

Hub

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Flash Special

We know you're busy people, and at the start of the New Year you'll be settling back into the routine grind of the working day, trying desperately to catch up on the multitude of emails and voicemails that were sent and left over the Christmas break! It'll be difficult to find the time in any one sitting to read a full-length short.

That's why, for our first issue in 2008, we're having a Flash Fiction Special! Seven pieces of fiction that are small, but perfectly formed! Seven tales of the fantastic, the futuristic, or the just plain weird! One for every day of the week – enough to whet your genre appetites, but not enough to get in the way of the daily drudge.

If you like the idea, we'd appreciate any financial recompense you can throw our way - seven pieces of Flash costs us our fiction budget for four full issues, so we'll be subsidising this one out of our own pockets (which we're happy to do, but we'd rather not, of course!) Anything you can spare would be more than welcome – a buck, a quid, a euro, a spare mince pie or turkey sandwich. Just to let us know you care... :-D

About *Hub*

Every week we publish a piece of short fiction, along with at least one review and sometimes a feature or interview. We can afford to do this largely due to the generosity of our sponsors over at **Orbit**. If you like what you read here, please consider making a donation over at www.hub-mag.co.uk. We pay our writers, and anything you donate helps us to continue to attract high quality fiction and non-fiction.

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T ME

by A.H. Jennings

The portable classroom was larger than Joan Ellen had expected. Lit from overhead with fluorescent lights and busy with seventh-grade artwork, it smelled of chalk dust, old books, and refrigerated air. It reminded Joan Ellen of home. These days, most everything reminded Joan Ellen of home – or at least how far she was from it. She tried to pay attention, but now Joan felt the yawning chasm of distance, the thousands upon thousands of miles between Tunis and DC.

“I’ll put this as simply as I can,” Mrs. Thornton said. “Patrick is a brilliant boy.”

Liz Thornton was Patrick’s homeroom teacher. She was a heavy-set fortyish woman with close-cropped brown hair and a mouth that bunched up at the corners. Like many of the teachers here at ACST, Mrs. Thornton had come overseas with the Peace Corps, married, and stayed.

“I had a hard time getting through to him in our first few weeks together,” Mrs. Thornton said, “but I think his last essay assignment represents a breakthrough. He— I have it here.”

The teacher opened a manila folder on her desk blotter and handed Joan a short typed manuscript crawling with red pen marks.

Joan Ellen frowned as her eyes slid over the heading at the top of the page:

WHAT COMES AFTER SCIENCE?

“It’s a bit of a mess,” Mrs. Thornton said, a tone of real excitement creeping into her voice, “but in its own way, it’s head and shoulders above many college essays I’ve encountered. His imagination, and his – He’s on fire.”

“He’s brilliant,” Joan Ellen said.

“Yes. Yes he is. And now I’ll outline what I’d like to do for him.”

In Tunis, traffic was awful all day every day, but during rush hour, it was even worse. Pieter had once joked that Muslims must not believe in traffic laws, but the joke held no humor for Joan Ellen as she threaded her way through a mess of battered and unruly sedans.

Joan tried not to think about the unfinished novel sitting on her iMac’s hard drive. Lately, she seemed to change its title every time she sat down to write.

She had always wanted a brilliant child, and Mrs. Thornton’s plan sounded fantastic, but Joan Ellen wasn’t sure whether she’d been swayed by the content of the plan or by the teacher’s obvious affection and enthusiasm.

The Mozart Effect. Joan Ellen remembered the term from her pregnancy. Edutainment Unlimited had used it to advertise their Prenatal Head Start Kit. Their literature had promised to “give your unborn child a HEAD START toward REAL AND LASTING SUCCESS.”

Money had been tight at the time, and Pieter considered the kit a waste of one hundred fifteen dollars. Even now, Joan Ellen could hear the irritation in his voice: *Have you listened to it, Joanie? It’s just static and modem sounds.*

And he was right – Well, almost. Joan Ellen had put the speaker to her ear and heard mostly static – but it didn’t sound quite like a modem. The white noise was shot through with a series of bizarre clicks and upper-register squeaks – it was as if someone had tried to train a CB radio to converse with dolphins.

The villa was a collection of round-edged whitewashed concrete walls surrounded by a wraparound porch, and beyond that, a high wall for privacy. Joan Ellen would have loved a pool – there was even room for one in the back lawn, but such things were against State Department regulations.

As Joan Ellen pulled into the driveway, the gardener, Rhida, jogged out to open the gate. Rhida was a brown and wizened man of indeterminate age who spoke no French or English. Even after six months living here, Joan Ellen felt uncomfortable around him – not because of the racial or cultural divide, she was sure – but because the concept of employing servants – and especially servants with whom she could not speak directly – seemed so strange.

Zayneb, the cook, met Joan Ellen in the kitchen, and Joan’s heart sank as soon as she saw the woman’s expression: Joan knew she should have gone with her gut and brought Patrick with her to the conference instead of leaving him with the servants for two hours.

