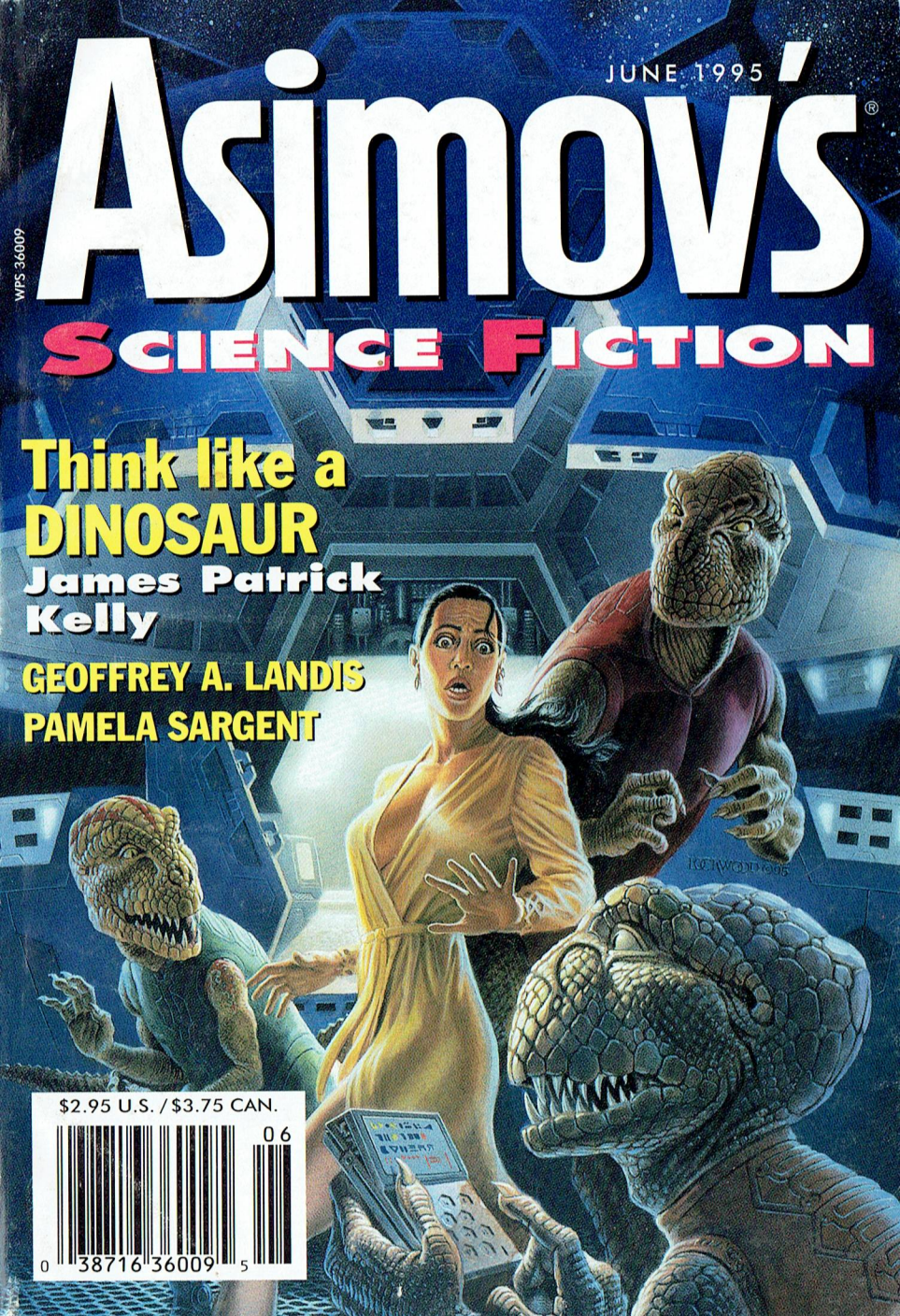
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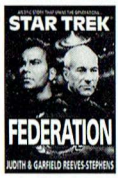

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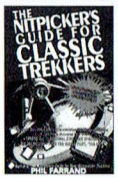

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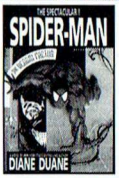

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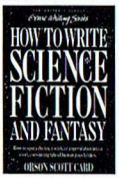

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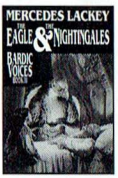

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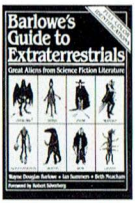

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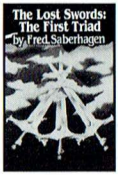

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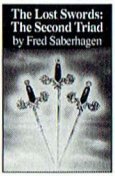

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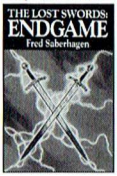

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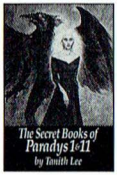

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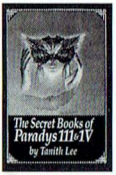

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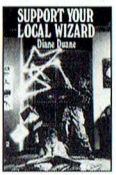

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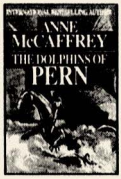

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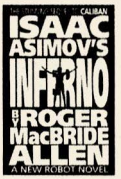

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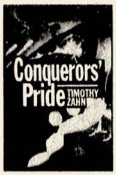

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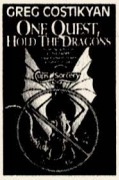

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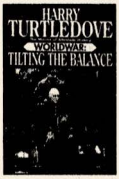

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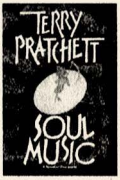

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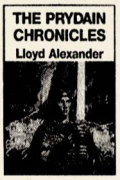

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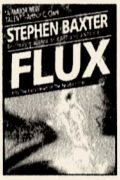

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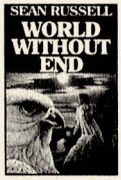

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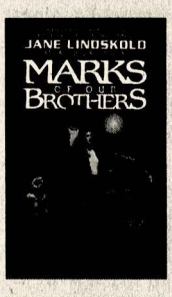

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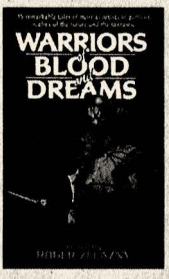

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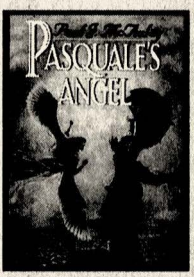

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REFLECTIONS

by Robert Silverberg

ALIVE AS YOU AND ME

Last night I dreamed that Isaac Asimov, just before he died, had decided to make a voyage into space. At NASA's invitation he went up in the space shuttle and beamed a message of joy and wonder and hope to the Earth-bound rest of us.

It was a lovely and touching dream. There was Isaac miraculously resurrected by my sleeping mind, grinning out at me from the television screen, his famous side-whiskers looking more formidable than ever under the gravity-free conditions. I listened to him describing in glowing terms the way the Earth looked to him from orbit, and telling us how happy he was that he had managed to make this one journey aboard a spaceship, here at the very end of his life.

It was, of course, a wildly implausible dream, even as dreams go. Isaac Asimov would have been the last person on this planet to get aboard a spacegoing vehicle. Arthur C. Clarke would have accepted the invitation, certainly, if only they had asked him while he was still a lad of seventy or so. Robert A. Heinlein very likely would have gone. Frank Herbert, certainly. But Isaac? *Isaac?* Don't be silly. Isaac was the world's worst acrophobe. A roller-coaster ride that he took when he was nineteen drove him into paroxysms of panic. He made a grand total of two airplane trips in his life, both times under military auspices during his World War II service, and they had such a powerful effect on him that he studiously avoided air travel for the next fifty years. And though he lived on the thirty-third floor of a Manhattan apartment building, he did his writing in a room with drawn blinds, facing a blank, windowless wall. A thirty-foot trip in a cherrypicker to light a ceremonial lamp for a Jewish holiday at a rabbi's request once reduced him to a state of near-paralysis. No, Isaac was not your basic astronaut kind of guy, and the thought of him sitting aboard a space shuttle waiting for the moment of lift-off makes *me* break out in a cold sweat.

But dreams don't have to make sense. That's the best thing about them, so far as I'm concerned. By day I am (or try to be) a coolly rational person, lucid of intellect and single of mind, who pursues a logical course through life with better

than average success. Once I hit my pillow, though, anything goes —hours and hours of free-form improvisation, utterly unfettered by any sort of logical necessity. In my dreams, rivers can flow uphill. Cats can fly. (Sometimes, so can I.) And Isaac Asimov not only lives again, but is capable of taking a trip aboard the space shuttle and telling us what fun it is.

I love it. It's like an effortless movie show every night.

I try to remember my dreams—the best ones, at least. I tell them to my wife when *she* finally wakes up, a couple of hours farther along in the morning than I do. I tell them to my agent. Sometimes I even jot them down and eventually make use of them in my fiction. I have generated perfectly good short stories out of dreams ("Good News from the Vatican," for example, the one about the robot who is elected Pope, which won me a Nebula in 1972) and on at least one occasion I've assembled an entire novel out of whatever it was that I happened to dream the night before.

The one thing I don't do, usually, is to try to figure out what my dreams "mean." So far as I'm concerned, dreams don't have to mean anything. (I'm sorry, Dr. Freud. In your line of work dreams may be the direct key to the patient's problems, but in my sort of business dreams can be accepted simply as the raw material of fiction without the need for close interpretation. They are bulletins from the uncon-

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scious that a writer can treat as dictation from himself to himself, and they will make such sense as is appropriate to the story into which they are mortared. Ursula Le Guin once wrote an essay about her Earthsea books called "Dreams Must Explain Themselves," and the title of that essay nicely expresses my basic position on the subject. Soothsayers and psychoanalysts may need to figure out the true meaning of people's dreams, but I don't: I simply have to find some appropriate *narrative* use for them in the course of some science fiction or fantasy project, and, if my storytelling sixth sense is working properly, the dream will explain itself within the context of the story as things unfold.)

I was delighted to discover, just a few days before my Isaac dream, that Graham Greene, one of my favorite writers, also paid close attention to his dreams, and in fact kept a diary of them. (A volume covering his dreams between 1965 and 1989 was published posthumously by Viking in 1994 under the title, *A World of My Own: A Dream Diary*.) In that book we see Greene seeing himself taking a boat journey to Bogota with Henry James (not much fun for Greene), undertaking a spy mission to Nazi Germany and thrusting a poisoned cigarette up Joseph Goebbels's nostril, and holding conversations with Oliver Cromwell, Fidel Castro, and Alexander Solzhenitsyn, among others. This very heterosexual man also has a homosexual encounter in his sleep with the master spy Kim Philby, commits both robbery and murder, and meets a talking kitten. A strange and fascinating person was Graham Greene, and his dreams, not very surprisingly, are shot through with the dark, vivid illuminations that made his novels such rich things.

Reading Greene's book of dreams, I was fiercely envious, because my own dreams have been pretty lively ones too and I have let all too many of them go to waste, beyond hope of recovery now. I have never kept a dream diary, or, for that matter, any very detailed diary of my waking life. (Isaac did, and built his three huge autobiographical books around it. Knowing Isaac, I doubt that he jotted down very much about his dreams, though.) Except for those that immediately cry out to me that they can be converted into usable fiction, which I note down early in the morning or once in a while in the middle of the night, I allow my dreams to vanish, and most of them evaporate quickly as the day arrives. (Some stay with me, of course, for years or even decades. Those, I know, are the Important Ones, and you can bet that I have employed them, sometimes more than once, in my writing.)

My most frustrating dream experience—and I wonder if it is one that other writers have had—recurs for me every three or four years. I dream an entire novel. It is a book that—in my dreams—I have just finished writing, and now

I am re-reading the manuscript before sending it to the publisher; and I lie there in my sleep, turning each page, avidly reading and admiring every word, while one part of my dreaming mind makes note of the fact that I am reading a novel that in reality I have not actually yet written. I remind myself sternly to commit the entire book to memory so that when I awaken I can begin setting it down immediately on paper. It is, of course, a magnificent novel, my best work by far. And, of course, when I awaken I can't remember a single syllable of it, only the fact that I have had That Dream again. (Though once I was able to bring back from one version of this dream some half dozen words that had been embossed on the manuscript page in bold calligraphy. They were not, unfortunately, words in any language that I or anything else understands.)

But, as I said a few paragraphs ago, I have been able to develop stray images and events that I remember from dreams into stories and even books. (So too did Graham Greene, according to the introduction to his dream diary.) And one time I did indeed put a whole novel together out of eight weeks' collected dreams.

This was *Son of Man,* which I wrote in a kind of white heat in December 1969, and which was published by Ballantine Books in the summer of 1971. That was a time, some of you may recall, when many of the finest minds of our nation were entering altered states of consciousness with the aid of psychedelic drugs, and *Son of Man* was intended to be a kind of psychedelic adventure in the very far future—surreal, dreamlike, alogical. I did not, incidentally, write it while I was in any sort of drugged state myself. I wrote it the way I have written everything else, sitting down with a clear mind after breakfast and doing a regular daily stint, same time every day, no chemical additives of any kind whatsoever employed while I'm on the job.

But I did transcribe my dreams, and they were grand and glorious ones. There was wondrous feedback between book and dreams throughout the time of writing, and as I got deeper and deeper into the strange novel, the dreams got stranger too, kicking the next day's work into an even higher energy state of strangeness. This is a sample passage, chosen at random:

"He looks. What appears to be a river is gushing from the hole in the side of the mountain. But the fluid that pours out is misty and intricate, carrying itself a multitude of indistinct shapes. Steam accompanies the dark flow. Patterns form and degenerate within this white halo: Clay sees monsters, pyramids, ancient beasts, machines, vegetables, crystals, but nothing lasts. . . . No two objects are alike. Unending inventiveness is the rule here. He sees a shining spear of a beast go careening end over end, and a thick snaky worm with luminous antennae, and a walking black

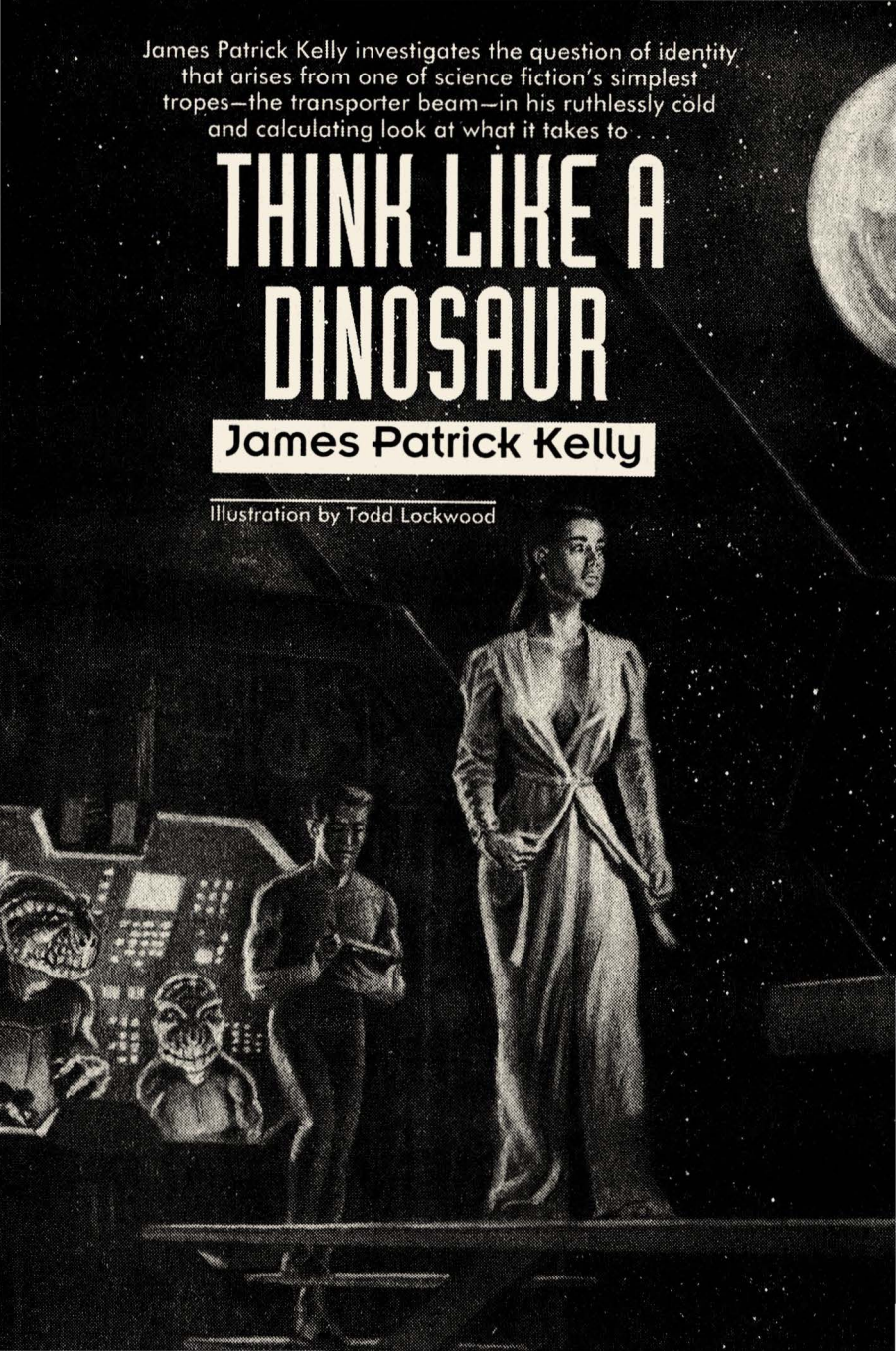
barrel, and a dancing fish, and a tunnel with legs. He sees a trio of giant eyes without bodies. He sees two green arms that clutch each other in a desperate and murderous grip. He sees a squadron of marching red eggs. He sees wheels with hands. He sees undulating carpets of singing slime. He sees fertile nails. He sees one-legged spiders. He sees black snowflakes. He sees men without heads. He sees heads without men. . . ."

And so on in a blaze of visionary craziness for 213 pages. I would gladly quote the whole thing to you here. It was a once-in-a-lifetime book, emerging via a direct pipeline from my unconscious mind. That it made some sort of sense to others at all was sheer luck; and evidently it did, because in its time the book had plenty of readers, though its time seems to be over now.

Nor do I often have dreams like that these days, and more's the pity. But the dreams still come, and sometimes they are very strange, as my Isaac dream testifies. It was good to see him last night, and I would be pleased to see him again tomorrow night, whether he's broadcasting from space or simply coming across the hotel lobby to greet me at this year's SF convention. Or maybe he'll be sitting in the row in front of me on the plane the next time Karen and I go to Europe. (" *'Isaac,' I said, 'You're three years dead!' 'I never died,' said he.*")

Anything can happen, you know, once head hits pillow. ●

We appreciate comments about the magazine, and would like to hear from more of our readers. Editorial correspondence should include the writer's name and address. Letters can be E-mailed to 71154.662@compuserve.com or posted to Letters to the Editor, *Asimov's*, 1540 Broadway, New York, NY 10036. Letters may be shortened and edited for publication.


James Patrick Kelly investigates the question of identity that arises from one of science fiction's simplest tropes—the transporter beam—in his ruthlessly cold and calculating look at what it takes to . . .
THINK LIKE A DINOSAUR
James Patrick Kelly
Illustration by Todd Lockwood


LOCKWOOD ©95

Kamala Shastri came back to this world as she had left it—naked. She tottered out of the assembler, trying to balance in Tuulen Station's delicate gravity. I caught her and bundled her into a robe with one motion, then eased her onto the float. Three years on another planet had transformed Kamala. She was leaner, more muscular. Her fingernails were now a couple of centimeters long and there were four parallel scars incised on her left cheek, perhaps some Gendian's idea of beautification. But what struck me most was the darting strangeness in her eyes. This place, so familiar to me, seemed almost to shock her. It was as if she doubted the walls and was skeptical of air. She had learned to think like an alien.

"Welcome back." The float's whisper rose to a *whoosh* as I walked it down the hallway.

She swallowed hard and I thought she might cry. Three years ago, she would have. Lots of migrators are devastated when they come out of the assembler; it's because there is no transition. A few seconds ago Kamala was on Gend, fourth planet of the star we call epsilon Leo, and now she was here in lunar orbit. She was almost home; her life's great adventure was over.

"Matthew?" she said.

"Michael." I couldn't help but be pleased that she remembered me. After all, she had changed my life.

I've guided maybe three hundred migrations—comings *and* goings—since I first came to Tuulen to study the dinos. Kamala Shastri's is the only quantum scan I've ever pirated. I doubt that the dinos care; I suspect this is a trespass they occasionally allow themselves. I know more about her—at least, as she was three years ago—than I know about myself. When the dinos sent her to Gend, she massed 50,391.72 grams and her red cell count was 4.81 million per mm^3. She could play the *nagasvaram,* a kind of bamboo flute. Her father came from Thana, near Bombay, and her favorite flavor of chewyfrute was watermelon and she'd had five lovers and when she was eleven she had wanted to be a gymnast but instead she had become a biomaterials engineer who at age twenty-nine had volunteered to go to the stars to learn how to grow artificial eyes. It took her two years to go through migrator training; she knew she could have backed out at any time, right up until the moment Silloin translated her into a superluminal signal. She understood what it meant to balance the equation.

I first met her on June 22, 2069. She shuttled over from Lunex's L1 port and came through our airlock at promptly 10:15, a small, roundish woman with black hair parted in the middle and drawn tight against her skull. They had darkened her skin against epsilon Leo's UV; it was

the deep blue-black of twilight. She was wearing a striped clingy and velcro slippers to help her get around for the short time she'd be navigating our .2 micrograv.

"Welcome to Tuulen Station." I smiled and offered my hand. "My name is Michael." We shook. "I'm supposed to be a sapientologist but I also moonlight as the local guide."

"Guide?" She nodded distractedly. "Okay." She peered past me, as if expecting someone else.

"Oh, don't worry," I said, "the dinos are in their cages."

Her eyes got wide as she let her hand slip from mine. "You call the Hanen dinos?"

"Why not?" I laughed. "They call us babies. The weeps, among other things."

She shook her head in amazement. People who've never met a dino tended to romanticize them: the wise and noble reptiles who had mastered superluminal physics and introduced Earth to the wonders of galactic civilization. I doubt Kamala had ever seen a dino play poker or gobble down a screaming rabbit. And she had never argued with Linna, who still wasn't convinced that humans were psychologically ready to go to the stars.

"Have you eaten?" I gestured down the corridor toward the reception rooms.

"Yes . . . I mean, no." She didn't move. "I am not hungry."

"Let me guess. You're too nervous to eat. You're too nervous to talk, even. You wish I'd just shut up, pop you into the marble, and beam you out. Let's just get this part the hell over with, eh?"

"I don't mind the conversation, actually."

"There you go. Well, Kamala, it is my solemn duty to advise you that there are no peanut butter and jelly sandwiches on Gend. And no chicken vindaloo. What's my name again?"

"Michael?"

"See, you're not *that* nervous. Not one taco, or a single slice of eggplant pizza. This is your last chance to eat like a human."

"Okay." She did not actually smile—she was too busy being brave—but a corner of her mouth twitched. "Actually, I would not mind a cup of tea."

"Now, tea they've got." She let me guide her toward reception room D; her slippers *snicked* at the velcro carpet. "Of course, they brew it from lawn clippings."

"The Gendians don't keep lawns. They live underground."

"Refresh my memory." I kept my hand on her shoulder; beneath the clingy, her muscles were rigid. "Are they the ferrets or the things with the orange bumps?"

"They look nothing like ferrets."

We popped through the door bubble into reception D, a compact rectangular space with a scatter of low, unthreatening furniture. There was a kitchen station at one end, a closet with a vacuum toilet at the other. The ceiling was blue sky; the long wall showed a live view of the Charles River and the Boston skyline, baking in the late June sun. Kamala had just finished her doctorate at MIT.

I opaqued the door. She perched on the edge of a couch like a wren, ready to flit away.

While I was making her tea, my fingernail screen flashed. I answered it and a tiny Silloin came up in discreet mode. She didn't look at me; she was too busy watching arrays in the control room. =A problem,= her voice buzzed in my earstone, =most negligible, really. But we will have to void the last two from today's schedule. Save them at Lunex until first shift tomorrow. Can this one be kept for an hour?=

"Sure," I said. "Kamala, would you like to meet a Hanen?" I transferred Silloin to a dino-sized window on the wall. "Silloin, this is Kamala Shastri. Silloin is the one who actually runs things. I'm just the doorman."

Silloin looked through the window with her near eye, then swung around and peered at Kamala with her other. She was short for a dino, just over a meter tall, but she had an enormous head that teetered on her neck like a watermelon balancing on a grapefruit. She must have just oiled herself because her silver scales shone. =Kamala, you will accept my happiest intentions for you?= She raised her left hand, spreading the skinny digits to expose dark crescents of vestigial webbing.

"Of course, I. . . ."

=And you will permit us to render you this translation?=

She straightened. "Yes."

=Have you questions?=

I'm sure she had several hundred, but at this point was probably too scared to ask. While she hesitated, I broke in. "Which came first, the lizard or the egg?"

Silloin ignored me. =It will be excellent for you to begin when?=

"She's just having a little tea." I said, handing her the cup. "I'll bring her along when she's done. Say an hour?"

Kamala squirmed on the couch. "No, really, it will not take me. . . ."

Silloin showed us her teeth, several of which were as long as piano keys. =That would be most appropriate, Michael.= She closed; a gull flew through the space where her window had been.

"Why did you do that?" Kamala's voice was sharp.

"Because it says here that you have to wait your turn. You're not the only migrator we're sending this morning." This was a lie, of course; we had had to cut the schedule because Jodi Latchaw, the other sapientologist assigned to Tuulen, was at the University of Hipparchus presenting

our paper on the Hanen concept of identity. "Don't worry, I'll make the time fly."

For a moment, we looked at each other. I could have laid down an hour's worth of patter; I'd done that often enough. Or I could have drawn her out on why she was going: no doubt she had a blind grandma or second cousin just waiting for her to bring home those artificial eyes, not to mention potential spin-offs which could well end tuberculosis, famine, and premature ejaculation, *blah, blah, blah.* Or I could have just left her alone in the room to read the wall. The trick was guessing how spooked she really was.

"Tell me a secret," I said.

"What?"

"A secret, you know, something no one else knows."

She stared as if I'd just fallen off Mars.

"Look, in a little while you're going some place that's what . . . three hundred and ten light years away? You're scheduled to stay for three years. By the time you come back, I could easily be rich, famous and elsewhere; we'll probably never see each other again. So what have you got to lose? I promise not to tell."

She leaned back on the couch, and settled the cup in her lap. "This is another test, right? After everything they have put me through, they still have not decided whether to send me."

"Oh no, in a couple of hours you'll be cracking nuts with ferrets in some dark Gendian burrow. This is just me, talking."

"You are crazy."

"Actually, I believe the technical term is logomaniac. It's from the Greek: *logos* meaning word, *mania* meaning two bits short of a byte. I just love to chat is all. Tell you what, I'll go first. If my secret isn't juicy enough, you don't have tell me anything."

Her eyes were slits as she sipped her tea. I was fairly sure that whatever she was worrying about at the moment, it wasn't being swallowed by the big blue marble.

"I was brought up Catholic," I said, settling onto a chair in front of her. "I'm not anymore, but that's not the secret. My parents sent me to Mary, Mother of God High School; we called it Moogoo. It was run by a couple of old priests, Father Thomas and his wife, Mother Jennifer. Father Tom taught physics, which I got a 'D' in, mostly because he talked like he had walnuts in his mouth. Mother Jennifer taught theology and had all the warmth of a marble pew; her nickname was Mama Moogoo.

"One night, just two weeks before my graduation, Father Tom and Mama Moogoo went out in their Chevy Minimus for ice cream. On the way home, Mama Moogoo pushed a yellow light and got broadsided by an ambulance. Like I said, she was old, a hundred and twenty something;

they should've lifted her license back in the '50s. She was killed instantly. Father Tom died in the hospital.

"Of course, we were all supposed to feel sorry for them and I guess I did a little, but I never really liked either of them and I resented the way their deaths had screwed things up for my class. So I was more annoyed than sorry, but then I also had this edge of guilt for being so uncharitable. Maybe you'd have to grow up Catholic to understand that. Anyway, the day after it happened they called an assembly in the gym and we were all there squirming on the bleachers and the cardinal himself telepresented a sermon. He kept trying to comfort us, like it had been our *parents* that had died. When I made a joke about it to the kid next to me, I got caught and spent the last week of my senior year with an in-school suspension."

Kamala had finished her tea. She slid the empty cup into one of the holders built into the table.

"Want some more?" I said.

She stirred restlessly. "Why are you telling me this?"

"It's part of the secret." I leaned forward in my chair. "See, my family lived down the street from Holy Spirit Cemetery and in order to get to the carryvan line on McKinley Ave., I had to cut through. Now this happened a couple of days after I got in trouble at the assembly. It was around midnight and I was coming home from a graduation party where I had taken a couple of pokes of insight, so I was feeling sly as a philosopher-king. As I walked through the cemetery, I stumbled across two dirt mounds right next to each other. At first I thought they were flower beds, then I saw the wooden crosses. Fresh graves: here lies Father Tom and Mama Moogoo. There wasn't much to the crosses: they were basically just stakes with crosspieces, painted white and hammered into the ground. The names were hand printed on them. The way I figure it, they were there to mark the graves until the stones got delivered. I didn't need any insight to recognize a once in a lifetime opportunity. If I switched them, what were the chances anyone was going to notice? It was no problem sliding them out of their holes. I smoothed the dirt with my hands and then ran like hell."

Until that moment, she'd seemed bemused by my story and slightly condescending toward me. Now there was a glint of alarm in her eyes. "That was an terrible thing to do," she said.

"Absolutely," I said, "although the dinos think that the whole idea of planting bodies in graveyards and marking them with carved rocks is weepy. They say there is no identity in dead meat, so why get so sentimental about it? Linna keeps asking how come we don't put markers over our shit. But that's not the secret. See, it'd been a warmish night in the middle of June, only as I ran, the air turned cold. Freezing, I could

see my breath. And my shoes got heavier and heavier, like they had turned to stone. As I got closer to the back gate, it felt like I was fighting a strong wind, except my clothes weren't flapping. I slowed to a walk. I know I could have pushed through, but my heart was thumping and then I heard this whispery seashell noise and I panicked. So the secret is I'm a coward. I switched the crosses back and I never went near that cemetery again. As a matter of fact," I nodded at the walls of reception room D on Tuulen Station, "when I grew up, I got about as far away from it as I could."

She stared as I settled back in my chair. "True story," I said and raised my right hand. She seemed so astonished that I started laughing. A smile bloomed on her dark face and suddenly she was giggling too. It was a soft, liquid sound, like a brook bubbling over smooth stones; it made me laugh even harder. Her lips were full and her teeth were very white.

"Your turn," I said, finally.

"Oh, no, I could not." She waved me off. "I don't have anything so good. . . ." She paused, then frowned. "You have told that before?"

"Once," I said. "To the Hanen, during the psych screening for this job. Only I didn't tell them the last part. I know how dinos think, so I ended it when I switched the crosses. The rest is baby stuff." I waggled a finger at her. "Don't forget, you promised to keep my secret."

"Did I?"

"Tell me about when you were young. Where did you grow up?"

"Toronto." She glanced at me, appraisingly. "There *was* something, but not funny. Sad."

I nodded encouragement and changed the wall to Toronto's skyline dominated by the CN Tower, Toronto-Dominion Centre, Commerce Court, and the King's Needle.

She twisted to take in the view and spoke over her shoulder. "When I was ten we moved to an apartment, right downtown on Bloor Street so my mother could be close to work." She pointed at the wall and turned back to face me. "She is an accountant, my father wrote wallpaper for Imagineering. It was a huge building; it seemed as if we were always getting into the elevator with ten neighbors we never knew we had. I was coming home from school one day when an old woman stopped me in the lobby. 'Little girl,' she said, 'how would you like to earn ten dollars?' My parents had warned me not to talk to strangers but she obviously was a resident. Besides, she had an ancient pair of exolegs strapped on, so I knew I could outrun her if I needed to. She asked me to go to the store for her, handed me a grocery list and a cash card, and said I should bring everything up to her apartment, 10W. I should have been more suspicious because all the downtown groceries deliver but, as I soon

found out, all she really wanted was someone to talk to her. And she was willing to pay for it, usually five or ten dollars, depending on how long I stayed. Soon I was stopping by almost every day after school. I think my parents would have made me stop if they had known; they were very strict. They would not have liked me taking her money. But neither of them got home until after six, so it was my secret to keep."

"Who was she?" I said. "What did you talk about?"

"Her name was Margaret Ase. She was ninety-seven years old and I think she had been some kind of counselor. Her husband and her daughter had both died and she was alone. I didn't find out much about her; she made me do most of the talking. She asked me about my friends and what I was learning in school and my family. Things like that. . . ."

Her voice trailed off as my fingernail started to flash. I answered it.

=Michael, I am pleased to call you to here.= Silloin buzzed in my ear. She was almost twenty minutes ahead of schedule.

"See, I told you we'd make the time fly." I stood; Kamala's eyes got very wide. "I'm ready if you are."

I offered her my hand. She took it and let me help her up. She wavered for a moment and I sensed just how fragile her resolve was. I put my hand around her waist and steered her into the corridor. In the micrograv of Tuulen Station, she already felt as insubstantial as a memory. "So tell me, what happened that was so sad?"

At first I thought she hadn't heard. She shuffled along, said nothing.

"Hey, don't keep me in suspense here, Kamala," I said. "You have to finish the story."

"No," she said. "I don't think I do."

I didn't take this personally. My only real interest in the conversation had been to distract her. If she refused to be distracted, that was her choice. Some migrators kept talking right up to the moment they slid into the big blue marble, but lots of them went quiet just before. They turned inward. Maybe in her mind she was already on Gend, blinking in the hard white light.

We arrived at the scan center, the largest space on Tuulen Station. Immediately in front of us was the marble, containment for the quantum nondemolition sensor array—QNSA for the acronymically inclined. It was the milky blue of glacial ice and big as two elephants. The upper hemisphere was raised and the scanning table protruded like a shiny gray tongue. Kamala approached the marble and touched her reflection, which writhed across its polished surface. To the right was a padded bench, the fogger and a toilet. I looked left, through the control room window. Silloin stood watching us, her impossible head cocked to one side.

=She is docile?= She buzzed in my earstone.

I held up crossed fingers.

=Welcome, Kamala Shastri.= Silloin's voice came over the speakers with a soothing hush. =You are ready to open your translation?=

Kamala bowed to the window. "This is where I take my clothes off?"

=If you would be so convenient.=

She brushed past me to the bench. Apparently I had ceased to exist; this was between her and the dino now. She undressed quickly, folding her clingy into a neat bundle, tucking her slippers beneath the bench. Out of the corner of my eye, I could see tiny feet, heavy thighs, and the beautiful, dark smooth skin of her back. She stepped into the fogger and closed the door.

"Ready," she called.

From the control room, Silloin closed circuits which filled the fogger with a dense cloud of nanolenses. The nano, stuck to Kamala and deployed, coating the surface of her body. As she breathed them, they passed from her lungs into her bloodstream. She only coughed twice; she had been well trained. When the eight minutes were up, Silloin cleared the air in the fogger and she emerged. Still ignoring me, she again faced the control room.

=Now you must arrange yourself on the scanning table,= said Silloin, =and enable Michael to fix you.=

She crossed to the marble without hesitation, climbed the gantry beside it, eased onto the table and laid back.

I followed her up. "Sure you won't tell me the rest of the secret?"

She stared at the ceiling, unblinking.

"Okay then." I took the canister and a sparker out of my hip pouch. "This is going to happen just like you've practiced it." I used the canister to respray the bottoms of her feet with nano. I watched her belly rise and fall, rise and fall. She was deep into her breathing exercise. "Remember, no skipping rope or whistling while you're in the scanner."

She did not answer. "Deep breath now," I said and touched a sparker to her big toe. There was a brief crackle as the nano on her skin wove into a net and stiffened, locking her in place. "Bark at the ferrets for me." I picked up my equipment, climbed down the gantry, and wheeled it back to the wall.

With a low whine, the big blue marble retracted its tongue. I watched the upper hemisphere close, swallowing Kamala Shastri, then joined Silloin in the control room.

I'm not of the school who thinks the dinos stink, another reason I got assigned to study them up close. Parikkal, for example, has no smell at all that I can tell. Normally Silloin had the faint but not unpleasant smell of stale wine. When she was under stress, however, her scent became vinegary and biting. It must have been a wild morning for her. Breathing through my mouth, I settled onto the stool at my station.

She was working quickly, now that the marble was sealed. Even with all their training, migrators tend to get claustrophobic fast. After all, they're lying in the dark, in nanobondage, waiting to be translated. Waiting. The simulator at the Singapore training center makes a noise while it's emulating a scan. Most compare it to a light rain pattering against the marble; for some, it's low volume radio static. As long as they hear the patter, the migrators think they're safe. We reproduce it for them while they're in our marble, even through scanning takes about three seconds and is utterly silent. From my vantage I could see that the sagittal, axial, and coronal windows had stopped blinking, indicating full data capture. Silloin was skirring busily to herself; her comm didn't bother to interpret. Wasn't saying anything baby Michael needed to know, obviously. Her head bobbed as she monitored the enormous spread of readouts; her claws clicked against touch screens that glowed orange and yellow.

At my station, there was only a migration status screen—and a white button.

I wasn't lying when I said I was just the doorman. My field is sapientology, not quantum physics. Whatever went wrong with Kamala's migration that morning, there was nothing *I* could have done. The dinos tell me that the quantum nondemolition sensor array is able to circumvent Heisenberg's Uncertainty Principle by measuring spacetime's most crogglingly small quantities without collapsing the wave/particle duality. How small? They say that no one can ever "see" anything that's only 1.62×10^{-33} centimeters long, because at that size, space and time come apart. Time ceases to exist and space becomes a random probablistic foam, sort of like quantum spit. We humans call this the Planck-Wheeler length. There's a Planck-Wheeler time, too: 10^{-45} of a second. If something happens and something else happens and the two events are separated by an interval of a mere 10^{-45} of a second, it is impossible to say which came first. It was all dino to me—and that's just the scanning. The Hanen use different tech to create artificial wormholes, hold them open with electromagnetic vacuum fluctuations, pass the superluminal signal through and then assemble the migrator from elementary particles at the destination.

On my status screen I could see that the signal which mapped Kamala Shastri had already been compressed and burst through the wormhole. All that we had to wait for was for Gend to confirm acquisition. Once they officially told us that they had her, it would be my job to balance the equation.

Pitter-patter, pitter-pat.

Some Hanen technologies are so powerful that they can alter reality itself. Wormholes could be used by some time traveling fanatic to corrupt

history; the scanner/assembler could be used to create a billion Silloins—or Michael Burrs. Pristine reality, unpolluted by such anomalies, has what the dinos call harmony. Before any sapients get to join the galactic club, they must prove total commitment to preserving harmony.

Since I had come to Tuulen to study the dinos, I had pressed the white button over two hundred times. It was what I had to do in order to keep my assignment. Pressing it sent a killing pulse of ionizing radiation through the cerebral cortex of the migrator's duplicated, and therefore unnecessary, body. No brain, no pain; death followed within seconds. Yes, the first few times I'd balanced the equation had been traumatic. It was still . . . unpleasant. But this was the price of a ticket to the stars. If certain unusual people like Kamala Shastri had decided that price was reasonable, it was their choice, not mine.

=This is not a happy result, Michael.= Silloin spoke to me for the first time since I'd entered the control room. =Discrepancies are unfolding.= On my status screen I watched as the error-checking routines started turning up hits.

"Is the problem here?" I felt a knot twist suddenly inside me. "Or there?" If our original scan checked out, then all Silloin would have to do is send it to Gend again.

There was a long, infuriating silence. Silloin concentrated on part of her board as if it showed her firstborn hatchling chipping out of its egg. The respirator between her shoulders had ballooned to twice its normal size. My screen showed that Kamala had been in the marble for four minutes plus.

=It may be fortunate to recalibrate the scanner and begin over.=

"Shit." I slammed my hand against the wall, felt the pain tingle to my elbow. "I thought you had it fixed." When error-checking turned up problems, the solution was almost always to retransmit. "You're sure, Silloin? Because this one was right on the edge when I tucked her in."

Silloin gave me a dismissive sneeze and slapped at the error readouts with her bony little hand, as if to knock them back to normal. Like Linna and the other dinos, she had little patience with what she regarded as our weepy fears of migration. However, unlike Linna, she was convinced that someday, after we had used Hanen technologies long enough, we would learn to think like dinos. Maybe she's right. Maybe when we've been squirting through wormholes for hundreds of years, we'll cheerfully discard our redundant bodies. When the dinos and other sapients migrate, the redundants zap themselves—very harmonious. They tried it with humans but it didn't always work. That's why I'm here. =The need is most clear. It will prolong about thirty minutes,= she said.

Kamala had been alone in the dark for almost six minutes, longer

than any migrator I'd ever guided. "Let me hear what's going on in the marble."

The control room filled with the sound of Kamala screaming. It didn't sound human to me—more like the shriek of tires skidding toward a crash.

"We've got to get her out of there," I said.

=That is baby thinking, Michael.=

"So she's a baby, damn it." I knew that bringing migrators out of the marble was big trouble. I could have asked Silloin to turn the speakers off and sat there while Kamala suffered. It was my decision.

"Don't open the marble until I get the gantry in place." I ran for the door. "And keep the sound effects going."

