterflies. What they are, apparently, is a bizarre hybrid of plant and animal. It seems that these creatures photosynthesize. They live on light, carbon dioxide, and water, and a broad spectrum of insects. They excrete mainly oxygen. They are no imminent threat to the environment, to human life, to property. It is not yet known what effect they will have on the ecology. But at least some of the effects, scientists say, will be *positive,* with respect to the looming catastrophe generally referred to as the Greenhouse Effect.

What does this mean? the media cried. Will *all* pubescent humans turn into these creatures? Is the human species fated to extinction?

The surgeon general did not have the answer. *No one* has the answer. Researchers are working desperately on deciphering the disease. It may be a race against Time, the surgeon general admitted. But we are definitely not to panic.

Nevertheless, it turns out that the president had already—before the surgeon general's press conference—issued an order placing the National Guard—already mobilized in every major city—on heightened alert. He knows that we are a nation of hysterics, prone to knee-jerk reactions, however useless they might be.

And the surgeon general's final piece of advice to the nation? Pray.

25.

"Little green men," the tabloids call them. "Green angels," the ecologists have dubbed them. The scientists are still arguing about their

proper classification and name. They can't even say whether it's animal or vegetable, fauna or flora. But then the Pope hasn't said whether they have *souls* yet, either. Only the fundies and vigilantes think that they know anything for sure, that it's the work of the Devil—them and the parents, who've lost their children, who know that it's a disease.

Radical uncertainty, is *my* position.

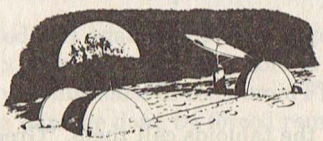
26.

The cocoon has begun to shake my cherry tree. What a relief—since the leaves, now mostly yellow, have been falling for days, making me dread the wind of storm, which would strip the tree naked in an hour or two (faster than a horde of birds take to strip it of cherries). The shaking is making such a racket, and is causing so many leaves to drop, that I've decided to call my Brigade, to get them here to protect it. Some of them won't be happy to find that I didn't trust them with my cocoon until it actually started to open. But they will, at least, protect it, and allow its winged green creature its freedom and safety.

27.

My cocoon has opened, and its shimmering new life flown forth. Miraculously it soared, without a moment's hesitation or awkwardness, as if it had been doing so for years. Species are dying all over the world, more daily than we can keep track of. But here, in my own backyard, I have seen the birth of something new, come out of our own selves. It is a tragedy, but it is a birth, too. Human life as we know it may very well be coming to an end. But, somehow, I can't feel completely hopeless and depressed about it. The birth of something new and beautiful, the creation of a wholly new species, moves me.

Life, as they say, is change. And now we'll learn what it really is. ●



THE TRIAL OF THOSE RESPONSIBLE FOR THE FIRST FALL OF STYLE CITY

"Who could have known" the lawyers said,
(no consolation for the dead)
"what seemed hard earth was hollow crust;
stone, little more than long packed dust
dried hard but brittle once Style City stood
gold gleaming under ancient suns?"

"Who could have guessed," the builders lied
(no comfort for the ones who died)
"an alien drought could last ten years,
while we built tier on shining tier
on ground that with the drought became
a dust ball bursting under ancient suns?"

"Who could have guessed,"the builders lied
(no comfort for the ones who died)
"Style City spreading up the hill
could weigh so much, or ground we still
believed was safe could crumble
like a dry clod under ancient suns?"

"No one!" the judge and jury cried
(no justice for the ones who died)
"a million dangers that we cannot see
could underlie us, who are we
to second guess what fate pulled down
and left in ruins under ancient suns?"

So engineers and money men,
went back out to build again
and politicians fat with greed
because there was a pressing need
approved the plans to build a home
for the survivors. On another dome
drying brittle in a second drought,
New Style City rises under ancient suns.

—William John Watkins

Television is such a pervasive part of our lives that it is not unusual to muse about running errands for Mary Richards at WJM-TV, daydream about going on the road with the Partridge family, or remember spending afternoons with the Harrigans watching our favorite...

SITCOM

Lewis Shiner

Illustration by Steve Cavallo

Let me tell you about a TV show. If you're under thirty-five it's probably a major part of your life. If you're forty-two, like me, it probably doesn't mean much to you, and you'll find it hard to understand how a simple situation comedy could destroy my marriage and make me doubt my sanity. And you'd never, ever believe the rest of it: that it got Richard Nixon elected president and killed the sixties.

It did, though.

I'm talking about *The Harrigan House.* You know, the one *Time* magazine called "America's favorite TV show." Only I'd never heard of it until last week.

My name is Larry Ryan and I'm a freelance magazine writer. My wife—we're still married, but that's just a matter of time at this point—is named Linda, and she's nine years younger than me. At thirty-three she's a card-carrying member of the Harrigan Generation.

She sells hosiery at a boutique operation in Highland Mall, some nights until after ten. It was just last week that she came into my study to give me a peck on the cheek and ask me to tape a show for her. "*HarriganMania,*" she said. "It's on ABC at eight."

"What mania?"

"Harrigan. You know, the Harrigans?" She let out a quick snatch of song. "*That's life at the Harrigan house.*"

"I have no earthly idea what you're talking about."

"I love it. You sound just like the professor. Except it's 'I haven't the foggiest notion.' "

"What professor?"

"Professor *Harrigan.* Why are you being this way?"

She wrote "8:00/ABC/2 hrs" across my notes for the stock car racing piece I was writing and walked out.

I took a lunch break about two o'clock and turned on MTV while I ate. I came in on a Tabitha Soren interview with a blonde teenager named Denise O'Brien. Under her name on the screen was "Janie Harrigan," in quotes.

"This is too weird," I said, probably out loud. The occasion was a live stage show, off-Broadway, where a bunch of semi-professional actors recreated *Harrigan House* episodes line-for-line on a minimal set. Tabitha flagged down a passing boy in his twenties and asked him, "Do you know who this is?" The boy stared for a second and then yelled, "Janie Harrigan!"

When I went back to work I couldn't concentrate. I admit I've never been a sitcom fan. Maybe they failed to get their hooks into me at an early enough age, since my father never permitted them in the house. He was full of rules like that, as if the fact that he taught at SMU law

school gave him some kind of anointed knowledge of right and wrong for him to crack over my little brother Phil and me like a whip.

Even so, how could I miss something that's this much a part of the cultural *gestalt?* I'm in the entertainment business, I do profiles of musicians, actors, athletes. It didn't make sense.

It's hard to sit and stare at a computer screen when your mind is not on your work. I found myself up and searching the house for the TV section. If the show was such a big deal, it had to be in syndication—probably two or three times a day. But I couldn't find it anywhere in the schedule.

In my business, if you want answers you pick up the phone. I called Austin Cablevision and got a woman in the PR department. "You wouldn't believe how many calls we get for that show," she told me. "We had it on up until, I don't know, a couple of years ago or so. TBS, I think it was. It seems like whoever it was that owned the rights pulled it off the market. I don't know if it was the studio or what. Maybe they're gearing up for a videotape release or something."

"The shows aren't on tape?"

"Never have been. I think the video rental places get as much grief over it as we do. Seems crazy, doesn't it? A show that popular and it's just not around any more?"

I had to go out that afternoon for the usual post office and Fed Ex drops, so I swung by the Bookstop in Lincoln Village. The woman who asked to help me was about my age, wearing a long dress and glasses.

It's one thing to sound like an idiot on the phone, and another to do it in person. I found myself suddenly embarrassed. "Do you, uh, have anything about a TV show called *Harrigan's House*?"

"*The Harrigan House*? Sure. You can take your pick."

She showed me to the section. There was an oversized paperback called *HarriganMania,* same as the special Linda wanted me to tape, and one called *That's Life at the Harrigan House.* Then there was *Harrigan House: The Compleat Episode Guide* and a smaller, brightly colored one called *The Ultimate Harrigan House Trivia Book.*

"Good lord," I said.

"I have a confession to make," the woman said. "Until these books started coming in, a couple of years ago? I'd never heard of the damned show."

I looked up at her from where I knelt by the row of books. "Maybe," I said, "we're too old."

The girl who checked me out was in her late teens. "The Harrigans," she said. "Cool."

The guy at the next register, who was blond and not much older, looked

over. "Oh yeah," he said. He turned *HarriganMania* over to check out the photos on the back. "Remember this one? The pie fight?"

"Yeah," the girl said. "It's like really sad about the professor, you know?"

"What do you mean?" I asked.

"You know. Dying and all."

"Oh," I said. "Yeah."

Instead of working that afternoon I read *HarriganMania.* It was hard to understand what all the fuss was about--even Tina Storm, the author and self-proclaimed "number one Harrigan fan," admitted that the show's premise was "dumb," the episodes were "banal and formulaic," and the acting was "wooden at best." After reading a few of the episode synopses, I had to agree. I found myself skipping on to the next section.

The bare facts were these: the show premiered on ABC on Friday night, September 27, 1968, at 8:00 P.M. Eastern. It ran for seven seasons, through 1975, 161 half-hour episodes in all. John "Prof" Harrigan was an English teacher at Ivyville College and "Mom" (Joan) was a widowed socialite; Nancy, their unflappable housekeeper, was from "back East" somewhere. The five kids were the show's gimmick, such as it was: Mom and the Prof each had one child from a previous marriage, Jeff and Janie respectively. They'd adopted one child together, Joey, plus taking in Nancy's daughter Judy to raise with their own.

The first episode took up shortly after the arrival of the fifth child, who was actually the Prof's little brother. He had obviously come very late in life to Prof's parents, since he was only five—younger than any of the other kids—when he arrived at the Harrigan house. The death of his (i.e., the Prof's) parents, and any possible associated traumas, were never alluded to.

In fact, the show didn't just avoid controversy, it completely obliterated it. There were no student protests at Ivyville College, not even in the wake of the Kent and Jackson State shootings of 1970. Adopted brother Joey was pure WASP, not Italian or Jewish, let alone black or Hispanic, let alone Vietnamese. How could he be, since the Vietnam War didn't seem to exist in the world of the Harrigans?

The episodes I was able to slog through dealt with such matters as the importance of investing your allowance wisely, and strategies for being popular in school. The professor was a bit pompous, but always full of good, solid common sense at the end. Like when little Jimmy gave the other kids permission to misbehave because he was, after all, their uncle. The Prof straightened everything out at the end when he explained that it was a combination of age, experience, and position that made authority work, and it took all three.

It was that kind of attitude that doubtless attracted Richard Nixon and prompted him to declare, two weeks before his 1968 presidential victory, "It's my favorite show. Families like the Harrigans are what make this country great." When they asked Hubert Humphrey about the Harrigans, he said, "Who?" At least that was how Tina Storm, who was a decade too young to vote at the time, remembered it. The next week, in mock elections in grade schools and junior highs across the country, Nixon won by a landslide.

Professor Harrigan reminded me uncomfortably of my own father, who was of course an avid Nixon supporter. He was so convinced of his own infallibility, so rigid, so heroic in his own eyes. The difference was that Prof Harrigan was able to tell his kids that he loved them, and in turn his kids thought he was a hero, too.

Harrigan catch phrases abounded. Prof's "I haven't the foggiest notion," of course, and his "Do you mind?" every time he found one of Mom's cats in his favorite armchair. Little Jimmy's cries of "Say uncle!" Janie's accidentally overheard remark, "Professor *Arrogant* you mean!" which was later picked up by the rest of the family—in a good-natured way, of course.

There weren't a lot of pictures in *HarriganMania.* Pub shots of the various actors and actresses, none of whom I recognized, and a few posed studio stills. There was nothing from the actual episodes because Sheldon Browne, the show's creator and producer, had supposedly refused permission.

I had a tingling feeling that meant there was a story lurking somewhere. The feeling turned into certainty when I got to the chapter about The Song.

It was irresistible, Storm said, like the theme from *Gilligan's Island* or any of those other viral little tunes that hook into your brain and refuse to let go. In sixty seconds the theme covered the entire harebrained setup, including the business with Prof's little brother "who was an uncle and a brother to them all."

The theme was performed by the 1910 Fruitgum Company, of "Simon Says" and "1,2,3 Red Light" fame. According to the book, an extended version of the song hit the top ten late in 1968.

That, I knew, was wrong. And I could prove it.

I had a lot of music reference books, including *Billboard's Top Ten Charts* and Norm N. Nite's *Rock On* Volume II. The 1910 Fruitgum Company was listed in both books, but not "Theme From *The Harrigan House*" or anything remotely like it, not by any artist. Okay, big deal, Storm had been sloppy in her research. Instead of a feeling of superiority, I got a chill.

* * *

That night I watched the *HarriganMania* special while the VCR taped it. In typical network fashion it was all form and minimal content. Tina Storm was the host, and she spent most of the show interviewing celebrities about their favorite *Harrigan House* episodes, and what the Harrigans meant to them. "The Harrigan House," Jay Leno said, "was like an island of calm in troubled times. It was a place you could come to for milk and cookies while the rest of the world was full of riots and Vietnam and girls putting you down." Shannen Doherty, wearing a "Do You Mind?" T-shirt, said, "Prof Harrigan was the father everybody wants to have. He was just *so* cool." Arnold Schwarzenegger said, "The Harrigans were about family values. Why can't there be shows like that today?"

There was an overblown emotional farewell to the actor who played Prof, who had died a few months ago in a private plane crash while doing a dinner theater tour. Then more tears were shed over the kid who played Joey Harrigan, who'd died of an O.D. in 1980. The woman who played Mom was brought onstage for a standing ovation, then hustled off again because she hadn't aged well and was obviously drunk.

In one segment they read excerpts from the thousands of letters the show had received from kids who wanted to run away from their own families and come live in the Harrigan House. The studio had been forced to come up with a form letter explaining that the Harrigans were fictional, that the kids should stay with their own parents and make the best of it.

Sheldon Browne did not make an appearance; he had refused permission to use any clips from the show. So instead we got footage of *The Harrigan House Live Onstage,* and shots of the *Harrigan House* comic books and trading cards, dolls and board games.

At the end all the celebrity guests got onstage and sang The Song together.

At ten Linda got home and we had sandwiches. I went on to bed while she stayed up to watch the tape. I read for a while and then tried to sleep. Linda's side of the bed was cold and empty, not that that was anything new. Most mornings I had to be up at eight to talk to editors in New York, while she slept in. More and more we seemed to live in separate worlds.

Maybe I could try harder. I thought I would go in and see if she wanted to talk, or maybe even fool around a little. I put on a robe and got as far as the doorway into the living room. Linda sat on the couch, tears rolling down her face. I couldn't remember the last time I'd seen her cry. Her lips moved as she sang along softly with the tape: "*and there they had their own little world/Nancy and the kids, the professor and his spouse/*

Laughter and love for each boy and every girl/That's life in the Harrigan House."

She didn't see me as I turned and went back to bed.

When Linda and I first dated there was an awkwardness that I chalked up to her being only twenty years old, compared to my worldly twenty-nine. I thought it would pass in time, but it never did.

I went in the next morning, which was a Saturday, to talk to her. I found her curled up on the couch, watching a black-and-white movie from the forties and reading the morning paper.

"So," I said. "Did you like the special?"

"It was great."

"I watched it while it was taping." For just a second she looked at me with real curiosity and interest, the first time in longer than I could remember. The look went away when I said, "I have to admit I didn't get it."

She turned back to the movie. "Well, you don't like TV. You say so all the time. I wouldn't really expect you to 'get it.' "

"So maybe you could help me, here. What is it you like so much about the Harrigans?" She shrugged, and I could see her slipping into hurt and anger. I kept after her anyway, knowing I should stop, a little angry at her myself for liking something that seemed so awful to me. "I mean, it didn't seem to have much to do with the real world. It's like some fascist fantasy, where there aren't any black or poor people, women just stay home and have babies, there's no crime, no injustice. . . ."

"And what's wrong with that?" She was actually angry and letting it show, something even rarer than her tears. "Does everything always have to mean something? Some of us are tired of real life. I have customers in my face all day and when I get home I just want to relax. I don't need to be challenged or stimulated, I want things to be nice. *The Harrigan House* was a nice show, okay? Is that so terrible?"

"I was just asking."

"Just asking. With that superior tone in your voice. Just because you went on a few protest marches in the sixties, that's supposed to make you some kind of holy person. Well, look at yourself. You used to talk about this Great American Novel you were going to write, about how you were just doing journalism while you got your novel together. Now you don't even bother to talk about it any more, let alone do anything. You don't even vote, for God's sake. Your talk and everybody else's holier-than-thou talk about changing the world is just bullshit. Talk is all it is. The rest of us want to keep our houses and cars and TV sets, thank you very much. *The Harrigan House* is shown all over the world. Eastern

Europe, Somalia, Brazil. That's what everybody wants, everywhere. To be like the Harrigans."

"Linda, I—"

"You think I like my shitty job? You think I like it that we're too poor to have kids? You think I wouldn't trade my life for Mom Harrigan's in a second? Or for the life of any one of those kids?"

"I'm sorry." With a tinge of bitterness I added, "I guess I didn't know you were that unhappy."

"Surprise! I am! Are you going to tell me your life is that great?"

"It's not so bad that I want to live in a sitcom."

"Fine. Don't then." She turned away again and the conversation was over.

After Linda left for work I called my brother, who lives on the other side of town. He's two years younger than me, but he's got a steady job at Community National Bank, a big house, kids, and a bass fishing boat. "*The Harrigan House?*" he said. "I don't think I ever watched it when it was first on. The kids watch the reruns."

"But you've heard of it."

"Hasn't everybody?"