Joan smiled tightly. “Is something wrong?”

“He do something,” Zayneb said. “The boy. He take chicken.”

“What’s he doing? What about the chicken?”

“He take.”

Joan Ellen realized now that Patrick had upset the cook so badly that most of her English had left her.

“Boxes with powder, he take, too.”

“Where is he now?”

“The bedroom. He take all – He’s in the bedroom, Madame.”

Patrick had taken the chicken, all right, and most of Joan Ellen’s make up. He’d lugged a card table in here and unfolded it in the middle of the marble floor, then arranged the chicken on its back, surrounded by the make up cases and – God damn it! – the jewelry box Joan had inherited from her grandmother. An odd chemical stench wafted from his room as Joan Ellen watched him work.

“Patrick,” Joan said. “What are you doing in here?”

“Wait,” Patrick said and brushed his shaggy blond hair out of his face. He bit his lip and leaned over the table, standing on bare tiptoes.

Patrick hadn’t just taken her makeup – he’d rearranged the cases, drilling holes in them, turning one or two inside out. Masses of wire and plastic drinking straws repurposed as tubing snaked their way from each module to the chicken, connecting to it by sewing needles and hair-fine copper filaments. How had Patrick done all this in just two hours?

“Now!” Patrick said. “Come look!”

Holding a white plastic kitchen timer, he backed away from the table as Joan crossed into the bedroom.

Ugh. That chicken! The flesh at the end of its neck had puckered closed without losing its pinkness – as if it had cooked somehow without heat.

Patrick turned the dial on the timer and the chicken shuddered feebly.

Joan Ellen stopped breathing.

The chicken wedged its left wing beneath its body and pushed against the table like an old woman trying to rise from a fall. It lay back, and its neck went limp with resignation. Patrick started talking fast.

“I read a book where a doctor did it with frog’s legs but the legs weren’t really alive again and to bring something back you’d have to get the organs working.” His voice dropped an octave and he seemed to speak as an imagined interviewer, asking, “‘But what if it doesn’t have any organs left?’” His voice went back to normal as he answered himself: “Well, then you’d have to build them. ‘And what about the blood?’ You have to figure out what blood does and make some. I think my blood is better than real blood because it stays cleaner longer and I used a chicken because a chicken’s brain is so small it doesn’t hardly need it.”

“*Patrick!*” Joan Ellen barked.

“Yeah!” Patrick said. He turned on her, grinning. He wore his brown flannel shirt backwards over a bright red T-shirt, and his shaggy bangs had slid back into his face.

“Patrick,” Joan Ellen said as calmly as she could. “Turn it off and put the chicken back!”

The grin left Patrick’s face. He seemed now to sense that he’d done something wrong. “Put it back?” he said. “But it’s no good for eating.”

“*Now*,” Joan growled.

Joan Ellen sucked her teeth as she watched Pieter yank his tie loose from his neck. Pieter was the quintessence of rationality, but his looks – his white-blond hair, the delicate framework of his bones, and his strange, all-seeing stare – made him seem related somehow to the dream-people Joan had imagined during her childhood.

Joan and Pieter had recognized one another instantly in some essential way, and they seemed able to understand one another without speech or even thought – At least that was what Joan Ellen had believed early on. Now, so far from everything familiar, she sometimes felt she shared her home with a couple of strangers – two people who neither knew her nor owed her any allegiance.

“But that’s great,” Pieter said. “I’m proud.”

“Well, it’s good that his teacher says he’s doing well, but – ”

“She didn’t say he was doing well,” Pieter said absently as he unbuttoned his shirt. “She said he was brilliant and that she’s got a plan. But no, the other thing – ”

“That’s what worries me. He brought a chicken back – ”

“He didn’t bring it back to life,” Pieter said. “He ran a current through it, got it jumping around.”

“No, he – ”

“What’s really impressive is that battery he made. I couldn’t make heads or tails of it, but it works. That boy.”

Pieter kicked off his shoes and sat on the bed to toe his socks off. He’d left his pants lying in a heap just outside the bathroom door. Who did he expect to – ? Oh. Right. The maid.

“I’m just so – I mean, *wow*,” Pieter said. “Science was my worst subject. It was just – ”

“He built organs,” Joan Ellen said. “He used my make up cases and Mee-maw’s – ”

“He thought he did. He’s a sharp kid, but he’s not...” Pieter trailed off at the sound of a tone from the intercom by the bedroom door. It was Zayneb, letting them know that dinner was ready.

Patrick seemed to take to Mrs. Thornton’s new learning program, and some of his behavioral problems – his talking in class, his delaying tactics – seemed to evaporate.

Still, watching Patrick on weekends and after school, Joan Ellen found herself assailed by a diffuse sense of unease. But Patrick seemed fine, and Pieter was nothing but thrilled, so she dismissed her worries as the product of an overactive imagination. Blockage left her feeling antsy and depressed, so this odd paranoia must be yet another of its symptoms.