At the first crack of light, she howled. The upper hemisphere seemed to lift in slow motion; inside the marble she bucked against the nano. Just when I was sure it was impossible that she could scream any louder, she did. We had accomplished something extraordinary, Silloin and I; we had stripped the brave biomaterials engineer away completely, leaving in her place a terrified animal.

"Kamala, it's me. Michael."

Her frantic screams cohered into words. "Stop . . . *don't* . . . oh my god, someone *help!*" If I could have, I would've jumped into the marble to release her, but the sensor array is fragile and I wasn't going to risk causing any more problems with it. We both had to wait until the upper hemisphere swung fully open and the scanning table offered poor Kamala to me.

"It's okay. Nothing's going to happen, all right? We're bringing you out, that's all. Everything's all right."

When I released her with the sparker, she flew at me. We pitched back and almost toppled down the steps. Her grip was so tight I couldn't breathe.

"Don't *kill* me, don't, *please,* don't."

I rolled on top of her. "Kamala!" I wriggled one arm free and used it to pry myself from her. I scrabbled sideways to the top step. She lurched clumsily in the microgravity and swung at me; her fingernails raked across the back of my hand, leaving bloody welts. "Kamala, stop!" It was all I could do not to strike back at her. I retreated down the steps.

"You bastard. What are you assholes trying to do to me?" She drew several shuddering breaths and began to sob.

"The scan got corrupted somehow. Silloin is working on it."

=The difficulty is obscure,= said Silloin from the control room.

"But that's not your problem." I backed toward the bench.

"They lied," she mumbled and seemed to fold in upon herself as if she

were just skin, no flesh or bones. "They said I wouldn't feel anything and . . . do you know what it's like . . . it's . . ."

I fumbled for her clingy. "Look, here are your clothes. Why don't you get dressed? We'll get you out of here."

"You bastard," she repeated, but her voice was empty.

She let me coax her down off the gantry. I counted nubs on the wall while she fumbled back into her clingy. They were the size of the old dimes my grandfather used to hoard and they glowed with a soft golden bioluminescence. I was up to forty-seven before she was dressed and ready to return to reception D.

Where before she had perched expectantly at the edge of the couch, now she slumped back against it. "So what now?" she said.

"I don't know." I went to the kitchen station and took the carafe from the distiller. "What now, Silloin?" I poured water over the back of my hand to wash the blood off. It stung. My earstone was silent. "I guess we wait," I said finally.

"For what?"

"For her to fix . . ."

"I'm not going back in there."

I decided to let that pass. It was probably too soon to argue with her about it, although once Silloin recalibrated the scanner, she'd have very little time to change her mind. "You want something from the kitchen? Another cup of tea, maybe?"

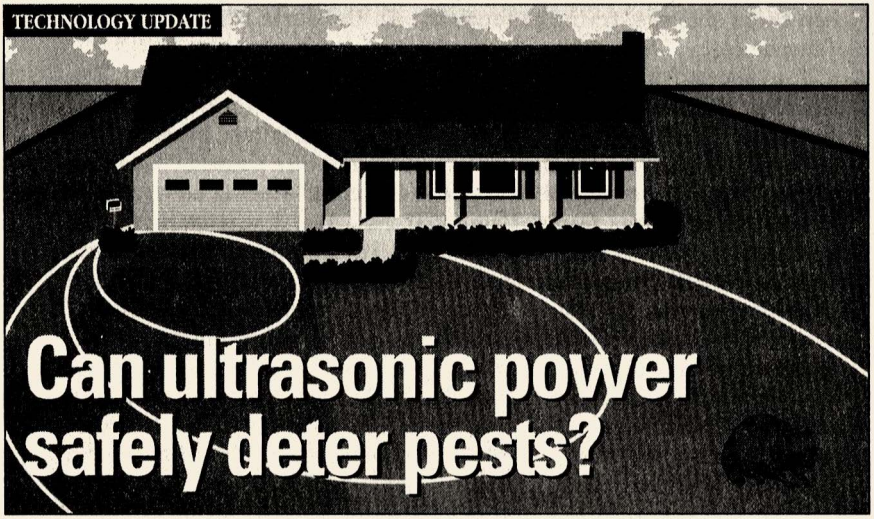
"How about a gin and tonic—hold the tonic?" She rubbed beneath her eyes. "Or a couple of hundred milliliters of serentol?"

I tried to pretend she'd made a joke. "You know the dinos won't let us open the bar for migrators. The scanner might misread your brain chemistry and your visit to Gend would be nothing but a three year drunk."

"Don't you under*stand?*" She was right back at the edge of hysteria. "I am not *going!*" I didn't really blame her for the way she was acting but, at that moment, all I wanted was to get rid of Kamala Shastri. I didn't care if she went on to Gend or back to Lunex or over the rainbow to Oz, just as long as I didn't have to be in the same room with this miserable creature who was trying to make me feel guilty about an accident I had nothing to do with.

"I thought I could do it." She clamped hands to her ears as if to keep from hearing her own despair. "I wasted the last two years convincing myself that I could just lie there and not think and then suddenly I'd be far away. I was going someplace wonderful and strange." She made a strangled sound and let her hands drop into her lap. "I was going to help people see."

"You did it, Kamala. You did everything we asked."



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She shook her head. "I couldn't *not* think. That was the problem. And then there she was, trying to touch me. In the dark. I had not thought of her since. . . ." She shivered. "It's your fault for reminding me."

"Your secret friend," I said.

"Friend?" Kamala seemed puzzled by the word. "No, I wouldn't say she was a friend. I was always a little bit scared of her, because I was never quite sure of what she wanted from me." She paused. "One day I went up to 10W after school. She was in her chair, staring down at Bloor Street. Her back was to me. I said, 'Hi, Ms. Ase.' I was going to show her a genie I had written, only she didn't say anything. I came around. Her skin was the color of ashes. I took her hand. It was like picking up something plastic. She was stiff, hard—not a person anymore. She had become a thing, like a feather or a bone. I ran; I had to get out of there. I went up to our apartment and I hid from her."

She squinted, as if observing—judging—her younger self through the lens of time. "I think I understand now what she wanted. I think she knew she was dying; she probably wanted me there with her at the end, or at least to find her body afterward and report it. Only I could *not.* If I told anyone she was dead, my parents would find out about us. Maybe people would suspect me of doing something to her—I don't know. I could have called security but I was only ten; I was afraid somehow they might trace me. A couple of weeks went by and still nobody had found her. By then it was too late to say anything. Everyone would have blamed me for keeping quiet for so long. At night I imagined her turning black and rotting into her chair like a banana. It made me sick; I couldn't sleep or eat. They had to put me in the hospital, because I had touched her. Touched *death."*

=Michael,= Silloin whispered, without any warning flash. =An impossibility has formed.=

"As soon as I was out of that building, I started to get better. Then they found her. After I came home, I worked hard to forget Ms. Ase. And I did, almost." Kamala wrapped her arms around herself. "But just now she was with me again, inside the marble . . . I couldn't see her but somehow I knew she was reaching for me."

=Michael, Parikkal is here with Linna.=

"Don't you see?" She gave a bitter laugh. "How can I go to Gend? I'm *hallucinating."*

=It has broken the harmony. Join us alone.=

I was tempted to swat at the annoying buzz in my ear.

"You know, I've never told anyone about her before."

"Well, maybe some good has come of this after all." I patted her on the knee. "Excuse me for a minute?" She seemed surprised that I would leave. I slipped into the hall and hardened the door bubble, sealing her in.

"What impossibility?" I said, heading for the control room.

=She is pleased to reopen the scanner?=

"Not pleased at all. More like scared shitless."

=This is Parikkal.= My earstone translated his skirring with a sizzling edge, like bacon frying. =The confusion was made elsewhere. No mishap can be connected to our station.=

I pushed through the bubble into the scan center. I could see the three dinos through the control window. Their heads were bobbing furiously. "Tell me," I said.

=Our communications with Gend were marred by a transient falsehood,= said Silloin. =Kamala Shastri has been received there and reconstructed.=

"She migrated?" I felt the deck shifting beneath my feet. "What about the one we've got here?"

=The simplicity is to load the redundant into the scanner and finalize. . . .=

"I've got news for you. She's not going anywhere near that marble."

=Her equation is not in balance.= This was Linna, speaking for the first time. Linna was not exactly in charge of Tuulen Station; she was more like a senior partner. Parikkal and Silloin had overruled her before—at least I thought they had.

"What do you expect me to do? Wring her neck?"

There was a moment's silence—which was not as unnerving as watching them eye me through the window, their heads now perfectly still.

"No," I said.

The dinos were skirring at each other; their heads wove and dipped. At first they cut me cold and the comm was silent, but suddenly their debate crackled through my earstone.

=This is just as I have been telling,= said Linna. =These beings have no realization of harmony. It is wrongful to further unleash them on the many worlds.=

=You may have reason,= said Parikkal. =But that is a later discussion. The need is for the equation to be balanced.=

=There is no time. We will have to discard the redundant ourselves.= Silloin bared her long brown teeth. It would take her maybe five seconds to rip Kamala's throat out. And even though Silloin was the dino most sympathetic to us, I had no doubt she would enjoy the kill.

=I will argue that we adjourn human migration until this world has been rethought,= said Linna.

This was the typical dino condescension. Even though they appeared to be arguing with each other, they were actually speaking to me, laying the situation out so that even the baby sapient would understand. They were informing me that I was jeopardizing the future of humanity in

space. That the Kamala in reception D was dead whether I quit or not. That the equation had to be balanced and it had to be now.

"Wait," I said. "Maybe I can coax her back into the scanner." I had to get away from them. I pulled my earstone out and slid it into my pocket. I was in such a hurry to escape that I stumbled as I left the scan center and had to catch myself in the hallway. I stood there for a second, staring at the hand pressed against the bulkhead. I seemed to see the splayed fingers through the wrong end of a telescope. I was far away from myself.

She had curled into herself on the couch, arms clutching knees to her chest, as if trying to shrink so that nobody would notice her.

"We're all set," I said briskly. "You'll be in the marble for less than a minute, guaranteed."

"No, Michael."

I could actually feel myself receding from Tuulen Station. "Kamala, you're throwing away a huge part of your life."

"It is my right." Her eyes were shiny.

No, it wasn't. She was redundant; she had no rights. What had she said about the dead old lady? She had become a thing, like a bone.

"Okay, then," I jabbed at her shoulder with a stiff forefinger. "Let's go."

She recoiled. "Go where?"

"Back to Lunex. I'm holding the shuttle for you. It just dropped off my afternoon list; I should be helping them settle in, instead of having to deal with you."

She unfolded herself slowly.

"Come on." I jerked her roughly to her feet. "The dinos want you off Tuulen as soon as possible and so do I." I was so distant, I couldn't see Kamala Shastri anymore.

She nodded and let me march her to the bubble door.

"And if we meet anyone in the hall, keep your mouth shut."

"You're being so mean." Her whisper was thick.

"You're being such a baby."

When the inner door glided open, she realized immediately that there was no umbilical to the shuttle. She tried to twist out of my grip but I put my shoulder into her, hard. She flew across the airlock, slammed against the outer door and caromed onto her back. As I punched the switch to close the door, I came back to myself. *I* was doing this terrible thing—me, Michael Burr. I couldn't help myself: I giggled. When I last saw her, Kamala was scrabbling across the deck toward me but she was too late. I was surprised that she wasn't screaming again; all I heard was her ferocious breathing.

As soon as the inner door sealed, I opened the outer door. After all, how many ways are there to kill someone on a space station? There were no guns. Maybe someone else could have stabbed or strangled her, but

not me. Poison how? Besides, I wasn't thinking, I had been trying desperately not to think of what I was doing. I was a sapientologist, not a doctor. I always thought that exposure to space meant instantaneous death. Explosive decompression or something like. I didn't want her to suffer. I was trying to make it quick. Painless.

I heard the whoosh of escaping air and thought that was it; the body had been ejected into space. I had actually turned away when thumping started, frantic, like the beat of a racing heart. She must have found something to hold onto. *Thump, thump, thump!* It was too much. I sagged against the inner door—*thump, thump*—slid down it, laughing. Turns out that if you empty the lungs, it is possible to survive exposure to space for at least a minute, maybe two. I thought it was funny. *Thump!* Hilarious, actually. I had tried my best for her—risked my career—and this was how she repaid me? As I laid my cheek against the door, the *thumps* started to weaken. There were just a few centimeters between us, the difference between life and death. Now she knew all about balancing the equation. I was laughing so hard I could scarcely breathe. Just like the meat behind the door. Die already, you weepy bitch!

I don't know how long it took. The *thumping* slowed. Stopped. And then I was a hero. I had preserved harmony, kept our link to the stars open. I chuckled with pride; I could think like a dinosaur.

I popped through the bubble door into Reception D. "It's time to board the shuttle."

Kamala had changed into a clingy and velcro slippers. There were at least ten windows open on the wall; the room filled with the murmur of talking heads. Friends and relatives had to be notified; their loved one had returned, safe and sound. "I have to go," she said to the wall. "I will call you when I land."

She gave me a smile that seemed stiff from disuse. "I want to thank you again, Michael." I wondered how long it took migrators to get used to being human. "You were such a help and I was such a . . . I was not myself." She glanced around the room one last time and then shivered. "I was really scared."

"You were."

She shook her head. "Was it that bad?"

I shrugged and led her out into the hall.

"I feel so silly now. I mean, I was in the marble for less than a minute and then—" she snapped her fingers—"there I was on Gend, just like you said." She brushed up against me as we walked; her body was hard under the clingy. "Anyway, I am glad we got this chance to talk. I really *was* going to look you up when I got back. I certainly did not expect to see you here."

"I decided to stay on." The inner door to the airlock glided open. "It's a job that grows on you." The umbilical shivered as the pressure between Tuulen Station and the shuttle equalized.

"You have got migrators waiting," she said.

"Two."

"I envy them." She turned to me. "Have *you* ever thought about going to the stars?"

"No," I said.

Kamala put her hand to my face. "It changes everything." I could feel the prick of her long nails—claws, really. For a moment I thought she meant to scar my cheek the way she had been scarred.

"I know," I said. ●

ALZHEIMER'S COMES TO SALEM

To the brainfire in my head
the neural Nazis came, tossed in
Milton, Neitzsche, and Camus,
who went solemnly through without remark,
fed to the flames the works of Twain,
who smiled with vindication and went down
just before Mencken, who with royal disdain,
said, "I've been burned in better brains than this."

And when they were done
with Literature, Science, and the Occult Arts,
turned without remorse to albums
filled with family photographs
and a past-life memory of you
dancing naked in the candle shadowed night.

—William John Watkins

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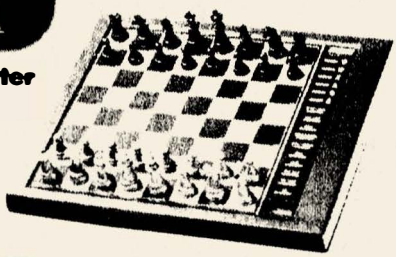

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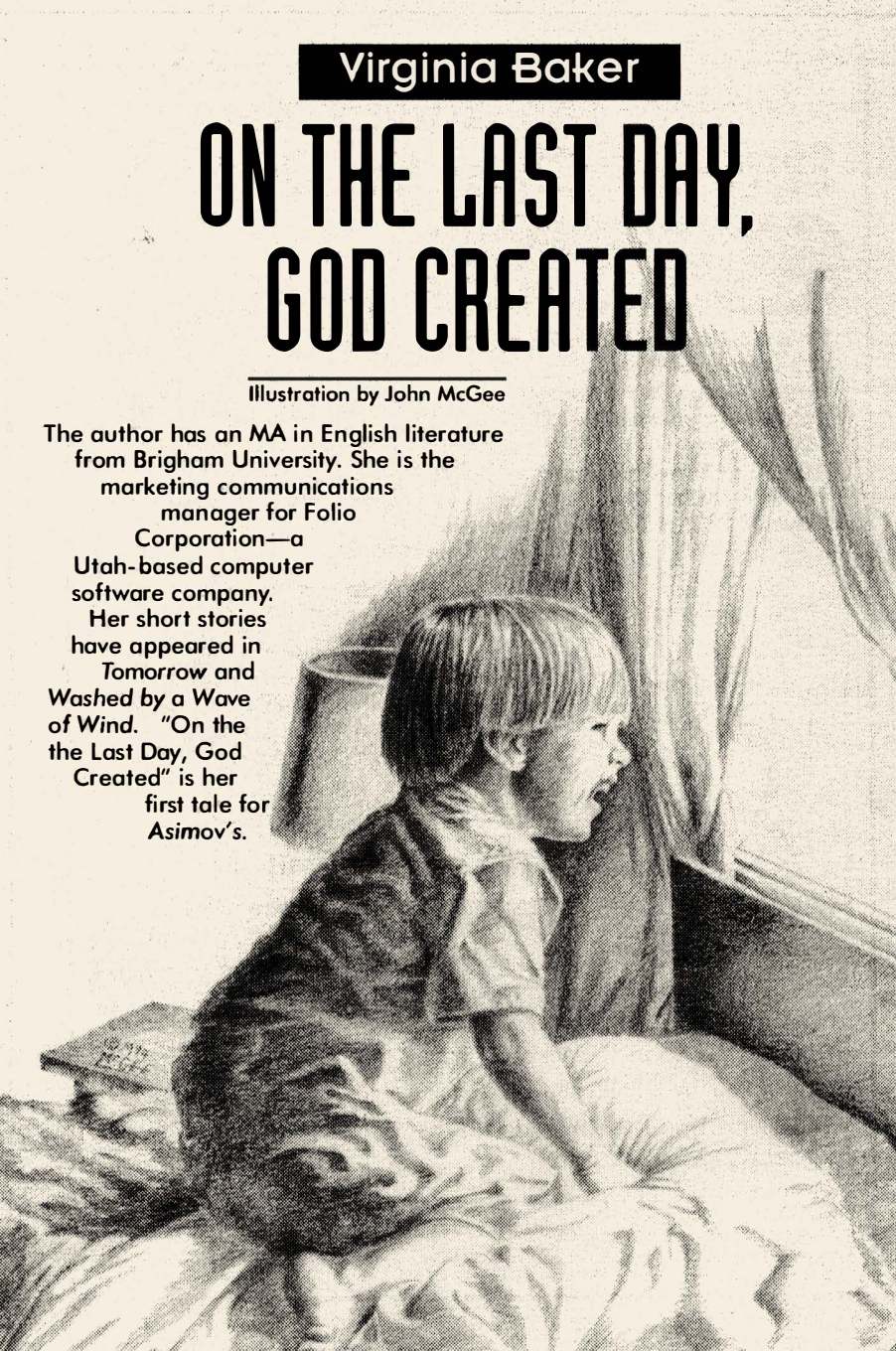
Virginia Baker

ON THE LAST DAY, GOD CREATED

Illustration by John McGee

The author has an MA in English literature from Brigham University. She is the marketing communications manager for Folio Corporation—a Utah-based computer software company. Her short stories have appeared in *Tomorrow* and *Washed by a Wave of Wind*. "On the the Last Day, God Created" is her first tale for *Asimov's*.



My Grandmother said it was Armageddon when the third nuclear bomb exploded near the Mount of Olives. Uncle Herb said she says that every time a bomb drops near Israel: Within five minutes, she has most of Sunday School believing it. He asked her to pass the potatoes; she gave him the peas instead.

I didn't know what I believed. I knew for a fact that Gramma made cookies with lots of chocolate chips, that she let me eat the dough before dinner, and that their warmth just out of the oven was a big part of the smell of them. I knew Uncle Herb didn't care to do much, anymore; and though he said he just favored the wound he got fighting in the Free PAL zone, Mom said it went deeper than that. And I knew Gramma and Mom didn't always get along.

Believing, I thought, was supposed to be something different.

Sitting next to Gram, who sat between her children like an isolated saint, I had to ask; catechism makes good conversation for some. So:

"Mom," I asked, "what *is* Armageddon?"

"That's when all the world goes to war, when it gets so bad only Jesus Christ Himself can step in to save us," she said. She glanced at Gramma, and she had that look in her eyes, the one she gets when she has to watch me snitch cookie dough before dinner and can't say anything to stop me because her mother is in the kitchen, winking and laughing over my sins.

Gramma smiled beatifically and passed the mashed potatoes, then folded her hands at her plate, though we had already said the prayer. They were knotted, like the roots of old trees. Brown spots lay on the skin. That whisper-thin skin that was so dry and hot whenever I touched her.

Mama bent her head before that smile, and slid a look to me that said, *Thanks a lot, Tod.*

They had squabbled that morning, she and Gram. Over church. Like always.

Mom had promised to take me to Arches. Gram asked if we were going to church. At least, had anyone else said those words, they would have been asking a question. The syntax would have made it one; the tones would have seen it through. But words were like the Loaves and the Fishes to Gramma: She could make anything out of them.

Mom had thought to get out of it: She said she didn't have a dress, had forgotten to bring one. Gram's mouth twisted a little, but she turned and left us alone. Mom smiled and said how she expected that had finished that.

But Gram came in again, carrying over her arm five or six of her own good dresses.

"See if any of these will fit," she said.

"Mom, I don't have any shoes," my mother said.

Gramma put on the floor a pair of scuffed black sandals: Sunday shoes, with the heels worn down. "Try these."

Mom did; they fit. Gram left smiling.

"*Now* what?" Mom whispered. I shrugged my shoulders; I didn't know. She bit at her thumbnail and looked down at the shoes, then back at the dresses on the bed.

"I guess we're not going to Arches, huh?" I asked, trying not to sound hopeful when I knew there really was none.

She shook her head. She shook it longer than *no* would have taken.

The dresses were polyester, some double knit. Mom was no clothes horse but she took pride in what she wore. Gramma's dresses were made to fit Gramma, who, after seven children and some advanced age, wore dresses that fit like tents over Mom. Some had flowers in lime and orange, fluorescent gardens lying flat on a nubby, black world.

She wouldn't even put one on.

Instead, she dug through her own clothes and found some pale floral pants and a sweater, and put on her sneakers. Me, she dressed in jeans and a T-shirt.

"Nothing fit," she told Gram. She held her head high for this.

Gram sniffed and muttered about people wearing pants to church. Mom muttered back about how she only meant *women* wearing them, and how she expected Gram might be a whole lot more offended if the men didn't wear any.

At a quarter to four, when it was obvious Mom was not going to change, Gramma gave up and told us not to be late for Sacrament.

We snuck out after an hour. We couldn't go to Arches. Church would be over in two more hours, and Gram would want help making dinner. And to get there we'd have to go to Moab, anyway, and Uncle Herb had said travel around the Colorado River had been restricted. Mom wondered if there could be the threat of a bomb there, and Uncle Herb said he hoped so. "Maybe if Moab went," he said, "she wouldn't think it was Second Coming no more."

So Mom took me to Newspaper Rock instead. I hung my arms over the fence while she told me the pictographs there had been made probably centuries before Christ. Whoever had written on this stone had stopped around A.D. 1300. No one knows why they stopped. No one knows why they started.

Some of the shapes I recognized: men on horses, deer, and buffalo (even though Utah never did have buffalo; figure that). Others were

strange, things I couldn't figure at all: rings carved around crosses, circling like orbits around the hub of lost religions.

A few were frightening, because they were strange but also because they always seemed to have their hands out, like they were reaching, *reaching*, and the hands always looked like claws on the crude canvas of the rock.

They looked like things that lived a long time ago, way before Jesus, maybe, things that had scared the hell out of some people and put the fear of—what? The fear of *something* into them, anyway.

I looked out around the place, beyond Newspaper Rock. The Rock was in a gully, and all around us, the stones rose up: red and orange. Sharp and smooth. Barren, for miles. As though they had been sculpted in the gravity of an entirely different world, a House of Horrors world, then planted here and picked clean by the wind.

A breeze whispered in an arroyo I couldn't see. A tall rock stood on the tip of a cliff, maybe ten miles distant. It stood as straight as any sentinel, keeping watch over a tribe it had lost long ages since.

"Mom, what *are* those things?" I pointed to a pictograph that looked like a tall tree with long, long arms and a terribly angry face. And even if it didn't have a name, I knew I could believe in it: Believe in a thing as tall as a tree, that hunted the small people of the tribes, just to make them frightened enough to stay by their fires, shivering, at night.

She shrugged. "I don't know. Nobody knows. You okay, slugger?"

I nodded, but didn't stop looking. You know when you look at something long enough, how it seems to move?

Goose bumps shivered on my arms the whole time we were there.

So that was something I could believe in. It was better, in a way, than all the true-life stories in Gramma's magazines—all of them church—and way better than the Church News part of the newspaper, which was the only part she ever kept.

It was awesomely better than the news, which was the same all the time, anymore: Terrorist groups had stolen more bombs and were threatening to nuke just about everybody. And they didn't even have the brains to nuke anyone important, so you never knew where to be safe. Uncle Herb said it was like sex in the '90s, and wasn't I glad I hadn't been born with two noses? I didn't get it, but he's been that way since God was born, and even worse after the PAL. I smiled anyway.

My cousin Randy (who shared my desk at Carson's sixth grade homeroom) called to tell me that some kid had flipped out during recess when a couple of guys from Mr. Kenyon's class rigged a holo of a bomb taking out the principal's office. Randy thought it was hysterical, but then

Randy uses the word *nuke* to describe sex: "The *good* parts version, Toddy. Your whole gut just goes *boom*."

"Ha," I said. "Like you know. You and Uncle Herb just like the word." But I admitted that it had probably been a really good effect, and wished that I had been there to see it.

It's funny how a word can change. I used to think of that word, *nuke*, as the springboard to some of my favorite movies, and the key to my own save-the-world fantasies. *James Bond Meets the Terminator Too.*

Like, nobody really dared, you know?

And then they did it: Let a little one go in Khartoum. The whole city, gone. The reporters went wild, but couldn't get close enough for pictures. Now we're all supposed to be fair game. I wasn't sure I could believe all this, without real pictures and all, though I'd seen the flashes on TV, the little tracks on the satellite maps glowing black for each time some place got hit.

Uncle Herb said that anybody could make those pictures, make up any old story they wanted to.

But the shots, close up, showed where things had been, and the fissures that had opened along the hot ground, leaving deep glowing lines, like bad scratches infected with glow-in-the-dark pus.

They always juxtaposed the hit shots with shots of the skylines where the cities had stood. Like flipping a switch: there and gone, there and gone.

Maybe I couldn't believe it because Gramma said it was Armageddon, sitting in her chair during the news. She said it every time.

You wouldn't think something like that could happen more than once. So when we got back from Newspaper Rock, I was even more surprised when the Sunday news at six reported a hit in some town in Siberia I couldn't pronounce, the one that split the Mount of Olives, and one that they found (before it blew) right under the Smithsonian in Washington, D.C. So it *had* to be Armageddon, Gramma said: They'd attacked America.

"May be one in Moab, Ma," said Uncle Herb, mugging at her with a crazy grin. "Wrath a' god visited on all those cow-town heathen artists' colonies. *Betcha.*"

"More like to hit the UNSF," Gramma said, primly brushing a mote of dust from her skirt. "Underground Nuclear Storage Facility, United States Air Force."

"The what—?" Uncle Herb began, but then he and Mom both busted up laughing, and Uncle Herb asked where in the hell she'd heard about that, 'cause it sure didn't have anything to do with the prophets and angels and life-after-life experience stuff she usually read about.

She just smiled, long and sweet, and beamed up at them. The pride

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in her eyes at that time was, I think, as much for having finally surprised some laughter out of them as in her knowledge of a thing they didn't know.

"Right down the way, between here and Blanding," she said. "Had to put something out there, I guess. Since the uranium mines dried up, hasn't been work for decent folk within hundreds of miles."

She patted Mother on the hand and got up. Herb went into the bathroom, chuckling. But Mother just sat still. The sports reporter on the tube said that the Celtics were on a hot streak; his voice was tinny on Gram's TV; a flyer at the bottom of the picture came on, announcing in large print that the president would address the nation following the newscast.

Mom was still quiet.

"Mom, is it really Last Days, do you think?" I asked.

She wouldn't talk; just sat still on the couch, quieter than she'd been all week. Gramma turned off the TV and tuned in the radio to the Spoken Word. She closed her eyes and listened, and I wondered what she saw within the world of her memories. The smile was still on her face.

The wheeze of plumbing banged through the house and Uncle Herb came out of the john and into the living room, a paper he'd gotten at 7-11 tucked under his arm. Momma looked up to him, and her eyes reflected the magenta glow of the Southern Utah sunset.

"In *Blanding*, Herb?" she said. "That's only twenty miles."

Uncle Herb breathed a "*Goddamn*," because he'd fought them, during the war, and seen how insane some of them could be—crazy, by the way we reckoned it—and there was no comfort in the desert between those twenty miles. He grinned at me before he thought I could see this, see it in his eyes and the pinching of his face that was halfway a grimace. He winked, but I had already seen.

And then Gramma was drawing herself up, the way a snake does before it strikes, and saying to him, "I won't have that language in my house. That word especially. You *never* say that word in my house."

"Tell it to the president, Ma," Uncle Herb said. "*His* house about got orbited and you're worried about a few nasty words. *Jesus*."

She looked at him with that kind of love that can kill you and said nothing more. No one said anything more. It was quiet.

Quiet.

I thought of the terrorists and wondered, briefly, if their language would look to us like the pictographs we'd seen on the Rock. I wondered if their minds worked different than ours because of it. And I wondered what else had been here on the earth, before the people of the Rock had stopped writing on it.

From the bathroom, the smell of Gramma's stale medicines made me

think of the wind through the arroyo, and the goosebumps that had raised as hard as rocks on my flesh and wouldn't go away.

Bombs. I could believe in those. I had seen them in my dreams.

I only dreamed of them once. Once, I dreamed I was sleeping, and a bright light outside my window woke me. I looked out over the sill and saw it: a glaring cloud blooming on the horizon. Though the sun hadn't quite come up, the dawn was bright, hotter than a killing sun in the desert. I stood up on my bed and watched until the wind hit, which wasn't more than a second or two.

It was almost pretty.

Then the angels came. They were like the tree-things on the rock, but with kinder faces.

As they took me up (as Gramma said they someday would), I watched that bright hot ball make the dust of the earth walk and talk. I looked back to see it turn all I had known or ever would have known into a world of white, just white. And I didn't even turn into salt, like Lot's wife. I know, because I heard, in my own ears, a chorus of angels screaming their *hosannas* above a buzz of wildly dancing molecules as it burned the flesh of this world, of my own body, right off my bones.

Then I saw myself as nothing; even the ash that had been my body was blown away by the wind.

I woke myself up, this time for real, and told myself I would never dream that dream again.

But less than one week later, I again slept in a dream and was awakened there by a bright light above me. And though I'd promised myself I never would, I looked out the window anyway.

This time, it wasn't a bomb. It was a bright light, but didn't hurt. It was radiant, like the sun seen through a prism in the soul. It was descending, and in the center stood Jesus Christ.

This light was warm, and in the dream, it was that warmth that told me that I was in the presence of God. Maybe not Gramma's God or even Mom's, but the one who loved the little children. And I remember thinking, *"This is it, that's it, it's over,"* but that felt pretty much okay, too. It wasn't fallout, or nuclear winter, and so far as I could see, Jesus wasn't hurting anybody on his way down. In the way of dreams, I didn't think He ever would. And that was just fine by me.

After the news, Mom took me into the yard and made me watch the sunset with her. She stood at the fence and watched the sun go down, her fingers tight on my shoulder.

She was crying.

I was about to ask her what was wrong, if it was Gram or that morning

or maybe the news (*or if the bombs were too close*) or anything. But she held up her hand, the way the teachers do in school, telling us to hush, *hush.*

I looked out beyond the fence. From where we stood, so high on Peter's Hill, I could turn in a circle and see everything: mountains, fields, and desert, almost all at once.

The winter wheat was crimson, the sun just a crescent of vibrant orange over the horizon. Beyond the wheat tips, there was the desert, red earth and red rock; I could see where the river beds had dried out from the summer before. This far away, the dry beds were little more than cracks in the earth. Behind me, the La Sals slept in a purplish hump, the sunset misting around their base. I thought about the legends I had learned in school, that said that trees had once been people; and I wondered if maybe those mountains had once been dragons who'd stayed too long in one place and been caught in some enchantment, like the Rock. I knew the Indians who lived there could believe that; I thought I could believe it, too.

"Momma?" I asked.

She reached out then, put her hand on my head as though to ruffle the hair there; instead, she pulled me close and bent down to brush her lips against my forehead.

"What is it, Toddy?" she asked against my skin, though her eyes were still on the dying sunset.

"How many angels can dance on the head of a pin?" I asked.

"How many—?" she said, and then she laughed. There wasn't much fun in it, and her eyes didn't light up the way they usually did when she *really* thought something was funny. But she did smile, and she did ruffle my hair then. "The things you ask," she said.

She straightened up once more to scan the horizon. The sun had all but disappeared; small, brilliant shoots of its last light shone through the swaying stalks of the wheat. Above us, the moon was beginning to show: a rime of frost high over our heads; a sliver in the sky, like broken silver coming slowly together.

She looked out there so long, I wondered what she saw. Dragons in the mountains? Old riverbeds? Did she see the Horse's Head, its face staring out at us from smack in the middle of Blue Mountain, where the pines had fallen to shape a perfect silhouette, even down to the blaze that stretched from the forelock to the nose?

I looked around and thought it could be anything: Dusk had brought out that quality of light I've seen only in the West, that raises each stone, each blade of grass, to its own degree of exaltation, each one extending a singular sort of grace.

Then I looked up at her eyes and I knew. She saw what I had seen in

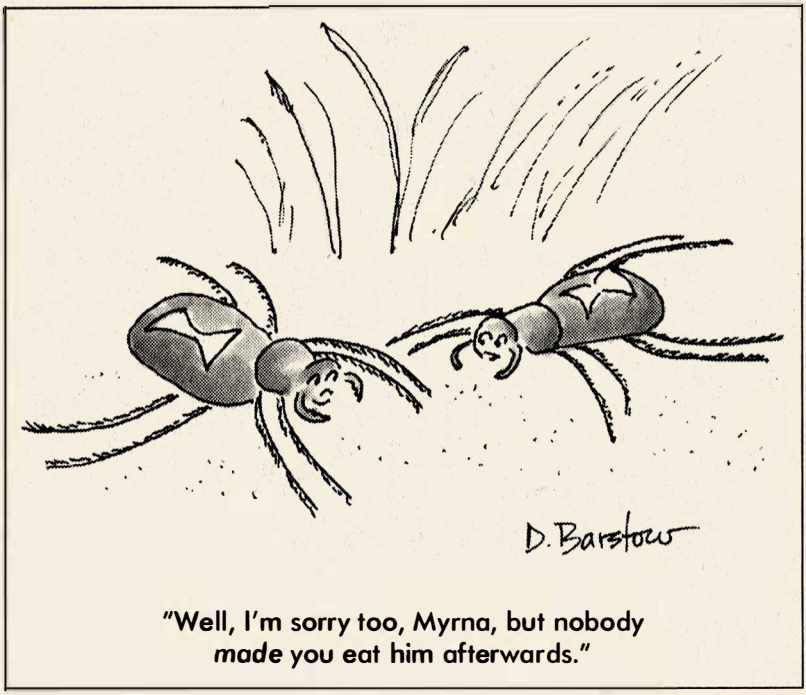
my dream: the molecules, charging the air, the whole world; filling it with a swarm of little suns, like bees, the enormous hum of their buzzing like the sound of angels' wings and the singing of their *hosannas*.

The last of the light had reflected on the windows of Gramma's house, making it blaze; but even that had dwindled now, and I could see Gramma inside, like a shadow, sitting quiet in her chair and moving to the slow sway of the choir's voices on the radio, singing *"Oh, My Father,"* low and sweet.

We could hear the words, like a whisper on the wind, running through the wheat; it swept up and by us and touched our heads, and the sigh of it moved in our hair. I thought of my other dream, the one of Jesus coming, and saw goosebumps rise on my mother's arms like mountains bursting up on a world seen through a giant's microscope.

I looked up to tell her about that dream but then she hugged me, held me tight enough to make small white dots swim on my eyes. When she stood up again I didn't say anything, just took her hand and smiled.

The sweetness of the wind was like a blessing on us. We went inside and it followed, its scent like the coming of a cleansing rain. ●



"Well, I'm sorry too, Myrna, but nobody *made* you eat him afterwards."

Geoffrey A. Landis

ACROSS THE DARKNESS

Thrust together on a dangerous voyage to the stars, five young women must learn how to survive the present and create the future . . .

Illustration by Ron Chironna

Our ship Santa Luzia has the wide eyes of a saint etched onto her foremost fuel tanks, though how the eyes of even a saint could see to guide our path in the absolute darkness between the stars, I could not say. Santa Luzia, and we within her, must see ahead only with the eyes of hope. We pass through the darkness at a speed almost unimaginable, five humans in a titanium bubble that seems far too fragile protection against the unending vacuum.

Eleven months out, the fusion drive began to lose efficiency.

I first became aware that there was a problem when Jeanne started acting grumpy and distant. After a day and a night of this, I asked her what was wrong. "It's nothing, Beth," she said. "Nothing at all. The damn drive has been losing power, and I don't know what's causing it, and it's not an important loss yet but if it keeps getting worse at this rate it could get real bad and we might not have enough fuel to slow down at the other end, but I don't know if it will keep getting worse, but I don't know that it won't, either, because I don't know what's causing the damn thing to lose power, and it has me worried, so it's nothing you should worry about, so why don't you go away and leave me alone?"

"You don't have to snap at me," I said, but I went away.

On a starship with five crew members and only a hundred cubic meters of living space, it's not possible to go away very far. I did my best to stay out of Jeanne's way. In this case, that meant hiding out in our sleeping niche. The space, usually cramped, seemed large and empty without her lanky body next to mine. But Jeanne was our fusion engineer, and if there was a problem, I wanted her to have the best conditions possible to solve it. That night she stayed up working on the ship's computer, and didn't come to our sleeping niche until very late. I opened my eyes, and in the dim red-tinted light that symbolized the ship's night I watched her wriggle out of her shift, stretch, and toss it over a hook. If she had wanted me, she would have spoken, but she said nothing, just settled slowly into the bed in a smooth, controlled collapse, and lay without touching me, close enough that I could feel her heat.

Jeanne had dark brown hair, cropped short, as we all wore it. Her deep brown eyes were always focused far away, even when she was talking to you, even when we were making love. Her body was spare, and she moved with a lean economy of movement. Sometimes when she slept I would compare my squat, stocky body to her lean perfection. She was everything I was not; she completed me, and I completed her.

The whir of the air circulation and Jeanne's regular breathing was a lullaby that gentled me into sleep. In the morning I asked her again about the drive.

"Beth, I still don't know, so don't bother me. The degradation in performance is still under 1 percent, but it's definitely getting worse, but only

slowly, so we don't have anything to worry about except I'm worried because I don't know what's going on and I don't like it, and nobody has ever run a fusion drive this long at such high acceleration so we don't really know a damned thing about what might be happening, and I'm worried, and I think maybe we should shut the drive down and check it out, but that might be just me worrying too much, and I don't know what to do, and I'm going to shut down the drive to see what's going on just as soon as we empty the tertiary drop tank." She took a long breath. "Are you satisfied?"

That evening we shut down the drive.

A hundred years ago, the fusion-powered prospectors of the Federação Católica do Sul sifted the gravel of the asteroid belt and brought back riches, making Brazil the center of an industrial empire that dominated half the globe. At the height of the Brazilian expansion, they sent tiny fusion starprobes out into the long dark, knowing that they would not receive the results in their lifetimes, trusting that when the results came back, someone would have starships ready to use them. Their faith in the future was naïve, unwavering, and completely Brazilian. They had the dream.

The empire of the Católica do Sul faded without actually falling, marking the globe with the rhythm and the complex shade of the Brazilian spirit even as it ebbed. Their attentions turned back inward, but their dream lived on. After years the results came in, and dozens of telescopes across the planet listened eagerly for the faint flickering of the lasercast reports. In a few hours of flyby after decades of emptiness, the Brasileiro probes told stories of frozen balls of methane, of empty deserts baking under nitrogen skies, of ringed gas-giants and colossal granite mountains on desolate, airless worlds. Of nearly a hundred probes sent to the stars close enough to reach, only one found a planet hospitable to any form of life. The star was Delta Pavonis, the eye of the peacock. It was nineteen light years away.

A fusion-engine rocket can traverse the solar system in months. The stars were a thousand times further away, but in that year when the probes sent back their spectacular pictures, the stars had seemed barely out of reach, so close that they could be grasped with only a little more effort. Billions had seen the photographs of a cloud-streaked blue-and-amber world that the Pavonis flyby probe had lasercast as it sped past on its voyage across the endless night; where a probe could go, how could humans fail to follow? That fusion power put the stars almost in our grasp was a lie so plausible that entire nations were convinced.

A collaboration of a dozen nations built the ship. It was the largest single object ever built by humankind, larger than any pyramids or

dams, more expensive than wars. Governments fell, and rose, as politicians debated intangible benefits against very real costs. Getting it built had been my father's career, and his obsession. The fuel supply for the fusion reactor alone, ten cubic kilometers of helium-deuterium mixture frozen into balloon-like disposable tanks, would have been beyond the resources of most governments. The resources of the entire world were driven to the edge of bankruptcy to build it; the surface of the moon raked in an attempt to distill rare helium isotope from tons of dust. They had promised the nations that built it that there would be three ships, each with a crew of a hundred. Even with the best Brasileiro engineers in the world working on the design, that proved impossible. In the end they constructed a single ship, designed to carry the minimum crew needed to successfully start a colony. The mission engineers scrambled to design a new mission plan to assure the genetic diversity necessary for survival.