"Put one of the kids on, will you?"

"Sure."

The phone clunked, and a second later a voice said, "Hi, Uncle Larry."

"Hi, Danny. Do you ever watch *The Harrigan House?*"

"We used to. It's not on any more."

"Did you like it?"

"I don't know. It was kind of dumb."

"But you watched it."

"Yeah."

We talked about baseball for a minute or two and then I got Phil back on the line. "Is this for a story or something?" he asked.

"Maybe. Just bear with me for a second, okay? Do you remember ever actually seeing this show, or is it just that you heard the kids talk about it?"

He thought it over. "I guess I never did actually watch it. It's just part of the culture, you know? Like how you can not watch TV or read the paper, but still know everything that's going on? It's like it's part of the air we breathe and the food we eat or something."

The stock car racing piece was a loss, at least for the moment. I went downtown to the main library to put an end, once and for all, to the knot of dread at the bottom of my stomach.

The first place I checked was the *TV Guide* for the week ending September 27. The Friday night listings had ads from all three networks featuring their new shows. *The Harrigan House* was not among them. Eight o'clock Eastern was seven o'clock in Texas, and nothing started at that hour. The second half of *High Chaparral* was on NBC, the second half of *Wild Wild West* was on CBS, and the second half of *Operation Entertainment* was on ABC. I tried the rest of the night's schedule, then the rest of the week. I tried the next week's issue, and the week's after that. Then I moved on to the fall of 1969 and 1970.

No *Harrigan House.*

I got the New York *Times* and the Austin *American-Statesman* on microfilm and checked them as well. I looked up *Harrigan House* in the *Reader's Guide to Periodical Literature.* There were no entries until the mid-eighties, and then the articles were either of the where-are-they-now or the sitcom-that-defined-a-generation variety.

I double-checked the alleged date of the show's premiere in an issue of *People* from November of 1987, and xeroxed the incriminating page from *TV Guide.*

Back at home I called LA directory assistance. Sheldon Browne's number was unlisted, of course. I dug out my research on an article I'd done the year before on telephone hackers—phone phreaks, they call themselves—and dialed the number of a kid in L. A. He got me Browne's home number while I waited, and threw in his fax for good measure.

A personal secretary answered at Browne's house. I was sure she would hang up on me if I mentioned the Harrigans so I said, "My name is Larry Ryan. It's about an investment of his. It's rather urgent, I'm afraid."

"Please hold." There was faint classical music on the line for less than a minute. "Mr. Browne does not recognize your name. What company are you with, sir?"

"Uh, Merrill Lynch."

"Mr. Browne has no investments with Merrill Lynch." The line went dead.

In for a penny, I thought. I punched his fax number into my machine, scrawled my name and number at the bottom of the *TV Guide* page, and fed it through.

The phone rang approximately a minute and a half later.

"So," the voice said. "You've discovered the secret of *The Harrigan House.*"

"Is this Sheldon Browne?"

"I suppose it is." His voice sounded tired. "A journalist, are you?"

"Well . . . yes."

"I don't care. If you're recording this, fine, you have my consent. None of it will do you any good."

In fact I hadn't thought to record it, but I turned the machine on as soon as he mentioned it. "I'm on to something," I said, "but I don't know what it is. All I have right now are questions."

"The answer to one of them, Mr. Ryan—that is your name?"

"Yes."

"The answer is, *Harrigan House* never existed. I never created it. There are no tape archives that I'm refusing to license to video or put in syndication to the cable stations. It's never, to my knowledge, actually appeared on a television screen anywhere."

"But . . . that's impossible."

"I said that for years, to anyone who would listen. No one wanted to believe me."

"But the books, the trading cards, the TV special last night. . . ."

"You're a journalist, Mr. Ryan, an educated man. I'm sure you're familiar with Voltaire? 'If God did not exist, it would be necessary to invent him'?"

I didn't believe him at first. On Monday I made a few calls to editors I'd worked with for years. "Try the *Weekly World News*," they said. "We don't do that kind of story, Larry, what the hell's wrong with you?"

At the end I even got desperate enough to think about the *Weekly World News*. But what was the point of burying the truth amid all those Elvis sightings, UFO encounters, and miracle cures?

Late at night I tried to make the pieces fit together. How long had this been going on? Did it go all the way back to the sixties? If the Harrigan audience wasn't old enough to vote, how could they have swung Nixon's election? The easy answer was that they had exerted some kind of influence on their parents, conscious or otherwise.

The other answer is much more frightening. What if the same elemental forces that had brought an entire TV show into existence had also created Nixon—five o'clock shadow, political history, Pat, Tricia, Julie, Checkers, and all? My mind shrank from the thought as violently as those of the Harrigan generation had fled from the tumult of the sixties.

It was just yesterday morning that I came into the living room and found the morning paper in my chair at the breakfast table. Linda was in her place, head buried in the Lifestyle section.

"Do you mind?" I said, picking up the stack of papers. I hadn't thought of Prof Harrigan until the words were already out of my mouth. Obviously I had let myself get deeper into the Harrigan world than I realized.

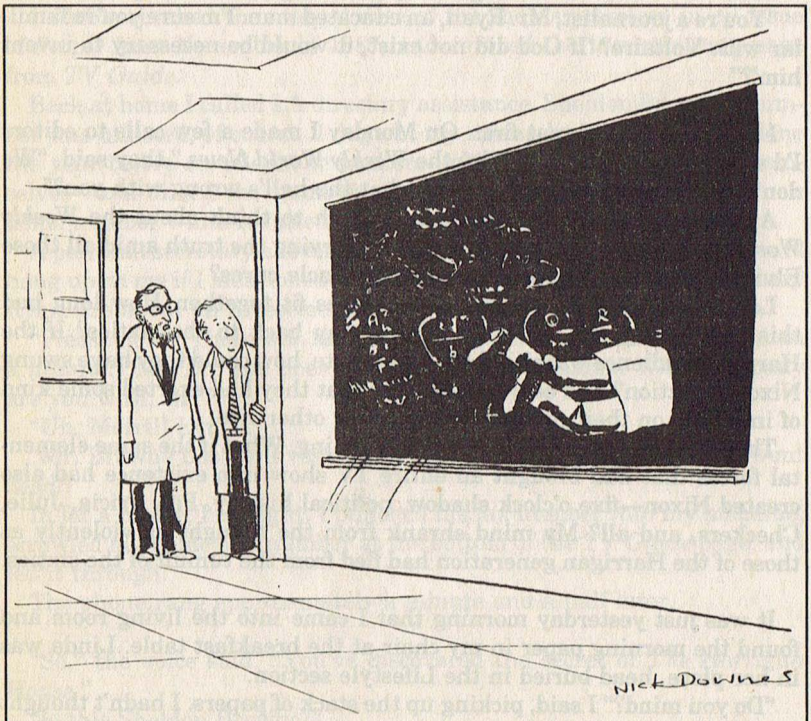
Linda peered around at me, a big grin on her face.

" 'Do you mind?' " she said back to me.

I smiled. "Oh well," I said. "That's life—"

And suddenly I saw where I was headed. Linda's warmth and acceptance reached out to me like a roaring fire in a blizzard. It was the chance of a lifetime. I could be part of something larger than myself, an unconscious conspiracy of light and happiness that could shelter me from a world of fear and anger and despair.

All I had to do was finish the sentence. ●



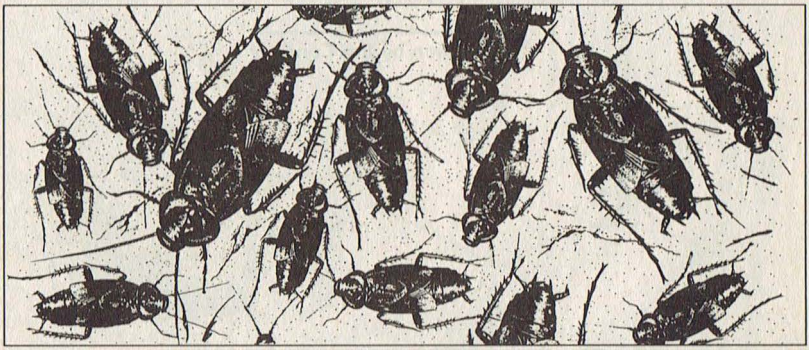
"It looks like Quigley's onto something . . ."

Geoffrey A. Landis

LONG TERM PROJECT: REPORT TO THE GREAT COUNCIL OF COCHROACHES

(Or, What Really Happened to the Dinosaurs)

Illustration by Steve Cavallo



Excerpted from the minutes of the 1,431,237th meeting of the great council of cockroaches, appendix three, report of the committee on long term plans, section one: report from nest 2394 on the project for interplanetary colonization. [Translated from the original pheromone scent-language archives].

We've been working on the big scaly ones for two-hundred million years [literal translation: six-to-the-third great-nest-number times the nest-cycle-period], and they're no closer to making spaceships now than they were six million years ago. We all agree [literal translation: swarm in the same place] that this engineering approach is a dead end [literal translation: cold nesting place] and that we should try another approach to space travel [literal translation: laying a pheromone trail across high cold to new nest sites].

We propose to abandon [literal translation: eat the eggs of] the engineering approach of using the big scaly ones, and start the project over with the warm furry ones. If this approach works, we anticipate nests on the nearer planets in short order, maybe as soon as sixty or seventy million years.

Respectfully submitted, nest 2394.

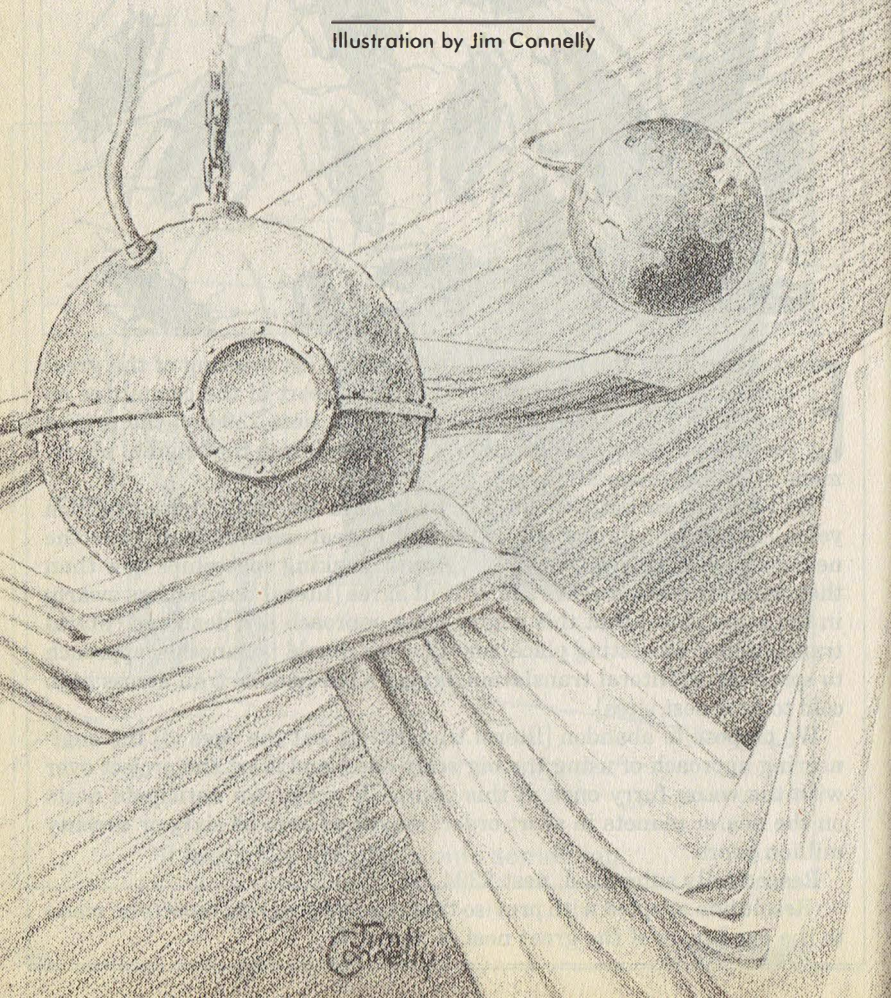
(Resolution adopted with proviso that regular progress reports be made to the egg-layers of the great nest of nests.) ●

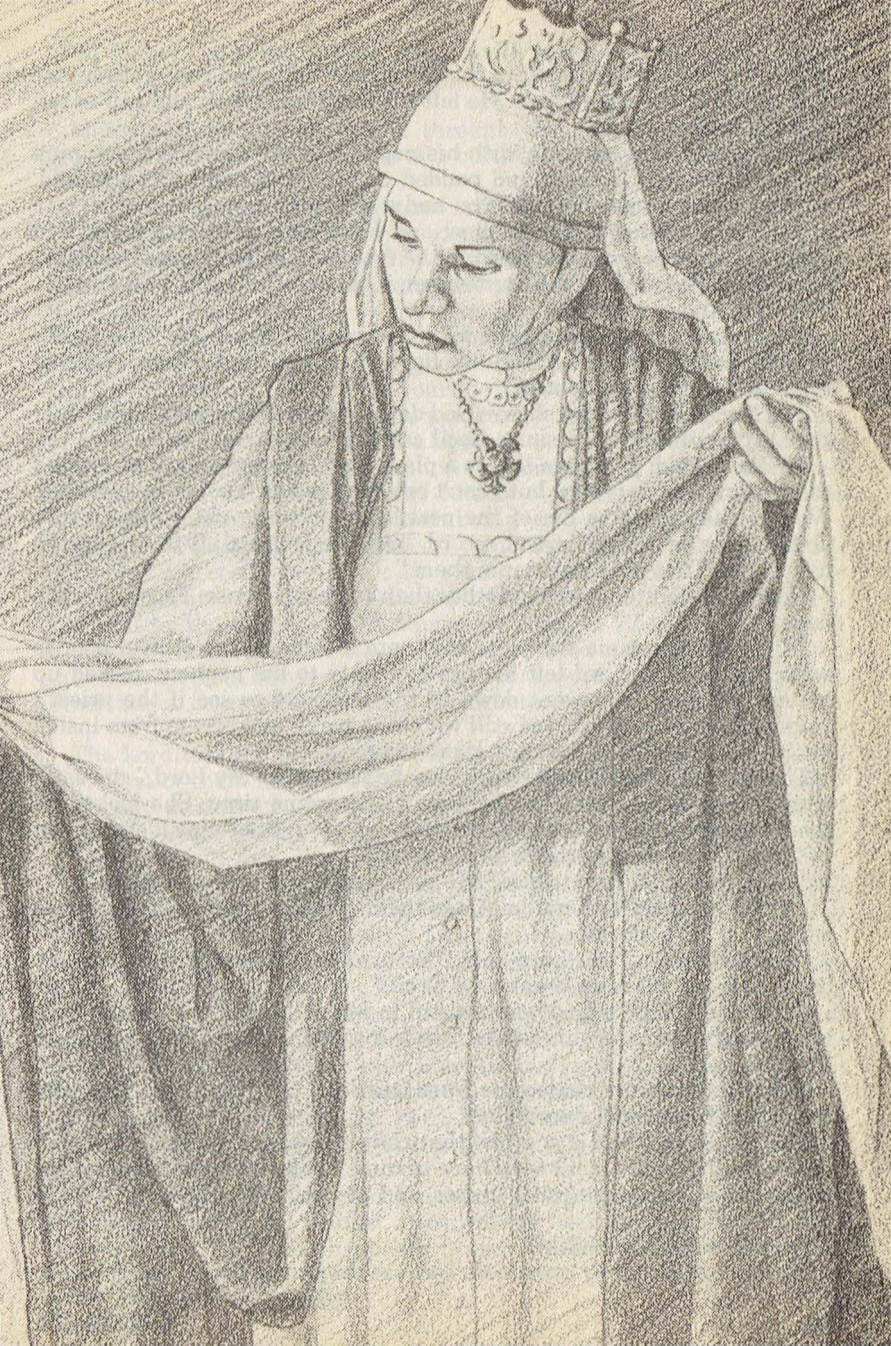
Rebecca Ore

HYPOCAUST & BATHYSPHERE

In July 1993, Tor Books brought out *Alien Bootlegger and Other Stories,* a collection of tales by Rebecca Ore. In 1994, they published her fantasy novel, *Slow Funeral.* Ms. Ore tells us her next book will be about nano-damage, ecological terror, and smart bugs. It is tentatively titled *Gaia's Toys.* "Hypocaust & Bathysphere" is her second story for *Asimov's.*

Illustration by Jim Connelly





A boy breaking deadwood in the forest saw God send two more future people to the time glade. He left his wood and crook and ran to tell the manor.

The Lord was sparring with his nephew in the courtyard, stopping sword blows with shields and padded coats. "My Lord," the boy said, pulling at his greasy hair as if he had a cap to remove.

The Lord nodded to his nephew and both lowered their swords and shields. "Must be more people from the future." The boy nodded enthusiastically. The Lord tried to remember if this boy was kin to his reeve, Tod Ball, and if so, how.

"I've never quite understood why God sends them here," the Lord's nephew said. "Especially since we haven't met one yet who *planned* to come to this time and place."

The boy said, "The priest says God doesn't want them roaming all over time. They come here because Cecil can explain them to us."

The Lord said, "Perhaps this is a place they can come without tearing the fabric of the universe, but I can't believe a peasant boy is responsible. We're either going to die of the pestilence or we're not going to talk about them for the historical record. Tell the house staff to fire up the hypocaust. That always amazes them."

"Uncle, it's better to wear clothes than to heat a house. Frost kills the fleas."