At the beginning of March, Barbara Tenhave invited Joan to lunch at the GSO compound. Normally, Joan Ellen would have begged off, but what good would it do her to sit at home staring at a blank computer screen?

Barbara was a cheerful sort of crank, and did most of the talking as they ate. Joan Ellen tried to listen, but she found herself nodding and smiling as Barbara rattled on about some internal conflict in the International Women’s Club.

Around one, Moktar, the balding and cross-eyed GSO cook, shuffled over to the table carrying a cordless telephone. “Phone for you, Mrs.,” he said.

“For me?” Joan Ellen heard herself speaking too precisely and realized that she shouldn’t have had that last beer. She took the phone. “Hello?”

“Mrs. Soames? This is Jouda from ACST.”

A bright blade of worry slid between Joan Ellen’s ribs.

“Patrick’s had a seizure. Mrs. Thornton and Dr. Spradling are on their way with him to Clinic Taofiq.”

Joan Ellen seemed to watch and hear herself from the next seat over. "I'll be there," she said. "I'll be there right – Have you spoken to Pieter? He's my – That's my husband's name."

Pieter and the others were already at the clinic when Joan arrived by taxi. They sat in a cramped third-floor waiting room with mismatched furniture and grimy-looking mosaics on the walls.

Pieter sat in an ugly brown chair, his sleeves rolled up, his tie pulled loose, his head hanging between bowed shoulders. He looked like some changeling version of himself: red-eyed and pinch-faced, with a red wound of a mouth.

"What happened?"

Mrs. Thornton looked up at the sound of Joan Ellen's voice.

"They think it's a stroke," Dr. Spradling said tonelessly. He was a graying, fiftyish man with powerful hands.

"A stroke?" Joan Ellen said.

"He – He screamed, and then he started seizing," Mrs. Thornton said.

"How does a ten-year-old boy have a stroke?" Joan Ellen said. She almost laughed.

"Joan," Pieter said.

"How could that happen?" Joan Ellen said. "He's ten."

"Joan," Pieter said. "Let's wait for the doctor."

He looked down, shook his head, and methodically touched his own hands, as if making sure they still worked.

Without taking her eyes off him, Joan turned and backed into a chair beside him.

Later, after Thornton and Spradling had both left for the night, Joan Ellen tried to listen as Dr. Ben Azir explained the MRI results. His English was flawless, but Joan Ellen still felt like she needed an interpreter.

"So then it's not epilepsy?" she said.

"Well," Pieter said slowly, "What I gather from what the Doctor is telling us is that just because a person has a seizure doesn't mean he's an epileptic."

"That is correct," Ben Azir said. He smiled tightly.

"And the stroke – ? I still don't understand."

"His brain is – There are some other abnormalities."

"What – ?"

"Has Patrick ever received a powerful shock or undergone electroconvulsive therapy?"

"What are you talking about?" Joan Ellen turned to Pieter. "What is he talking about?"

"I don't know," Pieter said stonily.

The doctor reddened, and part of Joan Ellen observed his discomfort with a mean sort of satisfaction.

"The imaging results were perplexing, to say the least."

"But it's not epilepsy," Pieter said.

Dr. Ben Azir took a breath and paused, weighing his words. "Not... of any kind currently known to medical science."

"Right," Pieter said. "Then can we take him home?"

“Hey, there, little guy,” Pieter said as he pressed his right hand against Patrick’s cheek. “What a day you’ve had.”

“I did it wrong,” Patrick said.

“Yeah, don’t worry about that,” Pieter said. “You ready to go home?”

Just a seizure, Joan Ellen thought as she watched Pieter gather Patrick into his arms. *Just a seizure.*

“Should we take him home?” Joan said.

Carrying Patrick, Pieter had to turn his whole body to look at her. “Where else would we take him?”

“I mean *home*,” Joan said. “I could take him, and you could come after.”

“That’s – Yeah, no. Let’s talk about that later, honey.”

“You want to take him back to DC?” Pieter said. Together, they’d tucked Patrick in and left him sleeping with the bedroom door open, then headed downstairs to talk over cups of that sludgy, too-strong coffee found everywhere in Tunis. Joan Ellen kept forgetting to buy an American brand from the commissary.

“Well, I don’t know,” Joan said. “I’m just worried that the medical facilities here – ”

“Medical facilities here are more than adequate – especially for dealing with something like this.”

“Are you sure?” Joan said. “Shouldn’t we be sure?”

“Joan. Really,” Pieter said, speaking gently to hide his exasperation, “Sooner or later you’re going to have to adjust.”

“It’s so different here,” Joan said. “It’s so different, and we’re so far away, and visiting isn’t the same as living.”

“You were fine in South Africa.”

“I know,” Joan said. “People spoke English there. People were – ”

“We’re almost done the school year,” Pieter said. “And I’ve got another fifteen months. Don’t – Let’s don’t do anything drastic, okay?”

“It’s not just the seizure. It’s the way he carries himself, it’s – ! Have you read that essay of his?”

“What essay?”

“The – The ‘After Science’ one?”