The starship we'd imagined had been spacious and gleaming with polished metal. The one we had, after less than a year of habitation, was dingy, stinky, and cramped. We'd imagined an unparalleled view of the stars. We flew in a windowless crew compartment surrounded by balloon-tanks of HeD fuel. The crew we'd imagined had been efficient, unshakable, superhuman. The people I flew with had trouble with pimples, got irritable a whole lot more than just once a month, and were a little too quick with sarcasm and witty put-downs. We were merely human.

The mission planners had been great visionaries and superb engineers, but, as we learned, not as good psychologists. They had chosen a minimum crew of five. This number was debated vigorously, with talk about required skills and degree of redundancy, and heated arguments about level of maturity versus age at destination. The crew structure was unusual in that the ship had no captain. All the crew-members were professional; all were given the same rank, and all had an equal voice in running the ship. We'd been given exhaustive training in how to resolve problems by workshopping and reaching a consensus, but the mission designers demanded an odd number to be sure the crew wouldn't ever deadlock. The engineer assigned to psych issues had concurred; a team of four might splinter into two antagonistic groups of two.

Instead we split into two groups of two, with one left over. The engineers had been naïve about one critical factor: sex.

Relativistic time dilation at 90 percent of the speed of light would shorten our travel time a bit, but not by enough. Even with relativity—and if the drive could be cajoled into working properly—it would take us over twelve years to get to Pavonis. After less than a year in cramped quarters, we were barely getting along. I wondered how we would be able to make it.

We were five girls just become women, who had been chosen to leave the world forever. We had not yet truly become a team, for all that we had been training together since the day we had been selected from the thousands of applicants, and, at fifteen, decided to give our lives to a one-way voyage for the sake of a dream we could barely articulate.

We had jettisoned the two high-thrust primary stage boosters three months back, and the single fusion sustainer engine must serve us for the rest of the voyage. Our acceleration had dropped from half a gee to a tenth of a gee when the boosters dropped away, but as we used and discarded fuel tanks, the acceleration slowly crept back toward a half gee again.

Losing the engine would be disastrous.

In principle, making extensive use of the exhaustive documentation in the computer archives, any of us should have been able to take apart the fusion drive. We'd all done it, alone and in teams, in training. In practice, we all had specialties. Rosa and Jeanne were the two crew members with primary training as drive engineers. Consuela and Katerina and I could only watch.

I disliked Rosa for my own reasons. Her father had been the last and the most devious of the political opponents of the project, and I'd heard the story that the price of his support for the project had been that one of his daughters be put on the crew list. My disdain of her was only compounded by the fact that she was big, bony, and awkward. She was bright and competent enough—she had to be, political influence or no—but icily aloof of any hint of sexual expression.

And, besides, she had acne.

Every day that the drive was off added about half a day to our travel time. Neutron activation from stray D-D reactions made the drive chamber too radioactive for humans to enter. With Rosa helping—iron maiden Rosa, engineer, and reserve pilot—Jeanne disassembled the drive using tiny remote-control inspection robots. It was a long, painstaking job, and even after the reaction chamber had been disassembled, it took the two of them about six hours to figure out what had been happening. Stray fusion plasma had been slowly sputtering metal off the walls of the reaction chamber. Most of the sputtered debris got exhausted with the fusion flame, but a tiny bit had been redepositing elsewhere in the drive chamber. Some of it was getting in the way of the laser collimation. If left alone, it would continue to get worse, until the drive eventually failed.

With thrust cut off, zero-gee was a novelty to us. For all that we'd been in space for eleven months, we'd been under the effective gravity of continuous thrust. In zero gee, with the continuous rumble of the

pulsed fusion engines absent, and with a real problem to focus our attention away from each other, the spirit was like Carnival—at least, for the three of us not involved in designing a fix. I got along well enough with Consuela and Katerina, when they weren't wrapped up in each other. While Jeanne and Rosa worked, we stripped naked and played gymnastics in zero gee, trying to see who could do the most flips before drifting into a wall, holding a race to see who could propel herself across the width of the common module by the reaction force of blowing air, and giggling enough to almost make up for the adolescence we'd never had. We were having a great time, at least until Rosa poked her head back and shouted at us to cut the racket; they were trying to work.

For Jeanne and Rosa, it was no Carnival.

In the evenings, I rubbed the tension out of Jeanne's muscles while she talked nonstop. Eventually she would wind down, her energy spent, and we would just float in silence, our bodies barely touching.

The first day after the drive shut down, Jeanne and Rosa were optimistic about fixing it. In a few days they managed to modify the computer model of the thrust chamber to simulate the problem, and soon after that they designed a makeshift barrier that, along with a reconfiguration of the magnetic field, would work to keep the sputtered material away from the collimators. They gathered us all together to critique it, but none of us could find any fatal flaws in the design. The next day they started cleaning away the deposits with the remotes.

Then one of the two remotes failed.

Rosa was on duty when the robot failed. She used the other robot remote to bring the first one in, and they both checked it out. It had failed because of cumulative radiation damage to the CPU. The chips were big bipolar jobs, and well shielded, but the drive chamber was so hot that it eventually fried the robot nonetheless. They replaced the part, and we all started to worry. There was only one set of replacement parts, and after cleaning the drive, they still had to realign the lasers.

The repaired robot failed the next day. They managed to finish the cleaning with the other, but the hardest job was still to come. The lasers could only be aligned with the drive on. Not at full power, but there had to be a plasma.

The remaining remote failed on the first day of realignment. They shut the drive down. Jeanne pulled Rosa into a sleeping niche, and they conferred in low whispers for a moment. Then they came out, and Jeanne suited up and went EVA to retrieve it. She was only in the hot zone for two minutes, not long enough to pick up a heavy dose. "It doesn't matter much," she said, trying to smile. "The children I have won't be mine, anyway. You know that." I wanted to tell her that it wasn't the babies

that mattered, that all I cared about was her. But I knew that she had problems enough already. I remained silent.

Jeanne and Rosa cannibalized one robot to fix the other. After only two hours of service, the fixed one lost control and floated into the plasma core. The lasers vaporized the robot, spraying metal vapor over the laser optics and across the drive chamber. All the work they had done was erased. The drive was now completely non-functional. We were traveling at three quarters of the speed of light. With the drive broken, we had no way to slow down.

Jeanne did not cry, not even a little; her iron self-control would not let her. But, when she told me what she would have to do, I spent all that night crying on her shoulder and trying to convince her to find another plan.

"It's not fair," I told her. "Don't do it. We don't need to stop. We can stay like this, forever traveling."

Jeanne hugged me. "No, love. I wish we could."

"But why not? We've got all we need here. Forget the plan. Let other people colonize Pavonis."

"There will be no others," she said. "Even before we left, the coalition was ripping itself apart, you know that. The ship was too expensive." Jeanne smiled wistfully. "And, even if we wanted to, without the fusion engine, we will run out of power to keep the life support up. You know that, too."

I did know that, though I had tried to forget it. "But we don't need full power. Can't we get it running just enough to stay alive?"

Jeanne shook her head. "Let's sleep. Time enough to make plans in the morning."

But I slept very little, staring blankly into the darkness.

The next day Jeanne was calm and completely professional when she called together the crew to discuss our options. The five of us workshopped the problem all that day, and kept arguing well into the ship's night, but we could find no solution other than the one Jeanne had told me the night before. In the end, we let her do what she had already decided had to be done.

That night, for the first time since we met, Jeanne let her self-control slide away. She told me about her life. I had known her ever since we both entered the mission training regimen that would wash out nine out of ten of the girls who had made the finalist position. On the voyage, I had been intimate with her for nine months. In all that time she had never told me her secrets, and I had been content enough not to pry.

She had always known she was different, she told me, staring into the dark. She'd realized from the start that she had to conceal her difference and pretend to be like other girls. Only by accident, when she overheard

a girl tell a friend that another girl was *lambebuceta,* and then giggle, did she realize that there was a word to codify her difference. It was a Brasileiro word that Jeanne hadn't heard before, but the way the girl had exaggerated each syllable and then made a kissing gesture toward the other girl had made the meaning obvious. When Jeanne whispered the word to herself, a shiver went through her. If there was a word, then somewhere there must be others.

At thirteen, it had been an easy difference to hide. There were other pursuits besides boys—athletics, and astronomy; the wonders of learning calculus, and above all that wonder of wonders, a starship almost completed circling barely a thousand kilometers above her head, visible in the hour after sunset as a tiny crystal of light slowly creeping across the heavens. At fourteen, when she volunteered for the program, there was no time for other pursuits. It was to be the greatest adventure in the history of mankind, and she had the dream. She was determined to let nothing keep her from becoming a part of it.

From there her path paralleled my own. For all of our pride in our intellects, the mission planners picked us more for our pedigrees than for our minds. Over the nineteen light-years of the journey, we would be beyond the shielding atmosphere and magnetic field of Earth, traversing an interstellar void that was permeated by cosmic radiation. As the ship reached relativistic speeds and coasted between the stars, time dilation would shorten the trip to barely over twelve years, but even with the shielding provided by burying the crew behind tanks of helium-deuterium, the radiation dose would be immense. The mission planners searched first for candidates that had minimum susceptibility to radiation-induced cancer. People vary drastically in their tolerance to radiation; some have lived in perfect health for decades after tolerating doses that had killed in hours workmates that received identical exposure. Any candidate with a family member who died of cancer was rejected. The remaining candidates were subject to exhaustive genetic screening for each of five hundred known proto-oncogenes that could cause radiation-induced cancer. Our minds were important, too, but secondary. Our bodies were what they wanted.

Jeanne's fate was dealt by tests she had no control over. She passed, as did we all, and two dozen other girls as well. We were trained, and selected, and trained more, until at sixteen we all had the equivalents of a doctorate in our specialties; I in biology and she in fusion engineering. And then the remaining candidates were selected down again, until at last the crew of five was picked.

"And all that time," she said, "I hid my secret like my most precious treasure, because although they never said anything, I knew that they would find an excuse to wash me out as psychologically unfit if they ever

suspected. I think half of the girls in the final selection were lesbians, a few of them even quite openly, and I never gave any one of them a hint that I'd like to know her closer, because I knew it was too dangerous. One at a time they washed out, as I had expected, and I studied psychology in secret, practiced making all the right answers on their tests, and stayed.

"And then, Beth," she said, "I met you. It's funny; I never even noticed you in the beginning of training, and then we were together more and more. It felt so natural, so right. But you were so straight. I kept wondering if it was just a façade, like mine, but I was too afraid to ask."

I smiled in spite of myself. "But eventually you did."

"After the launch, of course, when it was a little too late for the old men to change their selections." She laughed, her eyes twinkling. "Oh, Beth, you should have seen the expression on your face! You were so innocent, you really were! Completely naïve, and I loved you all the more for it. It was then that I knew I had to have you, no matter what."

"And you did." I stroked her cheek.

"Yes. I'm glad. Even if I'm going to die, I'm still glad. It was worth it, love, it was all worth it."

So Jeanne had known all along what she was! I was awed by her perfect self-confidence. I wondered if Katerina and Consuela had known it, too; if I was the only one who had never guessed what I was. I hadn't even dreamed it.

I had dreamed of other things.

In the darkness I told her about my father, how he'd had the dream, how he'd used his position as senator and later as commissar of spaceflight to bull the starship project through in the days when every new estimate by the design engineers tripled the cost, how it cost him his career, and eventually his life. I'd been raised with the dream of spaceflight. My father had never expected other than that his daughter would make the final cut, no matter how tough it would be. He'd given me his dream, and I'd believed that it was worth the sacrifice of any number of lives, including my own.

But then, I'd never been in love.

In the morning I didn't want her to go.

"I have to, love," she said. "I'm sorry."

"Why couldn't it be Rosa? Why does it have to be you?"

"I'm better with hardware, Beth, you know that. Rosa's a wizard running remotes, but she's clumsy with hardware, you know that."

"So what? It would maybe take her a little longer. We can spare her, and we can't spare you. She's nothing but trouble anyway."

Jeanne put her hand on my shoulder. "Rosa's smart and level-headed, Beth; I bet you'd probably even like her, if you ever decided to leave

Earth behind and gave her a chance. And you'd better learn to trust her sense for machinery, whether you like her or not. We can't spare anyone, but we can't afford to screw up this repair. I've got the fingers for it, and Rosa doesn't, and that's that. Now, would you please be good and come help me suit up? I'd like to have you there with me."

I helped Jeanne wriggle into her suit for the repair, and then kissed her long and hard, not caring about discretion—let Rosa watch, floating in the perfect safety of the piloting cubicle. Let her be thoroughly disgusted, the bitch. I didn't want to let Jeanne go. At last she gently pushed me away, placed a fingertip on my cheek to wipe away my tears, and then pulled on her helmet.

Iron-maiden Rosa monitored her as she entered the chamber. The rest of us, helpless, watched her on the big monitor, holding our breath at critical moments, knowing that there was nothing we could do to help. It was a job that should have been done by robots, but we had no more robots left.

I have no faith in saints, not now or then, but in desperation I prayed to Santa Barbara, who stills the lightning, and for once the voice of my father in my head was silent. I promised her that if she would do for me just this one miracle, I would believe.

Jeanne was inside for a total of twenty hours, cleaning the optics and then, with the lasers on, aligning them. Toward the end she was working very slowly, with long rests between, but she made no mistakes.

The instant she got back inside I rushed to her. She managed a weary smile for me. With trembling fingers, I unclipped the radiation monitor from her suit. I turned the screen slightly away from her and pressed the readout button.

The numbers were too high to have any meaning. The summary graphic showed completely black.

I tapped it lightly with my finger, hoping the summary might change to yellow, or at least show a hint of red. "It could be wrong," I said, and whacked it hard against the palm of my hand. "Radiation monitors are never completely accurate. They design these things to be conservative."

Jeanne put her hand over mine and shook her head slightly. "Thanks, Beth, but it's no use trying to fool me. I was in there for twenty hours. I can calculate the dosage as well as you can."

"But it's just not fair."

Jeanne shook her head. "So when has that had anything to do with it?"

We buried her in space. The fusion engine that took her life even now thrusts against us, a steady vibration against our feet. When we will reach our destination, Jeanne will travel on ahead of us. At 73 percent of the speed of light, Jeanne will travel farther than any of us.

* * *

Baby machines, that's all we are. Pilots, engineers, biologists, medics, as well; but all this is secondary. Genetic diversity was the god of the mission designers, and the mission designers our own uncompromising masters. In return for the gift of the starship, they demanded of us not just our loyalty and our competence, but our bodies and our lives. Above us, far from the stray radiation of the drive, is our irreplaceable cargo, the bank containing the supercooled sperm and ova that are the true colonists. Our bodies are no more than hosts, although we work and die to finish the hundred-trillion-mile journey to reach what will one day be their home. We are being used, and we name ourselves honored, for the sake of the dream.

After a few days I stopped crying, but the ache within me kept gnawing deeper inside, and there was nowhere to go, no private place I could bury myself for a while and try to heal. Katerina came to me to offer a shoulder to cry on, but I hated her for still having Consuela, and told her to leave me alone.

I curled in our sleeping niche, and tried not to think of Jeanne. Once, before we had become lovers, she had come to my sleeping niche. She'd officially been on night watch, but the watch formality didn't require her to remain in the piloting niche; only to be awake and prepared for any action. I had been restless. I stayed up with her, talking, and she had aimed her intense, far-away gaze at me, through me. I hadn't known what to feel. We talked about horses—her parents had kept horses, and she'd been a rider, as a child—and about books, and then about boys. "Did you have a boyfriend?" she'd asked. I had to admit I hadn't. "Me neither," she said. "You know, Rosa did. She told me once while we were training."

—And I hated Rosa even more. No boy would have ever wanted me for a girlfriend.

"Do you wish you'd had one, now?"

"I don't know," I said. It had never seemed important to me. "I guess."

"If you'd had a boyfriend, how would he have kissed you?" I shook my head and looked away, embarrassed. No one had ever kissed me, except for my father, who kissed me on the forehead before I went to bed, on the days when he was at home.

"Would he have kissed you like this?" She turned my face toward her and kissed me lightly on the lips, closing her eyes for a moment. I felt the tip of her tongue dart against my lips and jerked back, startled. Jeanne laughed, and after a second I laughed too. "You're wicked," I said.

"I know," she said. "Or, maybe like this?" I closed my eyes this time, and she kissed me on the tip of my nose. She rubbed the tip of her tongue up and down, and then nibbled gently. It tickled, and I started to giggle.

"Or like *this*." She reached around and pulled me against her, hard.

Then she turned her face until we were almost at right angles, and kissed me hard. Her mouth tasted funny; like velvet, like almonds, like dandelions.

At last I pulled away. I didn't know what to think. I was an expert on biology, but real people were an enigma. "You shouldn't."

"Did that feel good?"

"I don't know."

"You didn't pull away."

"I did too."

Jeanne had smiled, and raised a finger. "Not very fast."

And I'd spent the rest of the night, and the next day, wondering when—if—Jeanne would kiss me again; wondering whether I would let her; wondering how I would be able to stand the wait without the electricity inside me melting through my belly.

That was long ago, months ago; a lifetime past. I tried very hard not to think of Jeanne.

A day later Consuela came to talk to me, and that time I was desperate and lonely enough to talk. I told her how Jeanne had had the dream, and died for it, and how beautiful it was.

Consuela rolled her eyes. "If you tell us one more time about the dream," she said, "I'm going to rip your tongue out and shove it up your butt. Can't you talk about anything else?" She suddenly clapped her hand over her mouth, and her eyes squeezed shut. "Oh no. I didn't say that, did I? I'm sorry."

"Would you do me a favor, Connie?" I said. "Would you kindly go and jump out the airlock? And take Katerina with you. Why are you here, if that's the way you feel about it?"

"I'm sorry! All I meant was, we've heard it already. But you can tell me again. Please. I really don't mind."

"Just leave me alone, okay?" I buried my head in my mattress. She put a hand on my back, but I refused to look up. After a while I was alone.

Rosa pretended a sudden, intense interest in the scientific instruments, or would spend hours hiding in her sleeping niche practicing her little flute, the single personal possession she had brought. I hated her too, of course, and plugged my ears to keep out even the faint streamer of sound that filtered out, but I was glad, in a perverse way, that at least she was sensitive enough to leave me to myself.

I thought I'd known what I was doing. When I left I'd sworn that I would never feel homesick for grass, for weather, for unfiltered air or sunburn or the common cold. I didn't know how much I would crave simply a chance to focus my eyes on something more than three meters distant. To meet people I could say anything to, knowing I'd never see them again. To see animals. We should have brought a cat, I thought

suddenly. There was margin designed into the life support system, not enough for another person, but we could have had a cat. My father had always liked cats. Why didn't they let us have a cat?

I spent a week in silence, lying in our—my—sleeping niche without sleeping, trying to remember why I'd fought to be allowed to spend my life breathing the recycled air of a spaceship far smaller than a prison cell, for the sake of a dream my father had had.

Consuela had been right. I'd been a slave to his dream for all my life. It had seemed to me to be a beautiful dream, but it demanded too much. I waited until the others had gone to sleep. Consuela and Katerina were twined together in their sleeping niche. Rosa slept alone, curled into a tight ball in her cubby. I was careful to sneak past them quietly. I wanted to say goodbye, but could not. The note would have to do.

I should have made my confession and received my peace and absolution, but the compromise that the engineers and the priests had agreed to, of our confessing to a computer terminal, had never seemed right to me. And there was one sin that could not be forgiven. We had been blessed and received forgiveness before we'd left Earth. That would have to be enough.

The sleeping niches open out into the main room. Above is the piloting cubicle; below the library access room and exercise booth. Below that is storage and access to the life support. I headed all the way down, where the spacesuits were kept.

All I needed was a helmet. If you turn off the carbon dioxide recirculation, you go quietly to sleep, and never awake. I picked the red one, the one that had been Jeanne's. Still slightly radioactive, it was carefully kept separate from the others. The choice seemed appropriate. I ripped a handful of wires out of the air circulation, put it on, and looked around me.

There, standing in the doorway silent as iron, was Rosa.

"Beth."

I jumped. Of course it would be Rosa, the lone wolf of the crew. She'd been asleep, damnit. I thought I'd been quiet. Had she been watching all along?

"Don't do it."

"It's none of your business," I said. My voice echoed oddly inside the helmet. I'd thought it might smell of Jeanne, at least a little, but it had only the faint scent of silicon sealant. "Leave me alone."

Rosa shook her head. "We're all in this together. We need you."

"I don't want to be needed any more." I pulled the helmet off, dropped it on the floor, and kicked it, hard enough to hurt. It felt good. "I'm weary of being used, sick of being a pawn for someone's grand design. You just need my body, another baby machine for the grand plan."

Hearing myself say that, I felt like a stranger, as if the Beth I had been had floated away and another, unknown person stood there talking. Hadn't the old Beth been one of the most vigorous advocates of the plan, long ago? Yet I was only saying what all of us, in one way or another, must have felt.

"Beth, please. Isn't one death enough? If there is anyone on the crew who's not wanted here, it's me."

"You? You don't need anybody. You like being by yourself. You resent it whenever one of us even talks to you."

"Maybe when we first boosted. But not now."

"Then why do you act like such a bitch?"

Rosa stepped backward, apparently surprised. "Me? *I* act like a bitch? What do you want me to do? You all fit together so smoothly. Consuela and Trina, you and Jeanne. What was I supposed to do? What can I do, except to pretend I don't see it, pretend I don't care?

"Do you think you were the only one who cried when Jeanne died? You don't even care how I felt, do you? You think that you're the only one allowed to have feelings. When Jeanne and I worked together all day fixing the drive, when every night Jeanne would crawl in to her sleeping niche with you, and you would soothe away her tensions, and I would have to crawl back to my sleeping niche alone, do you think I wasn't even a little jealous?"

"You?" Now I was the one surprised. "You, jealous of me? That's ridiculous. You've never needed anybody. You're straight as an arrow."

"I hide my feelings because I have to, not because I want to." Rosa reached forward to put her arm on my shoulder, and I jerked away from her. "Do you think that just because we never had sex, I couldn't love her too?"

"You? But you're the only one on the ship who's not a, a—" The word stuck in my throat. "Not a *pervert.* You couldn't love her—you're *normal.*"

"Oh, Beth. Is that what you think you are? No wonder you're so confused." She hugged me. I stiffened and started to pull away from her, and then I realized she was crying too. "Nobody on the ship is a pervert, Beth," she said. "Nobody."

I let out my breath slowly, and all at once the tension drained out of my muscles, leaving me weak. Suddenly it was hard to remember why I had believed that there were no solutions for me other than death. I held her and rocked her in my arms and comforted her as best I could.

"I'm sorry, Rosa. We've both lost someone we loved," I said, almost whispering. I stroked her hair softly—bristly and tightly curled, so different from Jeanne's—and then I told her about the dream. "It owns us, Rosa. We gave it our souls, and we gave them freely. It's something that grabbed you when you were a child and believed in wonders, when you

looked up into the dark at those tiny points of light so far away. It's a thing that won't let go, no matter how you long to be like the others, a thing that makes you wake up sometimes in the middle of the night with tears in your eyes, knowing that there is something you desperately need and that you can't ever reach."

It had been my father's dream, yes, but it had been mine, too, and surely it must be Rosa's as well. She, too, had given her life. We all had.

"Jeanne wasn't the only one to die for the dream. It demands everything we have, and one day it will demand from us more than we've got to give. Then it will kill us, too." I stroked her hair, caressed her back, shoulder, face, and I saw how much Rosa was like Jeanne, how much she always had been. "Did you ever have a boyfriend?" I asked, and she nodded without saying anything. I took her face gently between my hands, and turned it toward me. She had her eyes closed, and I saw with surprise that they were wet. "Did he kiss you?" I asked. "Did he kiss you like this?" I kissed her gently on the lips.

"No," she said. Her eyes were still wet, but she had a faint trace of a smile. "He kissed me like this." She put her arms around me and pulled me close to her, crushing her breasts against mine, and this time she kept her eyes wide open.

I took her back to my sleeping niche. We didn't do anything but talk, and cuddle, and finally drift into sleep.

But I couldn't sleep.

I couldn't blame Rosa. It was me; I was the problem; I could see that now. Oh, Jeanne, I'm sorry, please forgive me I'm sorry, I'm sorry.

Oh Jeanne, Jeanne, I wish you were here but you're gone and she's not. I'm sorry. I'll never forget you, never, and she will never take your place not ever but, may Blessed Luzia forgive my sins, I can't help myself. You're gone and I still want to live.

I want to live.

And after a long while I convinced myself that Jeanne would forgive me for what I wanted, and I slept.

In the morning I saw both Katerina and Consuela sneaking sidelong looks over at us when they thought I wasn't looking. I knew that they were wondering just exactly what had happened the night before, and just how much things had changed between us. They were smart enough not to ask. Let them wonder for a while. The next time I caught Consuela giving me the eye, I turned and stuck my tongue out at her.

Sometime that day Katerina found the helmet where I'd dropped it, and I overheard her whispering to Consuela. After a brief conversation, the two of them came in my direction, clearly intent on having a talk. I

braced myself for confrontation, ready for a fight. "You want to talk, Beth?"

I crossed my arms and gazed into the wall. Anodized titanium reflected a blurred image of the cubicle. "No."

After a long look at my face, Katerina nodded. "We're here, Beth."

"Fine. I know it. Thanks." I was still getting used to being alive again, and really didn't want to talk with them about it. Rosa was enough. But I knew I was being too abrupt. "Another time, okay?"

They walked away.

Another night. Without asking, Rosa crawled into my sleeping niche and curled beside me without speaking, and I pressed up against the warmth of her back. One of her hands found mine. It had been a week since I'd slept in more than fits and starts. At last, I slept long and deeply.

I awoke to Rosa nudging me in the ribs. "Wake up. Wake up. We're having a crew meeting. You're the only one who's not up yet." Rosa started to tickle me.

"Okay, okay, I'm up. Can't this wait?"

"No. Ready? Let's start the meeting."

I swung up, dangling my legs out of bed. The main lounge was right outside the sleeping niches; so we were already effectively gathered for the meeting. I looked across at them, at the faces that I would see every day of my life, and could summon no feeling for them at all, not camaraderie or love or even contempt. They were the faces of serious and competent women who had made a choice that they would have to live with for the rest of their lives.

"We're slowly going crazy," Rosa said. "We're packed into too small a space, without anything important to do, except wait."

"Wait one second," said Consuela. "We *are* doing important things. What about the measurements of the interstellar medium? What about the magnetic field measurements? What about monitoring the drive?"

"And our studying," Katerina said. "And the simulations and drills."

Rosa shook her head. "Come on. Makework. Except for monitoring the drive, it's completely makework, and I'm sure all of us have figured that out by now. How much time do the measurements really take? An hour a day? And we're got eleven years for studying. If we keep on like this, we'll never make it to Pavonis. We'll never make it to turnover. We'll end up killing ourselves."

Katerina and Consuela both glanced up at my face, and then quickly away. "We know that, Rosa," said Katerina. "But what do you suggest we do about it?"

"We have been following the plan as if we were slaves to it," said Rosa. This was a side to her that I'd never seen. "I think it is time for us to

admit things have changed. I think we should start planning for ourselves."

"Now you're the one being ridiculous," Consuela said. "Isn't it a bit late to change the mission plan?"

"We already changed the mission plan once," Rosa said. "Sleeping arrangements."

I looked away, and saw that Katerina and Consuela also had the grace to look ashamed. The original mission schedule had the crew stand watches, with three sleeping niches for the three crew in the off-duty rotation. Jeanne and I had decided—without asking Rosa—on sleeping two in a niche, and when Katerina and Consuela did likewise, had left Rosa the odd member out. There was nothing to watch for, anyway. Space flight is boring.

"Then just what," Katerina said, "do you think we should do?"

"I think we should have a baby," Rosa said.

Katerina and Consuela and I all started talking at once. After a while, Rosa managed to quiet us down and explain. Her suggestion wasn't as impossible as it sounded. The life support system was one of the most carefully designed pieces of hardware on the ship. Every kilogram of extra mass required a thousand tons of hydrogen to boost it. The life support system was engineered with no margin to keep any more than the minimum crew alive. We all knew that. But now we were only four. We had room for another.

"More than that, though," Rosa continued. "The mission plan tells us what to do for every single hour after touchdown. I think we should take that plan, and toss it out the airlock. We should make our own society, not remake theirs."

"We can't. We owe the world. . . . "

"Nothing. We left them behind, and they left us on our own. We can."

For the first time since the discussion started, I spoke up. "We will."

The sperm and ova bank were not designed to be accessed from the ship in flight, but everything that could conceivably fail had maintenance hatches. Rosa and Katerina managed to get in by cutting through the spare refrigeration control unit. We picked a random number to decide who would. I don't know whether it was by luck, or by some connivance of the others behind my back, but I won the draw.

We named her Estrela. She is our hope; the dream we dreamed together.

It was Estrela who really kept us sane, those long nine years. Oh, she nearly drove us mad, too—I had never imagined how much work a baby would be!—but even in depriving us of our sleep and our freedom, she gave us a focus and a reason, and so kept us sane. Over the voyage, in

the too-cramped and smelly crew compartment, we bickered, and despised one another alternately, and it is the worst kind of feeling there is, to hate those whom you love and admire most, who you know love you. When things got worst, in the afternoons during naptime we would gather around her, watching her silently as she slept. One of us—usually Consuela, but sometimes Rosa—would whisper, "What kind of world shall we make for her?"

"A world without war," Katerina would say.

"A world where women can live together as friends and equals," Rosa would say.

"A world that always remembers the dream," I would say, and remember Jeanne. But there is no pain now.

"A sane world," says Consuela. Then she would get out her *cavaquinho,* and Rosa her flute, and we would sing, or sometimes just close our eyes and listen. For a brief moment, the ship would not feel cramped at all.

That was many years ago, when we were still at the very beginning of our journey. It was not the only crisis we had, but when we had weathered that, we knew we could take the worst and survive.

I've come to terms with myself. I don't need labels for sexuality any more. Rosa explained it to me, once, when I asked her. "You love who there is to love," she said. "How could it be otherwise?"

Now we are eighteen light-years from Earth, with the ship's magnetic fields braking hard against the solar wind from Pavonis, decelerating us toward our goal. The eyes of our ship Santa Luzia look behind us now, but our own eyes look ahead. Estrela is nine. She has never known any world but the spaceship. She is annoying sometimes, demanding to know what this is for, and why that, and why not another thing; but we spoil her, because she reminds us always of why we are here. In two years we will reach our destination.

In two months Rosa will have a baby of her own. We will land before Estrela is fully grown; there is just enough margin in the life support system to support a new infant.

"What kind of world shall we make for her?" asks Rosa, patting her bulging belly.

"A world of strong, happy people who love the land they live in," says Consuela, strumming softly on her *cavaquinho.* Estrela is curled up against her hip, nearly sleeping. With her free hand, Consuela rubs Estrela's back.

"A world where after working long and hard, the people will come home and know that all they have done is worth the effort," says Katerina, her brown eyes unfocused, staring at nothing.

"A world that will always remember the dream," I say, and look around me at the people I love. ●

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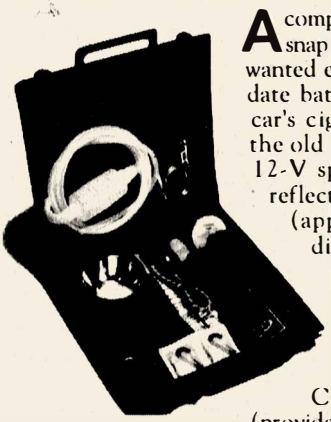

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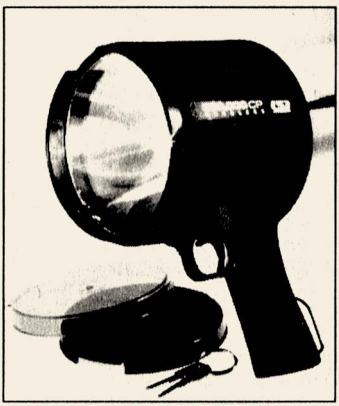

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Two old friends meet for one last adventure...

DRIFTING OFF THE COAST OF NEW MEXICO

Steven R. Boyett

Illustration by Mark Penta

Well, sir, there's bullets whizzing past us like we done shook up a hornet's nest, which in a manner of speaking I guess we done. Bierce is face-up on the travois we made for him after he caught one in the gut outside a Ojinaco, and Tom's pulling one pole of it and me t'other, and we couldn't be leaving no clearer trail if we jumped up and down and clapped our hands and yelled hey. All I got's my little Smith & Wesson slapping my leg like it wants out; I done lumped the Springfield in with Bierce on the travois cause it ain't no good to me while we're racing and wheezing along. It's hotter'n a Dutch oven in a burning house and we're running low on energy and rounds.

We're too god damn old for this.

Another slug goes whooting past my leg. Maybe it had my name wrote on it, but they done spelt it wrong. Anyways their shots are killing Mexican dirt more than anything else; Carranza's troops are pretty near out of range and don't shoot all that commendably to begin with. I ain't sure they been allowed to have ammunition till recently, and if I was Carranza I'da found that a sound policy myself.

Now we're heading uphill and the going ain't hardly fun at all. My lungs are on fire but I'm in pretty good shape for an old war horse if you don't check my teeth. Tom's having a tough go of it though. Sometime in them soft big-city years he done swallered a cannonball and has been lugging it around ever since, and right now he's red-faced as a naked preacher and sweating like his hat's squeezing it out of his head.

Tom sees me looking at him and I guess he reads my worried look. Can't hardly have a thought to yourself when you're with a body too long; you may as well get married and have done with it. He nods, probably 'cause talking is pretty much out of the question. Then he glances at Bierce and back at me, and I know what he is thinking and I shake my head no, and my look says Shame on you for thinking it. Tom kind of shrugs—which is his reply to plumb near everything anymore—and hauls on.

Round a bend Tom recognizes another opportunity to slow down Carranza's boys, so I grab up the Springfield from beside Bierce—it weighs about a hundred pounds more than I remember—and Tom drags the travois back a ways while I work the action and kneel down and wipe sweat from my eyes and put on my glasses and draw a bead. I feel another of my coughing spells coming on and fight it off long enough to steady that long barrel and squeeze off. That Springfield kicks like Everclear and my shoulder's already throbbing from plugging away.

I get up and my knees pop and it hurts like a sumbitch—and *then* the coughing spell lays me up. When it's over my lungs feel like they been scoured with steel wool.

I set the Springfield alongside Bierce.

"Get him?" asks Tom.

I shrug and grab up my end of the travois. "If my aim was true, some fella wearing a coat with shiny buttons has got a plug tore outta his chest that a 'gator could use for a chaw. But waiting to find out is a good way to end up on the receiving end of some Mexican hospitality, I figger."

Tom don't have no argument with that—for a change—and we set to pulling Bierce again. I hold my rifle out to get Tom's eye. "Thomas," I declare, "if I get out a this in one piece, I'll visit Springfield and kiss the ground. I'd lay odds it's good ground, too. Hell, it's in Missouri."

Tom, he just pulls up one corner of his mouth. "It is that," he says. "But *your* Springfield hails from Massachusetts."

It ain't a quarter mile later Tom points out a big rock outcropping directly ahead. I size it up, then glance back behind us: no trail dust. Just them two wavy lines from the travois poles saying, Here we are, *amigos*. I figger them *Federales* think we mighta dug in back at that bend where I opened fire and are hanging back and trying to figure a way to ambush us. Leastways there ain't been no bullets hissing past since then.

I glance ahead at the rock. "It cuts off the path a good piece," I say. "Reckon it'll give us good cover?"

Tom wipes his radish-colored face. "Reckon it'll have to," he says. "I'm pretty much wore out. Boots're wore out, feet're killin' me, wrists're throbbin' from shootin'." He rubs his wrist to emphasize his point.

I look at him a moment. I got me a run or two left, I'm certain, but Tom's right: he's wore out. "Well," I says, "if you're tired, I'm tired too, hoss."

He can't meet my eye so he glances around us. "Ain't that the way it is with us, Huck?" he asks.

"It is a fact, Tom," I say, and we commence to dragging the travois up to the sheltering rock.

"I can feel 'em, Huck." Tom's squatting in the narrow shade of the rock and using a thick yellow fingernail to pry a spent cartridge from one of his Colts. "They're out there."

I nod. "I know it." I'm looking at the liver spots on his unsteady hands, the dark wet patches on his hat, the thick rope of gray hair falling round his neck beneath it. I can hear him breathing heavy with the heat and his own weight.

He squints up at me. "They're gonna know we're here before too long," he says.

"I know that too." His face has got all paunchy like the rest of him, but it's still got something boyish about it, like as if age had only got

added to it rather than changing it to something else like it's done to the rest of us. *What's your plan, Tom?* I'm thinking. *You always was the one for plans. That's why we're here in the first place.* Then I hear Tom's own voice in my head asking You got anywheres *else* you'd rather be, Huck? And I got no good answer for that, so I go on up to Bierce.

We got the travois snugged against the rock in the shade all ready for a fast getaway if it comes to that—though where we'll get away *to* may be point of some dispute. Bierce is pale as chalk with his head propped on his fleabit Surplus bedroll. He's breathing like a sat-on squeeze box, his white hair's limp with sweat, and the bandage on his stomach has got a fresh patch of red edging past the dried brown. We got no more gauze, not even rags, so I decide I better check under his bandage to see what mighta got in there while we was dragging him across half the Northern Mexican desert.

"How's Bierce?" asks Tom. He's checking the cylinder on his second Colt.

"You deef?"

"I hear just fine. And if I hear him at all it means he ain't dead, so how close to it is he?"

I try not to frown at Tom. That's a cold thing to've said.

Well, when I lift up the wrap, Bierce draws in a ticking breath. His wrinkled eyelids tremble and his scrub-brush mustache wags. "Still bleeding," I say. "But not like before." I mop his brow with my shirtsleeve and then put that against his mouth to wet it some. "Terrible to hear a fella breathe like that," I say, retrieving the Springfield and standing. Sumbitch knees say hello again and I put a hand on one for support.

"Give him water, maybe?"

I hold out the bullet-holed canteen and Tom just makes that disgusted shrug again. " 'Sides," I say, "you don't give water to a gutshot man."

Tom snorts. "Do if there ain't no more harm in it."

I think about this for a minute as I rub my knees.

"He was a dog I'da shot him by now." He thumbs the cylinder back in place and holsters the Colt.

"Tom."

Tom shrugs. He pulls his hat off and fans himself with it. I'm looking at a lot of graywhite hair that used to be flaming red. "Bierce ain't no dog, Tom. Why you want to talk like that?"

The fanning slows down like his hat's waving underwater. "Maybe 'cause we wouldn't be in this fix if it weren't for him."

I lean the Springfield against the rock and lean beside it and take off my own hat. "Go on. I want to hear how you figure that." That poor hat of mine is a vast ruin with a wide crescent lopped out of its brim.

"How I figure it!" Now Tom's all bricked up. "Who the hell talked us

into comin' down here to ride with Villa like a bunch of *del Nortes?* Like we was a pair a wet-nosed puppies?"

I start to answer but he's got up a good head of steam now and making a downhill grade. He points at Bierce and says, "Who put us 'round the outside of two bottles of Kentucky rye in that fleabag flophouse in Las Cruces and got us all shellacked-up about—what was it?—'Fleeing the abandoned American dream and helping a people forge a nation with their workers' hands.' Pfff!" His hat slaps his thigh. It's dry enough to kick up dust and makes me powerful thirsty to look at. "Near as I could tell, them hands work the lever on a Winchester more'n anything else."

I see that this can go on a spell, so I put my hat back on and work open the drawstring bag on my belt.

"And you was all over the idea," he says. "And now Carranza's done made hisself president and here we are a-waiting for his boys to come put us down like a lame horse." He looks around. "I tell you what, it's some people and some nation."

I pinch a chaw from what's left a my plug and put it into my mouth. It helps the thirst a touch, and even if it don't it eases my lungs some. I chew thoughtfully for a minute—"for the effect," as Tom used to like to say—and spit carefully. "As I recall, Tom, New Mexico was a stop on the way for us. We was headin' to slap old Villa's back ourselves, weren't that the line you hauled me in on? 'Missouri don't want us no more, America don't want us, we should head down Mexico way, there'd be some *new* stories told about us then, you can bet an ace of spades on that.' Sound familiar to you, hoss?"

That shrug again. "No one pointed a gun at your damn head and said come on."

I spit again. "Never was a gun as persuasive as your talk."

He starts to get mad, then all of a sudden my line hits him as funny and he starts to laughing. Hell, I start laughing with him despite myself. It's like that with us.

And then the laughter simmers down and Tom gives me the kind of direct look he don't give much no more. He looks at Bierce and up at the rock leaning out above us and back to me. "So we'll stop here, then, Huck?"

I look at his watery blue eyes—one with a squiggly red vein worming along one side like the Mississippi on a map—at his flushed and sweating face, his boyish, tired face. "We been running a long time, Tom."

"Long time." His mouth presses straight and he's looking at me but I don't think he's seeing me. He's a deep one, old Tom, and if I'm any judge, he's seeing Hartford and the comfortable big lonely house he put on the block, and he's seeing Colorado, where there weren't no silver for me, and he's seeing New York City and all them tall buildings he's left

behind, and he's seeing Texas, where I coulda come up with more interesting ways a getting my head blowed off than riding with the Rangers. And he's seeing St. Petersburg, which we made the mistake of going back to once and found it just crawling with ha'nts for the both of us. It broke Tom's heart and then some, going back to St. Petersburg, and neither of us talked much about Missouri though I knowed he dreamed about it sometimes.

And then he sees me like I just appeared in front of him. "Thing is, Huck," he says, "all this time we been movin', and I don't know if we been running *from* or runnin' *to*."