"But watching time travelers step onto a Roman style warm floor is so amusing." The Lord left his practice gear to his nephew, picked up his sharp sword, and went down to the millpond to see if the priest's youngest brother, Cecil, was still watching perch and bream from inside his iron ball with the polished glass windows.

The pond bubbled. A villein girl worked bellows. "My Lord," she said, trying to bob and pump the bellows at the same time. She looked as though she was on the verge of womanhood, twelve perhaps if she'd been well fed. Otherwise, perhaps as old as fifteen.

"Can you signal him to rise? We've got more time travelers."

"My Lord, Cecil told me he hates them. The last one accused him of being a . . . a . . . chrah . . ."

"Anachronistic," the Lord said. "So are *they*. Does the priest really believe they come here because of Cecil?"

"The priest thinks God wants them to know Cecil. Cecil thinks time is like a thread, and this is the beginning of the fibers that extend to their times."

"I hate metaphors that come from textiles," the Lord said. "I prefer those that come from swordplay."

The girl said, "And it may be that they come here because the *more* they come here, the more they *have* to come here, like a road where feet grind down a passage until horses and carts find it the only way to travel."

"Is that what you think?"

She shrugged. "They come here because they come here," the girl said.

"Tell them to be polite to Cecil. He's really pissed because none of them have ever heard of him."

Morty and Sara materialized through the gate. Morty scuffed the ground and said, "Perhaps this is a cultic deep woods dancing ground; the earth seems well-packed."

"Do you have any idea what time it could be?" Sara said.

"Bath, 1352, if the machinery worked properly, but since it's obviously fall and we were supposed to arrive in the spring, something's off." Morty had a brain chip and visual enhancements, but the internal clock needed to be reset. His implants gave him the temperature.

Sara pulled out her compass and chronologically believeable astrolabe. "If we're not too far off, then we should be able to shoot Polaris tonight and figure out from the maps in your file where the nearest manor might be." She checked the liquid nitrogen freezer they'd brought with them to collect tissue samples. It was disguised as a wooden distaff, heavier than most distaffs Sara had seen in museums, a long staff of oak about an inch thick. All women in the Middle Ages carried distaffs. Some Medieval illustrations showed them being used as weapons.

Had the Pestilence been caused by rat fleas and *Yersinia pesti*? Or by anthrax aeresol spores? Or by combinations of diseases? Until the twentieth century, everyone believed in the black rats and fleas explanation, but by the late twentieth century, Twigg, in *The Black Plague: A Biological Reappraisal*, wondered how a rat and a flea that originated in Southeast Asia survived British summers, much less British winters. Fresh tissue samples should stop the debate.

The Lord told the priest, "They'll stay in the wood tonight to see the sky. Most of them have astrolabes to check where and when they are."

"I could go to them, my Lord." Over the years, the priest had learned several dialects of Future as well as Latin, Welsh, and Saxon.

"Suit yourself," the Lord said in one of those dialects.

The priest remembered that he'd nailed the Lord with a quarterstaff the last time they'd sparred. He bowed and said, "Perhaps thieves will be out, my Lord. I'd be pleased if I had your protection."

Yes, I did appoint this priest, the Lord thought. The Lord's father had let the priest's father pay the fine to have him educated. *I appointed him here because otherwise it looked like he was headed for Oxford. But that was before Crecy, and before his younger brother's infernal bathysphere machine.* He said, "Between your cudgel and my sword, we should prevail against any number of thieves and future people."

"With your permission, my Lord, I'll arrange for their baptism, as, since they haven't been born yet in real time, whatever sacraments they may have won't be valid."

The Lord thought, *And how many angels can God put to dancing on the head of a pin?* He nodded, then walked back to the stable to have his horse saddled. "What happened to your donkey?" he asked the priest.

"My Lord, I had expenses."

"Your sister whelped again. Why didn't you see to it that she did better than to marry a cottar?"

"Yes, my Lord, but my sister was headstrong. I'm the only one who bent to the Lord's will."

And which Lord did he mean? the Lord wondered wryly. The Lord said, "I think we've got a donkey you could ride." He felt very grateful for his distant cousin, who served as the family confessor. *That* priest had no gift for languages, not even Latin, but one did prefer to confess to a peer, not to the son of a man one had owned.

"My Lord, there's no need to rush," the priest said, bowing his head. "Time travelers generally bring weapons and sufficient supplies."

"I'd like to get a few Cokes before they drink them all," the Lord said. "And your brother Cecil likes to play with the cans. He's down in the pond; isn't it a bit too cold?"

"He wants to find winter frogs. I told him the tad breed out of pond scum in the spring and the frogs all die of frost, but he's not sure."

"Perhaps your brother has involved us in paradoxes. Perhaps because of *him*, we all die off, and my renovated hypocaust and manor become lost in a navigation canal."

"Yes, my Lord, but we don't *necessarily* die off. You can count on this village to be closed-mouthed. We know we're not mad or deluded by demons, but since the next village tends to be jealous of some of our more prosperous people, we know we'd have grief if we spoke."

"I suspect we mostly die of the plague, but then, I've been black-biled since Crecy. Give a villein a long bow, but make from the point and never turn your back on them. If those time people are so concerned about paradoxes, they shouldn't sneak in canned drinks."

"My Lord, you're so right."

About dusk, the time travelers saw two men, one obviously a knight, the other a tonsured priest, ride up. Both men wore linen head covers that looked like cropped versions of women's wimples. The Lord had a beard. The priest had stubble. "When are you from?" the priest asked, saying it, "Qhwne air yay freom?"

Morty pulled on his ear to start the translation chip. The priest said, "We might out gay through the sounds to teach your computer."

The Lord said in French, "Je ne parle pas vos langues. Parlez vous avec le padre."

Sara thought he was trying to speak Spanish or Italian. He pronounced every letter. "How do they know we're time travelers?" Sara asked.

"Oh, *that* dialect of Future!" the priest said. "Our future Englishmen."

"Why do they all come from the same three-hundred-year span?" the Lord asked the priest.

"Perhaps because the Final Judgment comes in the twenty-second century," the priest said.

Morty said, "They're talking about final judgment."

"Goodly sirs, when are we?" Sara asked, hoping that much would be intelligible to English-speaking people who'd been dealing with time travelers.

"The year 1348. We're waiting for the plague, which may kill all in this village to avoid temporal paradoxes," the priest said, looking sideways at his Lord to see if the terrible worm in the steel cocoon understood. "Then our relics will be obliterated by a navigation canal. We inherited a modern map and some books from one of your people who died here."

Sara was more than a bit confused. These people sounded like they'd entertained different time traveler teams each week for decades. All she could say at that moment, though, was, "But we're not near Bath, are we?"

The Lord said, "She's attractive for a peasant descendent. I'll order boiled sheets and steamed blankets so vermin won't shock her passion."

"Oui, mon signeur," the priest said, thinking *better time travelers than village girls.* "Ma'am, no, you are not near Bath. You're in what used to be the Danelaw. God sends time travelers to us for His own mysterious purposes, perhaps to avoid paradoxes, perhaps to show you how true Christians live, perhaps to subdue my younger brother's pride. Since you haven't been born yet, we need to arrange a christening."

Sara decided the only sensible response was a curtsey. Morty bowed and said, "I understand that you've had trouble with the murraine and don't have a lot of food. We can leave now, or we can leave in two weeks."

The Lord spoke. The priest said, "My Lord wants to know if any of you smuggled in any canned soft drinks. He's especially fond of Dr. Pepper. You could spend gold at the manor, copper in the village. Surely, you brought something to trade for your keep in these poor times."

Morty bowed and fished a handblown glass bottle out of his pack. He said, "Tell him to mix it with water. It's concentrated Dr. Pepper syrup."

Sara said, "Morty, you're not supposed to bring stuff like that! Goodfather, tell your Lord that we brought some Saracen-style gold coins and some shillings and pennies. They are actually duplicates from our time, but the metal weights are honest."

"No can?" the Lord asked almost comprehensibly. *New cahn?* He trusted the future coins would not appear to be counterfeit. But if they proved badly made, he'd resmelt the gold ones.

Everyone shook heads and bowed low, even Sara. This knight hadn't seemed to recognize her earlier curtsey. He smiled at them and turned his horse, stopping from time to time so they could catch up to him.

The Lord wondered why God always sent him such obvious peasants. Cleaner than their ancestors, though. He wondered if time travelers realized that the very *threads* of their clothes made people nervous. His wife, after much examination of time traveler clothes, said that the machines that made time travelers' clothes were too dumb to leave subtle messages in the spinning and weaving. That's why the villeins had turned their wool combs on the *first* time traveler. He wore inhuman clothes and was obviously no saint. He also perhaps discovered a pot

quern or two, or a fulling trough. Some villeins couldn't be broken of cheating their Lord's mills.

The second time traveler looked like a peasant trying to evade her Lord's fulling mill by weaving and wearing unfulled cloth so sleazy one could see through the loose weave. Underneath, she wore brain-dead machine cloth. The Lord knew none of them expected to be undressed by fourteenth century hands. From her, the Lord had learned how to unhook bras.

When they caught up to his horse the third time, the Lord said, "At least, you didn't try to fool us with bad post-Modern hand spinning and weaving."

Sara made out the word "post-modern," and said to Morty, "You'll never learn anything true and uncontaminated about the Middle Ages *now*."

The priest said, "Only God knows true and uncontaminated things. A human would have to sacrifice his life completely to another to even begin to know the surface of that other. All humans get is gists and piths in lives that were surface sketches of immortal souls."

Morty asked, "What did he say about the Post Modern?"

The priest said, "My Lord's glad you didn't try to fool us with bad hand-weaving. Machine-made cloth strikes us as odd, but some of the handwoven crap worn out of the twenty-first century is positively insulting."

"This duplicates hand-spinning and weaving," Morty said.

"Machines don't leave the same signs," the priest said.

Sara said, "I can spin. I learned over the summer." She flourished her distaff.

The priest smiled and translated for the Lord. The Lord said, "If true, my lady wife will be so surprised." One earlier time traveler could spin as well as a six-year-old girl. She claimed she'd sprained her wrist earlier when she saw how well his lady and her women spun. No other time traveler did even that well. "You people generally cook marvelously."

Finally, they reached the manor house. The time travelers saw Norman walls built on a Roman stone foundation. One small shed attached to the main hall was wattle-and-daub. The main hall was stone, but it was smaller than Sara had expected, and so looked like a triple-wide prefab with delusions of grandeur. Jutting above was a round tower. The Lord's own confessor came out from the tower and glared at the vicar priest. The Lord swung off his horse and said, "They brought Dr. Pepper syrup."

Morty said, "But it doesn't fizz."

"Fizz?" the priest asked.

"Little bubbles in the beaker."

The Lord's confessor said, "Ask them if they might bring it in cans next time. Cecil collects the cans."

Sara understood. She saw smoke rising from the wattle-and-daub shed,

but none from the manor's roof vents. Fleas, lice, rats, and greasy rushes waited inside for her, she was sure.

In front of the door was a box stood on end, one long side open. A man, obviously the porter, lay curled in the box. When the Lord kicked the box, the man flinched and climbed to his feet. He was four inches shorter than the Lord, dressed in a calf-length tunic that looked like grey upholstery with black stripes, and black leggings that looked like the maker couldn't decide whether these were to be trousers or hose. Bowing, he opened the door.

Inside, the floor was warm. The windows were green glass that looked as though someone had heated drink bottles and spun them out into lumpy sheets. Though the light was dim, Sara made out the center floor mosaic of Neptune on dolphins.

Morty asked, "Have you always had the hypocaust?"

The Lord said, "We built on top of it. Roman, don't you know. Not really practical in this climate, but the weather's been unseasonably warm for the Little Ice Age. Men of the Danelaw weren't so feared of pagan things as the Anglos." He didn't tell them that another time-traveler had discovered it under the ancient foundation when the Lord had been a boy, visiting here with his uncle.

"What will you do?" Sara asked.

"For now, when it's colder than this, we build fires in tripod braziers, so not to mar the floor tiles. We vent the smoke through the roof. The creosote in the smoke kills wood-eating insects in the roof timbers, so our system is quite practical for our time. My wife might have some cast-off fur-lined dresses you could wear. You said you had Saracen coins."

"But the smoke. You'd have sinus problems all the time," Morty said.

The Lord smiled and said, "I have enough villeins to get my wood cut a year before we burn it. Good aged wood doesn't smoke as badly as green wood. If you find you're too cold, you can help out in the cookhouse. Otherwise, I can put you up with my reeve."

"We thought we'd be your guests," Sara said.

"What did your ancestors do in the nineteenth century?" the Lord asked. He was beginning to understand them better, or else they'd figured out how to speak better, probably some combination of the two.

Sara's nineteenth century ancestors had been colliers, agricultural laborers, a ditcher, and textile workers, so she knew better than to answer. She said, "If you're not happy to have us around, we *could* have gone straight back to our time before we left the woods, but now we're stranded here for two weeks."

"My dear, you don't need to rush away. I think you're going to be as comfortable in the village as you could be here. You can come up to my house from time to time." The Lord turned to the priest and said, "Put them up with my reeve, Tod Ball." The Lord knew the priest hated rich villeins almost as much as he despised Lords, both as equally descended from Adam and Eve as the lowest he. The priest grumbled, but Ball had married the priest's cousin. The Lord continued, "You'll learn so much

from my reeve. Village life is the core of Medieval existence. My kind simply defends it."

Morty said, "I'm a specialist in medieval technologies, so I want to see everything." Sara, the med tech, had always been an avid amateur history buff, with an undergraduate degree in it, but the more she studied history, the more she realized that the past would have been more complicated than the future if the past had been as densely populated. Morty shrugged at Sara, who hoped that shrug wasn't recognizably Jewish. The Jews had been expelled from England over sixty years earlier, when the king owed them too many marks.

The priest told Morty and Sara, "The reeve, Tod Ball, has the biggest allotment in the village, plus the Lord farms out the oven to his brother. He's always had beautiful daughters who ally him with many other families. He's married to one of my kinswomen. One son came back to weave for the village. Ball always gets re-elected reeve."

The priest led Sara and Morty on foot through strip fields, some furlongs planted in winter crops, some fallow in hay, others now stubble or dead bean vines.

"They look just like oxen at the reenactment villages," Morty said when he saw the first oxen. "I thought they'd be tiny or something."

The priest said, "We've lost a lot of our stock to the murraine, so what's left has plenty of fodder."

Sara said, "The animals in the Luttrell Psalter looked big enough." The oxen were definitely bigger than Jersey cows, not as big as Holsteins. Sheep ate away at bean and grain stubble, fenced-in with wattles. Sara felt that the past too much resembled a reenactment village. A boy sat on a log weaving more wattles, sticking withes through wood sticks lashed into rectangles. Outside, among the village houses, geese hissed at pigs over scraps, while chickens scratched up bugs, just like their descendents did.

In a small garden, two peasant men were spading. Morty said, "Turning over the garden so frost breaks up the clods. Amazing."

"More peasants," Sara said. The peasants wore shapeless garments in striped and dotted browns, blues, and yellows. Most of the wool looked almost like felt, fulled into a solid sheet that wouldn't fray when snagged or cut. The belts looked card-woven when they weren't leather. The women's garments were long, to mid-calf, while the men's were shorter, but Sara could see no shaping other than gussets and gores. No darts, no curved cuts.

Not quite like a reenactment village. The weaving was better.

"Does that look like card-weaving to you?" Morty said to Sara.

The priest said, "It *is* card-weaving. Weaving cards are fragile, thick parchment, thrown out when the holes in them tear, and so don't survive often in the historical record."

In front of them, on the path, two women wood gatherers, in tunics and with their heads covered in beige kerchiefs, drove a pair of oxen

yoked to a sledge. Not oxen, but rather cows? Yes, the draft animals had udders, shriveled now, and big bellies. The cows seemed unenthusiastic. Morty grinned like a teenaged boy seeing his first naked willing girl. He went up and walked around them, touched the yoke, then came back to Sara and the priest and said, "The Medievals really *did* use cows as draft animals!"

The cows lurched unevenly in the yoke, twisting their hindquarters and tossing their heads. The women broke off branches from every tree they passed and threw them onto the pile on the sledge which scraped across the ground on runners. One of the women had a distaff loaded with unspun wool tucked in her belt. A heavy stick, though not as thick as Sara's, it could have served as a prop weapon in one of the Medieval drawings. The top was carved, not lathe-turned, to a knob where a linen ribbon descended in spirals to bind the wool. The spindle, with a wooden whorl, dangled in a half hitch from the distaff's top knob. Sara knew she couldn't spin thread so evenly. Her liquid nitrogen cooler looked less and less like a real distaff, no wool tied to it, no spindle dangling from spun thread half-hitched around the top ball.

Sara looked around and saw that almost all the women had distaffs stuck through their belts. At least she'd gotten that right. A few wore even wider belts stuffed with straw, one steel knitting needle almost two feet long stuck into a belt, hands working stitches from the needle in the belt to other needles. Knitting surcoats in the round, Sara thought. The thread came down from the left hand. When the knitters turned to other tasks, they flung the knitting over their shoulders, or stuck a couple of the pins into their knitting belts.

Morty said, "I thought knitting came later."

Sara stopped between two houses and looked back. The village would just be visible from the manor. Some of the houses looked like small versions of Elizabethan houses, half-timbered with clay infill. Others were wattle-and-daub hovels. Each had a small garden surrounding the house, dead now except for what appeared to be kale, cabbage, and bean stubble. The village smelled of urine, but not so much of shit. The priest led them to the largest of the timber-framed houses and said, "Tod Ball may not be free, but he is rich."