“No, it’s – ”

“It’s a mess. It’s crazy, like – !”

“He’s ten.”

“Pieter.”

“I waited a year for you and Patrick to follow me here,” Pieter said. “It was the hardest year of my life. So let’s just – Let’s not be hasty about the two of you leaving me here, okay?”

What comes after science is more science and better science and I think that to understand the new science our brains will have to change which is okay because we’re already changing them slowly over time. A long time ago people saw visions all the time for real. There are documented cases of gods appearing to Roman soldiers and telling them things like when and where it’s safe to cross a river because the Romans’ brains were divided in a way that made it hard to calculate things like the depth and speed of a river and the distance across it. Science is going to change so drastically that we are going to look back at ourselves the way we look at those Romans and think it’s almost funny how hard even the simplest things were Before.

Joan Ellen had started writing in college, mostly because all her friends thought of themselves as Writers. She found it strange how seriously they took themselves: they seemed to consider writing some transformative act that exempted them from the dreariness of normalcy. One by one, they'd given up, publishing little or nothing at all. Joan had never written to publish – she considered everything she did a practice exercise – and by the age of twenty three, she'd begun placing stories. Living in South Africa, as she and Pieter divided their time between Capetown and Pretoria, Joan had begun her first novel. In six months, she'd finished it, and was astonished when it was snapped up by a South African publishing house. For a while, she'd gone back to stories, but for the past year, she'd been working on a new book, currently titled, *To Me*.

Joan was unconcerned when her dry spell began – after all, she'd just moved to the other side of the world, and more than that, over the years, she had developed an ability to work out revisions and the solutions to story problems without considering them consciously. That dark secret part of Joan Ellen that supplied the germs and themes of fiction seemed to work well enough unsupervised. But now, three months had passed without a usable word, and Joan couldn't help but brood over the possibility that Joan Ellen Soames might already have written all she had to say – that maybe she had more in common with the other jobless Embassy wives than she liked to admit.

Joan sucked her teeth and looked up as Pieter stepped out of the bathroom, still dabbing aftershave onto his cheeks. "I don't know about this," she said. "Do you think he's up to going out?"

"He's been shut up in here for days," Pieter said absently, "If he's well enough to start school Monday, he's well enough to have a little fun. You should come with."

"The novel..."

"It's only a few hours," Pieter said. "The novel will be here when you get back."

Bright Maghrebi sunlight slanted down into the field as Joan Ellen watched from the bleachers, wishing she had a cigarette.

A cigarette? She and Pieter hadn't smoked since her pregnancy test came back positive.

What were the teams? Who was ahead? The rules of the game seemed wholly arbitrary.

"Aw, come on!" Pieter bellowed beside her. Some of his beer sloshed onto the aisle steps.

"Why are you yelling?" Joan said.

"Did you see that?" he said, red-faced. "It was – ! You've got eyes!"

"It's only a game."

Pieter's head rocked back. "Only – ?" He seemed to check himself. "Yeah. Yeah, wow. You'd better drive, huh?"

"Where's Patrick?"

"With the other kids," Pieter said. "You know. On the thing..." His hands fluttered in search of the word.

"I'd better go check on him, I think."

The school ladies room was small. Just a couple stalls, an opaque window, and a trio of sinks with mirrors affixed to the north wall.

"I'm not crazy," Joan Ellen said, and took a moment to watch herself in the mirror.

Other embassy wives drank too much. Barbara Tenhave drank too much, but Joan Ellen kept busy. She was a professional in her own right.

"You are," she said. "There's nothing wrong with him."

A terrible smell had shut itself in here with her. Like shit, or burning hair. The world seemed ready to shake apart.

...our brains will have to change...

How easy all this would be if Joan Ellen could just change her brain.

“You can’t just change the rules!”

“Can too!” Patrick said as he grasped the aluminum bar above his head and swung out above a stretch of braided netting.

“Patrick!” Joan called. She hated to sound so like her own mother.

He glanced her way and let go the bar, falling hard into the netting. He didn’t raise his hands to break his fall, and his scream was not a scream; it was a high whistling sound like the noise a teakettle makes.

Joan Ellen didn’t remember mounting the climber. First she was standing on the sand at the edge of the playground. And then – quick cut – she was kneeling on the platform by Patrick’s head, turning him onto his back as his whistling ceased and he began to convulse.

The girl who’d chased him stood open mouthed on her wooden climber platform, watching with a stricken expression as thick white foam poured from between Patrick’s clacking teeth.

Don’t put anything in there! The thought was bright with panic, but Joan knew it was entirely correct. If she put anything in his mouth, Patrick would either bite through it or break his teeth.

What should she – ?

Joan lifted Patrick’s head until his chin touched his chest.

“Get help!” she roared. “Get – ! *Somebody! Someone please!*”

The tears didn’t come until the uniformed men lifted Patrick’s stretcher into the Renault ambulance. The first sob nearly bowled Joan Ellen off her feet, but she swallowed the next one and shrugged Pieter off.