Now, I don't know what he means by that, but Tom's always saying things I don't know what they mean, and I'm used to it.

On the travois Bierce coughs wetly and we look to see his leg jerk and his head raise and lower. He's got that certain stillness as I go on over to him and fresh red is spotting his dirty bandage and it's drawing flies and I just *know* he's dead, but I set an ear close by his nose and listen a spell. "Still with us," I tell Tom, and I hear the surprise in my voice.

"Tough old geezer."

"If that ain't the pot calling the kettle black." I tighten Bierce's dressing and mop his brow again, even stroke his hair back a couple licks. I try not to pay attention to the little flecks of red in his mustache since there ain't nothing I can do about them anyhow.

I straighten up and take off my hat again and rub my head. Catch Tom peeping at me. Usually he ribs me about my bald patch. He's just green cause I never did go gray, though he wouldn't admit to it under Chinese torture.

Bierce grunts once like a snuffling hog. "Glad he ain't awake for this," I tell Tom. "Gutshot ain't nothing you want to be around for. Saw enough a that in the War to last me a lifetime."

Tom don't say nothing. The War is something he don't talk about much.

I had got fed up when Missouri couldn't make up its damned mind about whether or not to fight and who they should fight for if they did. If Missouri was a mule deciding 'tween two piles a hay, it would have starved to death. I coulda done as good calling heads or tails. Well, when I see they are just going to keep on talking about it like that will settle the issue, I lit out for Ohio and signed up. Nearly got myself killed by Northern and Southern alike the whole way up and over.

I tried to talk Tom into coming with me, but he wasn't having none of it. He was all took up with some woman he thought he was in love with, and his attention was mostly going her way and I admit I felt a bit put out. It pained me something awful to split with Tom, but he didn't ease

it none. We had ourselves a pretty good row before I abandoned ship, and it was some piece of years and miles before we patched it up again.

In Ohio I tried for cavalry, but by that late in the War they wanted you to bring your own horse and I didn't have one handy. But I could ride shank's mare well as anyone with two legs, and so I became a footsoldier in the regulars—till they learned how much of the Ole Miss was tucked away in my head, and then I became a Union river pilot. Most their boats was taken—"commandeered," they had it, if they wasn't "liberated"—from the Confederate states. Hell, I'd stowed away on some of them myself, before the War.

Now, I'd heard tell there was a Union regiment of nothing but niggers. I asked around about them, sort of indirect and quiet, because I didn't want no one asking why I wanted to know. Coming from Missouri didn't hardly stand me in good stead, and if you think them Union boys loved niggers more than any Georgia plantation owner did, you best set and have another think.

I was looking for Jim, of course. He'd lit out a year or so before me—for real and final this time—and me and Tom was about the only ones knew he'd made for Ohio. I wanted to know if he'd made it, and j'ined up like he said he would. To me, a nigger spending that much effort and risking his neck to get himself away from all that, only to grab himself a rifle and come right straight back, was full-on crazy. Which meant Jim had probably tried it all right.

Tom, he stayed behind in Missouri. His cousin Sid—always a trial when we was boys—had growed up to be a right decent fella, if you ask me, though he was stiffer than a Louisiana jail sentence and nowhere near as inneresting. Sid moved to St. Louis and opened up a little print shop, and Tom 'prenticed to him as a printer's devil and learned the trade. By a curious coincidence, it wasn't long after that, that some pretty riling abolitionist pamphlets began b'iling up all over that part of the South—mostly in St. Louis. I got hold a some and saw Tom writ all over 'em, signature or no. I never let on I'd seen 'em, and Tom never let on he'd done anything more during the War than print-jobs for Sid.

Funny thing, too: after the War Tom moved about as North as you can get in every way 'cepting geographically—he went to work for C. L. Webster and Co., a book publisher in New York City. That was where he growed that cannonball in his breadbasket and watered-down his Missouri speech something awful. Me, I went where I always go when everything comes unbuckled.

"Say, Huck?" Tom's voice brings me clear back from the Mississippi. He's nodding at Bierce. "He look familiar to you?"

"Never saw him 'fore New Mexico, I'm sure."

"Me, neither," says Tom. He looks a touch uncomfortable. "But he reminds me of someone and it's buggin' me like a tick."

"Ain't sure who?"

"No. But I'd bet real money that hair of his used to be red as mine."

I start to say *Red as yourn used to be, you mean*, but decide agin it. If Tom wants to go on thinking he's a redhead, that's all right by me. From my experience, "redhead" is more a philosophy than a hair color anyway. "Well," I say instead, "he don't remind me a nobody 'cept himself."

I spit, and give Tom a sidelong look. "They say a fella knows he's gettin' on in years when everybody 'minds him a someone else." I laugh, and that starts me up to coughing again, but it isn't a bad spell this time out, though it hurts 'cause my throat's like a dustbin.

"Well, I'm still a boy, then," he says, " 'cause you sure as hell don't remind me of no one *I* used to know." His Irish is up good now. "You'd sooner blow off your own big toe than float your lanky ass down a river for some damnfool cause." His laugh's bitter and a little mean.

"It's gospel, Tom," I agree. "That's why I'm here with you in Mexigoddamnco, hidin' behind a rock and blowin' my big toe to kingdom come."

Tom looks angry and looks away. We both know I'd head down a river in two seconds—hell, it was my idear to make for the Rio Grande in the first place, so's we could reach El Paso. No, the bigger thing settin' between me and Tom is, we both know it's Tom who's changed.

Now Tom waves a dusty boot at Bierce, to get off the subject. "He got rounds?"

I shake my head. "No rounds, no gun, not so much as a pen knife. Got him a pen, though. And a journal and a couple dollars. Reckon he meant to win his revolution with hifalutin' talk."

"Well, he could do it if anyone could."

"That's a true thing." I watch Bierce till I see his chest rise and fall. It takes an uncomfortable long time. "But he's a dark one, Tom. Head fulla strange idears." And because it's on my mind I add, "He makes what you turned into look like your cousin Mary."

Now he's all dandered, because he don't even argue, he just turns away. "Shame about them rounds," he mutters. He pats his hip. "I'm down to one loaded and one halfway. You?"

"What's left in the Springfield. She holds five and I fired two. Pistol's loaded."

Tom snorts at that, and for once I can't say's I blame him: I'm carrying me a pitiful little Smith & Wesson seven-shooter, which carries a ball like a homeopathic pill.

He draws a finger through the dirt by his knee. "Don't like doin' that kinda 'rithmetic."

I spit. "Nope."

He glances at Bierce again, looking thoughtful. "His journal tell you anything?"

"Ain't read it."

"Well, maybe we should."

"His bi'ness."

"His *business!* Huck, the man got our fat into this fire an' now he's leavin' us to cook. Is it asking too much to know more about him than his blasted name?"

"You want to read it, go on."

"I'll just do that thing." And he goes on over to Bierce and only hesitates a touch before bending to him. Bierce mumbles something as Tom pulls the journal from his inner-coat pocket.

"What's he say?"

Tom shakes his head. "Sounded like 'Mary.' "

I spit out the last of my chaw and watch Bierce twitching and muttering like a man in some kind of fever dream while Tom thumbs through the journal. "Well?" I say.

"*That's* a deep subject," Tom says out of habit. He turns some pages. "It's some kinda wrote-out dictionary, looks like. Here, listen at this: 'Age: that period in which we compound for the vices we still cherish by reviling those that we no longer have the enterprise to commit.' "

"Now what's that mean in English?" I ask.

Tom shakes his head. "Nothing else in here but more of the same." He looks disgusted. "Shoulda knowed he was a writer. It's more a what seems familiar about him."

"Close fella," I says.

Tom closes the book. He looks up at the slope of our rock, sniffing the air and tense as a hound. "How long you think before they catch up?" he asks.

Right then a pocket of granite blows off above Tom's head. Dust kicks up, flakes sting my cheeks—and *then* I hear the shot.

"Not long, I reckon," I says.

Tom ducks and says "shit" a whole bunch of times. I fish out my shooting glasses from my duster and unfold the stems and put them on. Tom's got a fist against his chest. "Shit," he says again. "My heart just ain't made for this no more."

Another patch of rock lights out for parts unknown. I pick up the Springfield. It's still heavy, but nothing near what it was when we was running uphill and dragging that travois. "You want a lend a hand, there, Thomas?" I says.

Tom nods and draws his right-hand gun. I pretend not to notice how his hand's shaking. "Whyn't you take Mr. Bierce's hat, there," I says,

"seein' as how he ain't got much use for it right now, and push it head-high from the edge of this here rock."

"Hell, that trick's older than dirt," says Tom.

"So'm I," I says, not looking at him but working the bolt on the .30-06 Springfield. The spent cartridge hops out like a freed junebug. "An' I didn't get this way by usin' inferior tricks. Them boys got enough ammunition that they'll shoot at that hat just for the fun of it."

Tom stoops to retrieve Bierce's short-brimmed black hat and straightens with a grunt and a hand on his lower back. He sets Bierce's hat on the butt of his Colt. I'm already hunkered down prone, and now I poke the barrel of the Springfield just past the base of the boulder. "Hold on," I says, and shove my glasses along my nose with a finger. "All right, hoss," I says. "Do it to it."

Tom eases the hat on out. The crown scarce clears the edge when a plug tears out of it and whooshes above Tom's own hat, followed by the flat *crack* of a Winchester. Tom snatches his hand back like it was burnt and commences to cussin' a blue streak, but I'm holding my breath and sighting down the arroyo and don't pay much attention. I see that little plume of smoke and follow it up a tad and just squeeze off calm as you please. The recoil hurts my shoulder something fierce, and I set my free hand on the ground and slide myself back and up to settin' with my back to the boulder without waiting to follow my shot, 'cause I done kicked up a little plume of smoke my own self.

We listen a spell.

"Don't hear a thing, Huck," Tom says after a moment.

" 'Spect not," I agree while I'm rubbing my shoulder. "Feller don't complain much with half his head blowed off."

Now it's dusk. The cicadas are warming up for their season finale and the sky's all Halloween orange and chimney red. I reckon ole Carranza's *Federales* are full of piss and vinegar and just hankering for nightfall. Me and Tom's upslope from them and bottlenecked by the canyon entrance this boulder's the natural guard of, but there's a whole lot more of them and they got a lot more guns and patience. Come dark they're gonna be on us like ugly on an ape.

Bierce is bad off.

" 'Childhood,' " Tom reads. " 'The period of human life intermediate between the idiocy of infancy and the folly of youth—two removes from the sin of manhood and three from the remorse of age.' " He closes the journal and looks annoyed.

"That's a mite rich for my plate," I say.

"Palate," says Tom, looking annoyed. He sets the journal down and

allows as how he's powerful thirsty, so I give him the last of my plug. "It helps, a bit," I tell him.

He shoves the chaw in his mouth and commences to chewing. "Hell, I ain't chawed since we was kids," he says.

"Never too late to take 'er up again," I say.

He gives another a them bitter laughs sounds more like something's caught up his nose. He leans back against the rock and chews and gets a faraway look in his eyes, and I know he's thinking about St. Petersburg. The damn fool had insisted we visit the cemetery so's he could pay his respects to his Aunt Polly, and it was there we found his old sweetheart's grave as well, only her tombstone read "Temple" and not "Thatcher." But Tom knowed who it was right enough, and it just horsewhipped him. I mean it broke him complete, not just that she died, but that she'd had her own good long life without him and been a "beloved wife and mother," if that epitaph weren't just words. I had to help him out of there and ride him through a two-week drunk. To me it ain't no good looking at all them bygone things. Hell, if I carried all that around with me all the time I plumb couldn't walk. But Tom, he didn't let go easy, and he had him a whole freight train he lugged along behind him.

I have to admit that chaw may have been a mistake; it tends to cause a recollectiveness in a fella. "Coming on dark," I say, to take his mind off those things.

He don't answer for a second. Then he shrugs and says, "Can't stop the world turning."

Now we're both thinking 'bout being so old.

I don't realize I'm dug deep into my own recollectiveness till I hear Tom's voice like it's a long ways off. "Huck? You ever feel like . . . I don't know. Like you wasn't real?"

"Hell, boss, right now I feel so real I could use a little watering-down." But I look over at him and I see that he means it, and since it's been a good long while since Tom's talked to me about anything you could sink your teeth into, I tell him something I ain't never told nobody.

"There was this one day," I say. " 'Bout five years back. I'd done sold everything that tied me down and I was down and out in this sanitarium in Cincinnati on account a my lungs. It was right before I ran into you again at that aeroplane exhibition."

Bierce kicks fitfully and makes a groan that's awful to hear because of how far down it sounds like it came from. He's close by so I reach out and put a hand on his damp head. If I was in his shoes, *I'd* want to know someone was out here.

"None of them quacks would out and say it," I go on, strokin' Bierce's head, "but I reckon they thought I was in for the duration. Hell, I thought so too, then. That place had this big glassed-over sun room, and I'd took

to spending my nights there on account a the comet. Some people was all afeared of that thing, going around talking nonsense about 'last days' and all. Me, I thought it was pretty. Looked to me like some kinda fish making its way upstream."

Tom nods. Everyone that's got a memory remembers that comet.

"Well, I was just looking at it and drowsing off on my cot, when I come on with this terrible feeling. At first I thought it was that sanitarium food gone bad and gonna kill me. Sure wouldna been no surprise; that was *the* worst food I ever had, and I've et some pretty awful things in my time. But this weren't like a *food* kind of sick; this was a deeper kind of thing. Like something inside was being tore out. I was dizzy and couldn't see straight, and there was this one moment like you just said, where I just didn't feel like a real person at all, and nothing I knowed or lived or seen was real either. I don't mind saying it scared me something awful. I thought it was the comet, but nothing about it changed, and everything around me seemed the same. Then I thought, Sweet Jesus, I done died and become a ha'nt. You get our age, that's something you go to bed with most ever' night."

Bierce's head is hot in my hand, and I'm a little surprised to learn that I'm comforted by touching him as much as I want it to comfort him.

"But I pinched myself," I go on, "and I could feel the cot warm from my body heat and smell all that starch in them cheap sheets, so that weren't it neither. Ain't no ha'nt going to warm his cot. Never did find out what that feeling was, but I sure never forgot that night. Sent me on my way again, it did."

Tom's nodding like he knows exactly what I mean. "April twenty-first, Nineteen and ten," he says. "It's branded in my skull. I felt like the whole world just went away from me like closing a door. Like—like who I was, was being took off from the rest of me like a shoe. All night long I sat awake in bed and thought about this gypsy woman who read my fortune sometime in my thirties. She looked like a dried-up apple and had hands like bird claws, I remember, and she read my palm an' told me my fate weren't in my hands."

"You can sure take that a number a ways," I say.

"I think she meant ever' damn one of them." Tom tosses a pebble he's been toying with, then chases it down with a spit of tobacco juice. He misses by a country mile; ol' Tom spits like his Aunt Polly must have taught him how. Probably harder with all your teeth though. "Something made me cut loose after all that," Tom goes on. "Something urging me on. Sold my press, my house and books. My wife was long passed away and we never had kids. Wasn't much connecting me to anything. Kind of startling how easy it was to cast off and drift away from that life."

"Well, come to think of it, it woulda been 'round about late April," I

says. "I remember it was rainy season, anyhow. And after that night I couldn't stay another minute. Had to sneak out from that sanitarium like I was twelve years old and at the Widow Douglas'," I says. "I headed southwest. I remember nights camping out on the plain when I got to feeling like I'm the only thing that *is* real."

Tom thinks about this. "It's kindly the same thing, ain't it?"

"All I know is that if it gets any *more* real, I'm gonna—"

I stop cold just as Tom puts his hand up. It had sounded like a boot scraping on a rock. Tom points upward and I nod and we both get down to it.

Them jackasses are coming over the top of the rock to get the drop on us, which seems a mite sensible till you figure that it's nigh on dark, and they's outlined against the sky like shoot-em-up cut-outs, and we're deep enough in shadow that there could be thirty of us drinking tequila and having a party with dancing girls and a *mariachi* band before they'd be able to tell.

Tom digs for his cannon and I grab up the Springfield and stand over Bierce. I know I ain't fed a round in the chamber 'cause that's a sure way to shoot your own damn foot off, so I have to stand there knowing I got to work the bolt before it's any use. That pea-shooter S & W on my hip is pretty much a piece of last resort.

The first bear to come over the mountain, we set back and let him take his time and feel his way and stick his head out and take a good long gander before Tom leans out and blows his fool head off. Son of a bitch don't even have the courtesy to die in a helpful manner: he just lets out a yip like a puppy and flops back on the rock and stays there, depriving us of the use of a perfectly good pistol, even if it is of Mexican manufacture. His two *hermanos* are behind him, from all the *ijo putas* we hear, and they fire off a lot of bullets I sorely would like, for I would expend them in a much more economical manner. But there's a pretty-near vertical drop for them to deal with and they can't draw down on us before we start pickin' away. Tom has to waste another round to keep 'em from getting too curious up there, and here we are and I guess that's why they call it a Mexican standoff.

So I just sit here in the shadowy dark feeling my lungs afire and my heart freight-training along on a downhill grade, and Bierce is wheezing below me and Tom's rubbing his arthritic wrist, and me and him are just looking at each other like, Well, what now?

I jerk my head to indicate behind me and Tom nods. Since they got us pinned against this rock, their *amigos* are probably working their way up the arroyo to flank us. All of a sudden we got a pretty narrow range of movement. But they can't get a bead on us without being wide open.

I turn my back on Tom and cradle the Springfield. Bierce gives a dry

cough beneath me and for a mean second I want to gag him to shut him up. But in a way it's Bierce's cough that saves me.

Since he's already giving us away I go ahead and work the action on the Springfield, so that when the *Federale* in the dark jacket rounds the rock with his hogleg lining up on my chest, I fire blind and he jerks backward with his feet leaving the ground like he's been yanked by an invisible rope. My arm don't want to cooperate when I work the bolt, and the spent cartridge lands hot on my forearm. One round left in the Springfield, and that Mexican's relatives is probably right behind him wanting to discuss this lamentable situation.

Above us comes a funny grinding sound. I don't want to look up and it's a good thing I don't, cause sure enough old Dark Jacket's brother-in-law comes cannonballing into sight already blazing, only I got him beat at this, too, 'cause he's firing chest-high and I'm squatting in anticipation of this. Two holes get cut in the air above my head, and so help me the thing I see best about that Mexican is the white teeth in his shit-eating grin, so I put my last .30-06 round somewhere in their vicinity. Then I let the rifle go and I draw my overgrown pea-shooter, but no more relatives show up and I figure the rest are gonna be a little hesitant with two of 'em dead as yesterday on my front porch, so to speak. So when I hear that grinding again I chance a look up.

Tom, he figures out what it is same time I do. "Rock!" he yells, just as I hear the damn thing come tumbling down at us. Tom jumps away from our boulder and I sort of spring out after him. Ain't no way I'm jumping t'other way 'cause that's just a shooting gallery, and besides Tom's gonna need some cover. Sure enough they start firing at Tom from on top of the boulder. I let off a shot their way just to keep 'em honest and they ease up some. Meantime that rock they've tumbled lands not a foot from Bierce's head and rolls toward us a ways. It's about a yard wide, and it fetches up against Tom, and hang me for a liar if that rock don't take a round that woulda cooked Tom's goose but good.

Well, there's just nowhere to go but back against our boulder. The box canyon's too far a sprint, and I wasn't particular good at outrunning bullets even as a youngster. And there's Bierce. So I grab Tom and pull him back. He's down on one knee and sighting up like this is some kinda Wild West show, and they could put an end to him even if they laid low and throwed rocks. But they've lost enough boys that I figure they're already calling a lodge meeting to rethink the situation, so we make it back to our boulder with our skin intact.

We set down on either side of Bierce, both of us breathing so loud I can't hear nothing else. I glance over at them two *Federales* I shot. Both of'em got pistols and bandoleros that look mighty appealing, but getting

to 'em's a good way to make myself look like a Swiss cheese. But it's powerful frustrating and sorely tempting all the same.

Tom's gritting his teeth and looking mighty pained. "Y'all right?" I ask.

"Got a stitch in my side," he says in a tight voice.

"Better'n needing stitches." I look out at the two dead Mexicans. "You think of any way we can relieve them two boys of their pistols?" I ask. "I figure we can make better use of them than they can."

Tom winces as he leans out a little to see. "I'd have to be pretty desperate to try her," he says.

"Well, what the hell you call this?"

He sets a hand low on his back and gives a little grunt. "Could put our belts together and try fishing for them," he suggests. "We're good Missouri boys."

Now that's a thing I never did notice till now: Tom never did take up the habit of suspenders, though he lived in the east for a good stretch. But I still don't like it: our belts'd give us six foot—maybe seven with that belly of Tom's—but the closest of them ex-*hombres* is nearly ten foot away, and his *amigo*'s another four.

Packs quite a wallop, a Springfield does.

"Well, one of us'll run for 'em if it comes to it," says Tom. He settles back against the rock with a loud sigh. "Till then I'd ruther come up with some better solutions."

"I'm all ears."

We're quiet a bit, thinking heavy.

"How's rounds?" asks Tom.

"Springfield's empty. Six left here." I waggle my Smith & Wesson. "You?"

"Two and six."

"Leastways we'll take fourteen of them *cabrons* down singin' with us," I says. My cheer sounds forced even to me.

"Thirteen, Huck."

"How you figure? Six and two's eight, and six is—"

"I was thinkin' of Bierce."

"Bierce?" I look at Bierce and then back at Tom before I understand what he's driving at. "Christ o mighty, Tom. That's . . . that's a sin, ain't it?"

Tom laughs, though it looks like it hurts. "You picked a fine spot in your life to worry about sin, old man."

"Well, all I know is, I seen some awful sights in my day, but I never signed on for nothin' like what you're talking about. No, sir."

"You saw what they did to our horses, Huck. They'll do worse to us if they can."

"Don't much cotton to us *gringos*, do they?"

"How would you feel if a couple thousand Mexicans marched on into Washington to help give ol' Woody Wilson the boot."

"Can't say I'd like it," I admit. " 'Less I wanted him out myself." I lean back against the boulder. "Still, it's nice to know that, when they kill us, it ain't nothin' personal."

"Well, we wanted adventure."

"I don't rightly recall saying that *we* part," I says. "Seems to me like I wasn't j'ined up with you two days before you was tellin' me how nobody knew us no more and you wanted out. How you missed having *adventures*." I slap the boulder. "Well, how you like it, old man? It ain't like playin' Robin Hood, is it?"

"Well, why'd *you* come along, then?"

I chew on this one before answering. It ain't occurred to me to wonder it before. "We're friends, Tom," I say.

He snorts. "*Old* friends."

"I heard that. But I still got six rounds that says half a dozen of them bastards is missin' reveille tomorrow if I got any influence in the matter."

Tom looks like he wants to say something but changes his mind. And I get bowled over by one of my coughing spells, and it's a long bad one this time. When it's through with me I look at Tom and he's got his head against the boulder and looking up at the sky. It's full dark now and the stars are bright enough to see his face by. He's pale and he looks pretty wore out. We're both listening hard.

Finally Tom says, still looking up, "What happened to you after the War, Huck? Where'd you go?"

I clear my throat and spit. "Where I always go when there ain't nowhere else," I tell him. "I went back to the River."

"All that time?"

"A good piece of it. The River was always good to me, Tom. Ever' kind of fella I met anywhere in the world, I met him on the River first. Seems like the whole world was compacted there. Pirates and smugglers and gamblers, confidence men and N'Orleans whores, cane and cotton planters and land speculators, carpetbaggers and lawyers and card-tellers, teachers and preachers and painters and settlers. I saw races and fires and wrecks and smugglers; I saw Southern ladies dressed as men to get up North, and feuds and flat-out cold-blooded murders. Beautiful women and terrible men. It was all there, Tom, and no need to go nowheres else."

Tom's eyes are shut now. "Not even to Africa in a balloon?" His voice is a whisper.

"Not even there. That river's *home*, Tom. She's in my blood by now, and it seems like ever' time I get too far away from her, everything just falls to nothing."

"Pretty far away from it now, Huck."

"Too damn far." I want to ask Tom a question but I think I hear something so I set still. That devil in my lungs starts wanting out, but I make myself push him back down. After a minute I don't hear nothing so I says, "Tom?"

He takes so long answering that I'm switched if he hasn't fallen asleep.

But then he says, soft, "Yeah?"

"What happened to us, Tom? What happened to you?"

And again it's a long time before he says anything, and I hear him draw some long breaths and I wonder if he hasn't nodded out after all. But then he says, so faint I got to lean toward him to hear it, "We grew up, Huck. We got old." His voice gets stronger as he builds up a good steam. "We was boys, god dammit, and that's all we was ever supposed to be. But we got old, and the world kept turning and it turned away from us. 'Cause that wasn't in the bargain, and the world was done with us when we wasn't boys no more. And there's no more buffalo, and there's no more Injuns, and there's no more Frontier. There's Gatling guns and mustard gas and fly-planes droppin' dynamite on boys in ditches."

He coughs a bit, then says, raspy, "Oh, Huck—it ain't a world for boys no more."

"Well, how do we get out of this, then, Tom? Ain't there something writ down in *Ivanhoe*, or *Robin Hood*, or them books about pirates or Romans that you can use? That's how you always got us out lickity-split and scot free, was all them books you read. You always got a plan, Tom. Like them guns them dead Mexican boys are holding right there—if we can get to 'em, we can hold out a bit longer. Maybe make the box canyon and lose the *Federales*. Reach the Rio Grande. It's a river, Tom; we'll be safe there. I can get us anywhere from there. I'll get us *home*. So come on, hoss, what's the plan?"

"I'm tired." His laugh's pretty weak. "Just tired is all."

He moves his hand from his back and I catch a glimpse of it gleaming in the starlight. For a second I think to ask him where he'd got water from, but then he gives another little cough and I realize what's happened to him and I'm stepping across Bierce and grabbing Tom's shoulder and pulling him a little ways from the rock. He don't put up no fight.

The back of his shirt is just drenched. He leans heavy agin me when I try to lift up the tail, but it's dried and stuck to his skin and I don't want to start it flowing again.

"Aww, Tom," I say. "God damn."

I lean him back against the rock and he looks up at me all sheepish and boy-faced. "Told you I had a stitch," he says.

I keep watch most the night. Tom's leaning heavy on my left side, and Bierce is pillowed on my right leg. I've got Tom's loaded Colt in one hand,

my Smith & Wesson in the other, Tom's other Colt with two rounds left in my holster. I'm sure if I was apart from the situation and watching it I'd find it downright comical, but being in the thick of it just makes me envy anyone who can be apart from it. Reports of this life are greatly exaggerated.

When the halfmoon comes up I'm remembering a time on board the paddlewheeler *Crescent City* when the pilot was bringing her in to Hannibal. He was a fiery redheaded cuss with sharp eyes and a sharper tongue, and he saw me haunting the texas and asked me was I interested in piloting. This was one of the times I run away before the War and the thought of being a pilot had never crossed my mind. I told him no sir, but I p'inted out a lot of landmarks and soundings where the water don't run but a couple marks, and he looks me up and down and starts to asking me about other p'ints on the River. And do you know, I knowed ever' damn one of 'em, and I knowed what time of year was good or bad to run 'em, and whether in rainy season you run or put in, and where they's shoals and low-lying wrecks, and this pilot—Sam, his name was—he let me stay behind him while they brung her into port, and told me to look him up if ever I "felt the lack of piloting in my soul," 'cause I was a natural if he ever saw one, and he made sure I knowed he didn't hand out that word like candy.

That is all a long time ago.

It's coming up on ten, I reckon, and the *Federales* ain't tried again. They must think we're better armed than we really are, or for sure they'da come at us by now. I figure there's two likely times they'll try, and that's midnight and dawn. Tom's beside me breathing deep and slow, and I got my duster 'round him to keep him warm. These desert nights are cold as a well-digger's ass, but it ain't bothering me none. Fact it feels kindly good. Eases my lungs somewhat, and even settling in my bones it lets me know that I'm alive.

Bierce starts drawing fast shallow breaths and jerks against my leg. I know what's happening and who it is he's rassling, and there ain't nothing I can do but put a hand on his shoulder for him to hang on to if there's to be any hanging on.

But there ain't.

There's an awful emptiness after Bierce lets out that long trailing rattle. Maybe I should fill it up with some words, but I don't have none. Tom's the one for words. And maybe I should be ashamed, but I don't want Bierce touching me no more. He's gone and there ain't no more comfort to give him.

I edge away from Bierce and Tom rouses. "Huck?" His voice is thick and far away. "We're still friends, ain't we?"

"Old friends, Tom." I pull my duster tighter against him and keep my watch like a good soldier.

'Round midnight the coyotes start to howl.

Voices wake me up. The rock's cold against my back and my side; it feels like it's sucked all the heat out a me and left behind the kind of deep cold settled in my bones that even a fireplace don't thaw out, a cold long past shivering.

Them voices ain't speaking English.

I open my eyes a sliver and there's cold dawn light and hard-edged shadows and about a dozen *Federales* milling around right in front of us like we ain't worth bothering with. One fella with a funny little mustache and brass buttons on his *capitan* jacket is tearing pages out of Bierce's journal. The morning breeze scatters them like leaves. One of 'em fetches up agin my leg and flutters there like a butterfly.

Old: in that stage of usefulness which is not inconsistent with general insufficiency, as an old man. Discredited by lapse of time and offensive to the popular taste, as an old book.

I see that the *Federales* have took me for dead because I got Tom's dried blood all over me. The lump in my stiff hand is Tom's loaded Colt. I ain't so much scared as I feel like a damn fool. I'm trying to remember falling asleep, but I can't. I remember coyotes howling. I remember Bierce letting go in the night. Remember Tom's blood—

And a terrible dread comes into my heart. It can't be true and it ain't *right*; it goes against our whole life and ever'thing that's supposed to be.

What's cold at my side ain't rock.

I can't clamp down on the cry that bubbles out from deep inside my ruined lungs. I open my eyes all the way 'cause there ain't no point in playing 'possum no more, and I'm raising Tom's Colt as the *Federales* look my way, and them brass buttons are catching the morning sun as the *capitan* begins to turn, and all that's left and all I know is, there's six rounds in the Colt and a river roaring in my ears.

"Every man is in his own person the whole human race, with not a detail lacking."

—Mark Twain ●

Brian Stableford

THE AGE OF INNOCENCE

While old age and infancy are often compared, their differences may be more apparent once lifetimes span the centuries . . .

Illustration by Ron Chironna

Sybil and her best friend Gwenan got their first real sex education when they were eleven years old, watching their great-great-great-great-grandparents playing in the park.

The park had several dense clumps of bushes whose principal *raison d'être* was to provide cover for frolicking ancients. Most of the carers who took ancients out to play were adults, who almost invariably made a big show of staying out of the bushes while their charges got on with it, but Sybil and Gwenan were curious enough to take the first reasonable opportunity to slip into the bushes unobserved and find out what went on there.

They were not entirely *surprised,* but the visible reality of sexual intercourse seemed much more absurd than the theory had implied.

"Surely our *parents* don't do things like that?" said Gwenan, in hushed tones, the first time they saw it happen.

"Not *now,*" Sybil informed her, airily, taking her customary pride in the narrow margin of her greater wisdom. "People lose the urge when they get to be a hundred or so. That's why the second century is supposed to be the prime of life—all their creativity can be concentrated in *useful* channels. It only comes back again when the higher brain functions begin to disappear, and by the time they get to three hundred or three-fifty they're *slaves* to it. I heard Mother say so, when she was talking on the phone to Aunt Genista."

Gwenan became embarrassed then, and turned away, but Sybil didn't. It wasn't that she didn't feel awkward spying on them, just that her curiosity was stronger than her guilty unease. All sorts of questions ran through her head. Were ancients capable of loving one another, after their fashion, or did love vanish along with self-consciousness—and if it did, could they even be said to love their descendants? Would ancients have sex with *anybody*—anybody, that is, who was small enough—or did they prefer particular partners? *Why* did ancients like sex so much, given that they were quite incapable of procreation? *Did* they actually like it, or was it just a kind of compulsion?

She studied the grimaces on the great-great-great-great-grandparents' little faces, trying to fathom the meaning of the expressions. Her mother had often warned her not to read too much into great-great-great-great-grandmother's expressions, but Sybil couldn't help trying to figure them out. Great-great-great-great-grandmother was still human, after all, still capable of joy and sadness, irritation and contentment, if not of actual thought.

When it was all over, Gwenan's great-great-great-great-grandfather rolled away, looking contented but not particularly joyful. His tiny eyes were dark and bird-bright, and he was whispering to himself rapidly and incoherently. Sybil's great-great-great-great-grandmother, on the other

hand, looked joyful without being particularly contented. Her blue eyes were misty, and she was gravely silent. Sybil's great-great-great-great-grandmother was a very *quiet* ancient, as ancients went. Mother said it was because she hadn't been overfond of talking even in the days when she had an active mind.

Sybil thought that her great-great-great-great-grandmother was still rather pretty, after her own ancient fashion. If she had been filmed against a miniaturized background of some kind, Sybil thought, it wouldn't have been immediately obvious that she *was* an ancient. She still hadn't lost the last lingering echoes of adult presence and adult poise, in spite of the fact that every time she came to the park she made straight for the bushes.

By the time they had watched the ancients indulging their sexual appetites three or four more times, even Gwenan became appropriately blasé about it. That didn't stop her becoming fearfully embarrassed about watching if there were any other people around, but the event itself no longer caused her to blush crimson—and it was usually possible to slip in and out of the bushes without being observed. For Sybil, the fundamental mystery of it persisted. It somehow seemed to be the key to what being an ancient was all about—and she couldn't help wondering, crazy as it might seem, whether ancienthood rather than adulthood might somehow be what being human was all about. Even though adulthood generally lasted at least twice as long as ancienthood, ancienthood was where everyone ended up: it was life's culmination, life's denouement.

As it happened, the day of the accident was one of the days that Sybil and Gwenan watched, perhaps more closely than they ever had before, studying the details of the process and—in Sybil's case—wondering what refinements and nuances had to be added in order to transform it into *adult* sex, and hence into authentic love-making. It was the seventh occasion on which she had been able to give such matters patient and serious consideration; she had not the slightest reason to suspect that it might be the last.

"I don't understand where the urge could possibly come from in the first place," Gwenan said, as she peeped out of the bushes to make sure there were no adults around before emerging into the warm sunlight. "All things considered, I think I'd rather do without."

"You won't have the option," Sybil told her, with a world-weary sigh. "We change according to an inbuilt cycle. Innocence, childhood, adulthood, second childhood, and back to innocence again. It's called the wheel of existence. It carries you round whether you like it or not. The urges come when their time is due, and go when their time is done."

"You got that from a holovid tape," Gwenan said, accusatively.

"Of course I did," Sybil said, meticulously dusting herself down. "How else are we supposed to learn what's what—or understand what's what when we see it?"

"Well I think it's disgusting," Gwenan countered, defiantly. "It's not right. People their age ought to have more . . . more *dignity*."

"Dignity doesn't come into it," Sybil reminded her. "They outgrew *that* long ago. Anyhow, it's natural, so it doesn't matter whether you like it or not—it's just the way things are."

Gwenan could be so slow that it was sometimes hard to believe that Sybil was only five months the elder of the pair, especially in view of the fact that Gwenan *looked* older. Sybil realized, though, that these things were relative. Five months might be hardly anything in the context of an entire human lifespan, but it was a yawning gap between two eleven year olds.

When her own great-great-great-great-grandmother had been eleven, Sybil calculated, Gwenan's great-great-great-great-grandfather must have been thirty-one, possessed of a vastly different wealth of experience—but now they were both pushing four hundred, twenty years didn't mean a thing. They didn't have an atom of self-consciousness between them, and the patterns of ingrained habit which were the legacy of their separate lifetimes were virtually identical.

"Do you realize," said Gwenan, slowly, while the temporarily sated great-great-great-great-grandparents were dressing themselves again, "that we'll be like that one day." It was as if the thought had only just occurred to her, although Sybil couldn't imagine that anyone might be capable of avoiding consciousness of that particular fact even for half an hour.

"It'll be okay," Sybil assured her. "We've already had practice being tiny and mindless—we'll be able to do it again easily enough when the time comes."

The two ancients had stretched themselves out in the sun, tiredly, but Sybil knew that it wouldn't be long before they were raring to go again. Their energy came in short bursts, but they always made the most of their time outdoors. They really weren't very much like babies, in appearance or behavior. The proportions of their bodies were quite different, retaining adult ratios in spite of the loss of mass, and their behavior was equally distinct. In spite of what holovid pomposity termed the wheel of existence, there was a world of difference between progressive innocence and decadent innocence.

"It's not the same," Gwenan insisted, revealing that even she understood *that* much, in her own rough and ready fashion. After a pause she went on: "I don't think it's fair that we should have to do this, you know. Why should *we* be the ones who have to take the family ancients out for

their walks, and chop up their food for them, and clean out their attics. That's not natural. In most families, adults look after the ancients. *That's* normal."

Looking after the family ancients was the first serious responsibility that Sybil and Gwenan had ever had to undertake. At first they had agreed that it was a vile imposition and an awful nuisance having all the work of cleaning and food-preparation to do, but it hadn't taken long for Sybil to figure out what their parents meant when they said that kids could learn a lot from their great-great-great-great-grandparents. Ancients might have grown out of self-consciousness, but the habits they retained had a lot of fascinating humanity in them. Looking after an ancient was supposed to be good for a child—an invaluable part of preparation for adult life. Sybil no longer thought that she had adequate grounds to disagree with that—but she couldn't help thinking that Gwenan did have a point. Children had so much to learn while they grew, and so little time, whereas adults were already *finished,* and had all the time in the world to be what they were and do whatever they had to do.

"Most families don't have children," Sybil pointed out, pensively. "Adults have to do most of the work of caring for ancients—that's just simple arithmetic. Ancients are ancient for a hundred years but children are only children for a little while." She had only just begun to carry out calculations like that, and found such matters of proportion oddly but endlessly fascinating.

When the great-great-great-great-grandparents were up and ready again Sybil and Gwenan took their respective charges by the hand and led them over the brow of the hill and down to the lake. Sybil liked the lake far better than the bushes at this time of year because the water lilies were in full bloom and the water-birds had downy chicks trailing after them in tight formation.

The ancients agitated for permission to take their clothes off all over again and go swimming. Sybil and Gwenan were only too glad to let them get on with it.

If there was one thing ancients liked better than sex it was swimming—and that, to Sybil, was a far less understandable urge. But swimming was a much more satisfactory activity from her point of view, because it lasted much longer and exhausted the ancients more fully, and gave Gwenan and herself the chance to have a really good chat about things that actually mattered, like clothes and holovid shows and all the horrid iniquities of programmed schoolwork and parental control.

By the time they both had to go to their separate homes, Gwenan was in a thoroughly good mood, and Sybil felt positively happy. They fixed a time to meet on the next day before they parted at the park gates.

Unfortunately, while Sybil and her great-great-great-great-grandmother were making their way along the main road to the pedestrian crossing, the ancient suddenly spotted something bright lying on the central reservation, and took it into her stupid, empty little head to go get it.

"It wasn't my fault!" Sybil wailed, hysterically. "It really wasn't. There wasn't anything I could do."

"I know, darling," her mother said, hugging Sybil to her bosom and patting the back of her head. "Even the robotruck couldn't do anything, and artificial reflexes are *much* faster than yours. You really mustn't blame yourself."

"She never did anything like it before!" Sybil continued, protesting at the injustice of it all. "I'd have held her hand if I thought she might. How was I to know that her road-safety habits had worn off?"

"You couldn't, darling," her mother assured her. "It's not so bad. She was very old, you know, and she can't have felt a thing. When the time comes to die, it's best to go like that—like switching off a light. She had a good life . . . a *very* good life. It's a miracle she survived so long, considering the times she lived through when she was my age. I always find it hard to believe that the world has so many more ancients in it than children, when I remember how many of great-great-great-great-grandma's generation didn't make it to a hundred. All lives have to end eventually, though—it was just bad luck that it had to happen so soon after you started looking after her."

Sybil wasn't so young that she couldn't see a certain irony in the fact that her great-great-great-great-grandmother had survived the third and fourth plague wars *and* the second nuclear war, had traveled extensively in the sub-Saharan swamps of Africa and the rugged hills of Antarctica, and had flown to the moon and back twice, only to be run down by a robotruck two hundred meters from her front door. Nor was she unable to extrapolate that pattern of irony to an appreciation of the fact that great-great-great-great-grandma had survived being looking after for thirty years and more by her own parents, well over two hundred years of looking after herself, and eighty-some years of being looked after by various other descendants before a mere six weeks of Sybil's tender care had seen the end of her.

"I'm so *sorry*," Sybil said, packing all the meaning she could into the simple phrase. "It *wasn't* that I didn't want to look after her. It really wasn't. I didn't mind. I would have looked after her until I was sixty or seventy if I'd had to, *honestly*."

"Hush now, darling," her mother said. "There's no need for you to be so upset. It was just an accident. It would have happened just the same

if I'd been with her, or anyone else. *She* wouldn't want you to be upset. It's just one of those things. People do die, darling. In the end, everybody dies. It's perfectly natural. It doesn't matter whether they die in their sleep, or in an accident, or just drop dead . . . it happens. People get old, and when they get old they forget things. Given time, they forget *everything,* even the things they need to do to stay alive. That's just the way things are, darling."