Ball's house was larger than the manor. His roof smoked at both ends. His door was paneled oak, quite smoothed and fitted, and swung open. Morty ran his hand around the door and said, "Mortise and tenon frame, free-floating panels. Quite well done."

The priest said, "Tod Ball traded Curt the Carpenter for that door." He knocked on it, and a women opened it a crack, looked out at them.

Tod Ball the reeve was a big serf about five feet, nine inches, with ginger beard stubble and a basin hair cut. He wore somewhat more shaped clothes than Sara'd seen earlier, but wore no shoes. His feet were huge, and callused along the insteps as well as on the soles. What he spoke was Middle Anglo with chunks of Danish. Morty's and Sara's

computers chopped at the speech for a few minutes, but obviously, they were being welcomed in.

About 25 watts for the whole house, Sara thought, after her eyes adjusted. The only light came from the doors and the fire on a stone hearth in the center of the floor.

When the computers recovered, Morty and Sara heard the reeve saying, "We're like this, the Lord and I." He held up his forefinger and middle finger twined together.

The priest said, "I've got hens to tend. My sister is recovering from childbed."

"Your cousin my wife and me'll entertain these time people," Tod Ball said. "I got plenty as long as God doesn't send too many of them. Can the woman spin?"

"Probably not," the priest said, "even if she thinks she can, but they'll pay their way with passable coppers."

"We can understand you now," Morty said. "I'm Morty, and the woman is Sara."

Sara said, "I can spin a little but I hurt my wrist."

"Good." Ball came over and patted both of them on the shoulders. "Most time people do best at cooking. If you can make us a custard and ham pie, with chopped Good King Henry, what you call a quiche, I've got an oven."

Sara remembered that the contemps ate a domesticated cousin of lamb's quarters. The priest said, "It's really the Lord's oven."

Ball said, "I helped my brother get the oven farm, paid the Lord's fee for him, but a man who's not active won't make good of the farming of even a mill, much less an oven. Come, sit, tell me about how men make crops in your time."

Hanging from hooks in the ceiling beams were huge wooden mallets, wooden spades with iron only along the cutting edge, other wooden rakes, billhooks. In the corner, a younger man worked on a floor loom, various parts rising and falling, his bare feet moving over long treadles hinged at the back. A woman and four girls made thread, one from flax on a drop spindle with a stone whorl, the others wool thread on the more usual spindle. Ball said, "My goodwife, my little ones. The two older boys are at the butts, shooting. The boy's supposed to be working for his master, but the man died in the pestilence down south and my boy felt he'd be safer if he came home with the cart and loom."

Sara said, "I guess no one in the village would inform the guild or his master's heirs."

Ball said, "My Lord said the boy could weave here until we knew what better was to happen, and he'd clear the boy with the guild and the heirs, if they survived."

Morty said, "The other boys? Practicing with long bows?" He peered back up at the collection of Medieval farm tools.

Sara said, "You have a large family."

The woman finally spoke, "We lost two boys and several girls." She

was pregnant now. Sara thought that Ball's wife looked to be about fifty, although probably she was really only thirty or thirty-five. She'd lost several teeth, pulled when the rot got too bad, perhaps.

"More to come," Ball said. "I feed her well." He nodded to the priest, who left them then. Sara felt slightly uneasy.

Morty said, "Does the village have a bath house?"

Ball's wife, whose name they never learned, said, "Bathhouses are dangerous."

Ball said, "I'll go with you, Morty."

Ball's wife sighed and said, "The Lady will be coming by tomorrow to take linen for shifts. If Sara can wind quills, my son will appreciate it."

The weaver said, "Mother, couldn't *you* wind them? These time travelers . . . ."

Sara asked, "I'd be perfectly happy to do it if I can do it fast enough. How do you wind quills?"

The weaver sighed and shook his head. Ball's wife pulled from one corner of the parlor what looked like a miniature spinning wheel and a handful of goose quill barrels, cut open at each end.

Sara watched as the woman slipped the quill onto a spike stuck out beyond two small upright posts. A leather cord went around the wheel and around the base of the spike set between the two posts. The woman pulled out a handshaped but fired and glazed clay bowl with sides curved in slightly at the top. In the bottom, to one side, was a clay loop. Ball's wife turned to a basket and pulled out a ball of fine linen thread and a leather bottle. She poured water in the bowl up to the top of the clay loop in the bottom, then threaded the linen through the loop and handed it, wet, to Sara. "Wind it back and forth," Ball's wife said. "Don't wind so the threads can slip between each other." She took Sara's hand and showed her how to turn the wheel by pushing the spokes away from Sara's body.

Sara wound the thread so that each thread round lay beside the next, trying for the neatness of a spool of thread or a level winding fishing reel. When she began to wind back the other way, the weaver said, "Get her to do it *right,* Ma, or wind them yourself."

Sara felt a blow between her shoulders, not an attack, but a solid thump.

Ball's wife had *hit* her. "Back and forth, from one end to the other, make the spirals slant, not straight up and down. Otherwise the next level will bind," Ball's wife said. "And it must fit in this." Ball's wife held up the shuttle. It was only an inch high, but longer than the shuttles Sara had seen in her own time. Ball's wife put down the shuttle and guided Sara's hands through the movements, then thumped her again, as if that would make Sara remember better. The weaving boy turned his head toward Sara and grinned. He looked to be about fourteen, with a freckled face, a shock of sandy hair, strong legs, and bare feet treadling the loom.

Sara remembered what Samuel Johnson had said later, that the Medievals felt corporal punishment was less spiritually damaging than bribes, flattery, competitiveness, and other mental tricks used to get people to learn. They bumped their boys against village boundaries on Rogation Day. Dubbing knights was done with blows calculated to knock a man off his feet. Pain aided memory. To avoid another thumping and to prove she wasn't just another incompetent from the future, she was very careful with the next quills, but the weaver had to wait for them.

Ball's wife sighed and asked, "What do you do in the future?" She put another ball of linen thread in the bowl and added more water.

"I study diseases," Sara said. She pulled the end of the thread through the clay loop and up to the winding wheel.

"I'd offer to exchange herbal lore with you, but I already know that you can't compound your own simples. What's the point of studying diseases if you can't make the cures?"

Sara wanted to ask what was the point of fooling yourself that you could cure illnesses when you *couldn't*, but decided to try filling bobbins faster. The weaver wove them still damp. Sara's hands were cold and chafed by the thread when they stopped. The room was dark. A bell was ringing.

Ball's wife said, "Midnight. Five yards since vespers."

"I'm good," the weaver said. He stood up from the bench and rubbed his bottom and lower back.

Sara wondered where Morty and the reeve had gone, but didn't say anything as Ball's wife led her to a huge bed. The girls and the boy came and joined them in it, wiggling out of their clothes when they got under the covers.

Sara stripped down to bra and panties. Ball's wife, obviously familiar with time travelers, said, "One of those make-your-tits-look-younger things. Take off that rig and sleep in your shift. Linen won't startle us out of sleep."

"We slept over at the bathhouse," Morty claimed. All five men standing around the hearth looked clean and roughly shaved.

"How are the boys doing?" Ball's wife asked her husband.

"Cutwit said he almost had a girl to wife, but she's marrying a freeman. Poor freeman, buying such a piece of ass from the Lord."

The son who must have been Cutwit said, "I do want to get married."

"Find a more faithful girl," his mother told him. "Not so pretty."

Morty said, "The bathhouse plumbing is really neat. The pipes into the big tub have real valves. Who'd have thought this small village would have had a bathhouse?"

Ball's wife said, "Good women go on alternate days. Our bishop insists."

The Lady came to inspect the linen at noon the next day. She rode in astride on a mare that looked like a somewhat coarse American Saddle

Horse or Tennessee Walker. Genuine medieval amblers, Sara thought, the stock that provided those two more recent breeds with their comfortable gaits. The horse's head was more like a pony's head, round jaws and short ears. Two young squires and a page followed the Lady on similar horses, but only the page dismounted to help her off her mare. Then he climbed back on his horse, and the three gentlemen waited while the Lady came in.

Sara felt that she looked peasanty in comparison to the Lady. The Lady's hair was completely concealed under her linen headdress, but her eyebrows and lashes were dark blonde. She wore a little square silk hat over the linen coif, and her wimple was tied back as if it had been hair. She had blue eyes, was wrinkled but very fair. She seemed never to bare her teeth, and had probably lost many of them in child bearing and nursing, if ladies nursed their own babies in this period. Otherwise, she looked healthy. The Lady wore a dark blue surcoat of fine wool thread over a silk underdress, dyed crimson. Sara felt that the Lady was overdressed for a visit to villeins, but perhaps the Lady wanted to intimidate them with her elegance.

"So you're the time traveler's woman? I see our reeve gave you a shift." Her nails looked shaved, not cut, pared with a pen knife. Sara had learned that the medieval penknife was nothing like a twentieth century pen knife. Quills took a stout sharp blade.

As the Lady bent over the loom, the reeve's wife whispered, "She eats shell and bones when she's breeding. I tell my girls if they want more of their teeth through breeding, they ought to eat burnt shells. Some say ashes help."

Sara decided to be perverse. "Sure she's not a witch?"

"No, it's shells. Marl gives good heart for the land, shells give good heart for a breeding woman."

The Lady unwound the linen from the cloth beam, checking it, then piling it in erratic folds on the floor rushes. Sara saw now that the boy had woven complex treadled patterns in that dim light, not plain weave. The Lady said, "Open the door wider," and the reeve's wife did. The children all backed away and sat on benches around the wall.

The Lady said, "You did good work with my thread." The boy weaver smiled and bowed to her, then grinned at his mother. He seemed genuinely pleased with the compliment. "Wash it and bring it up to the house. We'll give you a sweet, a goose, and two hares."

"Yes, my Lady," the boy said. Sara suspected that the hares would come to the family, but he'd get all the sweet. It didn't sound like he was getting any actual money for his work, though.

The Lady said, "Morty, we understand you know something about the pestilence."

"Not enough," Morty said. "If it's related to the cattle murraines, but isn't the anthrax of our day, we could die, too. Or if it's a different illness than we've been led to expect. Probably more than one disease entity is involved."

Sara knew that if they caught anthrax, despite what vaccines and bio-enhancements they'd had, they were to throw just the frozen samples through the gate. Then a team dressed in biohazard suits would come through the gate and take them straight into an isolation unit.

The Lady said, "Of course, you'd like to believe it was something *we* were too ignorant to deal with, but something *your* physicians could manage quite well."

"I don't have that bias," Morty said, "but most people in my era still believe that the plague came from fleas and rats, because we can control *them*. Personally, I suspect it was anthrax, a murraine that killed people as well as sheep, like wool sorter's disease, only worse. Perhaps anthrax and another couple of diseases."

The Lady said, "I will survive. I'm well nourished."

"Perhaps, my Lady," Morty said.

"What *does* kill me?" she asked.

Morty's eyes defocused as he consulted his implant. He said, "I don't have a file on any county north of Somerset. You're not in the historical records for Somerset County."

"We are north of there," the Lady said. "Enough. We'll guard our manor from strangers. Where would be safest for my sons?"

"Scotland," Morty said.

"I think not," the lady said. "Scots would kill my sons."

"Isolated castles," Morty said. "The rich don't suffer as much as the peasants."

"Say villeins, virgaters, cottars, honor them with what status God gave them," the Lady said.

"Why don't you honor the poorer ones with more *food?*" Morty said. "I saw them all naked in the bathhouse."

"Look at our reeve's family. Does his family look pinched and starving?"

"No."

"It's up to the peasants. They breed themselves out of land. Perhaps God sent this pestilence to thin them."

Sara hoped that Morty didn't ask her why she needed imported silk, and how many bushels of wheat and shillings of rent bought it. He said, "I'm not used to your era, even though I've read about it."

The Lady said, "I'm so glad I don't live in your rude future. You come to this place, eat my folks' food, talk away their time, pay them in false coin, then say to me that I make them to starve."

The village church bell tolled three times then. All heads turned toward the sound. The Lady said, "The other time people didn't come to study the pestilence."

"We did," Morty said. "But we were planning to arrive after the worst of it."

Sara said, "I'm glad we can be honest with you. You know what we are. I guess I'd feel unclean being a spy from the future watching people die around me."

The Lady said, "You'd never have fooled me into thinking you were my rank, or even my countrywoman."

"But I *am* British," Sara said.

The Lady said, "*I'm* Norman and Dane. Not Welsh, not Saxon, not British, not Scot nor Pict. We beat *them*."

Sara hoped that Morty didn't argue with her about the Danes. Everyone bowed the Lady out. The weaving boy cut the cloth off the warping beam, pulled away the unwoven threads at the end of the warp, and put them in a leather bag. "For the papermakers," he said to Morty and Sara.

Ball said, "I get along well with my Lord, but my Lady is a cunt."

Sara said, "Morty, I'm sure glad you didn't argue with her about the Danes not being such hot conquerors."

Morty said, "What a bitch. What can I do around here to help out, other than by just being some sort of time-traveling tourist? Why do you keep your tools hanging from the roof inside here and not in a tool shed?"

Ball said, "Tools cheap when *you* come from?" He reached up and brought down two wooden spades with iron tips, handing one of them to Morty. "Woman," he said to his wife, "you got some clogs that would fit this man?"

The weaver son shaved a bit at the insides of the wooden soles of a pair of shoes with a scorper until Marty felt reasonably comfortable. Ball went out barefooted.

Sara asked, "What are they going to do?"

"Dig a clamp for cabbages and parsnips, or hill the leeks," Ball's wife said. "You know anything about setting up a warp? We've got to get the loom redressed for field clothes."

"Perhaps if you can show me."

The weaving boy shook his head.

"It's a wool warp," his mother said. "They're a lot more forgiving."

"Let her cook, Ma," the boy said.

His mother said, "My journeyman son's a very smart boy."

Sara wasn't sure quite what Ball's wife meant by that. "What do you have to cook?"

"Parsnips, cabbage, beans been soaked, salt herring, couple cheeses, bread in the hamper. Got a bit of honey if you want to make a frumenty with the summer wheat."

The hamper was a wooden box suspended by ropes from the rafters. After setting the beans on to cook in a covered pot suspended on a crane over the fire, Sara checked the hamper to see if the bread was anything she'd want to eat. It looked a little hard, but otherwise edible. "Got any ale and flour?" she asked, wondering if she'd be inventing Welsh rabbit for the first time. She'd spotted a tripod pot on the hearth.

Sara chipped the cheese into little bits with a knife, then dusted flour over it. The goodwife seemed to know what Sara planned to do and dipped out ale from a bucket and put it in the pot. She told Sara, "I've even got a peppercorn and salt."

While the beans cooked, Sara fried cabbage in lard and poppy seed, then crushed the peppercorn and added it to the boiling ale. She dumped in the floured cheese, stirred, then pulled the concoction back from the fire.

The goodwife had been cutting bread slices and toasting them upright on an iron angle plate all the while.

The boy stopped his warping, washed his hands, and came up with a wooden bowl and spoon. They all broke the bread into spoon-sized bits in their bowls before pouring the cheese sauce over. The medievals put the cabbage in with the rest of the meal.

"Smart girl," the goodwife said. Sara realized how hungry she'd been and nodded as she ate. The bread was made of more grains than wheat, and the cheese tasted vaguely like feta, or goat cheese. Ewe cheese. The solitary peppercorn got lost in the wilder flavors.

After Sara finished, she said, "I thought you ate off trenchers. Bread."

"Stuff soaks through bread. Bowls are better," the goodwife said. "You did good cabbage, though it's still a mite green. I'll beat you if we get the flux of it."

"The lard was quite hot."

"We can't use lard every day now," the goodwife said. "You'll have to learn to cook cheaper."

"Couldn't I buy the household some oils?"

"What with the pest, no oils or fats to be had other than what the village grows."

The weaver sent the newly woven linen to the bathhouse to be washed. After the linen was dry, he laid it over a log and beat it with a wooden club. Morty said, "I wish I had a camera."

"The Lord wants Sara to come with me to the manor house," the weaver said.

After Sara bathed by the fire in a wash barrel, Ball's wife dressed Sara in a best linen shift. Fussing through her chests, Ball's wife pulled out a blue-dyed overdress with dark pink flower patterns across the top of the bodice. Sara was about to ask if the overdress was embroidered when she remembered that peasant weavers often wove *in* patterns rather than take a needle to them after they were woven. Then she wondered why Ball's wife wanted her to be so dressed up? Probably to show how prosperous the reeve was.

Ball's wife said, "Our master lets us keep some of the lambs' wool for our own clothes." She pulled out a pair of dark pink stockings made from bias-cut woven wool that matched the color of the weft insertions. They were cut at the top in a pattern that allowed for a cord to run through the holes. Sara used the cords as garters above her knees. She didn't like the seam under her foot, but peasants didn't wear knitted socks, at least not in this village.

The weaver boy asked, "Is she ready yet?"

"We haven't finished with her hair, but you can come in now."

The weaver boy came in, the linen rolled and under his arm. He looked for a clean place to put it, shrugged, and kept holding it. "Ma, she'd look quite nice if you set her cap back a bit to show her hair."

Ball's wife nodded and arranged the cap and wimple accordingly. Then she went through the chest again and pulled out a pair of slippers. "Pull off the hose and don't dress your feet until you get to the castle," she told Sara.

"Is there frost?"

The boy asked, "Ma, better give her clogs."

"Is Morty going too?"

"Your companion is down at the pond with Cecil and his bathysphere."

"Bathysphere?"