Joan clenched her teeth and climbed into the ambulance to sit on the bench beside Patrick, watching his face in repose.

Pieter joined her without her noticing and touched her arm as the ambulance began to move.

“He’ll – ”

Joan Ellen cut him off with a sharp shake of her head. “Talk to him. Do you hear? Do you hear, baby? Mommy’s here, and Daddy, too.”

Dr. Ben Azir trotted down the corridor, his footsteps clacking under the fluorescent lights. Joan Ellen placed a steadying hand on Pieter’s back as he unfolded himself to look up at the doctor.

“I came as soon as I heard, but the imaging results aren’t back yet.”

“I saw it this time,” Joan Ellen said. “It’s got to be epilepsy.”

“We’ll do our best to – ”

“Why would you think it was anything else?” Joan said. “You said something about the – about the MRI?”

A caught look appeared on Ben Azir’s face. “The lesions.”

“Lesions?” Pieter said.

“Has Patrick ever suffered intense migraines or been severely electrocuted?”

“Of course not!” Joan said.

“The – The damage is quite advanced, Mrs. Soames, and damage like this doesn’t happen on its own.”

“His brain is damaged?”

“Quite severely, according to the MRI. So much so that he shouldn’t have been able to move or speak.”

“I’m going to throw up,” Pieter said crisply.

“Wait,” Joan said. “But he did move. He spoke. Your imaging is faulty, or – ”

"I thought as much myself," Dr. Ben Azir said. "I didn't mention it before because I didn't want to alarm you."

Joan Ellen didn't know what to say.

"I am more than competent," said the doctor, but Joan hardly heard him. "I studied at Johns Hopkins and at the Sorbonne."

Joan Ellen had taken up her post beside Patrick's bed while Pieter went to freshen up. Patrick seemed to sleep – His sleep looked heavier than usual, but Joan imagined she saw his eyelids flutter every now and then.

But he's not asleep, she thought.

They'd have to go home. They'd have to – Returning to DC would offer little comfort now.

Quietly, Pieter slipped into the room. He smelled of aftershave.

Joan went very still as Patrick stirred in his sleep.

Pieter said something, but Joan ignored him.

"C – c – caaaaaaan too!" Patrick said. His voice was much too low. "Y – Yesssss. Yes I.. Yes I cuh – Yes."

His eyes were still closed.

"Come on!" Pieter said. "You can do it, champ! Wake up! *Wake – !*"

Patrick started talking backwards.

That's not Patrick, Joan Ellen thought. It was all she could do to keep from saying it aloud.

Patrick had stopped talking and sat up, eyes wide and vacant. His mouth had fallen open, and his thumbs twitched against his other fingers.

It's a seizure, that's all. It's another – !

Joan Ellen made a noise. Had she screamed? She wasn't sure. Someone should – Someone should call a nurse.

Silence expanded to fill the room. Then:

"Mom?"

"What – ? What?"

Patrick had lowered the aluminum rail to sit at the edge of the bed, his bare legs hanging over the side. His hair stood up in corkscrews, and the freckles on his cheeks and nose had dimmed, as if his ordeal had evened his complexion.

Pieter stood beaming at the boy.

"What... just happened?" Joan said slowly.

"I woke up," Patrick said.

"I think we should start going to church," Pieter said as he adjusted his tie before the mirror.

Joan couldn't think of a response. She'd taken her shower and had thought for a long time as she washed her hair. Now she stood just outside the bathroom door, steam billowing past her into the room as Pieter let go his tie and nervously fingered the back of his neck.

He closed his eyes.

"It's – What was all this with Patrick? A miracle. The Hand of God reached down and saved – What else was it?"

"Honey, he still needs tests. He'll need – We still don't know what happened."

Pieter let go his neck and drew his shoulders together, then let them relax again. "I dreamed him before he was born."

“Pieter, honey.”

“I never told anyone, but it’s true. I dreamed – ! I dreamed of holding him when I was just a kid. It was so real. It was – His weight. And now here he is.”

Pieter wiped his eyes and turned to look at Joan. She knew she should say something, but she couldn’t find the words.

“...So this Sunday,” he said. “I think I’d better – You don’t have to come if you don’t want.”

Without waiting for an answer, he crossed to the chair by the window and drew his jacket on.

When Joan Ellen sat down to work that morning, all her problems had resolved themselves. AT first she was wary – from time to time, she’d put in three or four solid hours of intense labor, only to find that she’d wasted her effort producing unreadable dreck. Not this time. Something had clicked. The characters interacted more honestly with one another. They seemed eager to help Joan understand their motivations. It was as if Joan had twisted some random mental dial and chanced upon a clearer frequency of fiction. She worked in a sort of trance, forgetting all about Patrick.

Around one, the need to urinate brought Joan back into the world. Had Patrick eaten? Had Pieter called? *Look at you,* she thought grimly. *Some mother. Some wife.*

Joan shook her head and left her office for the bathroom.

Silence was the only answer when Joan Ellen knocked at Patrick’s bedroom door.