Sybil had run out of sobs and painful declarations, so silence fell for a minute or two. All she could think of, though, was the way her tiny, pretty great-great-great-great-grandmother had looked while she lay on the road, shattered and bleeding, while the life just ebbed out of her. Her blue eyes had been wide open, frightened and uncomprehending. Although Sybil understood only too well how deceptive the expressions of ancients could be, she couldn't help reading far too much into that last desperate stare: a sense of utter loss, not of life as such but of life's *happiness,* life's *color,* life's *stubbornness.*

Sybil didn't doubt for a moment that everything her mother had said about the goodness of great-great-great-great-grandmother's life was perfectly true, but that didn't mean that there was any vestige of goodness about her death. It didn't matter how ancient an ancient might be, death was still a tragedy, a travesty, and a trauma. And all the stuff about the inexorable turning of the wheel of existence was just a bad joke, or an ineffectual attempt to hide from the awful reality.

When Sybil's mother finally spoke again, her tone was very different. "Mind you," she said, with a deep sigh, "it's going to be hell on earth arranging the funeral."

"Arranging funerals," Sybil told Gwenan, while they sat beside the lake watching Gwenan's great-great-great-great-grandfather swim, "is hell on earth."

"Do you think he misses her?" Gwenan asked, staring at the tiny head bobbing in the water. "He doesn't seem to."

"Plenty of other pebbles on the beach," Sybil observed, indulging her new-found delight in cynicism. "According to psychologists, they don't form *any* personal attachments once they're past three hundred, and they're pretty fickle even before that, when adulthood is decaying into second childhood. According to the best estimates, even the intensest adult bonds rarely last more than twenty or twenty-five years. We're only human, after all—not like swans, which mate for life."

"*I'm* not fickle," Gwenan said.

Only because you haven't got the urge yet, Sybil thought—but there were more important things than that to talk about. "Hell on earth," she repeated, insistently.

"Why?" Gwenan asked, obligingly. "You only have to dig a hole in the garden and put the casket in. It's easy."

"*That's* easy enough," Sybil said, carefully duplicating one of her mother's finest sighs. "The problems start with figuring out how to notify all the interested parties, and getting some response, and finding somewhere for them all to stay . . . it's a matter of simple arithmetic, you see."

"No, I don't," Gwenan said.

Gwenan's great-great-great-great-grandfather attempted to climb up on a lily-pad which couldn't possibly support his weight, and splashed back into the water in a most ungainly fashion, giggling all the while.

"Look at it this way," Sybil said, glad that all her scrupulous calculations weren't going to go to waste. "Everybody has two parents, even if they only live with one. Every parent has two parents, and every grandparent has two, and so on. That means, when you work it back, that everybody has *sixty-four* great-great-great-great-grandparents."

"Sixty-four's not so many," Gwenan objected. "Anyway, most of yours will be dead already, and whoever's looking after the rest probably won't even know that they're distantly related to your great-great-great-great-grandmother."

"That's not the point," said Sybil, with a sigh. "The point is that it works the other way around too. Nowadays, of course, hardly anybody has more than one child, but back in great-great-great-great-grandmother's day no one knew how overcrowded the world would eventually become, because it was much more common for people to die at a hundred or a hundred and fifty, even leaving wars and such out of account. People sometimes had four or five children, and two was utterly commonplace. The problem, you see, isn't counting up *my* great-great-great-great-grandparents—it's counting up great-great-great-great-grandmother's six generations of descendants. Not easy. *Then* you have to try to find them all. Some of them are on the far side of the world, some on Mars, some in the Lagrange colonies."

"That's no problem," said Gwenan, scornfully. "They're hardly likely to take an interplanetary trip just to go to a funeral."

"But they all have to be *told*," Sybil said, impatiently. "And they all want to be there in electronic spirit if not in the flesh. It's difficult and time-consuming, believe me."

"*You* don't have to do it," Gwenan pointed out, determined not to pander to Sybil's imaginary martyrdom.

"We all have to pull together at a time like this," Sybil said, darkly, quoting her mother word for word. "Everybody has to do their bit."

Gwenan's great-great-great-great-grandpa was now trying to pluck one of the huge golden water-lilies, and failing miserably. He flopped

and floundered amid the floating vegetation, scaring the moorhens, gabbling on and on whenever he could get his head above water. When he was an adult, Sybil thought, he must have been exceedingly fond of the sound of his own voice.

Gwenan changed tack. "I suppose," she said, ruminatively, "that you could get another one. If you have sixty-four great-great-great-great-grandparents, and even more great-great-great-great-great-grandparents, you could take in one of the others instead. You've got the attic all fixed up, haven't you? Everything ready and waiting."

"*Get another one!*" Sybil echoed, distastefully. "We're not talking about *pets,* you know. Ancients are people. Our attic was great-great-great-great-grandma's *home.*"

"I bet whoever's got the others would be only too pleased to let you have one," Gwenan said, sarcastically. "My mom's always trying to get rid of *him,* but everyone who might be able to take him keeps right on telling her how good it is for a little girl my age to have an ancient for company. *Company!* I'd rather have my great-great-great-grandma from Birmingham—at least she can still talk a *bit* of sense, even if she doesn't say much—and at least she's three-quarters my size. I'm twice as tall as *he* is, and he never says anything meaningful, even though he hardly ever shuts up for more than five minutes at a time."

"Size isn't important," Sybil said, mechanically. "Anyway, he won't get any smaller now."

"He might," Gwenan objected.

"No, he won't," Sybil insisted. "People can't keep on shrinking forever. After a certain point the organs won't work any more because they don't have enough cells to do all the different jobs that cells have to do to keep the organs working." Sybil felt that she might have phrased this explanation a little better, but she hadn't quite understood the educational holovid from which she'd plucked the pearl of wisdom. She figured, though, that Gwenan—who was at least three stages behind in her schoolwork, because she got bored too easily when she was alone with a keyboard and screen—wouldn't be able to challenge her.

"He might not get any smaller," Gwenan said, "but I'm still getting bigger. Either way, we grow apart. What they say about second childhood and the last age of innocence is all rubbish. Children don't have *anything* in common with ancients—not really. It's all just an excuse, to make us look after them."

Gwenan's great-great-great-great-grandfather was climbing out of the water now, rubbing himself dry before putting his clothes back on. He looked completely done in.

It's a wonder more of them don't drown, Sybil thought. "I suppose you'd rather be living in the bad old days," she said aloud, in a mock-adult

tone, "when nobody lived past a hundred and everybody got *diseases* and *cancers* and things."

"Yes I would," said Gwenan, unequivocally. "What's the point of living to be four hundred if you end up like *that*?"

Gwenan's great-great-great-great-grandpa was having trouble putting his pants on. Although he remembered well enough what he had to do, his fingers had lost so much of their dexterity that it wasn't easy for him to go through the motions, especially when he was cold and tired.

"There's no point complaining about it," Sybil told her friend, dutifully suppressing the pang of sympathy she felt, out of respect for great-great-great-great-grandmother's memory. "It's just the way things are. No matter how clever the doctors are at clearing cells which don't work out of the body, so they don't get in the way, they can't put a stop to *all* the ways in which we get older. It's something to do with the stuff in our genes having to be copied over and over again. No matter what the doctors do, mistakes still happen and always will. I read somewhere that we begin to die before we're even born, and that there's no way round it, even though the genetic engineers have finally stretched the length of our lives to the true limit."

"That's silly," Gwenan complained. "You must have got it wrong. It's no use pretending to be so *clever*. You may have a good memory, but you don't have a clue what most of it *means*."

"I'm *beginning* to understand," Sybil countered, defensively.

She realized, as she said it, that it was true. She *was* beginning to understand the mysteries of life and death. The tragedy of great-great-great-great-grandma's death had served to hasten the onset of that understanding.

While Gwenan went to help her great-great-great-great-grandfather finish dressing, and to do what she could to soothe his irritable frustration, Sybil murmured "Hell on earth" yet again—but she didn't really mean it.

In the event, the funeral went very smoothly. It was so interesting that Sybil would have said that she'd enjoyed it, except that funerals weren't the kind of thing you were supposed to enjoy.

With a little help from Sybil, her mother had managed to locate sixty-five of the seventy-two living descendants her great-great-great-great-grandmother had turned out to have. Seventeen were ancients themselves, too old to make any kind of response on their own account, and six were children—but five of the ancients and two of the children were brought to the funeral by their guardians. Twenty-one of the other forty-nine were off-planet and a further thirteen thought that it was too far to come, so there were only fifteen *real* family guests, plus seven extras.

A dozen neighbors, plus assorted ancients and Gwenan, made up the company.

Aunt Genista was a great help with the organization of the meal, where almost everybody ate too much, and she accepted all the credit fulsomely, but Sybil knew that her mother had done all the really difficult work, doggedly and methodically. It wasn't just that she had pulled a representative sample of great-great-great-great-grandmother's descendants together for the day, but that she had taken the trouble to make sure that *all* her family knew what had happened. It was only at times like these, Sybil realized, that the widely scattered individuals descended from a particular ancient could have any sense of connection, of relatedness, and of the true working of the great mechanical wheel of existence.

One of the children was a boy in his twenties who thought of himself as an almost-adult and was far too grand to talk to an eleven-year-old like Sybil, but the other was a nine-year-old boy named Jacob who thought it quite pleasant to have a distant cousin. Sybil knew that she and Jacob would probably never meet again as children, and might be entirely different people by the time another funeral brought them together, but she also knew that they would remember one another then, and in the meantime would be in some small sense part of one another.

While the messages of condolence from non-attendees were being played on the holovid Sybil, Gwenan, and Jacob huddled together in a corner so that they could exchange unobtrusive whispers.

"When I'm thirty," Jacob told them, "I'm going to join the space service. I'm going out to the moons of Saturn."

"Why Saturn?" Gwenan asked.

"Because it's got better rings," he explained. "There aren't any ancients out there, you know. It's an *adult's* world."

"Actually," Sybil told him, "it's an AI's world. People are a tiny minority—even fabers. You'll have to be somatically modified, you know, if you want to be a real spaceman. You need four arms to work in low gravity."

"Titan's got gravity," Jacob informed her. "It's okay to have legs on Titan. What are you going to be?"

"Lots of things," Sybil told him, loftily. "Lots of *different* things. To start with, though, I want to be an engineer. A human engineer, I think."

"Making fabers?" Jacob asked, exposing the limitations of his imagination.

"Making *new* people," Sybil replied, haughtily. "*Better* people."

"I don't know what I want to do," Gwenan confessed. "It's difficult to think that far ahead, when there's so much to learn. But I don't want to work at a screen. I want to use my arms and legs as well as my eyes and fingers."

When the messages had all been displayed everybody went out into the garden, to the side of the grave. There were no other graves in the garden; Sybil's mother hadn't been living in the house very long before Sybil was born, and great-great-great-great-grandmother was the only ancient who'd ever lived in it.

Sybil's mother made quite a long speech, going through the various phases of great-great-great-great-grandmother's life—all the things she'd done and places she'd been—but the task of saying the final few words had been delegated to Sybil. Sybil had worked hard on her speech, knowing that it was an unparalleled opportunity to impress a whole company of adults with her intelligence and maturity. She knew that she could be the star of the ceremony if she were clever enough, and that she might thus be able to erase the lurking suspicion that it had been *her fault* that great-great-great-great-grandmother had been killed.

"I'm sorry that great-great-great-great-grandmother died while I'm only eleven," she said, doing her level best to sound sincere. "It would have been nice to look after her for a little bit longer. I'll miss her, because she was such a happy person. I know people say it's easy to be happy when you're an ancient, because people shed their worries along with their defective cells, but I don't think it's as simple as that. I think being happy is a habit like all the other habits that keep people going when they're very old, and I think it's difficult to be happy, even if you're an ancient, if you didn't get the habit while you were an adult. I don't know for sure, but I think maybe it's not so easy to be happy when you're an adult, if you haven't been able to learn it when you're a child, and maybe it's not so easy to learn it when you're a child, if you don't have a happy ancient to show you how. I'm glad I had a happy ancient to show me how, just for a little while."

Everyone applauded. Sybil knew that the applause was a ritual, just like her speech—she had said what she was supposed to say, the way the turning wheel of life demanded; it was all performance, all programming—but that didn't mean that the applause was fake, or that what she'd said wasn't true. She thought that she'd done a good job, and given great-great-great-great-grandma a proper send-off, and that was only right, given that she had been looking after great-great-great-great-grandma when the robotruck killed her.

Afterward, when she thought everyone else had gone inside, Sybil went back to the grave, and looked down at the little mound of earth.

"Three hundred and seventy-six years," she whispered to herself. "*Three hundred and seventy-six years.*" It was a lot. The day before, she had counted all the way from one, just so that she'd really *know* how many it was. "It's a big wheel that takes so long to turn."

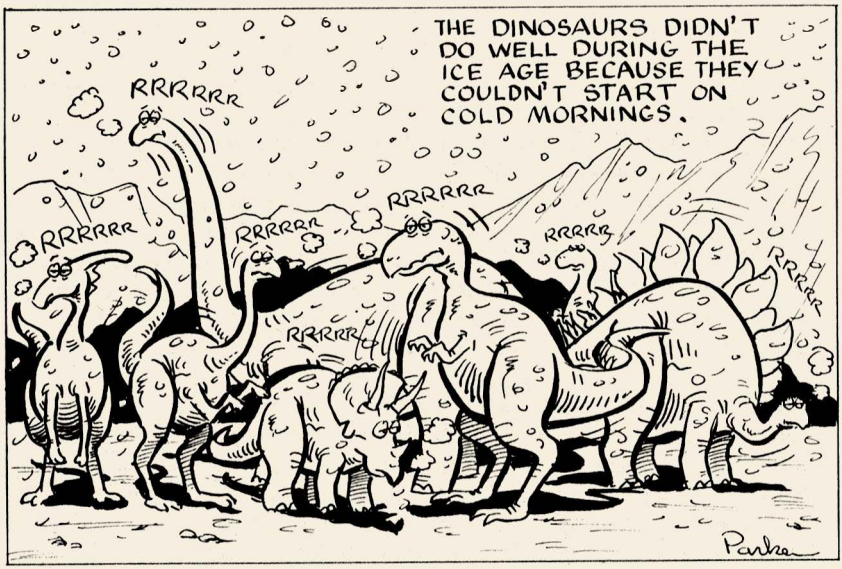
She turned around abruptly as she heard a noise behind her, wondering if she'd been overheard, but it was all right. It was only Gwenan's great-great-great-great-grandfather, all by himself for once. He barely glanced at Sybil as he walked past her, and went to stand at the edge of the grave, looking down. The expression on his tiny face—far tinier than a baby's—was quite unreadable, but he wasn't muttering away the way he usually did, and his silence seemed appropriately solemn.

Sybil knew that the old man couldn't possibly understand what had happened. He couldn't even *begin* to understand the idea of death, and probably had no memory at all of her great-great-great-great-grandmother—but *something* had brought him here anyway, and *something* made him pause where he was, uncertainly staring infinity in the face.

Within the slowly dying pattern of his habits, Sybil thought, the vestiges of a fuller and better humanity must still be lurking. Was the sadness of his unaccustomed silence the ghost of love, or grief, or just that particular and peculiar helplessness in the face of the inevitable that people never quite overcame?

After a minute had passed, Sybil reached out and took him by the hand. He didn't resist.

"Come on," she said, solicitously. "We'd better go back inside, before you catch a chill." ●



NEXT ISSUE

JULY COVER STORY

Multiple Hugo and Nebula-winner **Ursula K. Le Guin,** one of the true giants of the field, returns to the same fictional universe as her famous novels *The Left Hand of Darkness* and *The Dispossessed* to bring us another brilliant Hanish novella, "A Woman's Liberation"—this one a searing inditement of slavery, and a poignant and compelling investigation of the price of freedom. . . .

BIG NAME AUTHORS

World Fantasy Award-winner **Tanith Lee** introduces us to the fascinating and mysterious "Edwige"; and the late **Avram Davidson**, Hugo and World Fantasy Award winner, and one of the most distinguished writers of our time, stylishly unravels for us the enigma of the sinister "Twenty-Three."

EXCITING NEW WRITERS

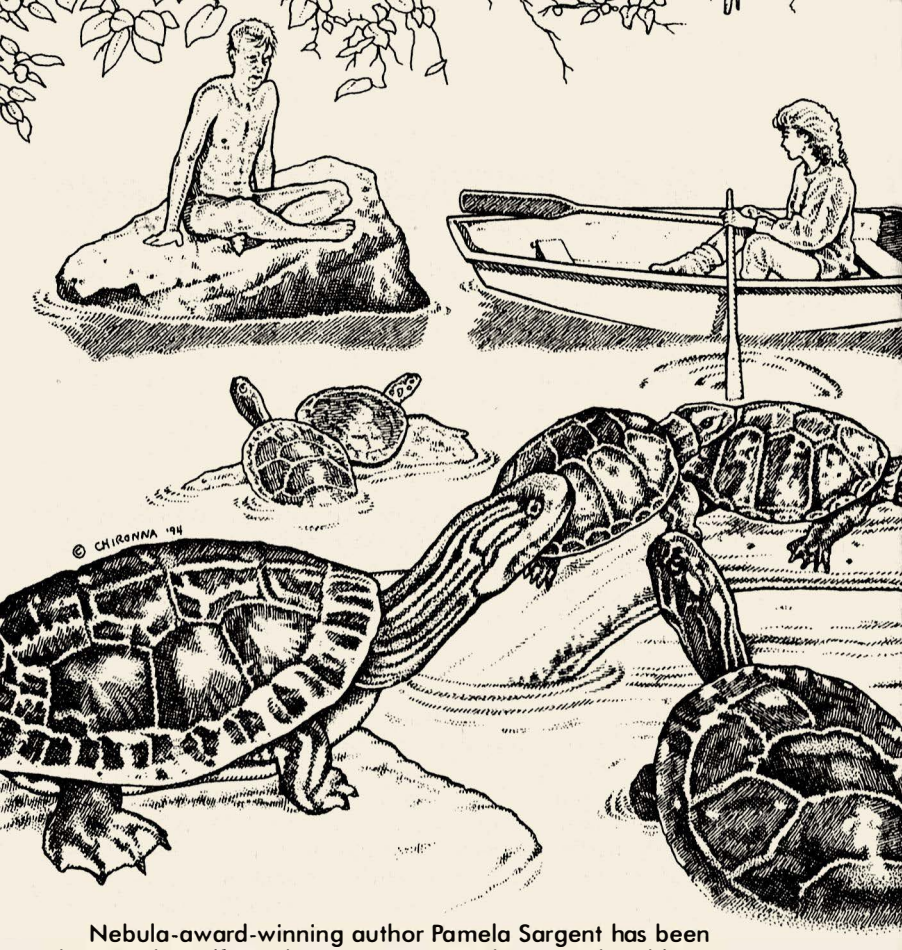
British author **Ian MacLeod** takes us to a world breathlessly waiting to celebrate the unique holiday called "Starship Day"; **Mary Rosenblum**, one of our most popular authors, finds strange dangers and even stranger wonders as she explores "The Centaur Garden"; **Holly Wade Matter** investigates the eerie secrets of "Mr. Pacifaker's House"; and **Mario Milosevic**, making his *Asimov's* debut, runs a few very bizzare "Frames" by us for Our Viewing Pleasure.

FEATURES

Robert Silverberg's "Reflections" and an array of other columns and features. Look for our July issue on sale on your newsstands on May 23, 1995.

COMING SOON

Nancy Kress, Pat Cadigan, Robert Reed, Allen Steele, Howard Waldrop, R. Garcia y Robertson, Tanith Lee, G. David Nordley, David Marusek, Harry Turtledove, Mary Rosenblum, Tom Purdom, Brian W. Aldiss, Jack McDevitt, John Brunner, and many more.



Nebula-award-winning author Pamela Sargent has been keeping herself very busy. To promote the Spanish publication of her historical novel, *Ruler of the Sky,* the Institute of North American Studies; Edhasa, her Spanish publisher; and the U.S. Information Agency sent her on a lecture tour of Spain last spring. Ms. Sargent's three new anthologies, *Women of Wonder, The Classic Years: Science Fiction by Women from the 1940s to the 1970s, Women of Wonder, The Contemporary Years: Science Fiction by Women from the 1970s to the 1990s,* and *Nebula Awards 29,* will be out soon from Harcourt Brace. Her next projects include editing *Nebula Awards 30* and *31,* and we hope to see her writing new stories for *Asimov's*.

Illustration by Ron Chironna

Pamela Sargent

AMPHIBIANS

The nurse opened the white curtain around the bed as two orderlies wheeled the stretcher out of the room. Lillian stayed in her chair, keeping out of the way.

"Mr. Haynes," the nurse murmured, leaning over the bed, "you've got to stay flat for the rest of the day. Understand? You can't lift your head."

Lillian's father did not reply.

The nurse said to her, "You make sure he doesn't sit up. Don't raise his bed, either, or he'll have an awful headache."

"I'll make sure," Lillian said.

"He's got to stay flat until tomorrow."

"I understand."

The nurse lingered near the bed. She was a stocky gray-haired woman who always addressed Lillian's father as "Mr. Haynes" and never lapsed into the artificial heartiness and familiarity of many on the hospital staff. "I think he's asleep," the nurse murmured. "Remember about not raising the bed."

"I will."

The nurse left the room. Lillian got up and went to her father's side. His eyes opened slowly, as though it was an effort for him to lift his eyelids. The skin on his face was taut against his skull; the hands folded over his chest were claws. His elongated face and bony body made her think of an El Greco painting. He allowed only Lillian's mother to feed him or to help him on with his robe, and he accepted even this assistance with a scowl.

"Hello!" a white-haired woman called out from the door. She was dressed in black, with a cleric's collar; a large gold cross hung from her neck.

Lillian moved toward the intruder, ready to head her off. "My father's asleep," she said in a low voice. "I don't want him disturbed right now."

"Could you give him one of these?" The woman handed Lillian a pamphlet with a picture of Jesus Christ on the cover. "I'll try to come back later."

Lillian shook her head. "He's really not up to visitors today. He just came back from a myelogram."

"Well, you tell him that all our prayers are with him. I'll say a special one for him tonight."

"I'll tell him."

The woman smiled warmly at Lillian, then left. Lillian moved a chair toward the head of the bed, setting it down next to her father's night table, and said, "She's gone," as she sat down.

Her father opened his eyes. She was prepared to see anger in them

again, helpless rage at all of the people willing him to live, but his brown eyes were calm.

"Thanks," he said as she dropped the pamphlet into the wastebasket. "Let that be a lesson to you, Lilly. When you check into a hospital, don't say 'none' when they ask for your religion or you'll get them all trooping in trying to win you over, all the priests and ministers and Holy Joes."

"I'll remember." Whatever her father expected to find after death, he would approach it without a spiritual guide. Death, he had told her not long ago, was a plunge into the unknown, a leap into either another existence that would have its own laws, or into nothingness. The soul, or whatever remained of a person after death, would have to discover what was there for itself. Death, according to him, was an event horizon; no signals could reach anyone here from one who had completed that irreversible passage, and no one here could aid someone making that transition. He was an engineer by training; mystical explanations that violated his view of the universe held no appeal for him.

"Damn woman'll probably be back in a day or two." His voice was barely more than a whisper. He had always had a strong voice, a baritone that carried to all of the rooms of the house where she had grown up. "Could you raise this end of the bed?"

"I can't. You have to stay flat. You had a myelogram."

"I know what I had."

"You're not supposed to sit up or raise your head. You'll have one hell of a headache if you do."

Resentment flickered in his eyes. He seemed about to argue with her, but said nothing. Lillian picked up his glass of water, positioned the straw, then guided it to his lips. "They told me when they brought you back that you should drink lots of liquids now."

He sipped some water dutifully, then turned his head away from her. He had drifted off again by the time she put the glass back on the table, his eyes closed, his clawlike hands resting on his chest. Her father had been in and out of the hospital for months now, and Lillian had been home for less than a week before her mother had taken him there to be readmitted again.

You should have come home more often. Her mother had called to tell her not to put off a visit any longer, and Lillian had heard that unspoken sentiment in her voice. You should have come home sooner. Lillian had been telling herself that all during the flight. Her father couldn't be that sick; he had never been ill in his life. Her brother Brad, who had visited a month before Lillian arrived, had warned her about how serious this illness was, that he was sure the cancer had spread even if their mother wouldn't admit it. Lillian had refused to believe Brad until she had seen for herself how frail their father was.

But she had entered into a silent conspiracy with her mother upon arriving home. There would be no talk of death; her father's illness was only a temporary setback. Doctors knew a lot more now, and some of the patients they had met in the outpatient clinic had been going through radiation or chemotherapy for years. Lillian's visit, and that of her brother Brad and his wife Celia, were only their usual summertime visits and had no other special significance. Their father would have whatever treatment was necessary and resume his normal life. They were, as Lillian's mother cheerfully pointed out, still planning to take a trip to Hawaii that coming winter. She believed that her husband would recover, and her belief would make it so.

Lillian's father had shattered their conspiracy three days ago. He could not eat or sleep; his demands for Percocet and even more powerful medications to kill the pain became more insistent. They had taken him back to the hospital. Even after that, Lillian's mother had kept the conspiracy going right up until last night.

"They told me," she had said to Lillian after a supper of cold cuts and salad neither of them had been able to finish. "They think they might be able to get him into the hospice at St. Joseph's." They had been sitting in the living room, in front of the coffee table covered with travel brochures showing palm trees and sandy beaches. "They're supposed to be good about managing the pain."

"Mother—" Lillian began.

"Damn it!" her mother whispered. "He came back to me to die."

Lillian tensed; her mother had never alluded to the separation before. That had been another conspiracy, one in which both Lillian and Brad had participated. "Your father and I need some time apart, that's all. We're not going to throw away thirty-three years, you know, we just need to sort things out."

The separation had lasted for two years. Within three months after coming back to his wife, Lillian's father had begun the cycle of hospital stays, surgery, treatments, and consulting new specialists.

"David came back to die." Lillian had never seen her mother so furious, so agonized; her small body was bent forward from the waist, her hands clutching her knees. "Oh, God." Her short white hair was longer, the curls more tangled; Lillian wondered when she had last had her hair done. "Maybe he knew, Lilly. Maybe he found out he was sick before he decided to come home."

Lillian said, "I don't believe it." She swallowed hard. "Even if it's true, don't hold it against him now. He came back to you, he wanted to be with you. That must mean something."

"Yes."

"You said things were better between you."

"They were." Lillian's mother was crying, her shoulders shaking. Lillian touched her tentatively, then slipped an arm around her; she wasn't used to seeing her mother cry. Laura Haynes despised crybabies. She had not cried while telling Lillian and Brad that their father had gone off with a younger woman. Crying, after all, would not bring him back. A harsh rasping sound came from her, and it seemed that all the tears she had never allowed herself before were forcing themselves from her.

As Lillian gazed at her sleeping father, she wished that she had told him that she had forgiven him for his lapses, that she knew he regretted them and had tried to make up for them. There was a lot she hadn't said to him. They had both acquired the habit of misunderstanding each other, after having once been so close. She should have said what she had to say while he was still lucid, but the conspiracy she had entered into with her mother had kept her from speaking: he would get better, and they would have plenty of time to talk. Now his mind was so fogged with drugs that he could not follow a conversation for more than a minute or so.

He stirred, then lifted his head slightly. "Don't sit up," Lillian said. "Can I get you anything?" He did not reply. "I may go up to the lake in a couple of days," she went on, "just to check on things. Mom says there's deadwood to clear, and the grass needs mowing. The ducks are probably living on our dock by now."

His eyes focused on her. "Don't feed them. If you do, they'll take over the place."

"I know."

"Laura should go up there with you." He was silent for a while. "Tell your mother to go up with you and stay a day or two. She needs the rest. Tell her—" His face tensed for a moment. "Look out for the turtles. Tell her to see if they're out on the stumps. You look out for them, too—check up on them while you're up there."

"Sure." Lillian's parents owned a summer place, a tiny bungalow with four small rooms, a bathroom, and an attic; they usually stayed up there from May until the middle of September. Her father, while he still had his business, had commuted from the bungalow to his office during the summers. He had to be missing the place. Even during the separation, he had managed to spend weekends with a friend who had a cabin on the same quiet bay of the lake.

"Go up with your mother for a day," he was saying, "and tell me about the turtles. Promise me that. I want to know if they're still around."

"Mom won't go," Lillian murmured. "She'll want to come in and look after you."

"Brad's arriving tomorrow, isn't he? Think he and Celia can take over guard duty."

She had forgotten that her brother and his wife were coming, and was surprised that he remembered it. She leaned closer; his brown eyes were calm and alert. Now was the time, while his mind was clear, to tell him that she had forgiven him, that all the old grudges were forgotten. But then he moaned, and his eyes slid shut.

Lillian sat in silence, not wanting to disturb him, not moving from the chair until her mother arrived.

The summer before, up at the lake, Lillian had noticed a change in her father. Usually he was up before dawn, to go trolling for fish or to swim in the nude before other people were out on the water, but that summer, Lillian would wake to hear her mother calling to him from the kitchen. "David, David." After a few minutes, her mother would go to the half-open door of the other bedroom and call to him some more. "David." Often he didn't get up until she and her mother were finishing their second cup of coffee.

Soon she noticed that her father's hair was grayer, and that he had lost weight. He did not take the rowboat out for exercise, and no longer explored the shoreline in their canoe. He used only the small outboard motorboat, and went no farther than the middle of the bay, where he would sit and stare toward the cove and the tree stumps where the turtles came out.

To spot the small turtles on the stumps, and to get as close as possible to them in a boat, had become a game. The turtles never came out in the morning, when that side of the bay was in shadow. If the sky was slightly hazy, they might come out to bask on the stumps and the large rock near them, but too many clouds or too much sunshine would keep them under water. The best time to see them was in the late afternoon, and that was when Lillian and her mother would row across to the cove, then drift toward the stumps, using the oars only to steer the rowboat.

From a distance, the grayish-brown shells of the turtles were barely visible against the bark of the stumps, and to get close to them required stealth. At the slightest sound, the soft plop of an oar or a voice above the sound of a whisper, Lillian would hear splashes and see sudden blossoms of water where a frightened turtle had vanished below the surface. The object of the game was to get as close to the turtles as possible without startling them; a complete triumph involved maneuvering the rowboat among the stumps without scaring away any of the turtles basking in the afternoon light.

Lillian's father was a master of the turtle game. Whenever he rowed across the bay with Lillian or her mother, the turtles were always out, and he usually made it past the tree stumps without scaring off more than a couple of the creatures. Often he could get close enough to a stump

to reach toward a turtle with one hand, bringing his fingers within a few inches of the shell before drawing back.

That summer, he hadn't seemed interested in looking for the turtles. Then, two days before Lillian was to leave, her father, looking drawn and tired, had asked her if she would row him across the bay.

His request shocked her, but she said nothing as they walked down to the dock. Her father never allowed anyone else to row the boat when he was aboard; he was a reluctant passenger, the kind of man who insisted on handling the oars, steering the motorboat, driving the car. She suddenly feared that her mother had not been telling the truth about his recent brief hospital stay. "Just some small tumors—your father'll be back on his feet in no time."

He had brought a drink with him. Lillian helped him into the boat, then rowed away from the dock. As they neared the middle of the bay, on water as still as glass, he said, "I never brought Jenny up to the lake. I just wanted you to know that. She never came up here when I stayed at Stan Berger's place."

"Well." Lillian pulled at the oars. "Mom must have been glad to hear that."

"Truth is, Jenny didn't much like quiet spots, especially not on weekends—she wanted to be going out to dinner, going to parties with a lot of loud music, seeing friends. When she wasn't partying, she was networking. We didn't have a whole lot in common, as it turned out."

Lillian said nothing. She did not want to hear about Jenny. She had always been careful, when calling up her father, to speak to Jenny courteously if coldly whenever she answered the phone, knowing that was the mature way to behave. Lillian would not allow Jenny to come between her and her father. But it had been easier, after a while, not to call so often. Jenny, she could not help thinking, was as much her rival as her mother's.

"Too much time," Lillian's father said.

"What?"

"Too much time. I shouldn't have sold the business. Gave me too much free time to sit around feeling old and wanting more excitement. And then I find out that there isn't enough time."

"You've got lots of time, Dad."

"At my age, Lilly, you see how little there is." He sipped his drink. That was another change. "Start drinking before five," he always said, "and pretty soon you're checking into Betty Ford and going to AA meetings." It was almost five now, and he had finished two bourbons before even getting into the boat. His lips drew back from his teeth and she saw that his jaws were tightly clenched, as if he were in pain.

"Dad," she said.

"You may start running out of time, too. When are you going to marry Martin? What are you waiting for, anyway?"

"I don't know," she said. There wasn't any good reason for not having married him by now. They were in love, they were comfortable with each other, they had been migrating between his apartment and hers for nearly four years, and he got along with her parents, who liked him. Nothing stood in their way except her fear that marriage might change them, alter their emotional environment somehow. She knew what she had now; she might fail at marriage. The bond between her parents had been strong, but had not kept them from separating.

"Sometimes you have to make a leap," her father said, "without knowing where you're going to land, or whether you can ever get back to where you were."

"Were you making that kind of leap when you went off with Jenny?" Lillian regretted the question immediately.

"No. I thought I was, but I wasn't. Coming back to your mother was a lot harder." He sighed. "Jenny said that if I left her, it was over, and I didn't know if Laura would want me back."

They were nearing the stumps where the turtles liked to bask in the sun. Lillian rested the oars on the boat's gunwales, letting the craft drift.

"Turtles," he continued, "don't take those kinds of risks."

Lillian smiled; her father grinned back at her. "Seems to me they do," she said. "They risk something every time they come out of the water. Or when they jump back in."

"No, they don't. They just go back and forth, out of the water and into it again. They can't make up their minds whether to stay or go, live underwater or come out on land for good. You're doing the same thing with Martin."

"You're wrong." He had no right to tell her how to handle her life with Martin, not after his own mistakes. "Anyway, marriage isn't exactly a thriving institution these days."

"Whether you're legally married or not doesn't matter. You're going back and forth, Lilly. You know Martin won't break it off because he loves you, but you don't want to commit yourself. You've got something that isn't one thing or the other. Marry him, move in with him, or break up with him, but don't leave him hanging. It isn't fair."

She was about to retort, then saw him clench his teeth. "What's the matter, Dad?"

"Nothing's the matter. They got it all—just takes time to recover." He lifted his head and motioned with his glass. "We're closing in on them," he said softly.

Lillian changed direction, pushing the oars away from herself. She had learned that approaching the tree stumps backward, stern first, was

the only way to sneak up on the turtles without disturbing them. The turtles were out basking in the hazy light, as she had known they would be; her father was with her. She narrowed her eyes and counted six, the largest one no bigger than her hand. Their heads protruded from their shells, welcoming the sun.

She steered the boat toward the large rock that lay ahead, then slowly turned the craft until she was facing the stumps. Sometimes she almost had the feeling that the turtles knew when her father was in the boat. She and her mother could approach silently, making sure that the oars moved soundlessly, and still frighten the turtles into the water long before the boat was close to the stumps.

They drifted closer. The water was shallow here; Lillian steered the boat away from the long tangled roots of the stumps. This bay was usually quiet; waterskiers and people with large cabin cruisers tended to keep to the more open areas of the lake. Now the bay was more peaceful than ever, the water without the hint of a ripple, the air so clear that the green of the pines seemed deeper, the bumps and markings on their trunks more sharply etched. The world had come to a stop; for a moment, Lillian felt as though the boat was embedded in the water, the oars trapped in a solid crystalline substance.

Her father stared at the turtles, unmoving, his fine-featured face a mask. He smiled then, and lifted a hand; time started again as the boat drifted forward. They glided past the stump, watching the turtle hugging the rotting bark.

"You've still got the touch," Lillian whispered.

"Guess so." He held his nearly empty glass high as they left the cove.

That was the last time she had gone to see the turtles with her father.

Lillian thought of her father as she rowed toward the cove. She had driven to the lake alone; even with Brad and Celia in town, her mother had refused to come. Lillian had meant to clear some deadwood, chop it up, tie it in bundles, then haul it in her car to the road where it could be picked up. But the weather had grown hot, and Martin had called, staying on the phone for nearly an hour, patient as always, missing her. He would join her next week, pretending that he was just coming for a visit rather than to see her father for the last time.

She could take care of the deadwood tomorrow. Her father would expect her to visit the turtles' cove; he had been oddly insistent about that. She would tell him what she had seen, and pretend that he would soon be able to visit the turtles himself.

She pulled at the oars, heedless of where she was headed until she neared the cove. The turtles probably wouldn't be out today; the sun was too bright, and a warm breeze was rippling the surface of the lake. She

knew what would happen while she was up there. Brad would go to St. Joseph's and hound its administrators until he got their father admitted to the hospice. She would have to accept the inevitable then.

Lillian settled the oars inside the boat and drifted, squinting as she peered at the stumps. The turtles had fooled her; two of them were on the nearest stump, their shells dark shiny spots against the wood. The boat cut closer. Other turtles were resting on the stumps, some just above the water line, others nestled against moss. She had never seen so many of them here before.

"Haven't lost the touch." She heard her father's voice clearly; he might have been in the boat with her, gazing at the turtles from the stern. "They always come out for me, Lilly." The current carried her boat between two stumps and around another. She held her hand over a turtle as she passed, waiting for it to be startled by her shadow and to leap into the water, but the turtle did not move.

Lillian began to count the turtles as she floated around the cove, then gave up. This would be something to tell him. He would have to get better now, if only so that he could come up to the lake and see this crowd of turtles for himself.

The breeze suddenly died. For a moment, tears blurred her vision. She rummaged in the pocket of her shorts for a tissue and wiped at her eyes, then looked back at the tree stumps. Tiny sprays of water flew up; she caught a glimpse of one turtle as it leaped. All of the others had disappeared below the surface. She peered over the side of the boat, but the water had grown still, becoming a mirror reflecting her head against the sky and hiding what lay below.

Her father's voice said in memory, "Tell me if you see them," and she suddenly knew that he was dead.

Lillian grabbed the oars and rowed back across the bay. She was pulling the boat up alongside the dock when she heard the telephone ringing in the distance, up in the bungalow.

Lillian was numb after her father's death, clinging to Martin for solace when he arrived; even Brad seemed unable to handle the simplest tasks. It was their mother who arranged for the cremation and finally convinced the funeral director that her husband had wanted no service and only a simple interment with his family and close friends in attendance.

By autumn, Lillian's mother had closed up her house. She spent three weeks with Lillian, then flew on to Denver to stay with Brad and Celia for a while. By winter, she had returned home, deciding that she would stay in her house. Her closest friends were there, and she wanted to be in the places she had shared with her husband. She would remember him, but she had let him go, and would not dwell on her grief; he would

not have wanted that. She planned to keep the bungalow, too, and to spend the summers there as she always had.

Lillian knew that her mother was still mourning deeply, however well she concealed her sorrow. She had said her farewells, as had Brad; Lillian's father had apparently had a few minutes of consciousness and lucidity before his sudden and quiet passing. Lillian had missed her chance.

Her father came to her in dreams, sitting down to chat with her; she would wake up convinced that he was alive after all. Other dreams carried her home, where he greeted her and the logic of her dream revealed that his death was a misunderstanding, a false assumption on her part. He was always in a lighted place, a bright room or a sunny garden. She spoke to him, and he understood; their disagreements were past.

She kept expecting the worst of her grief to fade, but it remained with her, washing over her in sudden waves, shocking her again and again with the reality of his death. She struggled in her dreams, moving toward the lighted places where her father was waiting, only to be pulled back once more into the darkness.

The summer after her father's death, Lillian took two weeks off to visit her mother. A storm broke as she was driving away from the airport in her rented car; it was still raining when she arrived at the bungalow. The turtles would not be out on the stumps this afternoon; her disappointment at having to miss them surprised her.

Her mother looked as well as she had sounded over the phone. The hospital bills, still coming in, were even worse than expected, but their insurance was covering most of them. She had not been to the memorial park since her husband's interment; she felt closer to David here, at the lake.

Lillian had been worried about her mother. Now she saw that, despite her mother's grief, she had accepted her husband's death. Lillian sat on the porch, watching the rain pock the wrinkled gray surface of the lake, and felt the mingled rage, regret, and sorrow that thoughts of her father often brought.

Her mother, sitting with her, looked up from her knitting. "Is Martin going to visit us while you're here?"

"He won't have time," Lillian replied. "He's got a layout to finish, and then a magazine illustration he's already late on. And—" She took a breath. "He's thinking of moving to Seattle. He might have a definite job offer there. It's only a two-year contract to teach, but it'd be perfect for him—he'd have enough time to do his own work and maybe try some new projects without worrying about money for a while."

"And what would you do?"

"I don't know. What do you think?"

"I wish I could tell you what to do, Lilly, but this is something you have to decide for yourself."

Maybe Martin wouldn't get the job. Lillian hoped for that, despising herself for the wish. Even if the offer came through, she could talk Martin out of leaving, and everything would be the same.

She knew what her father would have told her. Go with him or break it off. Don't leave him dangling; make a leap one way or the other. For a moment, she almost expected him to appear on the porch, scowling his disapproval even while telling her she would have to make her own decisions.

The weather report had predicted rain and lower than normal temperatures for days, but daybreak brought sunshine and clear skies. Lillian spent the morning running errands for her mother in the nearby small town and part of the afternoon swimming. The weather held, and she thought she might be able to spot the turtles if she rowed over to the cove.

She found her mother weeding the flower bed at the side of the bungalow. "Think I'll check out the turtles," Lillian said.

Laura looked up. "You go ahead, Lilly." She leaned back on her heels. "I rowed over last month, just after opening the place. Never saw so many turtles before—they must be multiplying."

"Probably just part of the natural cycle," Lillian said. She thought of the last time she had seen them, just before Brad called to tell her that their father had died.

She went inside, pulled a T-shirt on over her swimsuit, then hurried down to the dock. By the time she had rowed out to the middle of the bay, the breeze had grown more gentle and more white clouds dotted the sky. She had seen the turtles before on days like this; she might get lucky. Somehow, it was important for her to see them.