"Yes, Cecil's my cousin," the woman said, "and our priest's youngest brother. Decided that if a boy was to polish glass as jewelers do the Lord's jewels, then he could see through it much better than if it were left blown glass."

"Did he get the idea from time travelers?" Sara asked.

"He described it to one before he made it. Cecil claims that all the future person did was name his machine a bathysphere. Don't ever tell him he didn't invent it himself. Hates being accused of being derivative. We think that the Lord should release him for the priesthood. We're all saving to pay the fee."

"Sounds like an extremely bright boy." Unfortunately, Cecil must have died in the plague, since Sara'd never come across anyone like him in the fourteenth century historical accounts.

"Well, you're ready for the Lord, now," Ball's wife said, pulling the cap back a bit more, exposing Sara's earlobes.

Morty saw the girl and the boy pulling the bathysphere up to the bank. Cecil was saying, "It's too cold now to go down anymore, but I got one frog from the muck at the bottom."

Morty said, "Where did you get the iron?"

Cecil said, "The smith's a kinsman. On my dad's side."

Morty asked, "Did he steal the iron from the Lord, or did you get bog iron, or what?"

"What," the boy said, not asking.

The girl said, "Do we want to cover the bathysphere for the winter?"

Morty said, "You ought to grease it so it doesn't rust."

"We can't spare grease for that. We won't be slaughtering hogs until November," the boy said.

Morty walked around the bathysphere. "How did you figure to make an exhaust valve?" The valve was a lid sealed with greased leather, a rod in the middle tying the lid back to a segment of chain, then to a cross rod where the tube came into the main body of the bathysphere. Whoever was in the bathysphere could close the valve manually if necessary. Normally water pressure would keep the valve shut, but as the air pressure rose, the valve would open. Obviously the boy couldn't go too

deep or the chamber would be hyperbaric, but even if the valve stayed closed, the bathysphere could hold enough air to last for maybe half an hour.

Perhaps this medieval boy had quizzed time travelers about bathyspheres? "Who told you how to make the air escape tube?" Morty asked the boy.

The boy hit Morty. As Morty wondered if he should paddle the boy or pretend that this hadn't happened, the boy said, "I'm tired of you people now. You mock me. Don't *ever* tell me I'm an anachronism! I have a Walther PPK."

Morty said, "A Walther PPK?" Then he remembered that that was a twentieth century handgun. "Who was stupid enough to bring *that?* You people have a murder rate at least four times greater than America in the twentieth century."

"I inherited it from a time traveler," the boy said. "And I did *not* make the plans for my bathysphere from what time travelers told me. You just can't believe that anyone back in time was smart enough to invent anything themselves, can you? We're all so dumb we think that slime generates tadpoles."

"How did you inherit a handgun from a time traveler?"

"She died of disease," Cecil said. "Did you have to have teeth fresh seeded in your jaws before you came here? Do your tooth surgeons really drill out tooth rot and put in clay or epoxy insets?"

"Yes. If we die here, we can't leave traces, since there were no traces of us in either the historical or archeological records. We'd cause paradoxes."

"We *all* die," Cecil said. "If I lived, I'd become known as the greatest medieval scientist in history!"

Morty wondered if the boy could be right. "I don't believe you have a Walther PPK, because that doesn't show up in the historical record. And if it had plastic grips . . ." Morty tried to remember if anyone could date plastic.

The boy reached into his tunic and pulled out a semi-automatic pistol. He said, "And a shoulder holster, and an extra magazine. The lead and steel will oxidize over the centuries into something you future people couldn't identify, but I *do* have it. The grips are walnut. They rot, as *I* do."

Rust was already pocking the blued steel. Morty asked, "Do you practice with it?"

"No, I don't have enough bullets. And it takes a different kind of gunpowder than we've got now."

Morty'd read enough about twentieth century teenage gangs to know not to challenge the boy any further. "I'm sorry."

"I can't believe in God like my brother the priest, so either I die to nothing, or I die to eternal torment. So what kills *you?*"

"I don't know," Morty said.

"*I* could kill you. But I won't if you give me two shillings, so that I can buy a bathhouse woman before I die."

"They don't cost two shillings," Morty said.

Cecil pulled back the slide on the pistol. The girl watching them both giggled. Morty fumbled through his purse, aware that the boy could take it all, and tossed the boy two shillings. The girl picked them up and handed them to Cecil.

Cecil put them in a pouch at his waist, then uncocked and holstered the gun. He said to Morty, "You think that I'm just a savage using an object I couldn't possibly have invented. Well, what have *you* invented?"

"Nothing," Morty said. "Everything I need has been invented already by my time."

"I doubt it," the boy said. He didn't turn his back on Morty as he and the girl covered the bathysphere with an oiled linen tarp. "And remember, I'm related to the reeve by marriage, so you'd better not try to pay me back for my hitting you. I don't think you're as smart as some of the other time travelers. You're boring!"

Sara, stumbling a bit in her clogs, followed the weaver with the linen. Approaching from this angle, the manor looked like a nasty small fort more than a house, the green lumpy glass more like laser ports than entrances for sunlight. They knocked at the back entrance porter's box, now closed in front with doors that looked like shutters. A different porter than the one at the front, an old short man in what looked like cast-off lordly clothes, flung back the shutters and said, "You can't come in."

"We're allowed," the weaver boy said.

"I told them you brought the pest with you, running from Norwich."

"I brought no wool. I washed in hot water, even purged the cart with smoke. So I didn't bring anything but myself to the village, and myself is healthy."

"The woman?"

"The Lord wants to see her."

"I must check," the porter said. He opened a small door, about a foot square, in the bigger door and called, "Villein with cloth and a time woman here!"

A muffled voice said, "Let them in."

"We don't want the pest here," the porter said, opening the doors. The weaver stepped inside. Sara wondered if she should change her clogs for slippers outside, or go in, and then change.

The Lady was just inside the door. She said, "We could order ale from the village if you brought a couple of shillings."

Sara was about to pull out her purse with the twenty-first-century handcrafted shillings when she saw the boy shake his head. He said, "I could get us ale for a penny."

The Lady said, "If one of my servants must go, the cost will be three shillings of what money that woman has with her. Considering that it's

not really our King's coin, we're doing her a favor to disperse it before she's caught with it."

Sara said, "Okay. I know blackmail when I hear it."

The two fourteenth century people looked confused for a second, then the Lady smiled at the weaver. Sara realized that the Lord and Lady of the Manor shouldn't be able to get yards of linen for only two hares and a sweet. *Sure, we'll make sure that you don't get into any trouble for running away with your master's cart when he died. Just weave for us cheap.*

"My Lady," the boy said, bowing, "if you'd give me my hares and my next thread allotment, I'll go back to the village."

"Don't you want your sweet?"

The boy said, "Oh, was there to be a sweet in the payment? I'm sure one of the small children would like that. For me, doing quality work is sweet, regardless of who wears my linen when it's cut. You're so gracious, my Lady, to keep me so employed, and for hares and sweets."

My Lady's face flushed slightly, then blanched. "I'll send one of my spinsters out with the thread."

"Some touched by your gracious hand, I trow," the boy said, bowing again with a smile.

"Woman, come with me," the Lady said, walking across Neptune's face, headed toward stairs at the end of the hall.

"My name is Sara."

"Is your companion's name short for Mordechai?"

"It may have started out that way."

"Morty, Sara. Those are Jewish names. Are you converts?"

Sara didn't feel like explaining that her name had been very Christian since the Protestant Reformation. "Yes."

"You'll both have to be baptized again, as you haven't been born yet. My confessor or the vicar can do it. Do you feel you'd be comfortable with my husband alone? I would prefer to go back to supervising the household."

Sara wasn't sure what she was supposed to say. Probably, *no, I wouldn't,* but she knew karate, and should be able to fend off a randy medievaloid. Sara doubted he'd tell anyone he was bested by a woman. "Would you vouch for his honor?"

The Lady turned back and stared at Sara as if Sara was daft. "His honor is never questioned in *this* house." They went upstairs to the solar.

In a room hung with tapestries of deer and boar, the Lord, dressed in silk as soft as underclothes, sat in a chair by rows of little green glass diamonds lead-camed into a casement window. On the floor was a two-inch-thick square of grainy stone, about two feet on a side, carved in flowers around the edges. On the stone, a brazier stood on foot-high legs, looking like an out-of-context hibachi. Charcoal glowed under the brazier grate. The scene was medieval as hell.

"Tell me news of the future," the Lord said. He sounded tired, fatalistic. He knew that his world came to a close between 1400 and 1900. He

might have seen Crecy, aristocrats slaughtered by peasants. Worse, he knew that the Black Death was coming.

The Lady said, "My lord husband, she said she'll feel safe with you."

The Lord smiled wanly, waved one hand languidly. "So odd to talk to people not born yet, who know what happened after we died."

The Lady bent her head and then said, "I've given that saucy boy more thread."

"As long as he weaves well and we can pay him in hares, let him talk."

"Yes, my lord husband," the Lady said. She looked back at Sara and turned pale again.

So, the Lord put his Lady in the bad cop position. The Lady wasn't from around here. Whatever the Lord did that was stingy or mean, he could make it seem to be the Lady's work. He'd protect the boy from his weaving master's heirs, if the loom's real owners lived through the plague themselves and wanted the cart and loom back. Meanwhile, his wife got cloth for hares and sweets.

After the Lady left, Sara went up and checked the heavy oak door the Lady closed behind her. It hadn't been locked from the outside. The Lord said, "Do you want to bar it?"

"No." She sat down on the bench by the door.

"You might want to walk around a bit outside when I get ready to bathe. My wife had fresh linen sheets put on the bed this morning, and the blankets have been washed and steamed. Would you want to stay in those clogs, or would you rather put on your slippers?"

The clogs were a bit cold. Sarah slipped her feet out of them and tucked the clogs under the bench. The Lord watched her as she pulled the stockings up and retied them at her knees. Only after she pulled her skirts down did she remember that medieval women rarely showed much leg to a strange man in private.

The Lord opened the casement window. Fresh but cold air came in. The coals in the brazier turned a brighter red. "Would you put some more coal in the brazier?" the Lord asked. He pointed to a basket full of black branches and chunks of wood. Sara knew medieval charcoal wasn't made into briquets, but these branches and chunks looked so much like real wood, only black and cracked. She picked one branch up and saw the grain at the cut end.

"You've never seen charcoal before," the Lord said, not asking at all, not particularly wondering.

"The Balls don't use charcoal."

"Can't," the Lord said. "It's reserved for the manor."

Sara broke the branch up. She lifted the brazier grate with a poker lying on the stone hearth, put the charcoal on the fire, then lowered the grate back. "Do you cook on it?"

"We're going to heat water on it."

"For your bath."

The Lord nodded. Then he asked, "Have you seen the villagers practicing with their long bows?"

"Not yet."

"I was at Crecy."

Sara wondered at the pain in his voice. After a moment, she asked, "Were you injured?"

"In spirit. A time traveler warned me about it before I went to France. I didn't believe the time travelers were real until then. Thought the villagers lied to hide bondsmen fleeing their lords. But I heard about Crecy before it happened."

"You won. The English won."

"The longbow won." He turned to her and said, "I knew one of the French nobles. I couldn't save him. I told the bowmen I'd ransom that man, but they grinned like wolves when they shot him. Shafts in him up to the feathers."

"The army had been up all night with dysentery," Sara said. "They were tired and angry."

"Killing nobles cheered them right up. And now we're hoping the pestilence you came to study doesn't come here. Will it?"

"I didn't get a chance to use my sextant, so I don't know where we are. Where are we?"

"North of Somerset."

"Where people prayed to stop the plague while it was still raging in France."

"Where the bishop thought words could stop the pest. When no one had microscopes to show tiny enemies."

"I'm sorry," Sara said. She got up in her stocking feet and put her hand on his shoulder. He put his own hand over hers and looked up at her.

In my time, he's a skeleton, dust, nothing. The hands stayed fixed.

"I need my bath. Talk to me, tell me funny stories." He pulled a bell-rope. Three boys came in with buckets and a copper cauldron. They didn't look at Sara as they put the cauldron on a stand over the brazier and filled it.

One said, "My Lord, have you fresh straw in the mattress or are you using the feather bed?"

"Both. New ticks for both of them, too. Sara, these are some of my brother's and sister's children. My own boys are squires with them and one with the Earl of Norfolk."

"Daughters?" Sara asked.

"Three at different nunneries, one married. The babies are with my wife's people."

Two of the boys filled the tub with about ten buckets of cold water, the third stirred the cauldron. Sara leaned back against the tapestry behind her and felt it sway backward to the stone wall. She sat up straighter, but was beginning to feel sleepy and relaxed as she watched the boys watching the cauldron. The Lord stood up and stretched, then closed the casement. The room became quite warm, a dark place full of

wool and green light. The boys finally dipped the water out of the cauldron and added it to the tub.

"You could go if you'd be embarrassed," the Lord said. "Or you could avert your eyes, but stay to entertain me. Tell me hopeful things."

She hauled the bench around so she could look out the window while the Lord bathed. The squires bowed and closed the door behind them. Sara heard silk rustling behind her, water moving, splashes, then a huge sigh. She wanted to turn back and look at him, but didn't. "Hopeful things?"

The Lord said, "You live in a beautiful age where criminals have their crimes painted on their eyeballs with light, live their crimes in dreams until they sicken of crime or die."

"Someone told you about cyberias. They're just in the concept stage in my era. Civil liberties types are opposed."

"They become reality in the late 2100s," the Lord said. "Also tiny machines that can clean the microscopic vermin from the blood and biles."

Sara said, "Nano-tech. It's not quite out of the security labs. Everyone's a bit afraid of it."

"Why?"

"Because the machines could break and hurt the body they're supposed to help."

"Worse than the plague hurts? I would so love to see through a microscope," the Lord said. "Would you wash my back?"

Sara felt a bit nervous about doing that, but when she turned around to look at the Lord in his tub, she saw that his eyes were red as though he'd been crying. "All the wonders," he said, "and I won't leave heirs to see them." He put his hands over his head as though the tears that must have come from his red eyes embarrassed him.

The soap was hard, not the soft caustic jelly Sara expected. It looked just like bathsoap.

"Soap of Castile," the Lord said.

"Yes, my Lord, I thought so."

"Everyone in your day has hard soap. And cheap, too. I wish you'd brought one of those razors better than those of my time."

Sara soaped his back, feeling scars beneath her fingers. Weren't they supposed to be on the front?

"My scars? Those came from a boar when I was a boy. Would you shave me, or should I call back one of my squires?"

"I'm not sure how to do it with a straight razor, my Lord."

"Ring the bell, then." Sara did, and the oldest squire came in with a razor, a stone, and a strop. Sara sat back on the bench and watched while the squire shaved the Lord and washed his head. Then the Lord said, "Turn to the window again while I get dried and dressed."

Sara peeked. The Lord's body gleamed, shoulders and arms tightly muscled even though the muscles weren't huge. An endurance body. She

turned to the distorted view out the window when she saw the Lord looking back.

The bed creaked, linen moved. The oak door closed. "I'm in bed now with sheets and blankets up to my chin," the Lord said.

Sara turned back. By the bed, a wick burned in a pottery lamp, giving off a yellow fluttering light. The Lord's eyes looked molten. He had one hand under his still damp head. The other lay on top of the covers.

I could sleep with him, Sara thought. *I can't get pregnant and they don't have syphilis or AIDS in this era.* She wondered what the straw mattress and linen sheets felt like, too.

"Would you like to sit down on the bed?" He twisted and sighed as though he was supremely comfortable, between linen sheets, on a feather bed over a straw mattress.

Sara, very curious, sat down. The Lord placed one hand on her leg as though bracing her, not moving it. She slid her hand between the mattresses. The straw mattress felt strange, a crisp but giving surface, somewhat like a leaf pile under a tarp. The feather bed softened it. Her hand moved up. The linen sheets were fabulous, smooth and cool.

"I didn't know . . ." She was going to sleep with him. "The linen."

"I pity you that you can't have the pleasure of down and linen in your future."

"Your life's so hard, then this."

He moved his hand on her thigh as she moved her fingers on the linen sheets. She said, "They claim our fibers duplicate any natural fiber, but they lie."

He said, "These would have been harsher when they were new, but they've been worn, washed, and boiled to this." His fingertips brushed the sheet, then returned to her thigh.

She looked at him and wondered if the Lady would kill her for sleeping with the Lord. "What . . . ?"

"It's all right," he said, still with one hand under his head, propped up. He took his other hand away from her thigh and put another pillow under his head. The blankets and sheets slipped down to show his chest. His hand came back to her knee and slid up her dress.

"You're dead in my day."

He closed his eyes, the lashes quivering against each other.

"Morty isn't my lover or husband."

The hand on her leg pushed all layers of fabric up to her hips, then went back to her naked thigh and spread out over it. The finger tips moved like tiny soft animals. She wanted to feel linen against her skin.

He said, "Linen is so lovely for tupping. It soaks away the sweats."

She leaned forward and he undid the laces on the dress, then pulled her under the covers, against the sheets, and kissed her. The shift she wore was not so smooth and fine as his sheets. He slid it off her and she felt the linen caress her. His fingers quickly released the bra. He pulled it off and sat up in the bed to look at it.

"You're a dab hand with a bra." Sara giggled. "I'm not the first, then."

"Are your tits flabby without this? Sit up."

Sara sat up, drew her shoulders back. The Lord ran his fingers from her collarbone to her navel, and said, "Such a sensely anachronism." He moved his body between her legs.