Church? When she and Pieter first met, his status as a committed atheist had been her parents’ chief reservation about him.

Joan shut her eyes and tried to remember what had happened in the hospital room. She pictured Patrick lying unconscious in the hospital bed, then saw him yawn and stretch. But what about the IV? What about – ? Why couldn’t she remember?

She thought of Dr. Ben Azir’s expression as he apologized for the hospital’s mistake: *I’ve read today’s imaging results. It was – Like you said, Madame, it was just an equipment failure. There’s no damage after all.*

Something had happened. Something –

“Hi.”

“Huh – Hi,” Joan said, blinking her surprise. Patrick stood just outside his bedroom, the door closed behind him. Without realizing it, Joan must have stepped back to let him into the hall.

“I – How are you today? I wanted to talk about school.”

“I’m not going.”

“Well, not today, of course. I think we should – ”

“That’s not what I meant,” he said.

“I don’t understand.”

“I don’t have time for school,” Patrick said, and Joan was amazed by how like Pieter he sounded. “Call ACST and tell them you’re withdrawing me. Cite my recent health problems. Then go to the Commissary and buy three cans of coffee, five bottles of bleach, all the cheese you can find, and a tub of peanut butter.”

Joan just goggled at him.

“When you get back, I’ll tell you what I’ll need from the hardware store.”

“You’re not Patrick.”

He laughed Patrick’s laugh. “Sure I am. While you’re out, pick up a pack of cigarettes. They’ll calm your nerves.”

“What the fuck, Joanie?” Pieter said. “Are you smoking?”

Joan had to smile.

Pieter shut the back door behind him and pulled up a stool beside her at the island counter.

“He said it would calm my nerves,” Joan said eventually.

“...I don’t understand.”

“I know I’m in control right now because I can talk like this. He’s outside doing something to the generator, and it must require almost all of his attention.”

For a long time, Pieter just sat, then he reached for a pack of Marlboros. He lit up and coughed quietly on the first drag. “They didn’t have Spirits?”

“Don’t I wish,” Joan said darkly.

What happened?”

“I’ve been running errands for him all afternoon, and the servants are building something on the roof. I haven’t been up there to look at it, and I’m either afraid to go or he doesn’t want me near it, so I can’t.”

“Who doesn’t want you near it?”

“At first I thought he must be someone else. That some thing or someone took him over, but now... If you – If you watch him, you can tell. It’s still him, but he’s smarter. He – ”

“You mean Patrick? Joanie, that’s – ”

Joan smiled again and nodded. “Go talk to him.”

Pieter stubbed out his cigarette in the saucer Joan had been using for an ashtray and headed back outside. He was gone for a few minutes, then came back, ashen-faced, to light himself another cigarette. For a long time, he said nothing. Then:

“He said to keep going to work.”

“Will you?”

“Of course. It – I have to do what he says. It seems wrong, but it makes sense.”

“I know.”

“I could stand to smoke a bowl right now, I’ll tell you that much,” Pieter said absently. “Are you sure it’s him?”

Joan considered, though she’d already thought this through more than once. “Pretty sure,” she said. “He said in that paper of his that our brains will have to change in order to – in order to comprehend this new science of his. I think he must have found a way to change his own ahead of time.”

The next several days passed in a haze of errand running and construction noises from the roof. Patrick shut himself in his bedroom/workshop for hours at a time, emerging for one meal a day. Pieter began to seem less afraid, less confused, and Joan Ellen wasn’t sure whether that was due to Patrick’s calming influence or some genuine mental and emotional adjustment that Pieter had bent over backwards to make.

Every day Joan tired herself out fetching chemicals or large sets of household items presumably intended for Patrick’s project. On Monday, he sent her to pick up a case of tuning forks and five 60-inch stereo speakers.

Joan spent her nights writing, drawing her novel to a masterful close. Part of her wondered if her recovered ability might be Patrick’s doing, but she found it difficult to care.

On Tuesday, after Pieter had left for work, Patrick appeared in the master bedroom wearing a white linen summer suit and tie that Joan Ellen had never seen before.

“I need you to drive me to Makni,” he said.

“Can’t you drive now?” Joan said groggily.

Suddenly, she was wide awake.

"Of course," Patrick said, "but I need to supervise the construction, and deflecting the attention of curious onlookers would tax my concentration."

"Why don't you just give your crew a break?"

"No time," he said. "Get dressed."

This early in the morning, traffic was light, and the parking lot was mostly empty. Joan Ellen pulled the Peugeot into a spot outside the main entrance, and waited as Patrick let himself out of the car.

Even his movements had changed. He didn't bounce around or race from spot to spot the way he had. Instead, he moved swiftly and carefully, walking in an oddly graceful slump.

A few minutes after Patrick disappeared into the mall, Joan Ellen felt his hold on her relax. A shudder washed through her as she gripped the steering wheel.

Panic welled in her belly.

Get out of here!

Could she? She hadn't seen Patrick angry since... since his change, and she wasn't sure what he would do if she left him stranded here.