The turtles were out. Lillian saw them as she rowed closer to the stumps. Two of them had even climbed out onto the large rock that jutted from the water.

"They always come out," her father said, "especially when I'm around." Her memory was playing tricks on her again, making her feel that he was alive. Lillian drew the oars inside the boat; when she looked up, her father was sitting on the rock.

"I've been waiting for you to show up," he said in his resonant baritone.

Her fingers tightened around the oars. Her father's graying hair was flat against his head, as if he had just come out of the water, and droplets of water glistened on his arms and chest. His stocky frame was naked. This was not the emaciated man resembling an El Greco who had died

in a hospital bed, but the sturdy man he had once been, the one she saw in her dreams.

"Dad," she said.

The boat drifted toward the rock, then floated motionless on the water, as though the current carrying it had suddenly ceased to flow. "What's going on?" she said.

"You shouldn't be so shocked, Lilly. We've been having an ongoing discussion for the past year, haven't we?"

"I suppose we have. I usually can't remember what you've said after I wake up."

"Maybe you'll remember more if you talk to me while you're conscious," he said. "How long are you going to be here?"

"Two weeks."

"Longer than usual." There was a slight edge to his voice. She thought of all the excuses she had given in the past for not coming home, for not being able to stay for more than a few days. Work was piling up in her studio, she was busy with a new ad campaign, the apartment was being repainted and she had to be there to make sure the job was done right. They had all been sound excuses, and often she had been relieved that she had such excuses to offer.

"I wish I'd made more time now," she said.

"It's past. Don't beat yourself up about it."

Oddly, she found herself accepting his presence, as she did when he appeared in her dreams. Even seeing him in the nude seemed natural enough; he had always preferred swimming without trunks whenever he could get away with it, and there was no reason for a spirit who had shed the material world to be clothed. The two turtles near him remained on the rock; those on the tree stumps were still. She was surprised that she could talk to her father without disturbing them.

"Mom said she came over here last month," Lillian said.

"I know. I saw her."

"Did you try to talk to her?"

"No, I didn't. Laura did her mourning, most of it, while I was sick, especially during the last couple of months before I died. You probably don't know this, but it nearly destroyed her. She's accepted things now—I don't have to say anything to her. Don't have to talk to your brother, either. Celia and he are expecting, you know. I'll finally be a grandpa."

How could he know that? Brad had told her only a week ago; even their mother didn't know yet. But of course her father would know Celia was pregnant, because Lillian knew it, and the only logical explanation for her father's presence here was that she was dreaming of him even though she felt awake.

"I was glad when Brad told me," she said.

"He's taking a leap into the unknown. No matter how much you think you know, nothing really prepares you for being a father or mother."

"Why are you here?" she asked. "How can this be happening?"

"Persistence," he replied.

"You always were kind of stubborn."

"I didn't mean that kind of persistence." He leaned back on one elbow. She stretched a hand toward him, wanting to touch him and assure herself that he was real, but drew back. "I meant that I'm persisting somehow. Something pulled me here, as if this place is some kind of juncture. Maybe it's just that I enjoyed this spot so much. So here I am, persisting. Probably happens to other folks after they're dead—maybe that's why people see strange things in different places."

It was like him to try to find a rational explanation. Someone as skeptical and pragmatic as her father would never believe that he was simply a ghost, a supernatural event with no natural cause.

"And maybe," he continued, "you're holding me here. Laura's made her peace with my death, and Brad's bringing a new life into the world. You're still hanging on to me, Lilly."

Before she could speak, he was on his feet. He leaped from the rock, and as his muscular body disappeared below the surface of the water, the turtles vanished in a series of splashes.

She leaned over the side of the boat, but could see nothing except tree roots and grassy growth on the muddy lake bottom. The water was shallow here; the small turtles could conceal themselves in the mud, but her father should have been visible.

The wind rose swiftly; the bay, so calm before, was growing choppy. She began to row across the bay, toward her mother's dock.

Lillian dreamed of her father that night. She recalled little of the dream when she woke, but felt uneasy, certain that he had been trying to tell her something important. He had spoken of being embedded in reality somehow, unable to move forward and powerless to step back.

The clock on the kitchen wall told her that it was only six o'clock. She made some instant coffee, and was sitting at the kitchen table when she remembered part of her dream.

He was afraid; that was what he was trying to tell her. At least that was part of it. "You're holding me here, Lilly." He had said that in the dream, too.

She dressed quickly, without waking her mother, and went down to the dock. The cove across the bay was still dark, cloaked by the shadows of the trees lining the bank, but she knew that her father would be there.

She spotted the turtles when her boat was twenty feet from the stumps. They were harder to see in the early morning light, but they

were there, in spite of the lack of sunlight and the coolness of the air. As she watched, her father emerged from the water, shook himself, and settled on the rock.

"Good morning, Lilly," he said. "You usually aren't up this early."

"You usually were, so I guessed I might find you here. I remembered what you told me last night, that you're afraid."

"I am, Lilly. It's why I keep going back and forth like this, coming here, going back. What I wanted was to stop suffering. That's what I remember from the hospital, wanting the pain to be over. I thought that meant that I wanted to die. Now my pain's gone, and I realize that I didn't want to die after all, not then, not so soon."

She held out an arm, but was still a little too far from the rock to touch him. "What's going to happen?" she asked.

"Might persist for a while. I used to think, once I was dead, I'd have the answer about things. Know what I mean? Either I'd find out about the afterwards, or I'd know there wasn't any just before I winked out. I was wrong about that—I still don't know, and I'm afraid to find out."

"I never thought you were afraid of much, Dad."

"Starting the business—that scared me. Keeping my job would have been safer. I was also afraid of getting old, which is how I ended up with Jenny, I suppose. And I was terrified of going back to your mother and asking her to forgive me." He looked down at a turtle resting on the rock near him. "It would have been easier not to do that. I didn't want to face her knowing she had every right to turn me away. It would have been a lot easier not to try to go back, not to take that risk. Same for Laura. She could have refused to take me back, and nobody would have criticized her for it. She could have kept her pride. I would have been dead by now anyway, and maybe she would have found somebody else in the meantime."

"Dad—" She was afraid to ask the question. "Did you know you were sick before you went back to Mom? Did you go back to her because you thought you were going to die?"

"Is that what you think?"

"I told Mom that even if it were true, it didn't matter, that it would just mean you wanted to be with her at the end."

"As a matter of fact," he said, "I didn't know. I went back thinking I'd have time to make things up to her. I didn't believe it even after the first tests came back. If I'd been religious, I would have thought God was punishing me. Ridiculous, isn't it? He would have been punishing your mother just as much, and she didn't deserve it." He paused. "Frankly, that was one of the riskiest things I ever did, begging Laura to take me back. Ever stop to think of what might have happened if she hadn't?"

"I guess not," Lillian said.

"She would have been tearing at herself now, thinking of how she'd let me die alone. And you kids would have been bitter and angry about the whole mess—no way to mend it, no way to settle things in your minds."

"I forgave you, Dad. I didn't get a chance to say it before you died."

"I know. Thought that might be holding me here, giving you a chance to say that to me. Maybe that was part of it, but the rest of it's my own fear."

"Maybe you wouldn't be afraid," she heard herself say, "if I could let go."

His brown eyes gazed steadily at her. "You still haven't done anything about Martin. You'll let him dangle until even he finally gives up, and then you can tell yourself it wouldn't have worked out anyway. You'll go back and forth, climbing out of the water for a little bit and then retreating below again."

"He loves me," she said. "He'll wait if that's what I want." For the first time, she was no longer so sure that Martin would wait.

The turtles disappeared into the water. Her father slid from the rock, following them.

Rain came later that day, continuing into the night. It was a soaking rain, and if the weather followed its usual pattern, the rain would fall steadily for the next day or two. Lillian would not be able to return to the cove. She felt relieved about that, and then guilty for feeling relieved.

But the rain had stopped by morning, and Lillian knew that she would have to see her father again.

He climbed out strongly onto the rock as soon as her boat was among the stumps; the turtles were out, even though there was no sun in the overcast sky to warm them. "Hello, Lilly," he said. "Come to any decisions yet?"

"About what?"

"About your life."

"It's none of your business what I do with my life."

"In a way, that's true, especially now that I'm dead. I mean there's not a whole lot a naked dead man can do for his daughter. You're an adult, self-supporting, living in a city a thousand miles away. Probably thought you were making a leap into the unknown when you moved there."

"You always resented that," she said. "You didn't want me to move so far from home."

"That was true at first—I'll admit it. Then I realized that was part of being a parent, letting your kids go. But you never really made the break into full adulthood. You had your life, but you still called home all the time when you needed something. You were independent, but you didn't

have any real responsibilities. You talked about doing your art and taking some chances, then got that job at the ad agency."

"It's steady work."

"And that's safer." He glanced at a turtle as it crawled closer to him on the rock. "Not like what Martin has to deal with." He gazed at her steadily. "Can't be easy for him sometimes. He must feel the way I did when I was starting the business. I used to wake up with the sweats in the early days, terrified, thinking everything would go down the tubes and that I was an idiot to leave my job."

She had never understood why her father, a businessman with an engineering firm, got along so well with Martin, a free-lance artist with whom he had little in common. Now it seemed obvious. They had both rejected the safer path to go off on their own.

"He hasn't called since I got here," Lillian said. "That's unusual for him."

"Maybe he's busy. Maybe he has some hard decisions to make." Her father stood up on the rock. "I can't stay here, Lilly. Are you going to keep on coming out here to ask me for advice? We could go on like this for years, assuming I keep showing up, that I just don't fade away after a while."

She tensed, afraid of losing him again. "Does it bother you?" she asked. "Do you feel cold or uncomfortable or hungry—"

"Caught," he said. "That's how I feel, stuck between one thing and something else. It isn't unpleasant, it's just—"

"Stay," she said fervently.

"You'd like that, wouldn't you? I'd still be around to give you advice. You wouldn't have to get on with your life. You could just keep going back and forth between pretending you're an adult and still being a child."

Before she could reply, he had slipped into the water and disappeared below the surface.

If she knew what lay ahead for him, maybe she could have let him go. Lillian dozed, trapped between sleep and consciousness. But she didn't know, and neither did he. He might leave the cove where he had managed to persist to encounter nothingness, to die completely, to vanish in every sense.

"That's what terrifies me," he said in her dream. "Keep wondering if I'm better off hanging on to what I've got now, haunting the lake. Felt that way sometimes in the hospital, when the pain wasn't so bad, felt that life might be worth hanging on to even if—"

She was having trouble hearing him. "Dad," she said, but he was fading; the sunny garden where he was sitting darkened. Lillian swam through the darkness, afraid.

* * *

The telephone on the kitchen wall rang while Lillian was having her coffee. Her mother answered, murmured a few courtesies, then handed the receiver to her. "It's Martin," she said.

Lillian had guessed that already. "Lilly?" Martin's voice said in her ear. Her mother was retreating to the porch, to give her privacy. "How's everything?"

"Fine."

"Laura sounded good. Is she doing all right?"

"Yes, she is."

"Listen—it came through, that job in Seattle."

Lillian's hand tightened around the receiver. "You're going to go, aren't you."

"Not without you. I want you to come with me."

"I've got a job."

"You can find another one. Better still, you can use the time to do more of your own stuff. We'll get a place together. I know some people out there who can help you get free-lance work."

"And what happens after your contract runs out?"

"Guess we'll see, won't we? Nothing's certain now anyway."

"I don't know what to say," Lillian said.

"You don't have to say anything right now, but you might as well think it over. I have to give them an answer by the time you're back."

She could talk him out of going. He wouldn't want to go without her. Things could stay exactly as they were.

She said, "I'll think about it."

"I'd better go. Promised I'd get this illustration in first thing this morning. I love you, Lilly."

"I love you, too."

She hung up and went out to the porch. Her mother set down her cup of coffee and looked up at her. "Your father always liked Martin."

"I know," Lillian responded. She was about to say that Martin's job in Seattle had come through, then changed her mind. A fog hung over the lake below; the tree-covered hills across the bay were veiled by a misty curtain. "Think I'll take the rowboat out."

"In this weather? It might be dangerous."

"I doubt it. The big boats don't come into the bay, and nobody else'll be out." She had to go to the cove.

She put on pants and a sweatshirt. The air was cold for this time of year, making her shiver. She rowed across the bay, thinking of what to tell her father, wondering what he would say to her.

Despite the mists and cold, the turtles were out. Her father was already sitting on the rock, looking more like a Michelangelo painting

than an El Greco. "I knew you'd come," he said. "Martin had something important to tell you."

"How did you know?" she asked.

"Because you know, and it means you have a hard decision to make, one that would change a lot of things. I knew you'd want to ask me what I thought. Can't give you an answer, because it's none of my damned business—it's your problem." He rested his arms on his knees. Despite his nakedness, he seemed unperturbed by the cool, damp air. "Anyway, I've got my own problems. I need some help from you."

"I can't help you, Dad. What can I possibly do for you now?"

"Bothers you, doesn't it, having me ask you for help. Never asked my little girl for any help in my life, but now that I'm dead, I need it. Help me, Lilly—tell me you can go on without me. I might be able to head on to the next stage if you'll just give me a push."

"You don't even know if there is a next stage," she said. "You don't know if there's anything at all."

"I have to take that chance, or keep going back and forth like an amphibian forever. You've got to help me, Lilly. Tell me you can let go."

The mist was beginning to lift, but her face still felt wet; then she realized she was crying. "Dad, I don't want you to go. If I could know there'd be something for you, maybe I could—"

"You can't know. I don't know. I have to take the chance." He rose to his feet and held out his arms. The cove seemed muffled in silence; she could not even hear the water lapping at the nearby shore. The bay had become solid, an unmoving wrinkled gray surface; the mist felt as thick as foam.

"Lilly," he called out.

"Goodbye!" The farewell tore itself from her throat. "Goodbye!" She clutched at the oars, wanting to row toward the rock and grab him, but forcing herself to be still. "I love you. Goodbye, Dad, goodbye."

He disappeared into the fog, his limbs and torso fading as the mists enveloped him. Lillian saw him smile before he vanished. Maybe that meant that there was something ahead, that he had glimpsed a world he could now enter. She would hold on to that hope, even knowing that there would be no certainty for her until she faced such a passage herself.

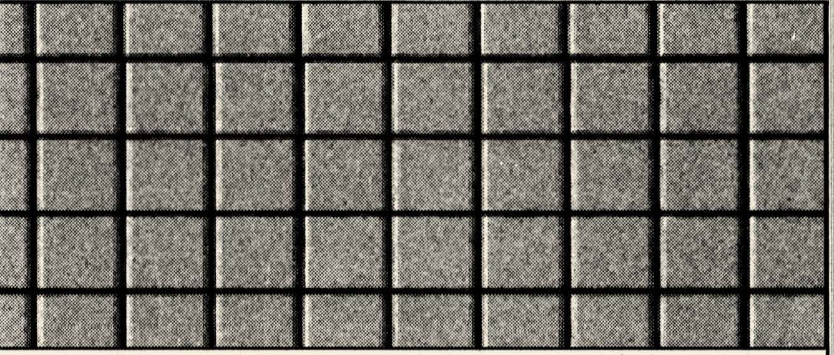
Water slapped at the boat's hull. In the east, over the hills behind her mother's bungalow, the sun was a pale disk floating in the haze. The turtles were gone, but she had heard no splashes as they entered the water. This was not the weather for them. Perhaps they would come out when the mist cleared.

She rowed back across the bay. In an hour or so, Martin would be back at his apartment, and she would call him then to tell him what she had decided to do. ●

THE SOURING OF THE MALL

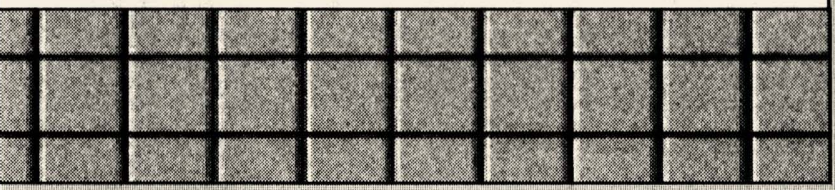
William John Watkins

Wherever the world is shaped by the hand of man,
a resonator forms for psychic pain.
Tile especially reflects and amplifies,
and concrete, porous as a sponge, collects
the waves we radiate when our emotions wax intense.



The Mall is large enough for herds
of wounded beasts that, passing through,
give off the emanations of their ache
—the child arm-hung and slapped for something spilled,
the couples bickering, faces close enough to bite,
the fat girl waiting by the fountain for some guy
in Harley black who lied and never comes,
the wife betrayed whose credit card has bounced,
spinsters searching for obligatory gifts
for fertile sisters they would gladly kill,
and all the wash of childish greed
no generosity could ever satisfy.

Slowly, like spilt milk splashed up the corner wall
where the cleaner knows no one will ever look and leaves,
the Mall sours and the crowds drop off,
the lights seem always dim or much too bright,
and late one night the cashier at the record store,
some big-haired Jersey girl on her way out
through the gritty corridor employees use
to cut a minute off their walk,
weaving like mice among the dumpsters stacked
for early morning pick up, meets
the bloody rape, the even bloodier knife.



Two lovers engage in a dangerous dance
of romance and treachery in...

SCORPION'S KISS

J. Brooke

Illustration by Steve Cavallo

At an outdoor table in a cafe on the Boulevard Saint-Germain he first mentioned all the ways they could kill you.

He spoke quietly, and none of the *boulevardiers* heard a word of it.

"Sometimes they use a virus," he said. "If they get a sample of your DNA, they can engineer a polyhedron just fifty nanometers across. Inside, a microscopic strand of RNA with your name on it."

"But how do they transmit the infection?" she asked, sipping her cognac.

"A vector. Usually, it's a bacterium—*escherichia coli,* the bacteria that live in your intestine. Or else they'll modify a rhinovirus—the common cold—to piggyback the first virus. Two-phase infection . . . that's a neat trick. One virus helping another—neither fatal, but when both infect the host. . . ."

Then he snapped his fingers and drank the rest of his Gran Marnier. "Like that," he said. "Your tongue goes black. Locomotor ataxia. Blindness. Then you're dead."

He liked to talk about shapes. Curves and arcs—trajectories of power. "One molecule broker goes up," he told her while autumn leaves tumbled around their feet and the passersby strolled in pairs. "Another goes down. . . . One night *les flic* stumble across a corpse in an alley, every capillary burst. Looks like a spiderweb under the skin."

He liked to talk to her while he waited for the people he did business with. She didn't ask what the business was; she didn't ask about any of it. Instead she'd sit there and run her tongue around the slick edge of her glass, tasting the last dew of cognac, and watch his brown eyes flash in the dusk.

He looked like the statue of Julius Caesar in the Pantheon, she told him. His face all planes and sharp angles, and nothing but steel in his brown eyes.

When the streetlights opened their petals and the seashell buildings of Paris, each one a living thing, began to flicker with green firefly light, he told her that her dark hair and her amazingly blue eyes put him in mind of a sea-nymph.

"A Provençal sea-nymph," she said, "named Simone."

"Naiad or not," he told her, "when they get a sample of your DNA, it's all up. They've got your genetic code. It's over. That's all she wrote."

"So?" she asked, playing with her glass of cognac.

"So you don't let them get your DNA."

"What happens if you cut yourself?"

"You burn the bandages. Drink out of a glass?" He held up his snifter of Gran Marnier. "Wipe it off afterward."

And he took out his handkerchief and polished the rim of the goblet very carefully.

That made her smile, but he didn't smile. He never looked quite at her—always, when they sat together at the small tables on the Paris sidewalks, he seemed to be staring *past* her . . . as though searching the crowds for someone. An old friend, perhaps.

"Sure," he said when she asked him outright. "An old friend." And his lips thinned and tightened in that way of his that she knew meant he was amused, but in a cold way, the way he was amused sometimes at the centaur fights.

She did not like the fights at first. It was something she got used to.

That evening he took her along and she didn't say anything. At the edge of the sand pit, she held onto the brass railing with both hands, her knuckles white, and she watched two glistening creatures hack each other to death with machetes.

She told him afterward she'd held the railing to keep from fainting.

But he said, no, it was because the smell of blood excited her.

He knew her, he said, better than she knew herself. And, after a time, the smoky warehouses became familiar. She shouldered her way through the crowd of howling men and women to the front row, and the sand pit seemed a venue like any other. . . . In time, she too yelled *kill him* when the two magnificent creatures wheeled and lunged at each other, and once the game-master even gave her the steel spike to finish off a loser.

She looked into the centaur's eyes, brown like a horse's and deep as rivers, and she drove the spike home. The crowd roared with a single raw throat.

She didn't ask where the centaurs gestated.

Later that night, she did not ask which black-market lab grew them, or whose DNA design gave them their strength and inhuman grace. She didn't even ask if the fights were illegal.

Instead, she came home to their apartment on the West Bank, and stood in front of the mirror. She looked at her silk blouse, speckled with rust-spots of dried blood, and she brushed her hair in the cold blue light from the tanks scattered throughout the living room.

Sometimes the shadowy shapes inside the tanks shifted and slithered; sometimes she glimpsed claws and mandibles.

She didn't ask about the tanks either.

That year, they wintered in Mycenae, and she walked with him on the coral cliffs at the edge of the sea, tasting the salt wind that blew in from the Mediterranean. She walked alone while he spoke with the Australians who sometimes visited their villa.

She did not like the Australians. She told him they had no life in their eyes. She mentioned, while the two of them stood on the cliffs in the hot sunset, that she did not think the men who visited him would bleed.

"They'd bleed," he said, and threw a stone into the breakers that battered the cliffs.

Afterward, in the evenings, he used to take her with quiet ferocity and use her body as though it were a precision instrument. Instead of passion, she felt elation . . . as though she were a scalpel in the hands of a surgeon, or an icepick in an assassin's fist.

Afterward, while he was asleep, she stood at the window and looked at the black sea blown white by winter storms, and she touched her lips where he had bitten her, and she licked the wound, tasting the sweet sting of blood.

In the summer of that year, they moved from Paris to Marseille, and then to Madrid, and then back to Paris again. At the Paris Opera, attending the premiere of a new menagerie, she listened to him explain all the ways that a man could die.

In their private box, he leaned over and slipped his hand under the chenille of her blouse and then he spoke of the azimuths and declinations of betrayal. "Sometimes," he whispered, "if you want to kill a man you release a were-molecule. . . ."

He saw the question in her eyes.

"A protein harmless by itself," he answered, "but lethal with a coadjuvant molecule—like insulin."

He counted off the names of members of the underground economy who'd died that way last year (diabetics all): and she closed her eyes and let herself become a universe of tingling skin.

In the darkness of the Opera, gorgons sang. Onstage, she heard the voices of golden sphinxes; and at the end, when the house lights came up, the audience applauded not the performance but the genetic engineer who'd written the DNA code for the creatures in it.

She knew that he liked to listen to Penderecki's *Threnody For the Victims of Hiroshima.* Late that summer, during the middle of the piece, he entered the room without knocking.

"We have to leave," he said. "Now."

She did not ask why.

Instead, she put down the book she'd been reading. They left without packing.

In Italy, she saw on the news that everyone in their apartment building in Paris had died from Hodgkin's Disease.

"Alain," she said to him, "I thought Hodgkin's Disease was an inherited genetic dysfunction."

"That's right."

"So you can't contract Hodgkin's Disease—it's not like a cold?"

"No," he said, "not like a cold at all."

"Then those people in our apartment building . . . it wasn't Hodgkin's Disease that killed them."

"Maybe it was something that looks the same. Exactly the same."

They spent the rest of the summer in Madrid.

During the long walks in the cicada-clicking hills, she listened while he shaped the beta sheets and the alpha helixes that formed the basis of all protein molecules.

"Cyanide," he said, "differs from common table sugar by a dozen atoms. . . . Shift a carbon group, rearrange the hydroxyl radicals—too bad. That's all she wrote."

While they walked through the streets of Siena, he told her about the ways that a molecule broker might fall from grace.

Sometimes, he said, one powerful client would decide that a particular broker of black-market molecules had violated the bond of trust—other clients would agree. And that would be that.

Or a member of the Honoured Society, from Australia, would speak one word. . . . "Just one word," he said.

The satellites would bounce that word across the Indian Ocean and over Asia and down into a fax machine in a dark basement in Abu Dhabi or Senegal or Barcelona or even Paris.

And inside that vat there would grow a dark yolk with claws and a stingeree, thirty endoskeletal legs. And two days later or a week later, a landlord would find a tenant dead of Ondine's Curse, or something that looked exactly like Hodgkin's Disease.

In Spain, because of the heat, no one ate dinner until ten. At midnight, the streets still echoed with the footsteps of laughing couples. The shops resounded with the clink of glasses and the shouts of old friends recognizing one another.

Together, the two of them walked the cobblestoned alleys of Siena after dark. "Never lick an envelope," he told her. "Use a sponge. Or let water from the sink run on your fingers and then wipe your finger on the stamp."

She didn't ask why but he told her anyway, because it was important. She could see that in his eyes—she always noticed that taut quality in his pupils, that sense of stricture and embrittlement.

"They can get your blood type from your saliva. From your blood type, they access a database and run down your disease resistance. Your blood type gives too much away. You don't want anyone to know that."

Together, they sat in the restaurant on the edge of the square that was roped off for the Palio. This was the horse race, he told her, that took place only once a year in Siena. Each of the seventeen districts of the city competed for the banner.

They also favored the café across from the tower which Giotto had

designed in the fourteenth century, and in both places he told her much the same thing.

"Historians call it the most beautiful bell tower in Europe," he told her. "But for sheer loveliness it doesn't compare with a well-crafted toxin."

In the dust and the heat of noon, she heard him describe beautiful symmetric shapes. Lethal proteins, he said, were a kind of topological poetry. Batrachotoxin from the Columbian poison-dart frog *Phyllobates aurotenia*, ricin from a certain species of shellfish, and, above all, the venom of the banana spider, *phoneutria fera.*

"Each molecular shape," he said, "is beautiful in its own way. Remove the seven-membered nitrogen ring from batrachotoxin and it becomes an hallucinogen, not a poison.

"And everyone who uses DNA to code for toxins does it in a different way. It's a matter of style . . . a personal signature."

She never said anything. He looked at her and told her he saw two years in her amazingly blue eyes, maybe three.

And after that?

"Don't think about that," he said. "That's something you don't think about."

One night in Barcelona, she got bored waiting in the air taxi and she told it to land. She went up the Passeig Nacional in the old quarter of the Barcelonetra, into a building she had seen him enter.

Inside, darkness.

She heard Penderecki's *Threnody For the Victims of Hiroshima* echo from vats that held wriggling black shapes. In the darkness she smelled blood.

She saw a woman sitting in a Chippendale chair. The woman's eyes were moist deserts, and on her face a red pattern had formed, like a spiderweb under the skin.

Later, in the air taxi, he played the *Threnody,* but this time the strange hum of quartertone violins at the end sounded like the last Cheyne-Stokes sizzle of breath in a dying throat.

In the fall, he took her to Australia.

During the three days they spend in Sydney, she whiled away hours window-shopping while he spoke to hard-faced men.

When they returned to Paris, he took an apartment much larger than the one they had left behind.

While she measured its polished cedar floors for carpets, he told her about the average lifetime of each profession. For a molecule broker, five years—for a tweaker, three years . . . if the kid was lucky. If, not, six months. Kids who wrote custom DNA code were like falling stars, he said. They burned bright, but didn't last long.

She went to the window of the apartment, and watched the seashell

buildings of Paris come alive with bioluminescent greens and blues. He touched her shoulder, then her cheek, and told her that a gene librarian could last ten years. Or even longer, if he was good . . . really good. If he picked the right people—the kind of people who did not ask questions.

As always, she kissed his hand. And together they watched the shells of the living chateaux glisten in the sunset.

In the café on the Boulevard Saint-Germain, where they had met, he explained to her the relationship between predator and prey.

"Mortality curves," he told her, while he sipped his Gran Marnier. "One population grows, the other declines. Lions and Thompson's gazelles . . . mullet and sharks. They depend on each other. They're connected."

When he spoke, his hands formed interlocking arcs. "Too many lions, and the gazelle population drops off. The predators starve. Too many gazelles, and the savannah gets overgrazed. The prey starve."

At night, they struggled on sweaty sheets. She remembered the predators, and their prey, and afterward while he was asleep she licked the blood from the cut in her lip.

She ran her sharp fingernail along his throat while she watched him sleep.

In the afternoon, he walked with her along the Seine. He held her hand and turned and without warning he said, "Yes."

She didn't ask what he meant.

She could see in his eyes that he'd known she would not ask, and she could also see that this was why he touched her cheek and then kissed her.

That evening, he found her walking between the vats that held wriggling black shapes, and he asked her if she would marry him.

"There wouldn't be time," she answered.

He traced the line of her collarbone under the skin. In the dim blue light from the vats, he put his arms around her and leaned his head on her shoulder.

"Time?" he asked, after what seemed a long while.

In his eyes, she saw the stricture, the sense of a brittle surface about to crack, and so she smiled again.

"Who?"

"One of the Australians," she answered, and ran her hand along his arm lightly so that she could feel the musculature under the skin. "He approached me two days ago."

His face reminded her of the Mayan masks she had seen in Chichen Itza, but she did not say so.

He asked her how.

"They used a sample of your DNA to design a virus." She took a handkerchief from his pocket and wiped his forehead. The night did not seem to be hot, but, even so, perspiration made a mirror of his brow. "They targeted the virus for one genotype only, whatever that means. They said it's not dangerous to anyone else—just you."

He leaned his head against the wall. Sitting in the Second Empire chair in the apartment, he seemed much smaller than in the café by the Boulevard St. Germaine.

"Where?"

"They got the sample of DNA from me. A vaginal smear. Spermatazoa contain DNA. That was what they said."

"Blindness," he said. She was not sure if it was a question but she did not ask. "Locomotor ataxia . . . then, that's all she wrote."

She told him that they had injected her with the virus, that it filled her bloodstream.

He turned to her in the blue-dim apartment. "That's all she wrote," he said, and that was the last thing he said.

The next day, she faxed a message to Griffith, Australia.

She hired a British solicitor to close his estate and sell the apartment in Paris, and also the villa in Mycenae. Not intending to, she listened to the *curé* speak at his funeral, then rented an estate in the Yucatan and told the Australians to meet her there for the final payment.

At midnight, she paced the wet sand at the water's edge. The tropical stars spread like spatters of blood across the sky, platelets treated with a binding protein that made them fluoresce.

When she heard the scream of the air taxi, she told the housekeeper to unload the cryo capsule that contained the corpse and bring it into the living room.

The Australian brought two other men. Their faces reminded her of the Quattrocento *condottieri* she had seen in Florence; faces without gentle curves, without smiles.

She said as much, and he told her he wanted to see the corpse.

She pulled back the tarp from the cryo capsule, and inside the blue ice, feathers of frost formed arcs, interlocking curves. The Australian's finger touched the surface of the capsule, and she watched him while he traced a head, a torso ribbed with ice.

"You did your job," the Australian told her and looked up.

He punched his account number into her pocket computer and transferred the funds from the Credit Lyonnaise Bank Nederlands into her account in the Cayman Islands. Long after the Aussie had gone, she imagined she could hear the roar of the VTOL turbines dopplering away over the midnight waters of the bay.

She sat alone in the empty living room.

"They thought it was me?"

She nodded.

When he came out of the shadows and placed his hand on the cryo capsule, she did not ask who was frozen in the block of ice.

Nor did she ask about the virus. Still, he saw the question in her eyes—so he answered it anyway.

"Curves," he told her, and touched her in a way that made her shiver all over. "Beta sheets, alpha helices."

Their hands met.

"Everyone who does DNA designs it in a different way," he said. "With the virus in your bloodstream, I have a sample of a very powerful man's DNA coding style."

"You can modify it," she laughed, anticipating his train of thought. "You're going to use it to kill one of the *other* Australians. . . . And they'll think it's *him*."

She caught that trace of torsion at the edge of his mouth, the embrittlement that meant he was pleased. . . .

"They'll kill each other," she whispered. "And it'll leave a vacuum. And you'll be the one who fills it."

He smiled.

When he caressed her cheek, she saw a question in his eyes: *why?*

"When you let me know about the virus in Paris, you gave me time to engineer an antibody," he told her. "Was it because you loved me? Or because betrayal excites you even more than the smell of death?"

She kissed him so hard that he drew away.

"You know me better," she said, "than I know myself."

And he put his finger to the cut on his tongue and pressed it to her lips and together they tasted the sweet sting of blood. ●

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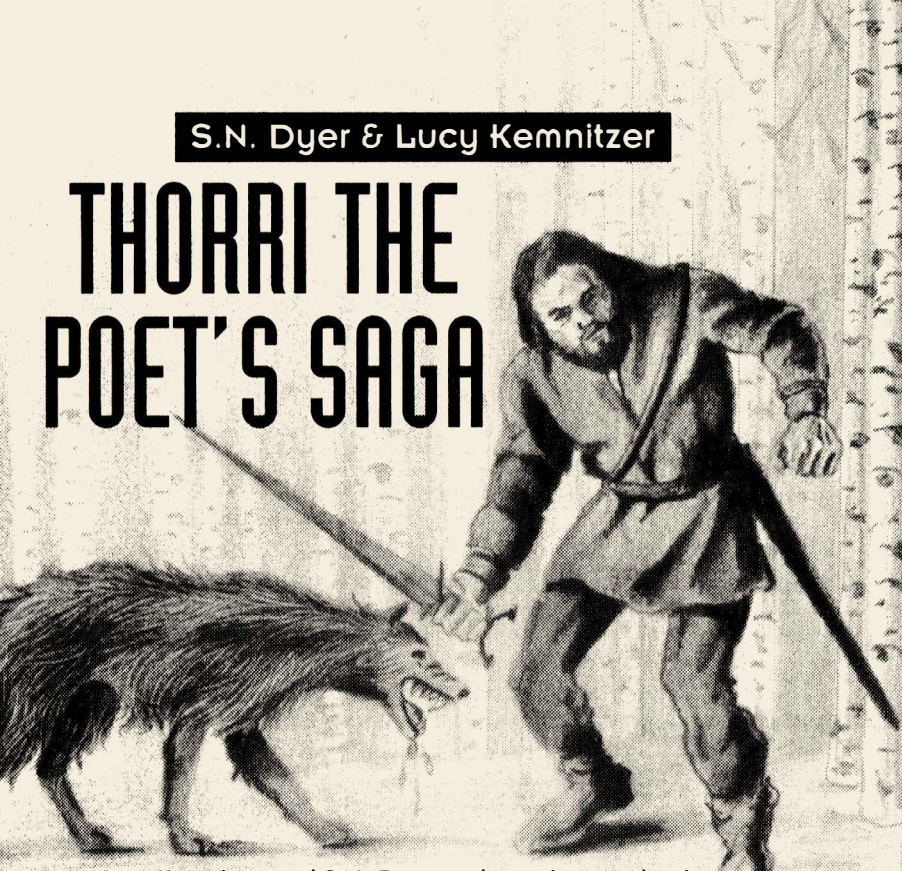
THORRI THE POET'S SAGA



Lucy Kemnitzer and S.N. Dyer used to write together in high school back in San Francisco in the late sixties. Ms. Kemnitzer is now a former labor organizer who writes a left-wing mother's column for a community women's newspaper. The author is married, has two children, enjoys listening to Indonesian jazz and Finnish folk-rock revival music, and can read old Norse. The following story marks her debut in the pages of *Asimov's*.

Although Ms. Kemnitzer's collaborator can't read Old Norse, she has sold nearly two dozen stories to *Asimov's*. "Thorri the Poet's Saga" is only her second tale to appear under the S.N. Dyer by-line. Her first "Dyer" tale was "The July Ward" (April 1991)—a riveting and terrifying 1992 Nebula award finalist.

Illustration by Steve Cavallo

Njal Thorgeirsson was one of the three greatest lawyers in Iceland, and knew something of the future.

"You see that man?" Njal pointed to a short man walking along the booths of Thingvellir, speaking anxiously to those seated outside. "He is looking for me."

Gunnar of Hildarend shook his head. "You will need more than this to impress me with your prescience, my friend. I can see Hilda Hot-head pointing out your booth to him."

"Then I will tell you that his visit will cause great sorrow for some, and small joy for others; but I think no great harm will come to us from it. I ask that you remember my words, and judge them next summer at the Althing."

They waited, speaking in low voices, until the stranger approached. His clothes were of well-made homespun, and his striped cloak was bordered with Irish embroidery; the brooch was foreign. The short man walked with an air of confidence not expected in so unprepossessing a figure.

"You have been a Viking," said Njal in greeting.

"In my youth, yes," said the stranger, taken aback by this.

"Anyone can see this," said Gunnar. "Again, I am unimpressed."

The stranger said, "I am Ari Tryggvasson. Can you tell me if Njal of Bergthorsknoll has arrived at the Althing?"

"It is said that the men of the Land-Isles have tented their booths. I would presume that you have legal problems."

Gunnar snorted.

Ari replied, "My neighbors in Thorthesdal have chosen me to seek Njal's advice in a matter that involves us all."

"The men of Thorthesdal have a reputation," Njal said, not specifying what it might be. "Will you know Njal Thorgeirsson when you see him?"

"I have heard that he is a handsome well-formed man, though unable to grow a beard, and that he is always accompanied by his sworn friend Gunnar Hamundarsson, who killed many pirates for Jarl Haakon and is said to be tall and strong . . . " Ari paused, and turned red as molten brass.

Njal laughed and clapped him upon the shoulder. "Tell me the problems of the men of Thorthesdal." They went into the booth and spoke by the hearthfire. Skarp-Hedin Njalsson had been out purchasing buttermilk. He passed it round, then sat to hear Ari's tale.

"This midwintersday I held a feast to celebrate the first tooth of my son Glum. All the neighbors came, excepting only Haakon Snakevision, who is our chieftain and thinks himself very grand. All was well until a

strange man in a blue cloak entered the hall. He stood away from the fire, in shadow, refused the ale-horn, and would speak with no one. I thought he must be an outlaw or a dead man.

"The children were playing with cooled ashes, arranging them like our beach, with a bit of wood for the cliffs. Grim Arasson was being very loud. The stranger called him over. We all stopped talking, and I sent my wife for my sword. But the stranger only handed my son a ring and said,

'The king's body burns. Brave man's reward;
Sand has swallowed the ill-fated singer.'

or something like that. It was not a very good poem, but at least it did not have double kennings or court meter."

"I too prefer the poetry of our fathers," said Gunnar, but Njal held up a hand. Ari continued.

"After the couplet he walked out into the night. I ran out and saw him standing in the home meadow in strong moonlight; then he disappeared. We'd never had a fetch in Thorthesdal before, and were concerned. A week later my bondsmen and I were collecting driftwood and we found a corpse, uncovered by the sea.

Njal leaned forward. "He was buried on the beach? That is very improper."

"The man must have been tall and thin. His hair was yellow as yours, Gunnar, and we found bits of a yellow silk jacket and green-striped trousers and a cloak of blue homespun. I notified Haakon Snakevision, and summoned a jury to witness the wounds. The skull had been flattened in back, and we think the neck had been broken also, but it was hard to tell, the body was not at all fresh. There were no other wounds we could find. He seemed to have a crooked left forefinger, and most of his teeth. No one remembered a man of this description."

"What did your chieftain suggest?"

"Haakon said 'The man is dead, bury him.' And this is the only sound advice he has ever given."

"That is a strong comment. Women have been widowed for less," said Skarp-Hedin with a grin. He was a capable well-built man with pale skin and chestnut hair, but his teeth were prominent.

"I would hear more of your tale," said Njal.

Ari continued. "The fetch has returned several times, always at celebrations. He is quiet and well-mannered but recites some poem which is quite gloomy. My sister took up her wedding ale and the ghost said,

'Happy is the husband Who falls to wolves and ravens.'"

Skarp-Hedin began to laugh, and his father asked him to be quiet.

"You may imagine that this did my sister's temper no good," said Ari.

"Has the ghost never said anything which might be helpful?"

"One time he watched my wife at her loom. This annoyed her. She said, 'The trolls take you, why do you bother us?' He replied,

'The wolf's hawk-ground of the ice of the wolf-field
Has stolen the breath of the speaker of Odin's theft.'"

Gunnar groaned. "I never could tolerate these kennings within kennings."

"This is a simple riddle," said Skarp-Hedin. "Wolf-field is a battle; the ice of battle is the sword; the hawkground is the arm holding the sword. All this signifies a warrior. Odin's theft is poetry. . . ."

Njal sighed, and stroked his chin. "And so this long and complex puzzle only tells us that a warrior has killed a poet, which we had rather suspected. . . . Ari Tryggvasson of Thorthesdal, you fear that this unnamed ghost may grow bored with visiting your hall peacefully. Next he may upset boats, or ride the cows, or wrestle with the shepherds. Did you search the body?"

The short man nodded eagerly. "Haakon would have kept the effects, but I refused to surrender them." He unwrapped a package of rough wool cloth. Gunnar reached over and lifted the objects one by one, to examine them in the firelight.

"A brass cloak pin, very ordinary. An iron crucifix—he was a Christ's man. An armring. An inlaid silver horsehead brooch. One and a quarter marks of unrefined silver. A sword—Norwegian, recent design but unornamented." He stood and hefted it. "It must have been a fine weapon before this rust. You have been treated disrespectfully, my friend." He set the sword down. "A brass box with silver latticework and runes. What is this?"

"A sample of embroidery from his jacket."

"You have been very thorough," said Njal. "If all the men of Thorthesdal are so, it must be a fine district. We will try to put a name to your ghost. I ask that you speak to me here next year. If you have any news, send to me at Bergthorsknoll.