Then he grabbed her hands in one of his, pulled them over her head, and fucked her.

Sara couldn't have possibly used karate. She was more bewildered than outraged. "Let me go. Let me help you. Let my hands go."

The Lord slowed down and said, "Sometimes, women cry 'holy me' after they're naked. I don't rape, but I don't allow women to try my patience."

"I certainly wasn't planning to try your patience. Okay."

He didn't let her hands go, but slowed down enough to catch her back up to his speed, then tried to tease coherent speech out of her. When Sara's tongue tumbled in her mouth, the words tangled in her lust, she felt him speed up, her body going with his.

The sheets did soak up all the sweat. "Don't grab my hands like that ever again," Sara said.

The Lord seemed amused by her pique. "Why should I leave your hands free? Show me," he said.

She was too spent to do anything, but said, "When I wake up."

The Lord put one hand between her legs and the other on her left breast, and they both went to sleep. In the morning, he lay in bed naked and watched her dress. Sara said, "What's your wife going to say?"

"She wondered if your tits stood up without a bra," the Lord said. "I'll tell her they did."

Sara thought, *They're both dead in my real time.* "I hope my Lord was pleased."

"Tupping is always a pleasure. We both, of course, will have to do some sort of silly penance, but my confessor knows to make that light."

The Lady came in. Sara blushed. "Her tits stood up," the Lord said.

"So nice for you," the Lady said. "Sara, you can take the thread back to the weaver. Tell him we don't want any of his lip."

She has to put up with this without showing any signs of jealousy, but I bet she is jealous, Sara thought. She pushed her feet into the clogs and tucked the slippers in her belt.

"If you were a village girl, I'd send you a sweet," the Lord said to Sara as she followed the Lady out.

At the edge of the village lived the weird people, a brother and sister who wore clothes in the oldest fashions, whose teeth showed signs of gritstone wear. Morty heard about them from the Balls. The sister spun, but never brought her thread to the floor loom weavers. She wore clothes whose threads turned sideways, woven into the cloth, then made another right-angled turn to travel in a different direction. Morty said, "A survival of the warp-weighted loom? It was traditional in Europe until Crusaders brought the floor loom concept back from Asia."

"Still used in Scotland," the boy weaver said. Sara didn't say anything, wondering whether the Lady would poison her or if the Lord would call for her again.

Ball said, "Those people are mean as snakes."

Morty asked, "Are they Celtic? Picts? Welsh?"

"Welsh," Ball replied, but Welsh was Anglo-Saxon for all foreigners, that didn't prove anything.

"Not Danish," his wife said.

"Alice wears unsewn clothes that pin at the top," the weaver boy said. "She takes at least a year to weave one garment."

"I've got to go see them," Morty said.

"Wouldn't be smart. They don't work well with others. The Lord must have tupped Alice when she was younger, since he leaves them be."

Sara hunched her shoulders.

Morty said, "Archaic technologies are my specialty."

Ball's wife said, "I'll point them out when they're up for ale. Don't poke around. They hardly miss an alehouse, even if she never brews herself."

Morty said, "Alehouse? Who's doing the next one?"

"I am," Ball's wife said. "We should have it ready tomorrow if the ale taster approves."

Morty and Sara discovered that alehouses were the rent parties and garage sales of the Middle Ages. A woman brewed ale, paid the taster off if she'd skimped on yeast or got the wort chilled. Once the taster approved the ale, the ale wife hung her mixing whisk out by her door. The neighbors came over with musical instruments, got drunk, wailed away at subversive ballads that would get their composer on medieval most-wanted lists, plucking dulcimers and harps, beating tabors, drinking ale, gossiping, drinking ale, sending the children home for a cold joint, eating hearthstone breads raised by the ale yeast left in the bottom of the brew kettle, drinking.

In the ballad, the lord didn't pay his bills and lost his child to a vindictive nurse and her carpenter lover. "God," Sara said, "That's 'Lord Weary's Castle.' Do any of you know who wrote the words?"

"Nobody wrote the words," Ball's wife said. The tunes from the dulcimers and harps turned wordless.

Just as most of the people were leaving to try the other ale brewed that day, the weird brother and sister, Jethro and Alice, came in, black-haired and smaller than the other villagers, both looking like they were in their mid-thirties, probably actually in their twenties. Morty knew cloth from a warp-weighted loom when he saw it. Even more thrilling, the two used Celtic shoulder pins. The sister wore a rusty black tunic top, woven in a circle without visible joins and pinned at the shoulders, and a checked wool skirt that closely resembled a skirt rescued from a Danish bog in the twentieth century. The brother wore a woad-blue tunic that reached his knee tops, pinned, like his sister's, at the shoulders.

Morty wondered if these two people came from a deposed aristocracy. Alice looked at him, eyes flickering over his clothes, then she stared hard at Sara, aware, no doubt, that the Lord had called for her that morning, but that Sara had stayed for the ale house. Morty saw the brother's knife and bow, how the other villagers left space around him.

Morty said, "Alice, may I examine your weaving?"

"Alice is what they call me, but it isn't my true name," she said. "But I will answer to it."

"I'm from the future, a scholar of medieval technologies. We understand that warp-weighted looms survived in Central Europe until the sixteenth century and in Scandinavia and the Hebrides until the nineteenth century, but we didn't know how long people used them in England."

"I don't know nothing about them Engles," Alice said. "I magic the cloth from sticks and stones and let the little people wash and stomp it when I'm asleep." She smiled as if wanting him to deny it.

"Of course, we only can prove the existence of warp-weighted looms if we have drawings or paintings, or if, as happens rarely, we find a row of stones parallel to a house wall. That happens if a roof collapses while the loom's set up."

"And if nobody digs out what was half-wove on the loom," Alice said. "I'm like a spider, making a web without knowing like. So my brother says."

"How do you make your garden? Digging sticks? Hoe? Plow?"

"With plow beasts," she replied, looking at him as though he were daft.

Jethro, the brother, came up with two clay beakers of ale, said, "Alice, this traveler mucking with you?"

"I'm really interested in your tool kits."

The brother laughed as though Morty had said something obscene. "So's the Sir up in the stone house," he answered. "I heard he's been into your companion's weaving."

Morty saw that the beakers were handmade, of a pattern close to Beaker Ware, perfectly Neolithic.

Jethro smiled and said, "I found 'em."

Morty remembered a Roman slave chain found in the 1940s and used to pull trucks out of mud until someone noticed that the links and shackles were hand-forged. He wondered how many neolithic beakers got broken in medieval alehouses, how many ancient garments worn to rags went to the paper makers or, if silk, were used to clean eighteenth century mill gears. Moths and beetles got wool scraps. Otherwise, what tons of fabric would smother us?

Alice said, "He made 'em like what he found." She drank her ale and smiled slightly.

Copies. Morty wondered if all the Beaker Ware surviving to his day had been dated by isotope. The past suddenly seemed more shifty than

he'd anticipated. "Would you have made them even if you weren't visited by time travelers?"

"Yes," Jethro said. Like his sister, he smiled slightly.

"You're Jethro. You and your sister live on the edge of the village."

"They call me Jethro," he said.

"I'm Morty."

"I heard you proved Jew or Saracen at the bathhouse. When do they let you people come back to England?"

"I'm not a practicing Jew, actually. Cromwell let my ancestors come back in the 1640s. After Charles the First was beheaded." Morty was uneasy about mentioning regicide.

"A King, killed. *Used* to happen all the time," Jethro said. He went to get more ale. Morty followed and noticed that the coin Jethro used looked more unreal than the usual village coppers. From an earlier time traveler's hoard?

"And what are you, Jethro? A freeman? I understand the Danelaw area had some other ranks, sort of half free."

"I'm who I am, regardless of who might think he had me," Jethro said. "My sister's barren, so free of a husband. Don't you want to tell me you're a convertite?"

"Yes."

"Ah, what we say. I need a lord, so I'm told, to avoid getting hanged," Jethro said. "My sister and I, we're on the manor roll, but inside my head, I'm freer than you."

Morty said, "I don't doubt it."

Ball said, "Why do you time travelers find people unlike the most of us so good to talk to?" He thrust a wheel-thrown beaker into Morty's hands.

Morty sipped the ale and stared at Alice, speculating about the body under her tubular clothes. Since Sara had fucked the Lord, he'd felt sexually edgy. Two pins pulled and he'd see the woman's tits. A belt whipped away and the skirt would puddle around her feet.

Ball said, "Be careful, Time Traveler."

Morty said, "Time travel is *supposed* to be risky."

"Don't go prodding around. Some people's got stuff they wouldn't want research papers writ on. Maybe the Lord would find out from a later traveler what's on his land."

Jethro and Sara moved away, drinking ale from their anachronistic beakers. Jethro turned back and smiled at Morty. His teeth seemed shorter than usual teeth, but Morty couldn't be sure in the rush light.

Just as Sara got drunk, a messenger came from the manor to invite her back to the Lord's bed.

Morty found Jethro and Alice's hut at the end of the village. It was a beehive hut, somewhat like a stone igloo. Even though Morty had noticed it before, he'd thought it was a granary or the village strong box in hut

form. Morty wondered why the rest of the villagers didn't use stone, or why these people *did*.

The door wasn't corbeled or the classic arch. It was framed in timbers and wasn't big enough to walk through upright. Morty saw skins on the walls inside. He called out, "Hello, the stone hut."

Alice popped her head out and said, "One of the convertites. You don't really want to come in."

"I traveled all these centuries to see how your people lived." Morty thought he smelled stale urine.

"My people?" She looked over her shoulder at her hut, then pointed to the other houses up the lane. "These aren't *my* people."

"I suspected as much. But I'm still curious."

"We're sort of like you, only from the past, not the future. Don't study us. What most folks do is different. Study them."

"I've studied warp-weighted looms from Aegean times to the twentieth century."

"Most people don't use them. They're too slow."

"Why do you use one, then?"

"I've got the time. No children. Go away. I'm glad to know that we all die, that it's not just *my* people who're going, but go away."

"Please." Morty knew he could force his way by this woman, slight as she was.

"No, I don't want a paper writ on my loom."

"You also have a pot quern, don't you?"

"You stupid git, go away!"

"Please talk to me. I'm personally curious. I'll promise not to write a paper on your tool kit."

"You'll crave to. And then something will happen so that you *must*. Don't they call it getting tenure? Go away."

Morty decided to wait until she left the hut, then he'd check. "How do you keep the rain out?"

"Skins inside. Brain tanned," she said.

Circumpolar tanning practice, Morty thought. "Do you have any skin shirts?"

"Only for deep winter," Alice said. "When the plague comes."

"Don't you want the future to know you existed?"

"The future's none of my business."

"That's awfully unfair to me."

"I don't care," Alice said. "You keep me from my light. If you stay here, I'm going to bar the door."

Morty said, "Please, I'm not trying to be nosy."

"I know you time scholars. You think because your people survive for generations to birth *you* that you own this past."

"If you didn't know we were from the future, would you be so upset with my curiosity?"

"I'm less upset. Among us, only the landlord's men would be so curious."

"I promise not to write a paper. I'm not interested in what you do, what tools you work with, for merely professional reasons. I'm truly fascinated by how humans do things."

"Also, with my body, old as I am."

Morty shut up, looked to see if anyone was watching, if the brother was coming back. "We have ways to make babies out of flesh samples."

"I don't care. Even if I sent a baby into the future, the baby wouldn't be of *us,* wouldn't know how to warp for stones, weave with string heddles, grind corn, make dark beer, sing the songs. What *we* were is over. Done. My brother and I lived beyond our own time."

Morty said, "But doesn't it matter to you that someone remembers?"

"Our ways didn't work well enough to survive."

"What were your people?"

"The foreigners called us Welsh."

"Can you speak a different tongue than English?"

"I forgot it," she said. "The tongue didn't save us."

"What if I told you that the Welsh in Wales still speak Welsh, have bardic contests."

"We're not Welsh like the Britons."

Morty thought the tone of her voice had changed. She hadn't thrown him out, barred the door, or yelled for her brother. "Pict?"

"Pict?"

Morty remembered that that term stemmed from Latin, meaning painted people. "I don't know what you called yourselves."

"We don't share that." Now she moved to bar the door.

Morty said, "I don't want to spoil your light. I'll leave you to work."

Perhaps, Morty thought, she and her brother are Romanized Celts, children of native women and Roman legionnaires. Or Picts, whatever they called themselves. He went back from her stone hut and climbed a tree, where he could spy on her from the first crotch. His left visual field magnified the scene. He adjusted the mix of visual spectrum and infrared until he could see through the door into the shady interior.

Alice pissed into a clay pot and added the urine to a large cauldron. Dye pot? Lichen fermentation? Woad or indigo vat? Whatever, the pot wasn't over the hearth fire, but rather beside it. After covering the pot with a skin, she looked out the door, but not up, not directly at Morty. Then, pulling on a cloak, she walked out of the hut. Morty saw she was carrying a sack. He climbed out of the tree and began to follow her.

She scrambled down a gully. Morty heard a small creek running at the bottom, trapped in underbrush. Then he heard stone against stone, a pot quern grinding.

Of course, Alice wouldn't keep her quern in her hut. They were illegal. If the Lord's agents found it out in the cave by the creek, they couldn't prove who owned it.

Morty keyed his visual chip to map the place, and went back to Tod Ball's house.

Sara came back from the manor house a few hours later with a black eye. Morty said, "How did that happen?"

"I told the Lady about infant mortality in our era."

"She didn't hit you because you slept with her husband?"

"No, I'm no threat to her that way. But she sure didn't like hearing that modern women raise most of their babies. I suspect she'd slit my throat if I'd told her about frozen ova and zygotes."

Tod Ball and his wife sat very still while Sara and Morty talked about this. Morty and Sara were silent and looked around at the grim faces. Ball's wife said, "We think you rude when you talk Future in front of us. We don't tell you about what travelers from *your* future told *us*. To tell us how you keep babies alive so easily is cruel."

The weaver boy said, "Sara, don't be slack-handed. Wind some quills for me."

Tod Ball asked, "When will the plague be here?"

Morty asked back, "Where precisely *are* we?"

"You have to ask at the manor about that."

"Don't you know?"

"We know the boundaries. Beyond that, Scotland is north. London is south. The French are over the water to the west."

"How far is the water?"

Tod Ball said, "One of the village bad boys actually went to the proper exile port when they outlawed him. Ships didn't come, so he came back and got properly hanged a couple months later by the King's court. Mussels and cockles packed in seaweed come here live, so the sea's a day or two away."

"I need plague samples," Sara said.

"They'll come to us soon enough," the weaver boy said. "You might as well wait here and be useful. We can't tell you the roads away, and the Lord isn't tired of you yet."

The weaver boy took the quills from Sara and got back on his bench, treadling slowly at first, beating the webs with his head cocked, as though he wasn't quite paying attention to his weaving. Then he caught the rhythm of it and began to weave faster.

Morty waited until Alice and Jethro were with the other villagers, threshing wheat with flails on the Lord's wooden-floored threshing barn. The flails were long pieces of oak or ash with a shorter piece attached with either a leather strap or a chain, medieval physics in action. The hinge allowed the short end pieces to bounce all over the wheat heads when the flails hit.

Children laid a linen tarp down on the barn floor, and the adults began to flail the wheat. Despite the cold fall air, everyone sweated, stripped downs to shifts or breeches, and continued to swing the flails. Then they'd pause while old women forked the long straw away, lifted the tarp, and poured the wheat and chaff into shallow baskets. The old women and children began winnowing the grain, throwing basketfuls up so that the

breeze could take away the lighter chaff. The adolescents and adults resumed flailing.

"Sara, I'm going to check something. Tell them I've been called up to the manor if anyone asks."

When the Lord rode down from the manor house, Morty ducked behind a tree. The Lord spotted him, smiled, and kept riding.

Morty wished he'd told Sara something else to say. But now he could do a tool inventory, perhaps of the whole village. First, he'd see what was in Alice and Jethro's stone hut.

The door was closed, but not barred. A Paleolithic woman sculpture leaned against the door by the leather hinges. The statue, about five inches high, wasn't carved in stone but in wood, with huge curves in the tiny figure. Morty picked it up, then wondered if Alice or her brother positioned the statue precisely so as to know if someone broke in. He touched the carved vulva, framed by short and long fringes of a string skirt. Where could they have seen a Paleolithic Venus? Or had the tradition of these statues survived in wood after the rise of agriculture? The string skirt itself survived at least to the nineteenth century in the Balkans, though worn by then over clothes and with longer strings.

Or had they heard someone from the future *talking* about Paleolithic and Neolithic stone figures, and decided to make one of their own to confound the next time traveler? How could you know? Morty went on into the hut.

Yes, Alice wove on a warp-weighted loom, the already woven cloth near the top stick, the warps hanging down in bundles, tied to weights at the bottom. She'd improvised loom weights—clay bottles filled with pebbles, stones naturally shaped so a cord could be tied to them, a couple of partially fired clay doughnuts that were in the pattern of true loom weights. The weaving above seemed finer than possible with such a crude loom, though not so fine as the boy weaver's linen. The pattern was birds' eye twill, with a tiny dot of purple in the center of each eye, framed with blue and red on a brown ground.

None of the cloth survives. Even later, from Elizabethan time, Morty knew that only a couple of dresses, and those of doubtful provenance, survived. Tapestries survived. Ages and ages of work, and only a few European scraps to show for it. The Incas had left far more.

Morty felt dizzy thinking of all the dead generations doing ephemeral work, then reminded himself that they were working for themselves, not for later historians. But, from *his* perspective, this woman laboriously wove dust and moth food.