Joan Ellen wavered a moment longer, then shifted the car into reverse.

Back at the villa, construction had stalled. As she guided the car onto the little lane beside the broad intra-city highway, Joan Ellen saw eight or nine men perched on the roof like birds on a wire.

Instead of pausing to open the gate, Joan parked the car outside the wall and let herself in through the front. As she took the steps from the foyer two at a time, she imagined Pieter sitting confused at his desk, trying to remember why he felt so strange.

Patrick had left his bedroom door unlocked. A dark rich stink gusted into the hall as Joan Ellen opened the door. It was similar to the must of molded bread, but there was something of the sea in it, a low-tide flavor that made Joan gag.

Tears stood in her eyes as she looked around the room. Patrick had painted the back wall an odd greenish black and got rid of the window somehow. He'd had a barbecue grill brought upstairs and filled it with an assortment of oddly fuzzy electrical components, then sealed it with a glass or clear plastic lid.

But that wasn't paint on the wall. It was an expanse of – Moss? Mold? – sealed behind a great glass pane. That was why Joan couldn't see the window.

Aside from the grill, the floor was bare. Where did Patrick sleep in here? Where did – ?

"I don't."

Joan Ellen's skin tightened across her shoulders.

Patrick walked past her into the room, carrying what looked like a bootleg CD.

"Stop freaking out," he said.

"What's happened to you? What did this?"

"You did," Patrick said.

As Joan stood speechless, he glanced at the barbecue grill, and a snarl of colored waves bloomed into being above it. It looked like a too-solid Aurora Borealis.

Joan's mouth fell open.

"I know," Patrick said. "It's beautiful. But do you know what it is?"

Joan Ellen shook her head.

"It's a five-dimensional representation of a song that's been stuck in my head for as long as I can remember. You put it there. With this."

With some effort, Joan Ellen looked away from the hologram to the CD Patrick held up for her to see. She didn't need to read the package to know exactly what it said:

EDUTAINMENT ENHANCEMENT SUITE

“At first – and I know how this sounds – I thought I’d sent it back in time somehow and made sure you played it for me. Once I decoded the snatch of sound I could remember, I knew it must be from Somewhere Else.”

“Some – ? From space?”

“Aliens made it, but it’s not from space. That first decoded snatch told me how to upgrade my consciousness. Otherwise, I could never have built this computer –” He gestured at the far wall. “– or the transmitter upstairs.”

Joan Ellen felt cold all over. “You’re trying to bring them here?”

“I don’t think any of you are ready for that.”

“Patrick.”

“I’m telling you all this because I need you to quit freaking out. I need you to quit doing things like leaving me miles from home and making me steal cars. You wanted me to be smarter than everyone else? Well, I am. Now I must know what force helped you make me as I am.”

“All I wanted was for you to live a good life.”

Patrick looked away. “I don’t know what that means,” he said. “Do you?”

Joan Ellen awakened to the noise of Pieter’s alarm.

Pieter held his breath for a moment, then let it out in an explosive sigh. He reached over and silenced the clock.

“Don’t,” Joan said.

“Don’t what? Go to work?”

“He’s going to do it today. He’s going to turn it on, and I don’t know what will happen.”

“I have to go,” Pieter said. “He told me to.”

“If he lets go of you at all today, I want you to come straight home.”

“...Okay.”

For a long time, neither of them spoke.

“I’m still proud of him,” Pieter said, and swung his feet to the floor. “He’s – He’s a genius. More than Hawking, or Einstein, or – ! or anybody.”

“Mm,” Joan said as she massaged the sleep from her face. “Just come home if you can.”

Joan sat forward in her chair and gaped at the computer screen. There it was, six black letters on a field of white: THE END. Marcel was dead, Julie had gotten her divorce, and Paul had walked out on his life, leaving his wife, his children, even his lucrative consulting job, behind. Now the title bloomed into Joan’s imagination. *T ME*. Not “TIME” or “TOME” or “TAME.” It was an expression of pure potential, a broken word left behind by a character that had found its place elsewhere.

After wheezing a tired little laugh, Joan clicked the SAVE icon and waited for something to happen. Her body felt too light, as if it belonged to someone else who, at this moment, was thinking about it intensely.

An insectile hum spread through the air, and Joan’s computer screen winked off as the power went out. She stood, crossed to the barred office window, and watched the palm trees shiver along the side of the highway as an alien din shook the city.

Pieter blinked, confused. “I’m sorry?” he said.

“We need to get the Minister on board with this,” McNeil said. “Those union disputes aren’t going to arbitrate themselves.”

“Yes. Right. I’ll tell him. I – There’s a meeting tomorrow morning.”

“I know that,” McNeil said curtly. “Listen, Soames, are you feeling all right?”

“Sure,” Pieter said. “I’m going to – I think I’ll pop off home and check on my boy.”

Pieter rose from his desk. He didn’t stop to grab his jacket from the rack. Instead, he jogged down the staircase and let himself out the back entrance.