"Well, Gunnar," he said when Ari had left. "What do you make of it?"

"He must have been a foreigner, one of those nosey Eastern Christ's men who speak only of their god. I would say he must have insulted Thor or Frey, and fought a duel."

Njal shook his head. "I think that someday we shall all give up our gods, and accept the one from Norway. But see the cross—Thor is on the reverse, so he had not sworn loyalty to a single god. And these are not battle wounds. I think he must have fallen from the cliff—or was pushed, then was buried in haste at sea's edge."

"Secret murder? That is a grave offense," said Gunnar. "We must seek to find the criminal who would not admit his killing, and has thus caused such inconvenience to Ari and his family."

2

The next day Njal went to the Court of Legislature on the assembly plain, and after that to the Law Rock to hear the announcements. There was a freedman named Otkel who lived near Thingvellir, and kept his milch ewes nearby so that he might sell curds and fresh butter at the Althing. His products were overpriced and not good, but he sold them to many important men. He had brought a lawsuit, and that evening Njal told Gunnar about it.

"Otkel's shieling is nearby, and some men came there yesterday night and lay with his dairymaid and killed his shepherd, who is also his kinsman. These men were Hoskuld, the illegitimate son of Haakon Snakevision of Thorthesdal, and the Easterners Bjorn and Bjorn Bjarnarsson, who are called the Bjornings and are bear-shirt men. They are the cousins of Haakon. I have never seen such ill-visaged, haughty men, and their chieftain seemed the worse of them."

"This is odd, for I have not heard of them before, and you would think news of such men would travel."

"It is not a prosperous district and few ships go there," said Njal. "Otkel stated his suit very poorly. He had not named the correct number of jurymen, and those he named were from the wrong jurisdictions, and one was a hired man and another a slave. Otkel must have thought that those chieftains who bought from him were his friends and would support his suit.

"Haakon brought a countersuit for wrongful proceedings, and demanded that Otkel be outlawed. The Bjornings promised to sharpen their swords and visit him soon. But the Law Speaker said that this was foolish behavior, and chieftains ought not to abuse their power. He recommended the case to arbitration, and it was decided that Haakon's kinsmen should have all Otkel's sheep, and leave the man alone. Haakon has invited all the important men to a feast, for they do not wish to drive the ewes home with them. I believe that I might have saved Otkel's case, if only he had spoken with me first."

"It is an ill time when men commit manslaughter without paying legal compensation," answered Gunnar. "I think we should investigate this ghost as swiftly as possible, and have done with the contentious men of Thorthesdal."

3

Skarp-Hedin Njalsson and his brothers attended Haakon Snakevision's feast, and had many scandalous tales to tell. "The Bjornings are

cruel berserks; even King Harold of Denmark would not allow them to fight for him."

"You ordinarily admire bold men, kinsman," Njal said. "I find it significant that you speak ill of these warriors."

Gunnar went later that day to the booth of Ulm the Mender. He found him at his forge, staring moodily at a German blade broken at the hasp.

The smith rose to meet him. "What brings you here, Gunnar Hamundarsson? Have you damaged your famous halberd?"

"I do not require a wounded weapon to visit you," said Gunnar. "I recalled that you favor puffin eggs, and my brother Hjort has found some."

"You might have sent a boy with these eggs," said Ulm. "I think you have something else on your mind."

"As to that, I have a question, nothing important. Someone found this arm ring, and it looks unusual. Can you tell me anything of it?"

Ulm turned the ring over in his hands. It was made of two intertwined bands of silver. "Eastern work," he said finally, "and not very fine. Perhaps if an Icelander had gone to the Norwegian court and not offended anybody, and not pleased anyone either, an earl might give him such a thing when he left. Of course, a person who did not know much of his business might trade for it there; I think it comes from Stavanger."

"Smith's eyes are sharp," laughed Gunnar. "I would never see so much story in a circle of metal. Here is another riddle—the same person found this brooch. What can you tell me of it, you with Hugin's own eyes?"

Ulm folded back the cloth around the brooch. "For that, you must ask Arnolf No-nose, the thrall of your old shipmate Sigurd the Unruly. For he has made the thing."

4

Weapontake arrived, and men armed and rode home from the Althing. After haymaking, Njal came to Hlidarend to visit Gunnar. Gunnar was grooming his stallion Hrafnfaxi, who had been brought in from the summer pastures. Hrafnfaxi was a dun with a black mane and a stripe down his back; he had fathered many foals and won many fights, and would allow only Gunnar to ride him.

"This has been a good year for milk and cheese," said Njal, "but the corn crop is small. I think not all your men will be needed to harvest it."

"You are about to ask me to do something," said Gunnar. "You see, I can read the future as well."

"I would like you to visit Sigurd the Unruly and speak with his slave regarding the brooch."

"This has been on my mind," said Gunnar, "and I was wondering when you would ask me to make the journey."

Gunnar left his mother and brothers in charge of the farm, and was gone three weeks. He returned near the end of summer, and sent his men into the pastures to gather the cattle and sheep and slaughter those who could not be overwintered.

Gunnar killed the fine ram he had been fattening in the home meadow, and carried the head to Bergthorsknoll and gave it to Njal's wife Bergthora. That evening they feasted. Njal and Gunnar sat in the center of the room, facing Skarp-Hedin and Kolskegg Hamundarsson across the fire. Bergthora and Gunnar's mother Rannveig Sigfusdottir sat upon the dais.

Gunnar told of his visit with Sigurd the Unruly, who was a quiet man and very generous. He had been much taken with Hrafnfaxi, and gave Gunnar a mare, also a dun, who was consecrated to Frey. "I think there will be many back-striped foals," said Gunnar, "and I would like you, Njal, to have the second one. The first, I think, should go to Sigurd."

"Did you learn anything of interest from the thrall?"

"The silversmith Arnolf No-Nose has bought his freedom, and Sigurd had settled him on a small farm nearby. They are on close terms."

"I am tired of stories about old jewelry," said Skarp-Hedin. "Tell me of Sigurd's bold-speaking wife."

"This is why I did not ask you to make the trip, kinsman," his father said. "Did Arnolf recognize the brooch?"

"Yes, and that is why it seemed Irish, for Arnolf was an important man in Ireland before his capture.

"There was a man named Thord Thortharsson, who ran into trouble in Norway due to some killings. He settled Thorthesdal and became chief there. His wife was the granddaughter of Asborn the Noisy, who they say was an illegitimate son of King Ragnar Hairy-Breeks."

"That is said of many men," said Skarp-Hedin. "I think he was a busy king."

The other Njalssons and Gunnar's brother laughed with him.

"Thord had two sons, Thorolf Openhand, who inherited the chieftainship, and Thorkel Squint, a man of good nature but little account. One summer a ship from the East arrived bearing timber; it was manned by men from the Hebrides. Thorolf invited them to stay with him. The captain was named Haakon Snakevision and he had stolen a wife in Norway. She was called Jorunn the Unfortunate. Thorolf Openhand decided to wed her sister Unn Olafsdottir."

"This is a mystery—how did Haakon acquire Thorolf's chieftainship?" mused Njal.

"And when will the brooch finally enter the story, I wonder," asked Skarp-Hedin.

Gunnar continued the story. "There was much unrest in the household—Haakon and his cousins the Bjornings were very quarrelsome, and Thorolf had to pay compensation for some killings. The district now seemed unpleasant to Thorolf. He heard of the new fertile farmlands in Greenland, and thought this might be a pleasant place to live.

"Thorolf refitted Haakon's ship and asked him to move his goods and his family there. They left Thorkel Squint and Haakon's wife Jorunn in charge of the land. Nothing was heard for some time, and then Haakon came back and said that Thorolf and his wife and son were dead and that Jorunn had inherited the property. Thorkel was a timid man, but he decided to take the matter to the local Assembly, and acted as his own lawyer."

"Too many men think they understand the law," said Njal sadly.

"Haakon Snakevision had bought the friendship of the other local chieftains, who came with armed men. So Thorkel moved away to the Westfjords. He was not well off there.

"Thorkel had three sons. The youngest was Thorri the Poet, who had seemed a promising child. When he was grown his father told him to find work. Thorri put off looking for work until all the good jobs were taken, but Sigurd the Unruly hired him as summer shepherd. Thorri would sit writing poetry while the cattle strayed off, and then many men would have to search for them. Next Sigurd put him to work making charcoal, but one day while he was daydreaming the fire got away from him and some woods burned down. So they set him in charge of drying the fish, but he forgot to turn them.

"Sigurd had promised to watch over the boy; he was an old friend of Thorolf Openhand. Then Thorri made a praise-poem about their chieftain, Gizur the Learned. Gizur exiled him for it, but he and Sigurd bought him passage to Norway. Sigurd gave him the brooch then, and that is the last that anyone saw of Thorri the Poet."

Njal looked into the fire, as if he were seeing a vision. Finally he spoke. "It may be that we will need to converse with Ari Tryggvasson sooner than I had expected."

5

Gunnar worked at home quietly until early winter. Then one night he awoke with a cry. His mother and brothers beat on the outside of his bedcloset until he emerged. He rode immediately to Bergthorsknoll and woke Njal to tell him the dream.

"The cattle were grazing in the cornfields after harvest, but it seemed I had forgotten to mend the walls, so they got loose. I followed them across the fells and found many milchcows dead, torn apart as if by wolves. There was a polar bear there, dead as well, and he had runes inscribed in bright blood on his white fur, but I could not read them. A bull came upon the scene and called for the barren cattle to help him, and they mourned the cows and raised a tomb over them."

"This is an odd dream indeed," said Njal. "The bull must be your fetch. I will ask you to promise me this—When you go upon your trip, you must treat everyone, man and beast, with equal courtesy and respect."

"This seems an unusual request, but I will honor it," said Gunnar. The next week he set out to Thorthesdal. He rode Hrafnfaxi. Skarp-Hedin rode a red mare, and both led pack-horses.

They came at length to Thorthesdal, and were directed to the farm of Ari Tryggvasson. The grazing land was poor there, but Ari had driftage rights, a boatshed, and several huts for drying and storing fish, and seemed to be industrious.

The farmhouse had thick turf walls, and the green of their grass made the house invisible from a distance. At first they thought it was a hillock on which some sheep were grazing, but as they drew closer they realized that milch ewes were loose upon the roof. Ari was attempting to get them down. The boy helping him seemed to have been responsible for the prank.

Ari greeted his visitors, and called for a kinsman to tend their horses. Skarp-Hedin said, "You have a problem here, it is clear, and I am the man to help you, for I have the widest experience in such matters." And he showed Ari and his son the best way to bring the animals down.

Then they went inside. The slaughter that year had not been large, but Ari offered them porridge and dried fish with butter. Some of his men had gone up the coast to see to a beached whale, in which he owned partial rights, and when they returned there would be fresh meat.

"Tell me of your chieftain," said Gunnar.

"Haakon Snakevision is not well-liked," said Ari, "but he is a powerful man and most people here are bound to him by loans and duty. He never gives advice or promises support in lawsuits except for money, and he has let the temple fall to ruins and never sacrifices. His cousins the Bjornings run rampant—they are bear-shirt men, and it would not surprise me if they were also werewolves. They have committed many killings, though none yet on my land, and never pay compensation."

Skarp-Hedin fingered his axe. "These sound like men to meet."

Ari looked about, then spoke brave words. "It would do us more good if we had no chieftain. Things were better when Thorolf Openhand lived at Thorhof."

"Thorolf had a brother Thorkel Squint. How is it that the wife's brother-in-law inherited, and not he?" asked Gunnar.

"This is the story that Haakon and his cousins swore to in court. They said that their ship foundered off Greenland, and all were tossed into the sea. Thorolf Openhand died immediately as the ship capsized. This meant that the property passed to his only surviving child, Thord Thorolfsson. The boy lived a while, hanging onto some lumber, but then he drowned as well. Thus his mother Unn Olafsdottir inherited from him; she was clinging to a barrel and making loud lamentations. Soon she became silent, which made her sister Jorunn, Haakon's wife, heir to everything. Haakon Snakevision and the Bjornings were rescued, and came back to claim the land."

Skarp-Hedin laughed, and said,

"The wolf-like waves fed well
Off the children of the water-steed."

"That's a kenning, I know what it means," Grim Arasson said proudly. It was clear he admired the Njalsson.

"Thorkel Squint owned the chattels, and he stayed on a while, but Haakon quarreled with him. I think he wanted to provoke him to violence, but Thorkel and his household left hastily one night when Haakon was out collecting loans. Jorunn had known about it, and Haakon was so furious he slapped her. Many men observed this."

"Why did she not divorce him straightaway?"

"That is easy to say," replied Ari's wife, a refined and skillful woman named Gudrun Grimsdottir. She had been pouring the ale herself for the visitors, but now had stopped to nurse young Glum. "She has tried many times, poor woman, but everyone so fears her husband they will not bear witness."

"Are there no children?"

"She has none," said Gudrun, "but Haakon takes dairymaids into the woods. Now many slave's babies and poor men's grandchildren bear his evil features. Also he has an illegitimate son he brought with him from home and has set over all the others."

Ari sighed. "It is a shame the woman has no kinsmen, and a hard thing, to live with such neighbors. Sometimes I think I should sell out and move, but I like the land." He took his infant son's fingers in his, as if comparing the child's hand to his own, and it was clear that he feared he might be forced into some action which would make his sons orphans.

"I am not surprised the Bjornings have left you alone, Ari Tryggvasson. You do not seem to be a man who would ignore a wrong done you," said Gunnar.

"They have called upon me only once, and I think they were trying to provoke me."

"Tell us about it," grinned Skarp-Hedin. "I am interested in everything about these bear-shirt men."

"It was last spring. The Bjornings rode up to my house, fully armed but clad only in skins. I sent Grim to fetch the men sowing, and I carried my sword and shield. 'What can I do for you, neighbors?' I asked.

"Bjorn Bjarnarsson spoke nonsense. 'It will be said of us that we did a great wrong to kinsmen.'

"Then the older Bjorn Bjarnarsson said 'The Bjornings will be seen to be the cause of worse events. Many a life is lost in trying to make a point.' I am a peaceful man, but I told them they were drunk. They rode away." He shuddered at the memory, and his wife hid her face. It seemed that she was crying.

"This is significant," said Gunnar. "I do not need Njal's counsel to understand these events. The Bjornings had just killed someone, and they were telling you of it in such a way that they did not reveal things, but might later absolve themselves of a charge of secret murder."

"The ghost? The dead man on the beach?"

"Indeed," said Gunnar. "I would like to continue to enjoy our rest today, but tomorrow I think we must visit Thorhof."

6

That night a storm came up, and they spent the next several days inside, venturing out only to feed the stock. Gudrun had a fine game board that had belonged to her father, with pieces made of glass and amber. Gunnar showed himself adept at playing the surrounding army, but never won as the besieged kingsmen. No one could defeat Skarp-Hedin except for Grim, who cheated and threw some warriors into the hearth.

The fourth morning the weather cleared, and the sea was calm and peaceful, the color of the sky.

"What did the ocean say?" asked Gunnar. *" 'Many men have died in my bed yesterday. Come, I invite you to join me.' "*

"Those foreign poems are odd and do not translate well," said Ari. "But many are appropriate." He sent most of his men to repair storm damage to roof and fence, and he went to his beach to hunt for driftwood. His guests offered to accompany him, but he urged them to follow their earlier plans.

Gunnar and Skarp-Hedin rode to Thorhof. This had been a prosperous property, but seemed in ill repair. Wet sheep looked unhappy as they gleaned in the corn pastures, and while there were stables and byres

enough, even the cows looked as if they had not been sheltered. Shepherds and housecarls were at work on the field walls, piling turf upon stone. Much of this stone seemed to have been taken from the temple, of which little remained.

Gunnar and Skarp-Hedin halted before the farmhouse. A huge man with uncombed hair and beard came forth. He wore a blue cape and scarlet shirt, and carried an axe.

"I am Gunnar Hamundarsson of Hlidarend, and this is Skarp-Hedin Njalsson of Bergthorsknoll. We have been visiting our friend Ari Tryggvasson at Arasted, and thought to pay our respects to his chieftain."

"Ari Tryggvasson? It is said that he fattened a pig on the home meadow, and his butcher mistook him for the dinner and was not stopped until he had removed something of importance. Gunnar, is it? I have heard of you, pretty-man. You won the favor of Jarl Haakon of Norway, and spent many a winter in style at court."

Gunnar stared at the man, but did not answer.

"I am surprised you ride a stallion. I have heard you rode a mare, and the Jarl would let his horse mount you both."

"You speak harsh words to innocent travelers," replied Gunnar. "Is your axe so thirsty that you offer it the hospitality you deny us?" He looked sternly at Skarp-Hedin, warning him to ignore any insults.

The berserker now turned his attention to the youth. "And look, this child is growing a beard. I hear his father has none—perhaps he had to farm his wife out to a more manly fellow."

Skarp-Hedin turned pale, with a spot of red upon his cheeks, but he grinned. "It is well I met you, rude fellow, before my beard is full. I now know the importance of grooming."

Before any more might be said a seemly woman appeared at the doorway. She was dressed in coarse striped homespun, and had no ornament save an old brooch from which hung the housekeys and her comb—poor garb for the mistress of so large a property.

"Bjorn Bjarnarsson!" she cried. "I have heard your evil words and deplore them. I am still the owner here, and will not have it said that we refused hospitality to honest guests."

Bjorn scowled, drawing down thick eyebrows to hide his eyes, so that his entire face seemed covered by fur save his nose. "I will go tell my cousin Haakon that his wife is making sheepeyes at womanish strangers."

He stalked away, brandishing his axe, and the woman called for a boy to tend the horses. "I am Jorunn the Unfortunate," she said, "and I bid you welcome. Please come warm yourselves by the fire until my husband returns."

She led them into the house, and it was much finer on the inside. The

walls were covered with rich hangings with figures woven upon them, though many seemed to have been slashed by knives and then repaired. Jorunn put the men upon the high seat, and brought them ale in a transparent horn. Then she sat at her loom. The high seat pillars seemed to have once been ornately decorated, but now obscene pictures were carved upon them.

"If you have questions needing honest reply, then you must ask swiftly," said the housewife.

"You are a respectable and refined woman. Why do you stay with these unpleasant Hebrideans?"

"I have no choice," she answered. "A hundred times I have walked around the bed reciting 'Haakon I divorce thee.' I have worn trousers in public. I have knitted my husband a shirt that showed his nipples and tricked him into wearing it, I have performed every honorable divorcible act known to the law—but no men will witness my actions."

"I will be straightforward with you," said Gunnar, "for I can tell that you can hold a confidence, and if you help us things may work out to your benefit. A secret murder has been committed, and we intend to prosecute it to the fullest. Do you know of Thorri the Poet?"

"That would be Thorri Thorkelsson, the son of the brother of my sister's husband. My poor kinsman, even as a child he was thin and ineffectual. He came to me one night early in Cuckoo Month, when winter had barely turned to summer. I recognized him immediately. The men were out sowing corn. Thorri told me he had returned from the East, where he had been a Queen's man, and had wintered nearby. Then my husband came home, and struck the alehorn from my nephew's hand. He sent me into the dairy, but I could hear loud voices arguing.

"My husband then called me back. Thorri was gone. Haakon gave me some papers with writing, and bade me burn them. I heard him tell the Bjornings the boy was dangerous. They took up their axes and left."

"They threw Thorri over a cliff, then buried him on the beach," said Gunnar. "He is the fetch who has been haunting Ari Tryggvasson."

A man entered, with sharp and devious features. "I am the chieftain Haakon Haakonarsson. I welcome you, travelers. I see my wife has brought you ale, but surely I can offer more to such notable men."

He ordered a table to be set up, and told his wife to bring curds, salt mutton, and bread of imported flour. He himself drank from an expensive mug made of glass. Haakon spoke very pleasantly, telling them of foreign events and local lawsuits, and asked for news of their own quarter. Nothing untoward occurred, and no criticism might be given of the afternoon, except perhaps the way that both Bjorns sat at the end of the fire and sharpened their swords. The brothers were equally large and ill-favored,

and could be told apart only by their hair. One had dark curls. The other had gone gray.

Gunnar and Skarp-Hedin rose the next morning and thanked their host. Jorunn ran to intercept them as they left. She bore a large cheese wrapped in cloth.

"It said that the people of the north coast are no good at the dairy-arts. I would like your judgment. Give this cheese to your father, Skarp-Hedin Njalsson, for I have heard he appreciates such things."

They thanked her and rode away. The horses pranced upon the rocky path.

"Hrafnfaxi is pleased to leave. Even Haakon's stable must harbor villains," remarked Skarp-Hedin.

They rode along some meadows, between outcroppings of lava, then came to a small birch wood. The horses snorted and shied away from the trees. Gunnar's halberd rang loudly, as it always did when about to taste blood.

"Someone who means us ill is in there," said Gunnar. As they emerged from the trees, he dismounted and stood ready with his halberd in one hand and his sword in another. Skarp-Hedin tethered his mare, then joined Gunnar.

A pair of wolves came out of the woods and began to circle. Each wolf was large as a man. The horses screamed.

Skarp-Hedin fingered his axe. "They feed the dogs well around here," he remarked.

The black wolf came at him, and he drove it back with a wound on its hip.

The gray wolf lunged at Gunnar, and he struck it with his sword. The weapon shattered.

Then Hrafnfaxi rushed forward, reared up and brought his hooves down upon the wolf's back.

"Thank you for your help," said Gunnar. The wolf turned upon the stallion, rending his belly so the entrails spilled onto the ground.

"My sword has failed me, but my halberd will not." Gunnar threw it so that it passed entirely through the gray wolf, anchoring it to the turf. Skarp-Hedin struck off its head with a single blow. The other wolf had fled.

Hrafnfaxi neighed piteously, unable to rise.

"You have done me great service today, fosterling," Gunnar told the horse. "See now how poorly I repay you," and he thrust his halberd into the stallion's heart.

"Few have been of such service as he," said Skarp-Hedin. "I would be well served if more of my friends were horses."

Remembering Njal's admonition to treat man and beast with equal

courtesy, Gunnar told Skarp-Hedin they would raise a tomb there about Hrafnfaxi. They built it of stone and turf, and the place ever since has been known as Horse Hollow. They put Gunnar's saddle upon the mare and led her away. Gunnar stopped some herdsmen.

"We have killed a wolf by the birchwood," he announced. "I thrust my halberd through it, and Skarp-Hedin struck off its head. Another wolf was cut about the leg. I ask that you go there and witness the wounds." They returned to Arasted, and told of what had happened.

"This is most unusual," said Ari. "I have never heard of wolves in Iceland. Perhaps they were Irish dogs; King Myrkjartan is said to have one as tall as a horse."

"I have never seen wolves before, but they seemed to match the description," replied Gunnar. "Let us go examine the body."

Ari's shepherd came in, with the tale that Haakon's herdsmen had been unable to find the wolf. They had seen the blood, though, and tracks, and thought its comrade must have dragged it off.

Ari gave Gunnar a grey stallion, young and unproven in fights but full of promise, and he and his men rode with them until they were out of the district. Then his men loaded their packhorses with a good stock of flour and dried fish, to supplement their winter fare.

"I worry that this gift may be misinterpreted," Ari said, concerned. "Spiteful men may say that I bought your favor with cod."

"A lord buys friendship with golden armrings, a chieftain with silver marks," said Gunnar. "A brave man offers his right arm."

They parted in friendship.

7

They returned to Bergthorsknoll. Gunnar sat beside Njal, Skarp-Hedin across the hearth-fire, and they told their tale.

"I am pleased you followed my advice and announced the wolf's slaying," said Njal. "This will avoid future trouble. It has been said that the Bjornings are the sons of a werewolf, and it would seem that the leaves fell close to the tree. Now, I would see this gift to me from Jorunn the Unfortunate."

Gunnar fetched the cheese from his pack. Njal unwrapped the cloth.

"We live in amazing times," said Skarp-Hedin. "First ill-mannered men become well-mannered wolves, and now ewes produce books."

"I thought as much," said Njal. "Remember the inlaid box which Thorri the Poet carried? It was a saga case, and here is the saga which it held. The brave woman must have burned some other papers."

He called Bergthora, and asked his wife to put the book in the chest

in their bedcloset. Then Gunnar returned to his farm, which his brothers and mother had kept in good repair, and spent the rest of the winter quietly. The snow stayed late that year, and Gunnar had cause to thank Ari for his gift of flour and fish.

On the equinox Gunnar was sowing corn, his halberd beside him. Njal came to him in the field.

"Ogur Freyspriest is sacrificing today, and Gizur the Learned has come to share the horsemeat."

Gunnar went home and dressed in crimson, with the gold armring from Jarl Haakon, and tied his hair with the gold embroidered band that King Harold Gormsson of Denmark had given him for slaying the viking sons of Snae-Ulf. No one looked so fine as Gunnar. They rode in great company to the feast.

Skarp-Hedin galloped before them and arrived first in the home-meadow. Ogur Freyspriest and his household came outside, well-armed.

"Where is Gizur the Learned?" cried Skarp-Hedin.

A bald man with a braided beard stepped forward. "My father's son bears that name."

"Good news, old man. We have heard that you collect poets. We have a sheep which speaks court meter."

Njal rode up beside him and dismounted. "Kinsman, your tongue will someday be the death of you, and of your mother and father and brothers," he said sadly. But Ogur and his guests were laughing at the jest, and invited them inside.

"I am investigating the secret murder of Thorri the Poet," Njal announced.

"I put the lad on lesser outlawry for a praisepoem," said Gizur. "I do not see the future so well as you, Njal, but I warned him that he should stay in Norway if he would live to be prosperous. The worst of our poets, you know, is better than the best the old country breeds. Secret murder is an awful crime; I would like to help you find those who mock the law."

Njal showed the book to Gizur. He carried it to the edge of the fire.

"It was written by monks in Vikingsholm, luckily in the vernacular. *There was a man named Ketil Cat.* They have put that into Latin and call him 'Ketullus Feles.' Monks have absolutely no feel for language. They are inaccurate copyists also, and always add bits praising their White Christ."

"Ketil Cat. I have heard of him," said Gunnar. "He attributed his riches to a red English cat he brought aboard to keep down mice. He named the creature his sworn brother, and when Jarl Sigurd's sister's son killed it he refused compensation."

"Do not ruin the story," said Skarp-Hedin, and the others agreed. Gizur began to read. He continued for several hours. Finally Njal stopped him.

"Please repeat that chapter."

On the return voyage to Greenland the cat climbed the masthead and began to yowl. Then they saw a wrecked ship. Four men clung to lumber. The captain had been an Icelander. He caught fever and lived not long. There were three Hebrides men who lived all that winter at Ketil's expense. They were quarrelsome and not well-liked, but Ketil protected them.

When summer came Ketil asked Haakon Haakonarsson what he wished to do.

"I must return to Iceland and tell my wife of her kin's deaths."

"I think your wife would have preferred that you had met the fate of the others," answered Ketil. But he purchased the three men passage and gave them fine gifts. Ketil was a generous man. The shipwrecked men are now out of the saga.

Gizur turned a page. "Now we go on to another fight with the Skraelings in Markland."

"We have learned what we need to know," said Gunnar.

Njal nodded. "We know now why the Bjornings had to kill Thorri Thorkelsson. He had heard this saga, and learned that the survivors had lied about the outcome of the shipwreck. They had claimed that Thorolf's wife Unn Olafsdottir died last, making her sister Jorunn heir to Thorhof. Instead, Thorolf Openhand survived the rest of his family, so that Thorri's father Thorkel Squint was rightful owner of the land."

"It is a sad time when the law is flouted," said Gizur. "Haakon Snakevision is a powerful man and the Bjornings are greatly feared. You will not find many willing to challenge them."

"I will not ask you to risk yourselves directly, as this is none of your concern," said Njal. "But I will ask you to stand ready to assist me at the Althing. It does not take prescience to know there will be trouble."

"In that event, I will also make sure I bring enough silver to pay compensation for any killings I may find necessary," said Gizur. "Is there anything else you require?"

"I would like you to continue reading," answered Skarp-Hedin. "I am anxious to hear of Ketil's vengeance for his sworn-brother."

8

In Lamb's Fold Month Njal sent for Gunnar. "It is time for me to ride to Thorthesdal and serve Haakon Snakevision his summons, and gather a jury."

"I will get my horse," replied Gunnar.

"I would prefer that you not accompany me; I will take my nephew Thorgeir, who is a promising young man."

"I do not trust those Thorhof people to behave properly," protested Gunnar. "At least allow me to ask my uncles Thrain Sigfusson and Ketil of Mork to accompany you."

Njal agreed, and added that he hoped all the Sigfussons would come to the Althing that year with their followers, for he required support.

"I have made a grave mistake, my friend," said Njal. "We have proceeded in this investigation without considering that we lack a proper plaintiff. This is a serious legal error."

"Ari Tryggvasson required our help."

"The ghost troubles him, it is true, and it is unlikely we could get the ghost to court, or hold him accountable. But the actual murder is a matter for kin to prosecute, and I was not hired by Thorri the Poet's blood. That is what you must do, Gunnar—find some relative of the dead man and get him to ask my help. Otherwise I face outlawry and confiscation for illegal suit."

"I will go alone this time," said Gunnar. "Skarp-Hedin's wit will not convince anyone to aid us."

9

Njal, his nephew and the Sigfussons stayed with Ari Tryggvasson. Ari called for the eight nearest householders. Njal took each man aside and questioned him carefully, as it would break his case if any juror could be disallowed. Indeed, one man did not live as close as necessary and another owned insufficient property, and a third was an outlaw, but new jurors were swiftly found. All promised to attend the Althing.

The company rode to Thorhof, passing along the way the tomb of Hrafnfaxi. Njal paused, and looked away.

"There will be many more barrows, with dead men sitting upright holding broken axes, before this matter is concluded."

"I do not envy you the sight of the future," said Ari.

Haakon Snakevision stood before his home with his son Hoskuld and with the black-haired Bjorn Bjarnarsson, who walked now with a limp. All three had swords in one hand and spears in the other, and there were many householders with axes.

Njal recited the summons, that Haakon and Bjorn were to come to the Althing to answer charges of secret murder.

Haakon laughed. "Go away, Beardless. When we have done with your case, you will need to dress as a woman to sneak away from Thingvellir." All his household laughed loudly.

Njal's brother's son Thorgeir spurred his horse forward, but Njal blocked him. He also held up a hand to stop Gunnar's uncles.

"We shall address these insults before the Law Rock."

Then the jury dispersed, and Njal and his companions returned to their homes.

9

Gunnar went to visit his friend Sigurd the Unruly, and told him his problems. Sigurd recommended that he speak with the silversmith Arnolf No-nose, whose niece had worked for Thorkel Squint.

Arnolf made him welcome and sat him before the fire. His small daughter came and sat upon Gunnar's lap and braided his beard. Thorkatla was a pretty child, with flaxen hair to her waist, and was also good-tempered and accomplished.

"I will not congratulate you for having a beautiful daughter, as this is not a matter over which you have control," Gunnar said. "But you govern her temperament and education, and this you have done admirably." Gunnar gave Thorkatla his red headband, which she could use as a belt.

Arnolf led Gunnar into the mountains, through inhospitable peat bogs and along lava beds. Only one familiar with the land could find his way through the mires. "This is not good land," said Gunnar. Barely enough lyme-grass was found to feed their horses.

They came upon Thorkel's home in ruins. An aged bondsman lived there, and told them the property belonged to creditors now. Thorkel had not raised enough corn and hay to last the winter, and had been forced to slaughter or sell all the stock. Then Thorkel traded a cow for a very poor boat, and thought to go fishing.

"Every man thinks himself a sailor," said Arnolf scornfully.

The housecarls had had sense enough not to go in that vessel, but Thorkel's pride or foolishness forced him to go anyway. His sons went with him. All had perished when the boat foundered. The bondservants took anything left of value and went their own way, except this one slave who thought himself too old to travel.

"Is there no kin left?" asked Gunnar.

"Thorkel's father came from Norway."

Arnolf invited the old man to stay with him, and promised to send someone to fetch him and his goods.

Gunnar did not speak much during the trip back.

"You seem gloomy," Arnolf said. "One would think you Thorkel's next of kin, as only you seem to mourn him."

"I have no choice. Njal is summoning Haakon Snakevision for the

secret murder of Thorri the Poet, and we can do this only for a relative. If I do not find a proper plaintiff, Njal will be outlawed, and I will not allow him to suffer this alone."

"Thorri cannot be worth two hundred ounces of silver. I would not think the renowned Njal Thorgeirsson so greedy that he would risk his life for the lawyer's half of the settlement."

"There is more than a man's compensation at stake here. Haakon has stolen much property and a chieftainship."

"I can see risking outlawry for those."

Gunnar reined in his horse, much angered. "You are wrong if you think we do this for gain. An honorable man named Ari Tryggvasson is being haunted by the fetch of Thorri the Poet; we sought only to help Ari, and this is where the path has led."

Arnolf said that he had mistaken Gunnar's intentions. "You have shown yourself a true hero, and I will now help you," said the silversmith.

Arnolf then told this tale. His sister's daughter had been in the service of Thorkel Squint, and slept with him in his bedcloset. Thorkel gave her the keys and referred to her as his goodwife. She died giving birth to a girl. Thorkel declared there were mouths enough to feed, nor could he afford to hire a wet nurse, and ordered a thrall to expose the child at the crossroads. The thrall secretly carried the baby to Arnolf.

Arnolf told everyone that his wife had borne the girl. Indeed, when they put the infant to Hallgerd's breasts she began to give milk, which seemed a sign that it was meant to be.

"So Thorkatla is the daughter of Thorkel?" Gunnar smiled, greatly relieved. Then his face changed, as if the sun had been covered with clouds. "But he did not sprinkle her with water or name her; she is not legally his heir."

Arnolf told him to be cheerful, and continued. The next summer he had contracted to mend Thorkel's housegoods and weapons, and brought his wife and daughter with him. One day he came to Thorkel Squint.

"You are a wise man," Arnolf told him. "My wife and I cannot agree on something. We would like you to settle the argument."

"I will help if I might," answered Thorkel, much flattered.

Arnolf put the baby upon Thorkel's knee. "I want you to look closely at her, and decide which of us she most resembles. If it is me, then I will name her Gudrun after my mother. But if you think she looks more like Hallgerd, then we will call her Thorkatla, for her grandmother."

"My mother was also named Thorkatla," said Thorkel. The baby had some ashes upon her cheek. At that moment a bondswoman came by with the water for washing; Thorkel took some and dropped it on the child's cheek, then wiped it with his sleeve. He looked carefully at the baby. "She shall be named Thorkatla."

Hearing of this subterfuge, Gunnar laughed long and hard. "You are wasted as a smith, my friend. Your cleverness belongs to a lawyer."

He rode back to Hlidarend with an improved spirit.

10

In midsummer Njal and Gunnar rode to the Althing and tented their booths. Njal went to visit chieftains and other powerful men to ask their support in his suits, for there were several minor matters of property he was also involved with. Those men who were bound to him by kinship or friendship or gratitude for past assistance agreed to help. But some refused to become involved; their names are lost but they were important men and were later shamed by their inaction.

Then Njal went to hear the Law Speaker recite the laws.

Gunnar rode to the shieling of Otkel the dairyman. The man was honored by the visit, and offered him fresh whey to drink. "Your manslaughter case against Hoskuld Haakonarsson was never finished," said Gunnar. "I would like you to assign me the rights to the case."

Otkel readily agreed.

Then Gunnar went to Ari Tryggvasson and gave him a message from Njal, who requested that he agree to foster a little girl. Ari said that his family had too many boys as it was, and his wife would not be unappreciative of the company.

Next Gunnar found Gizur the Learned and Ogur Freyspriest, and asked them to walk with him. They went up Almanna Gorge, and climbed the cliffs. There they had a good view of Thingvellir. They looked down upon brightly dressed men standing about the Law Rock, and the booths and grazing grounds.

"Do you see the Stronghold Booth?" asked Gunnar.

"There seems to be a giant outside it," replied Ogur.

"It seems to me that I am seeing a wolf," said Gizur, who had a touch of the second sight.

"That is Bjorn Bjarnarsson, a villain and a berserk. His chieftain has bought the friendship of many well-armed men of little account. I think that they plan to shed blood at the Courts, and then retreat to this booth."

"Armed men could hold up there a long time, until their besiegers wearied and went home to harvest," Ogur said.

"They could be burned out," said Gizur.

"That is too cowardly a crime to contemplate," said Gunnar. "I would ask you this—when Njal goes to present his suit, arm your men. I will not ask you to fight with us, but I would like you to bar the way to this booth, if it is within your power."

"That seems a reasonable request," the chieftains replied.

11

That night Skarp-Hedin woke his father. "Let me tell you my dream, kinsman. I thought I would swim in the Oxar River, but when I came to the standing stones there were many men lying deep in the water, dead upon the bridge. The river was red as blood, but I was able to cross by walking upon the bodies."

"This is no false dream," said Njal. "There will be a great battle tomorrow, and many will fall. This is deplorable. There should not be bloodshed at the Althing."

"You become an old man before your time," replied Skarp-Hedin. "This is an opportunity to advance ourselves."

But Njal was unquiet and did not sleep the rest of the night.

The next day Njal went to the Law Rock. He went unarmed, but his sons wore helmets and carried weapons and shields. There they met Gunnar with his brothers and the Sigfussons, his mother's brothers; they were all well-armed. Others had come to support them. It was said that so many well-built and brave men had seldom been gathered together. There were also many armed men with Haakon Snakevision. They wore cloaks of raven blue. Haakon and his son had gilded helmets, bright coats of chainmail, and painted shields. Bjorn Bjarnarsson wore a bearskin, and stood chewing upon his shield; men avoided him.

Njal stood up on the Law Rock and announced his case. He had a good voice, and it was well heard echoing against the cliff behind him.

"I summon Haakon Snakevision of Thorhof for the secret murder of Thorri the Poet." He listed the wounds on Thorri, and summoned Haakon for inflicting those as well, and called upon his nine jurors to testify that he had made the summons properly. Then he repeated the summons for Bjorn Bjarnarsson. Everyone agreed that he had spoken very well.

Hjalti Prow then stood; he was the son of Einar Thumb and Thorunn Horsehead, and was accounted the best lawyer in the Westfjords. He was a vain man, though his nose was thought too large. He wore a large new armring of gold.

"Not many men wear thirty-two cows upon their arm," said Skarp-Hedin. "His advice comes dear."

"I invalidate Njal's case against Haakon Snakevision and Bjorn Bjarnarsson," said Hjalti Prow. "It was improperly done. There is no proper plaintiff. All of Thorri the Poet's relatives are dead."

Men were surprised to hear that Njal had made such a basic error.

Hjalti further demanded that Njal be served with outlawry and confiscation for having brought the case improperly. He was eloquent, and convinced many listeners.

Njal spoke again. "I have no rich armrings from my client, it is true. I have brought the case in behalf of the dead man's sister Thorkatla Thorkelsdottir."

This news shocked Hjalti, and he went aside to confer with Haakon.

"We have no knowledge of this relative," he said finally.

Sigurd the Unruly came forward; he was an even-tempered man and well respected. He testified that Thorkatla was his neighbor, and the daughter of Thorkel Squint.

Hjalti smiled. He had a sly face. "Then I accuse Njal of the crime of bringing his case before the wrong quarter court."

Njal now smiled. "I call upon Ari Tryggvasson of Arasted to testify that he is the foster-father of Thorkatla, so that she resides in the same quarter as Haakon. The case has been appropriately managed."

Hjalti then said, "I bring suit against Gunnar Hamundarsson for the secret murder of Bjorn Bjarnarsson."

Everyone looked in surprise at Gunnar, who was the last man any would expect to kill surreptitiously.

Hjalti went on to call his own jury, who had witnessed the wounds of the dead man and heard Haakon's summons.

"This is a very serious charge," said Njal. "I will counter with these points. First, Bjorn Bjarnarsson provoked this killing by making vile comments, then by coming upon Gunnar in the guise of a wolf with intent to cause him grievous harm. By all these actions—the insults, the attack, and the shape-changing—he made himself an outlaw so that the killing was legal. Next, it must be said that Gunnar handled the manslaughter legally, by announcing it to some shepherds."

"He did not cover my brother's body," shouted Bjorn Bjarnarsson.

"That was not necessary, as the body was already covered with a wolf skin," Njal replied. "Finally, this suit against Gunnar was announced also at the wrong quarter court. I expect Hjalti to take full responsibility for this infraction.

"Furthermore," continued Njal, "in behalf of Thorkatla Thorkelsdottir I bring suit against Haakon Snakevision for robbery and perjury." He told of the evidence that Haakon had lied in order to obtain his property and chieftainship, and held up the saga which Jorunn had given Gunnar.

Hjalti was conferring in low tones with his client. Haakon pushed him away. "Gunnar Hamundarsson and Skarp-Hedin Njalsson obtained this evidence improperly, by seduction of my wife. My cousin and housecarls will testify that these men spent much time alone with her."

This was a grave charge. Before Njal might answer it, Skarp-Hedin

spoke up. "I have been told that The High One recommends one avoid beer and other men's wives. But when a man cannot plow his own field, is he not often jealous of those who seem capable of a man's work?"

At that Hoskuld Haakonarsson screamed out in rage, and threw a barbed spear at Skarp-Hedin. He ducked and it passed over his head. Gunnar then caught the spear in his left hand and threw it back. It passed through Hoskuld's thigh.

He looked down at his leg, which was turning red. "Gunnar has returned my gift," he said, and fell dead.

There was a sudden stillness and in the quiet, Gunnar's halberd was heard to ring loudly.

Then Bjorn Bjarnarsson attacked, leading Haakon's followers after him. The berserker cut down several men. He was very fearsome, with his bloodied axe and the shield with its toothmarks. Njal's supporters fled before him until Ari turned, waiting.