In the hut, Morty found a semi-lunar knife that could have been either an Eskimo woman's knife or a parchment maker's scraping blade, or the intermediary between both traditions. By the blade, he found an elm whistle.

The strange siblings cooked in a brass cauldron with figures hammered into the rim. They slept on wicker woven cots padded with animal skins.

One of the skins came from a wolf. Morty tried to remember when the last wolves died in England.

Then he looked up and saw a reindeer skull looking back down at him. *Bromley Horn Dance,* he thought. Reindeer antlers had survived centuries in a British village, into his own time. No one ever knew quite where they came from. Perhaps Jethro knew.

I don't think they're Latino-Celt at all now.

Morty turned around the hut, but nothing else looked so strange as the first things he'd spotted. He swept his footprints from the floor as he backed out, and put the doll back against the door under the lower leather hinge.

Now to see what Alice has at the cave. Morty triggered retrieval of his map to her ravine, and moved until virtual reality matched the on-time scene. What streaked when he turned his head too fast was the re-play.

At the gully, he turned off the re-play, and found the dug-out. It was roofed with timbers and sods, cut from the top down, not into the bank, the beginnings of a basement for a yet un-built house or the ruins of a Neolithic half-buried hut. The entrance was covered with brambles.

That's why I could hear her grinding so clearly. I must have been standing almost on top of her. But the cave didn't have an entrance through the sods over the timbers. Morty found a dug tunnel down in the gully, hidden behind brambles. He wished he had a flashlight. Since he hadn't even brought a torch or candle, he went back up to the top and cleared some of the turf away from the timber roof. What with his augmented eyes, enough light would come through the cracks.

Back in the dug-out, he saw the pot quern, one stone like a giant doughnut on top of a thick stone saucer. The wooden handle in the top stone was greasy. Alice had cleaned up all the grain before she left, even washed the stones. Obviously, spilled grain and meal would draw insects here.

Along one wall was a drying frame. On it a piece of fulled wool, still wet. Even though the wool surface had become felted and the individual threads obscured, Morty saw the Greek key pattern woven into it. Alice either fulled it by walking it in the creek or had a fulling trough by the creek.

Evading the Lord's mills was a crime for the manor court. Jethro and Alice looked like cottars, not virgaters, not among the wealthier villagers. They could never afford to pay a fine. They had to keep this secret.

Something hit Morty, and before he could figure out what had happened, he lay on the ground. Semi-conscious, he managed to roll over. Through the overlaid squirming of a random play-back from his shocked storage chip, he saw Alice and her brother with flails in their hands.

"Put a hide over him so we don't get the flails bloody," Alice said.

Morty tried to crawl away, but Alice broke his knees. Then the brother threw the wolf hide over him.

"Not that skin," Morty tried to say, but the flails hit him. He could never have imagined that they could hit so hard. The computer chips in

his head went haywire, throwing up random stored imagery, as though virtual reality could save him. What was happening came at eighty million polygons per second, his chip told him. Morty thought he remembered that reality was about that.

The flails kept falling at reality's eighty million polygons per second until he was dead.

When the siblings took the wolf hide off the body, Jethro picked something like pieces of amber from Morty's brains.

"Maybe they know it's in him," Alice said. "You leave it with the body."

"I heard some of these brain ambers trap sounds and sights like real amber traps insects," Jethro said. "I wouldn't want a future army coming for revenge."

He put the future brain things on a stone and bashed them with another stone. "Run them through the quern. Mill them to grit."

Alice said, "They've got brain grease on them. I don't want fat on my stones. Drop the bits in the creek."

"What about that?" Jethro said, pointing at the future man's body.

"Since he hasn't been born yet, it can't be manslaughter," Alice said, "but let's either get him away from the quern or the quern away from here."

"Less messy to move the quern and the fulling trough," the brother said, so they did.

Morty was missing. "Somebody probably put the feathers to him for being too curious," Ball's wife told Sara, "but you stay right here."

The weaver boy said, "That's our talk for he probably got himself killed. Couple of other time travelers did that, too."

The talk terrified Sara. She should live to tell the future time travelers what happened to them.

"Would the Lord's wife kill me?"

The weaver boy said, "Shut up and stay out of everyone's way."

"What were the next people after me like?"

"What are your dates?"

"I was born in 2152. We came here in 2183."

"You don't look that old," the boy said. "Don't tell the other women how old you are, or they might kill you, too. The people who came here three months ago from 2200 pretended to be shipwrecked Basque sailors until we told them we wouldn't let them leave without telling us their time, so maybe you lived to warn them."

"What happened to them?"

"After we told them that we knew they were time travelers and they told us their time, they left. Perhaps the King's coast guard picked them up on the Norfolk Road. Beyond that, I don't know. I wasn't here then."

"Why do we keep coming back here? Why *here*?"

"God sends you here to keep the fabric of space time unbroken. Maybe it's because Cecil is here to explain you to us. Or perhaps we all die of

the pestilence. Or perhaps we don't talk, ever. In our time, the Church accuses the unduly prosperous of being witches. I understand that in the future, the fey and uncanny get burned and hanged instead. Perhaps . . . ."

"I don't want to die here," Sara said.

"What kind of weaving do they do in your future?" the boy asked.

"I don't know. I just buy clothes, wear them, send them to recycling. They're melted down or something and made back into clothes. Machines do it."

"How often?"

"Our clothes wear out after a couple of wearings, but they're very dirt-and-odor resistant."

"Are they pretty weavings?"

"I don't pay much attention to that. We got reconstruction clothes before coming here. So they could be washed."

The boy treadled the loom without throwing the shuttle, as though imagining a time that didn't need him. "What would someone like me do without this work?"

"Maybe you'd have a skill implant, or maybe you'd design skill implants."

"Skill implant?"

"A machine that feeds you information so that you remember better. Sometimes something inside your skull. Learning isn't so tedious in our time." Sara almost forgot that the villagers assumed one of theirs had murdered Morty.

The boy said, "Cecil found some amber in the brains of a couple of dead time travelers. He collects odd time traveler things."

"He threatened Morty, didn't he? With a Walther PPK."

"What does a Walther PPK do to kill a man?"

"It's like a very fast crossbow with a little lead quarrel. If you find lumps of lead at the ends of Morty's wounds, then we'll know Cecil shot him."

"And how much would you want?"

"What?"

"You're in his guild, so to speak. What would you want for Morty's murder?"

"Isn't murder a capital offense?"

"It's not as bad as stealing from your Lord. Murders generally stem from people fighting each other. In Lincoln, people kill each other all the time. A man gets killed by other folks if he makes a habit of it."

"Oh."

"Don't you know what our laws are?"

"We expected to arrive in a deserted village, just after the plague died back."

"The false Basques didn't seem too surprised to find themselves here. Perhaps you live."

"I need to get back to where you found me."

"It's been more than two weeks now, but you could still leave, couldn't you?"

"Yes."

"The Lord said to keep you here until we found Morty's body."

"I didn't kill him."

"You need to help us determine the fine."

"You want me to stay until the plague comes?"

The boy treadled without throwing the shuttle across the separated threads again, the loom pulleys and treadles creaking. "So hard to learn all that can be learned about a craft, but I don't think I'd like living in a time that made it easy."

"Morty was fascinated with your crafts."

"He knew instantly that Alice wove on sticks and stones. The oldest way we know, the women's way. I suppose my loom made Alice's skills worth less. My arm could become a machine, the treadles worked with a cogged mill. Like a saw mill or a fulling mill. We invented the cogged mill here in England for sawing and fulling."

Perhaps true. Perhaps not. "Too bad Morty isn't here. He knows all about that stuff."

"Hugh the smith said Morty watched as though he'd turn apprentice."

"What do future people seem like to you?"

"People who want to take credit for things that past people invented. People who find physical work amusing, but who hate to sweat their minds to build links between mind and hand."

"I thought you liked me."

"You tried to learn something useful, at least. Morty mostly wanted to look. I suspect Alice and Jethro killed him. They hate people looking."

"Are the stone and stick looms against the Lord's rule?"

"Pot querns are. Fulling troughs are. Since you're the first, people thought Morty would write an account for other time travelers and those people might tell the Lord."

"But didn't the time travelers all come last to first?"

"Perhaps not all. Some of you run when they realize where they are. But of those we spoke to, all."

"So Morty doesn't live to write about pot querns and fulling troughs."

"Others wrote about the bathysphere and the hypocaust. We knew, because they weren't surprised. Then they were surprised again. Perhaps the earlier records were destroyed in a fire."

"Three hundred years worth of time travelers." Sara couldn't imagine what that might mean. Three hundred years back into her own past, the world worked more like the medieval world than like her present. The nineteenth century was the medieval with telegraph, photograph, telephone, and a steam engine with the same system, only made in metal, that turned rotary motion into reciprocal, round and round to up and down.

Ball came to the door then and said, "We found him. Flailed his brains open, they did. Couldn't tell him by the face, but the body's his."

"Who did it?"

"We found him in a dug cave in the woods. Outlaws, perhaps."

The weaver boy wouldn't look at Sara. Sara suspected that the villagers *knew* who killed Morty, but would protect them against the Lord and his time-traveling whore.

Ball, however, as reeve, was a perfectly skillful liar. "Perhaps he surprised the halfwit leper. Old leper wanders through about this time of year. Sure is hard for you, being all alone with past people, and the plague coming."

He led her to Morty's body.

The body lay on boards held up by two saw horses. Sara reached for the left hand and listened to what was recorded inside the sesemoid bone. She heard no legal proof, but enough to convince her that either Alice or Jethro had killed Morty. Someone who didn't speak smashed Morty's ear or the brain link between ear and implant. Earlier, he'd muttered about querns and looms. The device should have continued to record after Morty died, but his ear . . . .

The whole braincase was open. Sara tried to consider what she was doing to be just a dissection project, reached into the brain matter, and found nothing. No strange wandering leper did this, but rather someone who knew about futuristic brain inserts.

The Lord on horseback and his men on foot came up leading Alice. Sara said, "You or your brother did this."

"A leper wandering through," Ball said.

The Lord swiveled in his saddle, stared at Ball, then at Alice. Cecil said, "Sara, you didn't find amber in his brain, did you?"

"No."

Alice said, "You didn't find him in *my* hut, did you?"

Ball said, "No."

"Spilled grain or meal, where you found him?" Sara asked. She felt bolder with the Lord there.

"Just a leper's bell and a porridge pot," one of the other villagers said.

"Ah, Alice, I haven't seen you at the mills for either fulling or for grinding," the Lord said, the tone that of a Lord to an ex-lover peasant.

"No," Alice said. "We are poor, with only a few rods in wheat and maslin. We eat porridge."

"What is that you have on?"

"Cloth from a wanderer," Alice said. "I traded beakers for it."

The Lord looked at Sara, his present peasant lover. "Do you have any high-tech proof?"

"He muttered something about a pot quern and a warp-weighted loom before he died. That's all that was recorded. The blows that killed him damaged the apparatus. But Alice wears cloth woven on a warp-weighted loom."

The weaver boy said, "No tiny lead quarrels?" Cecil came in behind him, looking nervous. The priest came up and laid a hand on Cecil's shoulder, murmured in his ear. Cecil relaxed.

Sara hated them all that moment.

The Lord asked, "Alice, where is your brother?"

"On a pilgrimage, my Lord."

"Without my permission?"

"When he comes back, my Lord, he will pay the fine."

"Alice, bring your clothes to my mill. We can take one in three as payment. And your grain. We need to see you at the mill from now on."

Alice said, "Neither of them *born* yet, so what is killing them out of time?"

The Lord said, "Nobody's accusing you of anything other than not using my mills. So use them, and we'll have no future trouble."

"May my brother come back, then, without hurt?"

"I want you married away from him, and will forgive the fee."

A man deep in the crowd muttered, "If she couldn't be knocked up by all the men who've had her, she's got to be barren."

The Lord nudged his horse with his heel and rode into the crowd of peasants. "Isn't this satisfactory for everyone?"

"My Lord," Sara said. "Protect me."

"Don't go poking around my people. We don't like being your research projects."

The weaver boy said, "She knows the plague signs."

Cecil said, "In a bit of brain amber, not from real learning."

Sara said, "You may have invented the bathysphere independently, but you *stole* that Walther PPK. My Lord, I can help. I need to find out what causes it. We're not sure in my day."

The priest said, "Contagion."

The Lord said, "She'll tell you next that that's over-simple. There are breeds of tiny contagion too small for men to see clearly. Various forms of dust."

Sara wanted to say, *smaller than dust,* but she wasn't interested in educating them now, just in watching them die. Morty was dead, and they weren't going to hang the woman who did it, nor turn her over to the royal court. "Do you just let killers go?"

The priest said, "If she confesses to me, I'll assign her proper penance. If she did kill your friend and dies unshriven, Hell takes her. But then, are *you* baptized, and why haven't I heard *your* confession?"

The Lord's horse stirred restlessly. Sara said, "I'd like to just go back to my own time." Morty knew better than she how to work the traveler, but they'd both been cross-programmed on it. "Back where we first came."

"In the time glade," Cecil said. "But you can't leave yet. You don't have plague samples. You came here for cuts from our plague-killed flesh. We're going to make sure you can get them."

Sara asked, "You didn't steal the traveler, did you?"

Cecil didn't answer. The Lord said, "Cecil, give it back."

"She has to promise to take me with her."

Ball said,"Take us all away from the pest."

Sara said, "It doesn't work that way."

The Lord said, "You came for tissue samples. What is a man but a large tissue sample?"

"Something small from the past, yes. And frozen."

"Perhaps you're lying."

The priest said, "Could you take a man's child back with you in your womb?"

Sara could, but she wouldn't. She wondered if the technicians had lied to her about the impossibility of bringing larger unfrozen samples, live people, from the past. The future was overcrowded, and many pasts wanted rescuing.

The Lord said, "I've heard of plague down on the river. Men who have it breathe out death. I can't send one of my own to that, so no, Sara, I won't send Alice to the royal court. Perhaps you *should* take a child back. Cecil, are you man enough already? Would you trade your son's life for the woman's time-traveler device?"

Sara almost protested, but Ball's wife gripped her arms. Cecil said, "How do I know, my Lord, that the child won't be yours?"

"Have your aunt hold her until she bleeds, then keep her up for you alone until the bleeding stops."

"Does she talk a lot about the future?"

"Not much," the Lord said.

"Will you tell me about the future?" Cecil said.

"If you give me my traveler back. Not if you rape me."

"She only whores for Lords," Ball's wife said.

The Lord said, "Sara, we will keep you until we die."

"They'll come looking for me."

"You obviously *do* go home again. The fake Basques wanted little to do with us. They must have been warned."

Sara almost said, *I'll see you dead,* but instead bowed her head. She couldn't conceive with the implant feeding contraceptives to her ovaries. Then she wondered if Cecil was the Lord's natural son.

The priest said, "God sent you here."

Cecil said, "I still want a son in the future."

The Lord said, "Why don't we let our seed fight? I wouldn't mind sending a son in the future myself."

Cecil pulled out the Walther PPK and said, "She'll have a device set in her body so she can abort at will. Any scars on the belly or buttocks, my Lord?"

"A hard place on her left butt cheek," the Lord answered. The Ball family took her inside their house. Ball's daughters held her down while Ball's wife pushed a knife against the edge of the birth control implant. Sara said, "You don't have to cut me. Please, I can take it out without that." She opened the flesh pocket and disconnected the shunts and leads, then slid out the implant. "Now your nephew can get me pregnant, or the Lord." Easy enough to abort the fetus when she got back to her own time. "You don't need to hold me until I bleed. I couldn't get pregnant until I disconnected this."

Cecil came to her that night. He held a knife to her throat while he fucked her, quite ineptly. Ball's wife or Cecil watched her constantly, keeping her from seeing the Lord again.

The time threads moved forward. Jethro brought the plague back with him when he found out he could return to the village.

Alice brought her cloth to the fulling mill, and the fullers died within two days. Alice dropped dead in church.

"Stay away from wool," Cecil told the other villagers. "Let the bodies rot. Or burn them."

Now Sara could get her tissue samples. She cut into Jethro's buboes. The insides were anthracite black. As she froze her samples for the fake distaff, the plague moved into her body. The plague differed considerably from the bacteria and viruses used to develop the vaccines that enhanced Sara's immune system.

When Sara came back from cutting into Jethro, the villagers waved her off with torches. She went down to the pond and saw Cecil. He sat beside his bathysphere inside a circle of fires.

"I heard that the pope saved himself this way," Cecil said.

"Cecil. I need the traveler."

"You could be carrying it."

"The plague or your baby?"

"Either."

"Perhaps I can use it to escape myself."

"I won't help you if you strand me here."

"We'll have to see if you caught it from Jethro before I can do anything."

In a day, Sara felt knots under her armpits. *I have the plague! I'm not supposed to be able to get it, whether it's* Yersinia pesti *or anthrax.* Sara went into Alice and Jethro's stone hut at the end of the village. The villagers burned fires between her hut and their houses.

"Sara, Sara!" Ball's wife called. Sara came out of the hut and saw poles with bottles waving over the fires. "Take them before the fires burn the poles," Ball's wife said.

Sara reached for the first swinging pole, grabbed the clay bottle tied to it. Water. "Thank you.

"Will Cecil bring me the traveler?"

The weaver boy came up and listened while his mother said, "He says there's no need to spread the pest through time."

"Please, I need it."

The weaver boy said, "We've burned Alice and Jethro's bodies. Is the traveler you speak of small enough for one person to move?"

"No. It would take two people."

"We'll find it for you and put it back in the time glade. If you live, you can leave. Cecil's just jealous."

But I'm dying. It's not supposed to happen.

Sara didn't die the first day, nor the next. She found a kettle and managed to make porridge. They could take her out now.

The traveler did look like a fake rock when she saw it again. Cecil, the weaver boy, and a serf girl stood by it.

"I was going to try to go through without you," Cecil said. "But now that you're here, you can help me."

Sara stared at them. Cecil had a leather bag on his lap. Sara guessed it was the Walther PPK. *Open the gate, woman, and we'll see who goes through.*

Sara said, "I'm still sick." She felt disconnected now from both this past *and* the future. "Where's the Lord?"

Cecil asked, "Are you bearing a child?"

"Probably not." *I've gone insane. We're supposed to be superior, but they've tricked me.*

"You should have used something as heavy as a real rock," the weaver boy said.

"Cecil pushed at everything new until he found it. Checked even fallen branches. It was too light, so he knew it had to be from the future," the serf girl said. "Cecil is so smart."

"Cruel to come here," Sara said. "Sorry."

"If you'd been one of us and got the pest, you'd have died," Cecil said. "We think the Lord is ill. He's hiding his neck."

"I can't go through immediately. They'll only open the gate large enough for my tissue samples."

Cecil said, "*Someone* gets through. The next group that comes through is afraid of us."

Sara opened the rock and called up her training. Fever broke down the biolinks. She remembered as best she could. The traveler helped her and opened a gate. Sara said, "I'm ill of this," and threw the biopsy sample freezer concealed as a distaff through the gate. "Will it be safe to come home?"

The medieval children stayed off from her, watching, sharing between them a small leg of cold lamb. Four hours passed. Sara sat down on a log and cried, then said, "You should go home."

"If you can't go back, we need to know."

Meaning that they'd have to burn her body if she died on them. "If you live, you don't talk about what happened here, about us. What do you become?"

"A people who remake church and country," the little serf girl said. "My mother told me the stories when I was a baby. I'm going to move to Bath and become a weaving woman with dead husbands by the score. Others became pardoners with a yen for boys, preachers who give the Bible to the common man. We won't stay owned. You've told us. The ones the pest doesn't kill don't talk about time travelers, but don't we become different anyway?"

Yes, Chaucer's people, the peasant rebels of the 1380s, not talking directly, not wanting to be accused of lying or witchcraft, but spreading an

attitude. Sara couldn't look at the girl anymore, but stared instead at the gate, waiting to know what happened next.

When the weaver and Cecil's girl helper didn't show up at sunset, the Lord called for two men at arms to ride with him to the time glade.

The serf girl laughed when she saw the Lord and his men. *Cheeky little bitch,* the Lord thought. Sara lay on the ground, not dead, on her side, one elbow cocked to prop up her head. She stared out at the centuries, eyes flicking toward him, then back to the long time stare. "We're still waiting," she said. "I may be quarantined here."

"Quarantined?"

"If they think I'm carrying the pest. I don't know what's going on."

"One thing I *can* tell you is that you don't infect your future," the Lord said. Cecil was sitting on a log. He held his anachronistic and stolen gun between his legs. The Lord wanted to ask his men to take the weapon from the boy. "Cecil, what do you need that gun for?"

"I'm going to make them take me."

Then the gate shimmered, and things came through in smooth silver armor that flexed like heavy tweed, glass plates before their eyes, people in cloth of aluminum, perhaps. Cecil didn't raise his gun.

"Sara, are you infected?" a man's voice asked. "Feeling unusual?"

"They killed Morty."

The figures looked around at the Lord and his men. "These people?"

"No, others. The killers died of the plague. They knew we were from the future. They *all* know."

The villein girl said, "Take us with you."

The Lord said, "No, you've got to die of the pest."

"My Lord," Sara said. The men in the flexible armor opened a suit for her. *The pest could kill them, too,* the Lord thought. *Good.*

"That boy, what does he have?" one of the strange men asked.

"A Walther PPK," the Lord said. "Someone stole it from your future to have protection here."

"Damn, get it away from him!"

Cecil said, "No." He raised the pistol. "My Lord, how do you *know* I die of the plague?"

"There were no records, no memory of someone so brilliant, so inventive. But *you.*" The Lord pointed to the weaver. "Perhaps you don't have to die. You're just a weaver who stole from his master. History doesn't record the deaths of such as you. You and the girl, leave."

The weaver and the serf girl backed away, but didn't leave. *Curious and cruel peasants.*

Cecil pointed his gun at the Lord and pulled the trigger. The shot went wild, but something stuck out of the stop of the gun, the spent brass jammed in the mechanism.

One of the men in the strange armor said, "Stovepipe!" Sara grabbed Cecil. *Now, I'm killing him,* she thought as she spat in his face, spittle

in his eyes. Serves him right. The Lord signaled his men to help. They wrestled the Walther PPK from her.

"May I see it?" the Lord asked. None of this was real. He didn't order his men to hold the girl.

"Why did you let Cecil keep it, my Lord?" one of his men at arms asked.

"I thought the anachronism was . . . amusing," the Lord said. He remembered the archers at Crecy and wondered if time-traveler tales had made him fatalistic. "I probably die, too." He felt dizzy as he said that, knowing his men would abandon him now. He'd been trying to hide the signs since the day before, but now he needed air. He pulled his clothes away from his neck.

Cecil smiled. The Lord almost ordered his men to hold him, but what Cecil had failed to do, the plague was doing, killing him. One of his men at arms bolted on horseback, the others backed their mounts away from the Lord.

The men from the future in their strange clothes took Sara and the stolen handgun away with them.

One man came back. Had time passed on the other side? "We didn't mean to come to this time," he said.

"None of you do. God may be sending you. The first came from *your* future. Or maybe Cecil is right about this being the beginning of your time, so here's where you must return."

The man had Morty's hungry look then, but his own time took him back.

Cecil said, "My Lord, you look bad. Are you going to infect me now that I don't have the gun?" The weaver took the girl by the hand and began backing away slowly, as though the Lord or Cecil might stop them.

The Lord remembered Sara's spit, but wanted to mark Cecil himself. Mark him for hell. The Lord nudged his horse with his heel, riding up to Cecil. "Boy, neither of us win. The future doesn't remember you or your bathysphere."

But Time only forgot *Cecil.* His *temperament* dominated the future, that was clear, those inventions, that machine that opened holes in time the way his bathysphere took air below water. While Cecil would die/had died, his *kind*, those peasants with a fascination for aluminum, obviously *won.* Would win. Had *begun* winning.

More bathyspheres. Bathyspheres and their machine kin forever, moving through air, fire, and water. Time didn't need the hypocaust, but the bathyspheres . . . .

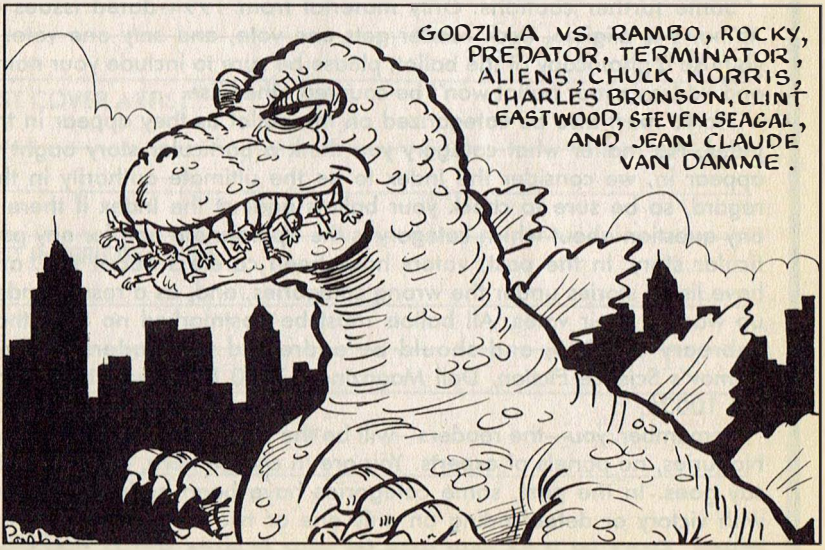
Perhaps future children of the work folk he owned now would even build machines that crawled through earth, that would find his bones. Had found his bones in that distant future. Put them in a museum somewhere. *Owned* his bones, the way he'd owned their ancestors.

The Lord told Cecil, "The future killed me." He reached down and gripped Cecil very hard. "But *you*—the *past* got you."

The Lord's sword worked better than future guns that jammed. ●

INDEX

This index covers Volume 18 of *Asimov's Science Fiction* magazine, January 1994 through Mid-December 1994. Entries are arranged alphabetically by author. When there is more than one entry for an author, listings are arranged chronologically in order of appearance in the magazine. All entries are followed by a parenthetical note: (a) article; (c) cartoon; (ed) editorial; (ge) guest editorial; (na) novella; (nt) novelette; (p) poem; (r) review; and (ss) short story. Collaborations are listed under all authors and are cross-referenced. When a title, a parenthetical note, or an author's name is omitted, it is the same as that of the previous entry.



NINTH ANNUAL READERS' AWARD

Well, it's the January issue again, the start of another new year, and *that* means that once again it's time for our Readers' Award poll, now in its ninth year.

Most of you know the drill by now. For those of you who are new to this, we should explain a few things.

We consider this to be our yearly chance to hear from *you*, the readers of the magazine. That's the whole point behind this particular award. What were *your* favorite stories from *Asimov's Science Fiction* last year? This is your chance to let us know what novella, novelette, short story, poem, cover artist, and interior artist you liked best in 1994. Just take a moment to look over the Index of the stories published in last year's issues of *Asimov's* (pp. 168-171) to refresh your memory, and then list below, in the order of your preference, your three favorites in each category. (In the case of the two art awards, please list the *artists* themselves in order of preference, rather than the individual covers or interior illustrations—with the poetry award, however, please remember that you are voting for an individual poem, rather than for the collective work of a particular poet that may have appeared in the magazine throughout the year.)

Some further cautions: Only material from 1994-dated issues of *Asimov's* is eligible. Each reader gets one vote, and *only* one vote. If you use a photocopy of the ballot, please be sure to include your name and address; your ballot won't be counted otherwise.

Works must also be categorized on the ballot as they appear in the Index. No matter what category *you* think a particular story ought to appear in, we consider the Index to be the ultimate authority in this regard, so be sure to check your ballots against the Index if there is any question about which category is the appropriate one for any particular story. In the past, voters have been careless about this, and have listed stories under the wrong categories, and, as a result, ended up wasting their votes. All ballots must be postmarked no later than February 1, 1995, and should be addressed to: Readers' Award, *Asimov's Science Fiction*, Dell Magazines, 1540 Broadway, New York, NY, 10036.

Remember, *you*—the readers—will be the only judges for this award. No juries, no panels of experts. You are in charge here, and what *you* say goes. In the past, some categories have been hotly contended, with victory or defeat riding on only one or two votes, so *every* vote counts. Don't let it be *your* vote for *your* favorite stories that goes

uncounted! Some years, that one vote might have made all the difference. So don't put it off—vote today!

The winners will be announced in an upcoming issue.

BEST NOVELLA:

1. _____

2. _____

3. _____

BEST NOVELETTE:

1. _____

2. _____

3. _____

BEST SHORT STORY:

1. _____

2. _____

3. _____

BEST POEM:

1. _____

2. _____

3. _____

BEST COVER ARTIST:

1. _____

2. _____

3. _____

BEST INTERIOR ARTIST:

1. _____

2. _____

3. _____

SIGNATURE: _____

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NEXT ISSUE

Our Bill of Fare for February features a generous and tasty assortment of some of the top young professionals in the business, all on hand here next month, for Your Reading Pleasure (we'll leave it up to you to decide what wine goes best with which of them!):

Nebula Award-winner **Michael Swanwick,** one of our most popular writers, returns with a sly and elegant tale about the pitfalls and surprises you could encounter while "Walking Out"; hot new writer **Mary Rosenblum** takes us to a strange far-future world that centers around the joys and dangers of "Flight"; Tiptree Award-winner **Maureen F. McHugh,** author of the popular novel *China Mountain Zhang,* shows us around a near-future China that's as exotic and strange as many another writer's alien planet, in the evocative "Joss"; critically acclaimed new British author **Ian R. MacLeod** takes us closer to home, to the present-day Northern Ireland of the Troubles, and deep into the human heart, for the powerful and haunting story of "Ellen O'Hara"; veteran author **Tom Purdom** offers us a thoughtful and thought-provoking look at a "Research Project" that has some unexpected and profound consequences; and new writer **Kandis Elliot** returns with another in her popular series of stories about the bizarre adventures of Professor Farnsworth, this time pitting the Professor against whoever—or *what*ever—is causing a series of very odd "Road Kills." Plus, **Robert Silverberg's** "Reflections" column, and an array of other columns and features. Look for our February issue on sale on your newsstands on January 3, 1995.

COMING SOON: big new novellas by **Brian Stableford, Jack Dann, Mary Rosenblum, Nicola Griffith, Charles L. Harness,** and **Charles Sheffield,** plus two major new novellas by **Ursula K. Le Guin,** and exciting new work by **John Brunner, Pat Murphy, Pamela Sargent, G. David Nordley, Tanith Lee, Avram Davidson, Harry Turtledove, Robert Reed, Esther M. Friesner, Ian R. MacLeod, Geoffrey A. Landis, Kit Reed, Jack McDevitt, Ron Goulart, Don Webb, S.N. Dyer, Lawrence Watt-Evans, Stephen Baxter, Phillip C. Jennings, David Redd, Eliot Fintushel, Kandis Elliot, Daniel Marcus, Sonia Orin Lyris, Wil McCarthy, Diane Mapes, Leslie What, Steve Martinez, Nisi Shawl, Holly Wade,** and many, many more.

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IA JANUARY '95

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SF CONVENTIONAL CALENDAR

We're in the holdiay con(vention) doldrums, so let's look at the new year. 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 with a music keyboard as Filthy Pierre—Erwin S. Strauss

DECEMBER 1994

10-11—**Baseball Card and Comic Book Show**. For info, write: **Lantern News, 520 Broadway, Fargo NO 58102**. Or phone: **(701) 235-4329** (10 AM to 10 PM, not collect). Con will be held in: Duluth MN (if city omitted, same as in address) at the Entertainment & Convention Center (DECC). Year's last con.

JANUARY 1995

6-8—**Tropicon, Box 70143, Ft. Lauderdale FL 33307. (305) 662-9426**. Airport Hilton, Palm Beach FL.

6-8—**MusiCon, Box 198121, Nashville TN 37219. (615) 889-5951**. Quality Inn Executive Plaza. Music.

12-15—**Dreamation, Box 3594 G. C. Stn., New York NY 10163. (718) 881-4575**. Elizabeth NJ. Gaming.

13-15—**Arisia, 1 Kendall Sq. #322, Cambridge MA 02139. (617) 371-6565**. Park Plaza, Boston MA.

13-15—**Making Orbit, % Berry, 394 Southbay Dr., San Jose CA 95134. (408) 321-0154**. Pro-space.

FEBRUARY 1995

3-5—**CremeCon, Box 37986, Milwaukee WI 53237**. Manchester East Hotel. E. Bergstrom, Kris Jensen.

3-5—**WinterFest, Box 1242, Claremont CA 91711. (800) 266-3111**. Victorville CA. Rocket-fly meet.

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. For fans of "Forever Knight" show.

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.

20-22—**Oz Rendezvous, Box 31672, St. Louis MO 63131. (314) 271-2727**. Las Vegas NV.

24-26—**ConCave, Box 3221, Kingsport TN 42135. (615) 239-3106**. Mammoth Resort, Park City KY.

JULY 1995

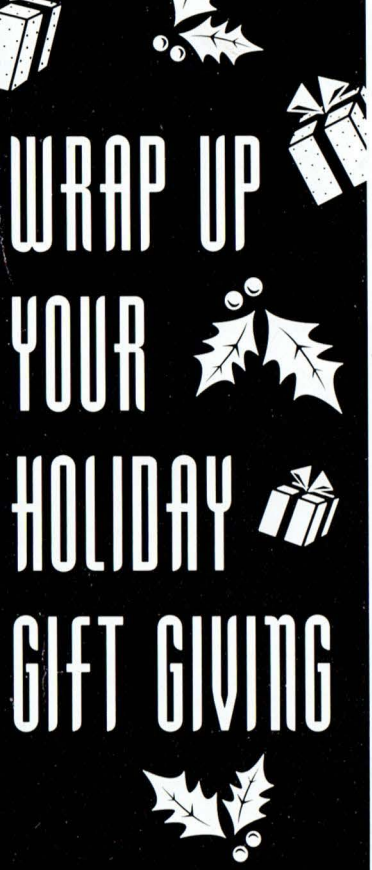
13-16—**DragonCon, Box 47696, Atlanta GA 30362. (404) 925-2813**. N. American SF Con. $45.

AUGUST 1995

24-28—**Intersection, Box 15340, Wash. DC 20003. (301) 345-5186**. Glasgow UK. WorldCon. $125.

AUGUST 1996

29–Sep. 2—**LACon III, Box 8442, Van Nuys CA 91409**. Anaheim CA. The WorldCon. Now over $75.



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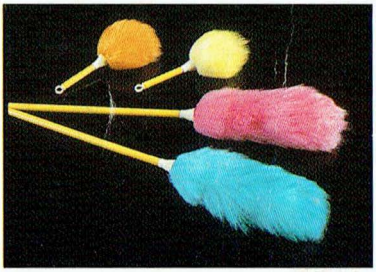

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