"A small man may fell a tree," he said, and chopped off Bjorn's foot. Then Gunnar ran up. He thrust his halberd through the berserk's shield and into his heart.

12

Gunnar and the others advanced, driving Haakon's men off the Law Rock and among the booths. Women and other non-combatants were cooking and mending weapons or taking the sun; they went to their doorways and watched the battle pass.

Hjalti Prow came up against Arnolf No-nose, and aimed a blow at him with a richly inlaid sword. Arnolf blocked him with his own weapon. Hjalti's sword bent, and he paused to straighten it with his foot.

"A sword should be as good as its ornaments," said the smith. Arnolf then swung his axe and sliced off Hjalti's arm, the one with the gold ring. The limb lay upon the ground. "That is no way to treat good jewelry."

Haakon Snakevision saw his wife's cousin Helgi Starkadsson relaxing beside a booth. Helgi was a Dane, captain of a trading ship. "Will you stand by and watch your kinsman die?" asked Haakon.

"It would seem to be what you deserve," replied Helgi. "But men will not think me worth much if I do not help you." He called to his shipmates and they joined the fight. This evened the odds, and made Njal's faction draw back warily. Helgi himself fought as well as two men, wounding a handful of opponents.

Skarp-Hedin found one of Ari's neighbors, who was limping away leaning upon a spear. "I have need of your crutch," he said. He ran forward. The spear broke against Helgi's shield, but Skarp-Hedin pushed him

back until he fell into a large kettle in which a woman had been making soup. Helgi cried out from the boiling water, and then the Njalsson struck off his head with his axe.

The woman berated him loudly.

"It is true I have ruined your family's nightmeal," said Skarp-Hedin, his cheeks flushing, but he held his temper. He directed the woman to go to his booth and ask Bergthora for better provisions than had been lost.

Haakon's men retreated now toward the Stronghold booth, but found their way barred by Gizur the Learned and Ogur Freyspriest. Haakon's men set down their weapons.

"You are all cowards," cried Haakon Snakevision. Seeking to shame them, he ran at Gunnar, swinging his sword. Gunnar thrust his halberd through shield and mail and deep into Haakon's belly. The chieftain fell to the ground, and was taken inside a booth to die. Then the fight ended, and men bore away the wounded and buried the dead.

13

The next day all gathered again at the Law Rock. Jorunn the Unfortunate sent word that she would accept arbitration, and a dozen chieftains were chosen to consider the case. The wounds and deaths of Njal's followers were set against those of Haakon's, and there was little else to consider, for the fight had been close.

The death of Hoskuld Haakonarsson was set against the case of Otkel's shepherd, and the two canceled each other. The deaths of both Bjornings were set against the death of Thorri the Poet, the attack on Gunnar and Skarp-Hedin, and their insults. Haakon's demise was considered justified because his crimes had made him an outlaw; many felt that Gunnar had done Haakon's wife a favor.

Hjalti Prow demanded full compensation for his wound. Njal, Gunnar, and Sigurd paid in Arnolf's behalf. Then Hjalti was sentenced to three years outlawry, but it was recommended that he leave the country and not return until all involved parties were dead, in order to keep the peace.

This left only the killing of Helgi Starkadsson to be settled. Jorunn had asked four hundred ounces of silver, double the usual compensation. The judges themselves offered to pay half, and other important men at the Althing reached into their purses so that the full amount was paid immediately. Sigurd the Unruly added a silk cloak with gold embroidery atop the pile of riches, for he had now seen Jorunn and thought her pleasant. He and his own wife had recently divorced due to mutual incompatibility.

It was decided that Thorhof and all of Haakon's property which had been derived from Thorolf should go to Thorkatla; the rest rightfully belonged to Jorunn. Arnolf told her that she might stay at Thorhof in charge of the household so long as she pleased.

Haakon's chieftainship needed to be awarded. Njal said that he would propose they award it to a man who lived in the district, who was skillful, brave, wise, and of good birth.

Gizur the Learned spoke in behalf of the other judges.

"We will accept your suggestion in this matter."

"I recommended Ari Tryggvasson," said Njal.

Ari was declared the new priest-chieftain. His neighbors swore allegiance to him immediately, and thought their lot greatly improved.

The rest of the Althing passed peacefully. The men of Thorthesdal rode home together, as did Njal and Gunnar with their followers, and no one was attacked.

14

The next summer Gunnar attended the wedding feast of Jorunn and Sigurd. He learned then that the ghost of Thorri still haunted Thorthesdal. After the harvest he and Njal rode to Arasted.

"I foresee conflict," said Njal.

"This knowledge of the future seems clear even to those of us without prescience," said Gunnar.

They were warmly welcomed, and Ari took them into the firehall and sat them on the high seat, sitting himself on the lower bench. He had not let being chieftain go to his head.

Arnolf No-nose joined them; he and his family lived at Thorhof where they had built a large smithy and planned to raise a new temple, but they spent most of their time at Arasted. Thorkatla and Grim Arasson were very taken with each other, and it was planned that they should wed, if they were still of such a mind when grown.

Ari's wife herself brought the washing water, and then beer. They conversed pleasantly, until Ari said "Here he is."

A silent cloaked man had entered the room and stood at the foot of the hearth. Despite the blazing peat fire, the room suddenly seemed very cold.

Little Thorkatla began to cry. Her brother frightened her.

Grim stood up. He had a sword which Arnolf had made him, wood painted to look like a richly inlaid weapon. "Do not bother us!" said the child, and swung his toy at the ghost's leg.

"Surely I can match this boy's bravery," said Gunnar. He rose, took up his sword, ran to the ghost and struck off the head.

The ghost picked up his head, replacing it upon his neck, then sat down beside the children.

Gunnar reached over and pushed the ghost into the hearth. He did not burn, but spoke.

"Hearty is the homefire Welcoming warriors."

"You are not welcome. Return to your grave," said Gunnar.

Several of Ari's men stepped forward, emboldened by Gunnar's harsh use of the ghost. They each took one of Thorri's arms and began to pull him toward the door.

Thorri grabbed one servant and threw him into the fire; the other he threw upward so that he was smashed against the rafters. Both were seriously injured.

Gunnar then approached waving his sword again. Thorri retreated before him and at the doorway sank into the ground. But Gunnar would not let him escape. He caught him by his hair and pulled him back out of the ground.

Then he wrestled with the ghost until he got him in an armlock, and forced him to walk before him. All the household followed, until they came to the mound where they had buried Thorri. Ari directed that the mound be opened, and Gunnar shoved the ghost inside.

Njal addressed the ghost. "Thorri Thorkelsson, your presence here is unlawful. You must remain in your home, and no longer bother anyone with unwanted visits or poems."

They placed all of Thorri's effects with him, including his brooch and the saga, and then closed up the mound. Thorri the Poet never left it again, and here the saga of the ghost of Arasted ends. ●

ON BOOKS

Paul Di Filippo

The Quiet Man

For over forty years Stanislaw Lem, the Grand Master of Polish SF, has been gleefully following the spacetime-spanning trail of his engagingly unassuming Everyman, Ijon Tichy, whose last name is a play on the Polish word for "quiet." Tichy's early adventures were collected in *The Star Diaries* (1976 US publication) and *Memoirs of a Space Traveler* (1982 US). There then followed two novels: *The Futurological Congress* (1974 US), and the as-yet untranslated *Wisja Lokalna* (1982 Poland). Reading the translations in sequence, one notices a definite maturation of Tichy, a personal voyage that corresponds roughly to the complexification of the world's history during those same four decades of composition.

This path is brought to a certain unquiet climax in the latest Tichy book, *Peace on Earth* (Harcourt Brace, hardcover, $19.95, 234 pages), originally published in Poland in 1987.

Tichy began life as a kind of semi-ridiculous Baron Munchausen figure, an intergalactic Gulliver, the deadpan first-person narrator of a series of absurd adventures, most with a satirical bent. He inhabited a far-future, galaxy-wide culture full of bizarre aliens and ultra-modified humans with tongue-twisting Seuss-like names, a culture that rivaled that invented by Douglas Adams for silliness. Spaceships featured rudders and brakes, as well as edible interiors. The societies Tichy encountered carried human follies, foibles, and fears to the max. On the planet Pinta, Aquatica's rulers were determined to make the populace over into water-breathers by sheer edict. On the world of Tairia, mutant killer potatoes menaced the spaceways! In this phase, Tichy resembled a cleverer, more deeply philosophical Ferdinand Feghoot.

With the publication of *The Futurological Congress,* however, Tichy took up permanent residence on our familiar Earth. His mentor, Professor Tarantoga, told him at the beginning of that novel, "Space travel nowadays [is] an escape from the problems of Earth." Abiding by that declaration, Tichy plunged into a hyperbolic milieu resembling the Paris Riots of 1968, later emerging from a frozen sleep into a chemically lobotomized overpopulated future that looked like a combination of Harry Harrison's *Make Room, Make Room* (1966) with Phil Dick's *The Three Stigmata of Palmer Eldritch* (1965), mediated by Prozac. Abandoning

his mythic, cartoon-bloodless stature for the role of vulnerable mortal, Tichy became less of an actor and more of a passive witness to the potential "comic infernos" awaiting mankind.

This role is carried even further in the latest book. Due to a grave injury sustained in the course of an official mission, Tichy is not himself. Or rather, he is himself plus one, a strange condition which leaves him mostly unable to take any decisive action, at the mercy of various factions intent on using him.

In this near-future scenario Earth has finally achieved total peace by agreeing to export all its weapons, active and experimental, to the Moon. (Recall that this book was written mid-Reagan, with Star Wars looming.) There, under the autonomous supervision of artificial intelligences, military R&D continues, theoretically ready to be called upon when needed by the terrestrial nations that set up the programs. But as the still-whole Tichy discovers when he is tapped by the Lunar Agency to make a one-man exploratory mission, the robotic intelligences have rebelled, cutting off all contact with Earth.

Tichy's attempts to unriddle the actions of the lunar machines are recounted in flashbacks that alternate with his current dilemma. You see, Tichy's mission, we are told from the start, has ended with the mysterious non-surgical severing of his corpus callosum, the bridge between his brain's hemispheres. Now his head is occupied by two entities, both (and neither) quite fully representing himself. This dichotomy of course is mirrored in the book's alternating chapters.

The realtime narrative is mildly interesting, yet overall rather flat, despite a variety of comic digressions and paranoid speculations. The distressed Tichy is harried from expert to expert, ending up in a strange asylum from which he merely hears about the book's apocalyptic denouement that he himself turns out to be responsible for. Left with his severed brain unfixed, Tichy seems exhausted and despairing on the final page, a far cry from the naïve and ever-cheerful star-explorer of 1954, just as the world no longer basks in either Eisenhower or Stalin's brands of optimism.

But the Moon chapters are a robot of a different chassis: resembling Algis Budrys's *Rogue Moon* (1960), they effectively convey the inexplicable oddness of a path of machine evolution taken without mankind's guiding hand. Lem has always been an original and prescient thinker regarding cybernetics, and he reveals himself to be still thoroughly up-to-date. It's especially interesting to see Lem's conception of "dust" and "quicksilver" robots, the latter of which predates the famous *T2* model.

In *Congress,* Lem invented "linguistic futurology," the investigation and elucidation of actual future events by the controlled warping of language. Always concerned with the crafting of catchy neologisms that embody new concepts, Lem continues to coin clever constructions here, among which are "sadistics," "particularization," "synsects," "micropes," and "bytocide."

Ingenious, energetic, simultaneously elevated above and yet deeply engaged with humanity and its problems, Lem remains SF's very own cybercosmic Harold Pinter.

Youthful Effusions

I live with a person who does not know Philip K. Dick as an SF writer at all. Having read only his posthumously published mainstream novels, she thinks of him, perhaps, as a little-known but talented contemporary and colleague of, say, the young John Barth. Her PKD is a quirky anatomizer of fifties angst, a metaphysician of the soul of California suburbia, a drainer of the algae-scummed swimming pools and psyches of that frozen-in-time Lotusland.

Talk about your alternate realities!

Now, thanks to Andy Watson, publisher of WCS Books, my mate Deborah (and you lucky folks too) can read what is believed to be Dick's first novel, heretofore unpublished: *Gather Yourselves Together* (hardcover, $40.00, 291 pages; order through eyeBALL Books, PO Box 18549, Asheville, NC 28814). This beginner's novel, although relatively simple and unpolished compared to later works, will only cement Dick's reputation as a compassionate genius whose native mainstream narrative impulses were frustrated by an inhospitable marketplace.

Gather features a limited cast: Verne Tildon, Barbara Mahler, and Carl Fitter are three employees of "the Company," a mining firm with interests in China. Left behind in the wake of the 1949 Communist takeover, custodians of an enormous overseas plant, the trio is absolved of duties and finally free to work out the psychodramas incipient among them, in a locale that at first covertly, then explicitly, calls up Dick's familiar post-apocalyptic shattered Edens. Verne and Barbara, having had an unsatisfactory affair years ago back in the States, struggle with the emotional residue. Young and innocent Carl, meanwhile, strives to understand his attraction toward Barbara and his fear of leaving behind the things of his youth.

This potent triangle generates plenty of interest, although emotions never quite reach the apex of aching queasiness found in Dick's other mainstream works. Combined with flashbacks to the Stateside pasts of the three protagonists, the narrative never loses its momentum or a certain mild suspense.

What has, I believe, been too little mentioned about Dick's sometimes rushed prose style is its compulsive readability. Not quite stream-of-consciousness, full of effective sentence fragments, Dick's occasionally meandering, seemingly haphazard thread of words, woven of emotions and perceptions, hunches and flashes of insight, functions like a guiding twine through the labyrinth of reality.

Present in this book is nearly every Dickian preoccupation that was to exfoliate later in such startling patterns. Dark-haired girls, simulacra, the cardboard nature of reality, the absence or disappearance of God, the fluctuation between past and present, bodies as

machines, the seductive allure of philosophy, metaphysical anxieties—from his very earliest work, Dick was fully Dick.

In an intriguing afterword, Dwight Brown explicates the autobiographical components of the book, making a good case that Carl Fitter stands in for Dick himself. (Carl's massive treatise on ethics can even be seen as the prototype for Dick's enormous Valis exegesis.)

While basically agreeing, I'd like to point out that Barbara herself represents a certain element of Dick's persona. The same age as Dick was when he wrote the book, she is simultaneously hardened and vulnerable, a stance that young PKD, coming off a broken marriage, must have found himself often adopting. Given Dick's notorious identification with his dead twin sister, and also an episode in the novel where Carl strains to "give birth" to a drawing that seems to represent his anima, the cross-gender identification is plain.

This handsomely produced book (credit goes to designer James "Kibo" Parry) rescues from oblivion an important—and entertaining—document from one of the field's seminal writers.

Three Splats

There is a lineage of mainstream writers intent on warping reality through quirky linguistic experiments. Surreal, dadistic, they depict worlds that are so alienated from ours—and yet so true to their hidden foundations—that their creations are adopted wholeheartedly into the SF/Fantasy camp. To mention Donald Barthelme, Robert Coover, Ishmael Reed, and Mark Leyner is to say it all. Coming at the same tradition from the other side of the genre wall, we find David Bunch, Felix Gottschalk, and Don Webb.

Smack dab in the middle of this amorphous congeries we can locate a newish name, that of Michael Brodsky, whose latest book is the enigmatically titled * * * (Four Walls Eight Windows, trade paper, $13.95, 367 pages).

* * * is basically "Bartleby the Scrivener" on acid. The story outline: young, earnest, ambitious Stu Pott, a kind of postmodern Horatio Alger hero, meets high-flying businessman Dov Grey and his Lady-Macbeth-like wife Gwenda at a party. The next thing he knows, he's been hired by Grey to work at Dov Enterprises, Inc. His job? To craft * * * out of "raws." (I found myself mentally substituting "splat" or "splats" as appropriate for the asterisks as I read, thereby making the prose flow smoothly, a strategy Brodsky might well have been trying to preempt.)

Stu struggles to come to grips with the ambiguous nature of raws and * * * (at times, the product seems to be something tangible, at other times * * * seem to be potent feelings or emotional states, "a random collection of unrelated manipulands directly related to [Dov Grey's] bodily functions"). He must contend with a treacherous co-worker named Jomm Dawrson and his wife Tullshie, as well as Personnel Director Ms. Redmount, who also happens to be Dov's lover. Eventually hired by Gwenda to nail his boss and Redmount in bed, Stu falls into a more deadly game

than he is really capable of handling.

What transfigures this plain story and lifts it into the SF realm is the masterfully skewed, hyperbolic language. Brodsky's characters are prone to launching into long self-defensive monologues at the smallest prompting. Listening to them is like being stuck in a room with Saint Thomas Aquinas, except instead of discussing God he's trying to justify seducing his secretary. The simplest actions and rationales become twisted paths through verbal thickets of "underdoggerel." Much like the recent Martian School of poets, Brodsky cloaks everyday reality with a veil of estrangement.

This novel reminded me of an exceptional SF story I hadn't thought of in a while: John Sladek's "Masterson and the Clerks" (1967), which also dealt with insanity in the workplace. Like Sladek, Brodsky would have been right at home in Moorcock's *New Worlds,* and should find a place in the heart of any SF reader interested in verbal hijinx that lead to the startling perception of everyday madness.

Downbound Train

Across a lake of blood an endless train, pulled by an Art Deco engine resembling a bomb, labors to carry its freight of wounded humanity to an unknown destination. On board, in the midst of the pitiful yet repugnant monsters, is a lone nameless pregnant woman, her simple demeanor and normal good looks making her a freak among the freaks. The horrendous travails she and the others will endure in their flight from (and to) destruction, across a world of ruins; the cruelty she will witness, interspersed with a little tenderness from an unlikely source—this is the disturbing tale to be found in the new graphic novel by the multitalented John Bergin, *From Inside* (Kitchen Sink Press, trade paper, $24.95, unpaginated).

Bergin's story boasts the resonant simplicity of the tale of Job. Beset by one grisly roadblock after another, numbed by the catastrophe that has befallen the world, Bergin's heroine at first resents her pregnancy. But when she is finally delivered of her child, she experiences an upwelling of hope, brought forth "from inside."

But to synopsize the novel in this way is to minimize the greater portion of it. As Samuel Delany once said, we don't *read* comics, we *look* at them. And Bergin's book provides page after page of stunning visuals.

With a scrupulously limited palette of burnt reds, browns, beiges, and blacks, Bergin builds a world where the muted blue of his heroine's dress or a flash of sky strikes like a blow. Giacometti humans labor in a Boschian landscape; aerial shots of the creeping train read as disturbing calligraphy; an iconography of skulls and bandages, body parts and tortured dolls, train wheels and coach-linkages is laboriously assembled into a tapestry of doom. (Hallucinatory photomontages of dolls, gears, and bones serve as vatic interchapter commentary.) After the birth of the baby, Bergin opens up his canvas a bit, effectively conveying the renewal of hope that comes before the shattering climax.

In this book, Bergin has brilliantly depicted the aftereffects of humanity's barely concealed lust for self-destruction, along with the incredible persistence of that tiny yet vital sprite named Hope, last element out of Pandora's box.

Hopeful Futures

Future Primitive (Tor Books, hardcover, $23.95, 352 pages), edited by Kim Stanley Robinson, is a reprint collection of stories subtitled "The New Ecotopias." Although the book proves to be a masterful, thoughtful, and thought-provoking assemblage of top-notch stories, I finished it feeling that it was at best a ranging shot on its ostensible subject matter, never quite hitting the target. Circling and dancing around any real Ecotopia, the individual stories all too often failed to live up—alone or as a whole—to that unique template novel.

For those unfamiliar with the precedent: *Ecotopia,* by Ernest Callenbach, appeared in 1975. Cast in the form of journalistic columns interspersed with more personal diary entries, it told the story of one William Weston, international affairs reporter, who is sent on a quasi-diplomatic mission to the land of Ecotopia, which consists of the former American Northwest, a land that seceded violently in 1980. There, Weston is confronted with a way of life completely at odds with the polluted and technophilic Western manner of living.

Callenbach's book is a minor masterpiece. Eminently readable and comprehensive, it paints in convincing detail a lifestyle at once utterly foreign yet dear to our deepest hearts. Callenbach seems to have overlooked no detail, however small, in the compressed space of his relatively short book, and he scores an incredible number of forecasting hits, from the breakup of the Soviet Union to the growth of recycling to cable TV (featuring continuous narrowcasting of the Ecotopian legislature) to text on demand from central computerized libraries. On top of that his viewpoint character—who starts out as a rather dislikable and pompous idiot—undergoes a convincing transformation and breakthrough, not without real emotional pain. Callenbach's Ecotopia seems as tangible at book's end as our current sorry mire.

Unfortunately, none of the stories in *Future Primitive* contain more than a fraction of Callenbach's insights, or seem to share his goal of blueprinting the transitional road from the here-and-now to the there-and-then. Many of the stories, for one thing, concern alien cultures—Gene Wolfe's " 'A Story,' by John V. Marsch" and Paul Park's "Rangriver Fell," for instance. And as much as alien models can stand as inspiration or contrast, they cannot by definition serve as attainable idealizations of human society. Other stories, such as the ones by Bisson, Murphy, and Lafferty in the first portion of the book, are here merely as thematic examples of man's desire to unite with something primitive.

Callenbach's own entry in the book, "Chocco," limns the pseudo-Amerindian culture that has come to flourish a thousand years after the disappearance of our own world (we are known to our de-

scendents as the Machine People). While damning in its indictment of our follies, it is rather static and limited in its depiction of these Sun People. Perhaps closest in spirit to Callenbach is Frederick Turner, whose book-length Utopia *The New World* (1985) is excerpted here.

What's also puzzling about *Future Primitive* is its exclusion of certain key writers in this vein. Works more akin to Callenbach by Farmer, Sturgeon, Spinrad, and Herbert, for example, easily come to mind.

In the end, despite Robinson's sympathetic and cogent choices, supplemented by his intelligent endnotes and bibliography, the definitive collection of Ecotopian writings remains unassembled.

Follow the Mors-red Brick Road

A. A. Attanasio has always demonstrated an almost supernatural ability to invest the familiar tropes of SF with more beauty and emotional charge than lesser writers might deem possible. Blessed like some Celtic bard with a prodigious word-hoard, capable of inventing scene after scene full of excruciating challenges for his boundlessly energetic protagonists, he ranks with Iain Banks and Colin Greenland as one of the prime renovators of the creaky space-opera mode.

In his latest book, *Solis* (HarperCollins, hardcover, $23.00, 203 pages), he delivers yet another thrilling tale, stuffed full of patented Attanasio poetry and wonder-provoking marvels, harking back this time to a famous sixty-year-old cycle of stories.

In 1931, author Neil Jones published "The Jameson Satellite," launching a series that detailed the adventures of Professor Jameson, whose preserved corpse outlived his time to be resurrected in a new robot body. Fully intentionally, I believe, Attanasio has chosen to reanimate a similar hero in a similar venue.

In *Solis,* Charlie Outis, citizen of the early twenty-first century, has had his post-death brain preserved cryonically. He is awakened a thousand years later. But not by altruists. A sect of perverts known as "lewdists" want to use Charlie's encapsulated wetware for its ability to run sex-simulations. Kidnapped from the lewdists by the "Friends of the Non-Abelian Gauge Group" (Attanasio's future, with humanity divided into clades, frequently feels like Bruce Sterling's Mechanist-Shaper scenario), the englobed brain that is Charlie eventually ends up forced to run a deep-space mining factory. How Charlie is rescued from this fate by an ultra-complex robot "androne" named Munk (a Simak-style silicon sentimentalist) and a female "feral" human space pilot named Mei Nili, along with other helpers equally odd, forms the catapult to a wild trek across the sands of a partially terraformed Mars—replete with floating carnivorous fish—to the refuge city of Solis (read "solace").

With Munk as a Tin Man possessing a human heart, Charlie as the Scarecrow (a brain in search of a body, rather than the opposite), Mei as a kind of brassy Dorothy, Solis as the Emerald City, and a deadly "morph" named Sitor An-

anta as the Wicked Witch, parallels with Baum's fairy tale soon became unobtrusively evident, yet are never overdone. The reader's attention is fully engaged in wide-eyed astonishment at Attanasio's verbal fluidity and his powers of invention. His future is made truly alien in the manner of those of Gene Wolfe, by a deft deployment of arcane words both real and coined, "frustrum," "chamfer" and "reboant" being among the former, "semblor" and "magravity" among the latter. (This ingenuity makes the few clichés, such as "plasteel" and "credits" jar, however.) And all the social and technological constructs of such a far-future venue are fully reworked, provoking delight and awe.

The no-longer-human humans known as the Maat who rule this future (reminiscent of Cordwainer Smith's unknowable Instrumentality Lords) would undoubtedly draft Attanasio into their omnipotent ranks, were they to read this book.

Taking Tiger Mountain (By Strategy)

For years Howard Waldrop has been promising to gift us with a novel called *Mars Is Red,* about the settlement of Mars by the Communist Chinese. If we ever get to read this vaporware, it will now have to measure up to Paul McAuley's marvelous *Red Dust* (AvoNova, hardcover, $22.00, 392 pages), which can be synopsized by the same high-concept blurb. (Slyly, McAuley's cadre even sing a patriotic song entitled "Mars Is Red.") But *Red Dust* (and my ears detect an allusion to the recent naturalistic Chinese film *Red Sorghum)* is uniquely McAuley, as the Waldrop will eventually be uniquely Waldrop, and the field will benefit from both.

Over the course of his previous three books, McAuley has revealed himself to be the equal and spiritual cousin of his U.K. compatriot Stephen Baxter in embedding the latest scientific concepts and attitudes in a highly polished and gorgeous setting. But whereas his last book, *Eternal Light* (1991) was sometimes so dense with ideation and action that it occasionally had to be parsed rather than read, his latest manages to be bizarre yet transparent, simple yet deep, timelessly ancient yet futuristic.

Red Dust is the story of Wei Lee, seemingly a lowly agronomist (though one with a rich and powerful great-grandfather, one of the near-immortals known as the Ten Thousand Years) and his astonishing rise to a position one step short of literal godhood. This journey will take him three-quarters around a dying Mars terraformed for six centuries, from lonely plains where Free Yankee cowboys herd yaks to the capital city of Xin Beijing to the vast seas of semiliquid dust to atmosphere-piercing Tiger Mountain.

Lee's Mars is a baroque, exotic locale, full of ruins and canals, Tibetan lamasaries run by deranged computers, augmentary viruses, and feral children. To attempt to encapsulate its wonders here would be to do the book an injustice. Suffice it to say that your attention will never flag from McAuley's acrobatic performance, equivalent in lapidary strangeness

to the music of Brian Eno. And what keeps McAuley aloft is a trapeze of brilliant language, from the peculiar non-idiomatic diction of the Chinese to such sentences as "Lee knew that the beat allowed the clockless crocodile of his back brain to dominate the quantum-decision trees of his mind."

McAuley's Mars and his storytelling methodology bring to mind the baroque *Planet Stories* mode of Leigh Brackett and others. Absolutely cutting-edge, McAuley has reinvigorated what used to be called "science fantasy" for the nineties. While intensely mythic, McAuley is also tuned into and respectful of pop culture: Elvis Presley, known as the King of Cats, has been replicated on Jupiter by von Neumann devices, and beams rebellious broadcasts to Mars. This fusion never strikes a false note: to quote one of Lee's companions: "It was magic, and she didn't need to know how magic worked as long as she could rely on it."

Along with the Attanasio book and Kim Stanley Robinson's Mars trilogy, the McAuley work resuscitates the solar system as an exciting SF venue. In the sixties, Brian Aldiss once wrote a poem entitled (if memory serves) "We Have No More Good Stories About Mars Because We Don't Need Any More Good Stories About Mars."

Well, now it seems we need them once again—and are getting them in spades!

Lost, Pursued, and Broken—but Undefeated

Many streams of literature feed into the ocean of SF. One of the strongest is that of "man against his environment," a type of story best exemplified by the harsh and merciless works of Jack London. Whether it's John Carter on Mars, Kickaka on the World of Tiers or Lazarus Long homesteading a colony world, SF is full of great chunks of narrative dealing with humanity's attempts to subdue—or simply survive—the rough and unforgiving elements.

In *Wilderness* (Forge, paperback, $4.99, 304 pages) one of SF's finest writers, Roger Zelazny (along with co-author Gerald Hausman, an authority on Native Americans), has delivered perhaps the wildest such ride in many a year. Not strictly SF (although it features borderline supernatural moments), *Wilderness* is prime reading for anyone who has ever been thrilled by tales of hardship and self-reliance among the perils of, well, the wilderness, alien or earthly.

Zelazny and Hausman have adopted as their twin protagonists two actual "mountain men," John Colter and Hugh Glass. Both men endured nearly superhuman challenges amid the Wild West of the early 1800s, and lived to tell about them. Although the two adventures took place fifteen years apart, Zelazny alternates his chapters between these men as if their adventures were running in parallel. (Their lives do intersect at one ironic and emotional point.) This allows the two stories to comment on each other, bringing to light the similarities and differences between the two men and their experiences.

Colter comes across as a more complex man than Glass, and his adventure is, in a way, more "intel-

lectual" than Glass's, insofar as Colter is playing a deadly game against human opponents, the Blackfeet tribe. Glass, on the other hand, is reduced to a more bestial struggle, one where a few inconvenient pebbles across his path could literally spell death. Yet, surprisingly, the emotional ending of Glass's tale is more resonant than that of Colter, who comes off as rather too self-involved.

This book is full of some of the best writing Zelazny has done in many a year. Exquisite poetry is balanced against vivid descriptions of natural scenery and hurtling, aching narrative tension. Some of the best passages bring to mind another element found in Jack London's work, specifically in *The Star Rover* (1915). This element involves out-of-body experiences or near-death hallucinations. Their battered bodies pushed to their limits and beyond, both Colter and Glass enter a mystic dimension where bear and hawk totems both threaten and invigorate, and the whole world shimmers.

The existential Odyssey both men undergo leaves them forever imbued with the tang of the wild, yet somehow more fully human. As Glass realizes late in his adversity, "His life was wilderness, yet many things set him apart from the beasts." The reader also will emerge from these twinned tales with a deeper knowledge of what being human means.

Haiti Drowned

In her second novel, *Half the Day Is Night* (Tor Books, hardcover, $21.95, 352 pages), which boasts a beautiful Paul Lehr cover, Maureen McHugh has lived up to the promise of her first superlative book, *China Mountain Zhang* (1992). Moreover, she has done so not by simply recapitulating that opening salvo, but by doing something essentially different.

Whereas *Zhang* opened up a whole, wide, intricately functioning next-century world to the reader, full of different social castes and cliques, *Half the Day* creates a claustrophobic, dysfunctional environment populated basically by only two classes, the haves and the have-nots.

In this future, the seabed has been settled with fairly large cities, many of which have apparently attained their independence. McHugh chooses to focus on several such interacting domes scattered across the Caribbean Ocean floor. There, where no sunlight ever penetrates, thousands of people live out their whole lives in the unending night alluded to by the title.

One of these citizens is Mayla Ling, investment banker, a creature of privilege, lifelong resident of the domes. Another is David Dai, a French-Vietnamese ex-soldier—uncommonly meek, yet competent—who has come to the undersea city as Mayla's hired bodyguard. The book will alternate chapter by chapter between their points-of-view, giving us both the insider's and outsider's perceptions of this constricted culture.

Deliberately—especially in Mayla's chapters—McHugh restricts the reader's access to information on the surface world, all the while hardening the palpability of the domes by supplying such details as

the taste of the air or the feel of a diving mask. It is amazing how little is revealed about conditions above, save for a few tidbits here and there, most of which paint a somewhat authoritarian society.

But the sunlit world above (which emerges by the book's final pages as a symbol of escape and freedom) cannot compare in paranoia and violence to the domes, which are ruled by either merciless corporations or repressive Third World dictators, and where there are very few places to run or hide. And running and hiding is exactly what David and Mayla are eventually forced to do, thanks to the overlapping machinations of terrorists, thugs, drug-runners, and police.

What emerges from this scenario is a kind of Graham Greene tropical adventure, a suspenseful narrative of First Worlders trapped in a hostile non-Anglo society. (Mayla and David's Asian features stand out in the Black and Hispanic Creole mix.)

The writing in *Half the Day* is snazzy yet subtle. McHugh experiments a bit with run-on sentences, and she sets up effectively recurring bits of symbolism involving people's eyes and butterflies, among other things. Many of Mayla and David's thoughts are conveyed in the form of internal questions, indicative of their uncertainty and trepidation. Also to her credit she avoids obvious setups, such as having Mayla and David fall in love. In addition, well-drawn minor characters come and go with realistic randomness.

To contrast McHugh's subtle accomplishments with a more traditional take on the same subject matter, try to imagine this book as if written by Niven and Pournelle, a kind of underwater *Oath of Fealty* (1981). We would have gotten schematics and lectures, as well as perhaps a more melodramatic plot. Instead, McHugh offers no civilization-wrecking or -defining catastrophes or achievements, but simply the collision and aftermath of small, distinctive individuals and larger forces, a small private war. For as David realizes at one point, "All that had to happen for something to qualify as war was for events to total a certain quantity of anarchy and death."

Not-Ready-For-Prime-Time Terrorists

Norman Spinrad is SF's very own Oliver Stone, except he's been at the task for much longer. Bloody but unbowed, for over thirty years now Spinrad has unfailingly donned his Doc Martens, laced his leathers, slipped on his knuckle-dusters and picked up his sledgehammer of prose. You don't *read* his books so much as *stand there like a scratching post* while his wolverine text sharpens its claws on you.

In his most recent explosion, *Pictures at 11* (Bantam Books, trade paper, $12.95, 455 pages), Spinrad brings us his most powerful story in a while, a savage and damning indictment of the media-saturated technosphere all of us are mindlessly wallowing in. Fittingly reminiscent of three films—*Network, Natural Born Killers,* and *Airheads*—*Pictures* is the story of the takeover of a Los Angeles TV station by a group known as the Green Army Commandos, and how they are ultimately defeated by the

very forces they have set in motion. I don't think I'm giving away much by revealing Spinrad's highly quotable punchline: "From the first day they had taken the media hostage . . . . Now . . . the media held the terrorists hostage."

The first twenty or so pages set up the basic situation, providing background on the four TV personalities who will, along with the terrorists, occupy centerstage for the next eight days of the hostage-taking. Functioning much like an artificial nuclear family (Ed the gruff Dad; Heather the pretty daughter; and Toby and Carl the two competitive sons) this quartet will each reveal repellent and admirable sides of their personalities. The terrorists themselves are less fleshed-out, but still instantly distinct.

In smallish sound-bite segments, each one tagged with the time it occurs so as to facilitate nail-biting during the frequent moments of deadline tension, Spinrad takes the reader on a hairy amusement-park ride that might very well be called "The Grand Combined Tunnel of Insider Cynicism and Rageful Roller Coaster of Doom." Two examples of Spinrad's ironic lessons on how the world works: Heather the weathergirl defuses one explosive situation with the mantra "See a movie, be a movie"; and the *deus ex machina* who eventually saves everyone's tail is a Michael-Ovitz-style *Hollywood agent.*

I kept asking myself throughout whether the ecological issues motivating the terrorists were integral to the plot. Would the book have functioned just as well with some other cause? But by the end, I was convinced that Spinrad had made a wise and logical choice. The cause he picked for his terrorists was perhaps the only one he could have used as a believable pivot for many of the plot twists. And at the same time, he managed to insert plenty of educational material in what is essentially a thriller. As his superagent figure says, you should try to benefit every client by each of your actions, even if it's not always possible.

Scatalogical, vituperative, irreplaceable, Spinrad ensures that SF's backbone retains a consistency firmer than jello.

Some Weird Yeast of Life

Brian Aldiss is one of my favorite writers. From the moment when, as a teenager, I fell under the spell of his pastoral *Greybeard* (1964) and was ever after moved to mentally label certain kinds of weather "those Greybeard days," I have never been disappointed by one of his eclectic, ingenious, and passionate books. Happily, nearing age seventy, the cosmopolitan Aldiss continues to proffer marvels of undiminished vitality.

Aldiss's latest book, *Somewhere East of Life* (Carroll and Graf, hardcover, $22.95, 391 pages) is the standalone fourth volume of his Squire Quartet, previous entries being *Life in the West* (1980), *Forgotten Life* (1988), and *Remembrance Day* (1992). Like the first three, *Somewhere* deals with the buried strata of the self, and how the subterranean can erupt violently in the most placid of existences.

The protagonist of this novel is one Roy Burnell. Nearing age forty in the first years of the next cen-

tury, he has a good job with WACH, the World Antiquities and Cultural Heritage commission. His job takes him to hotspots around the world, cataloguing treasures of art and architecture in imminent danger of being destroyed by the madness of local brush wars. Despite a nagging divorce, all seems fine with the privileged Burnell—until ten years of his memory are illegally stolen by Budapest thieves using a new process called EMV.

Memory and its complications have long been fruitful territory for SF writers, from Gene Wolfe to Keith Laumer. Aldiss extends the investigation of memory's role in defining our humanity in a circuitous way, at times even minimizing its importance. Although Burnell is ostensibly deeply wounded and obsessed by his loss, he continues to function in a competent manner, being all too easily diverted from the quest for his missing memories by wine, women, and war. And when, at book's end, a fragment of his memory is finally brought back to him, he actually chooses the pregnant-with-possibilities future over the dead past.

On another level, *Somewhere* reads like the wild and wry Flashman books of George MacDonald Fraser, as Burnell hurtles from one mad escapade to another. Aldiss's Balkanized future has a distinct flavor of the nineteenth century; the comparison is even made explicit at one point, in Chapter 7.

This milieu is perhaps the opposite of the consensus highly wired future where you can jack into the Net while sitting in a Mongolian yurt. In Aldiss's world, nasty festering backwaters—mostly in the Far East, hence the book's title—serve as reservoirs of both brutality and authentic emotions. Burnell's adventures among the violent factions of ex-Soviet Georgia and Turkmenistan bring him insights and lessons unobtainable in the sterile precincts of the German model city Soss where he keeps an apartment. Populated by a vast collection of wayward eccentrics and conmen, peasants and tyrants, the strife-torn precincts of the East (both realistic and Jungian-mythical) are the fertile ruins from which a new order is being born.

Aldiss's meticulous, hilarious, grimly ironic prose functions like a twisting river—sometimes calm, sometimes raging—that carries the reader along willy-nilly, from the mannered interactions at a countryhouse to the senseless executions of a war zone. In the end, the reader will empathize with Burnell, feeling that "The world . . . was more weirdly constructed than anyone could realize," and that perhaps the best strategy for dealing with it is "continually to ad lib." ●

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28-30—**TreKlave.** Holiday Inn City Centre, Bramlea ON. Trek back-stagers Fatjo, Braga, Moore.

27-30—**Francon.** Maison d'Allieurs, Yverdon-les-Bains, Switzerland. French-language SF/fantasy.

28-30—**Germany Nat'l. Con.** Friedrichsbau Center, Freiburg i. Br., Germany. Pohl, Ernsting.

MAY 1995

5-7—**MarCon. (614) 451-3254.** Hyatt, Columbus OH. K. Kurtz, S. & J. Robinson, Harryhausen.

5-7—**DemiCon. (515) 224-7654.** Howard Johnson's, Merle Hay Rd., Des Moines IA. Tucker, Jö-Nés.

5-7—**AngliCon. (206) 745-2700.** Seattle WA. British & other international SF/fantasy media.

12-14—**DeepSouthCon, 647 Devon Dr., Nashville TN 37220. (615) 832-8402.**

12-14—**ConDuit, 2566 Blaine Ave., Salt Lake City UT 84108. (801) 467-9517.**

12-14—**CanCon, Box 5752 Merivale Depot, Nepean ON K2C 3M1. (613) 596-4105.**

12-14—**Somewhere in Time, Box 1556, Covina CA 91722. (818) 810-1203.** Sheraton, Universal City.

19-21—**Oasis, Box 940992, Maitland FL 32794. (904) 788-6727.** Altamonte Springs.

19-21—**KeyCon, Box 3178, Winnipeg MB R3C 4E6.** Low-key, after the 1994 WorldCon.

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JULY 1995

13-16—**NASFiC 1995, Box 47696, Atlanta GA 30362. (404) 925-2813.** $55 to 6/15.

AUGUST 1995

24-28—**WorldCon, Box 15430, Washington DC 20003. (301) 345-5186.** Glasgow UK.

AUGUST 1996

29-Sep. 2—**WorldCon, Box 8442, Van Nuys CA 91409.** Anaheim CA. $90 to June 30.

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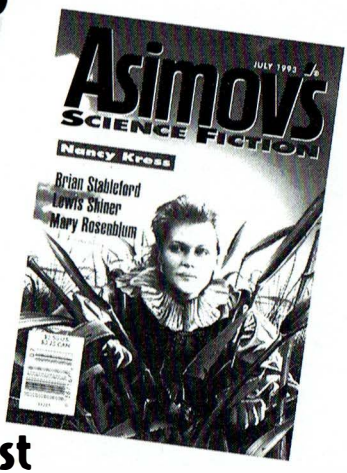

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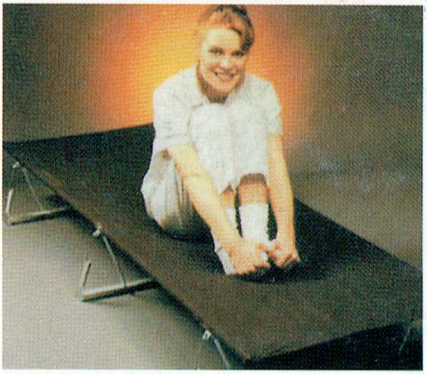

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