The sky outside was a dirty green color, and something about the clouds seemed wrong. They were too large, too vivid, and they reminded Pieter of circling dogs. If it hadn’t been for the clouds, Pieter would have taken this for tornado weather.

He checked his watch as he strode into the parking lot. Just as he laid eyes on the Citroën he’d bought when he’d arrived alone at post, a deep twang broke the air. It sounded almost like the compressed peal of an electric guitar chord.

The ground tilted crazily beneath Pieter’s feet, and he found himself breathing hard, kneeling on the pavement, his skinned palms pressed against the asphalt.

We’re under attack! Pieter thought. He knew he should run for cover, or at the very least, lie flat against the ground, but his body wouldn’t let him.

“Open that fucking gate!” he screamed, stabbing a finger toward the guard house beside the parking lot entrance.

Pieter wasn’t sure how long it had taken him to reach the villa or whether he’d driven there himself. He turned, searching for the car that had brought him here, as he fumbled in his pocket for the keys.

Something was happening on the roof.

Something – A tower? – rose from the roof. Who had put that there? When had it been built? It punctured the sky like a pencil through a sheet of construction paper.

...come straight home...

Joanie’s voice. Joan Ellen would know what was happening. At the very least, she –

Pieter clapped his hands over his ears as another wave of sound swept through the city. His thoughts skittered away from him like roaches across a kitchen floor. He didn’t think to hit the ground before the concussion came, and the next thing he knew, he was lying on his back in the middle of the street, feeling as if his brains were leaking out of his ears.

Again, his body acted on its own. It carried him through the gate, up the front steps, into the house, up the marble staircase, and into the master bedroom. The French doors stood open and the curtain rods hung askew as if bent by the – What had happened? An explosion?

Pieter could hardly remember from one moment to the next. His consciousness unraveled again, and he found himself clinging to the iron ladder that led from the broad upstairs balcony to the flat roof of the villa.

Pieter lifted his gaze to the sky. The tower wasn’t a tower at all – it was another, broader ladder that *breathed*, shining with its own peculiar light. Blurry-headed men with too many arms crawled up and down it. They looked impossibly small, impossibly far-off, but Pieter saw them clearly.

Something came loose in Pieter’s head, and he felt his consciousness break into slivers whose edges ground against each other. It was only when he thought to ask himself where Patrick was that he found himself once more able to move.

Pieter reached the roof and moved toward the ladder’s base. When he looked up – Was it up? Pieter wasn’t sure of direction anymore. Was this a ladder or was it a bridge? Pieter stood at its bottom – or at its near end, and saw his son as if through the wrong end of a telescope.

Something was carrying him away.

Something with – It wasn't like the other things – the men with too many arms – It was as if a nest of glowing worms had been pressed into a humanoid shape. Patrick rode on its shoulders the way he'd ridden on Pieter's, as a boy.

Pieter tried to tell him, No! Pieter tried to yell, Come back! But all he could do was howl.

Light spread across Pieter's vision, and unconsciousness drew the curtains down.

Pieter's body awakened and started complaining straight away. He groaned and pressed his hands against his face, trying to remember.

Joanie.

Pieter ignored the aching of his body and rose to stare around the roof. The twisted antenna had broken in several places and fallen across the concrete. Pieter looked for the ladder to the balcony, hoping it was still intact after – after everything. If not, he'd have to jump down and try to tuck himself into a break-roll.

Pieter thought to take a look at the lawn and saw Joan Ellen lying still amid the stiff Tunisian grass. He looked at her for a few seconds, not thinking at all, then rushed downstairs and outside to gather her against his body.

"Joan. Joanie. Wake up. Wake up, Joan," he said sternly, and then his voice became a coo. "Hey, Joanie. Hey, babe. Hey, it's me. It's Piet."

He rocked her softly.

Joan began to stir, and relief made Pieter groan aloud.

"Joan –"

Joan twisted in Pieter's grasp, clawing at his shirt.

"Joan, hey. *Hey!*"

Joan Ellen opened her mouth and a wave of noise poured forth: like radio static shot through with clicks and squeaks.

Pieter's mouth fell open as he recognized the sound. He heard himself talking over Joan's new language, but was that English he was speaking? Afrikaans?

"He's gone," he said. "He's gone, and I can already feel myself forgetting him. You were right this entire time. You were right about all of it. You were so – That boy. That – That boy."

REVIEWS

Previously reviewed by James Bacon

Grindhouse reviewed by Alasdair Stuart

Sapphire and Steel reviewed by Scott Harrison

Previously

Comic strips from the drawing board of PJ Holden.

£3 from www.pauljholden.com

Paul J. Holden is a comic artist from Belfast and for a while he inhabited that strange underground place that you may sometimes be lucky enough to find as you lurk around comic shops. Mostly it's all too commercial, pre-packaged and marketed to a fine art, but now and again in the less shiny-fronted shops where the guys at the counter know that *Miracleman* is really *Marvelman*, you find some gems. Small press comics on the bottom shelves,



for those bottom feeders who know that there is always something sweeter about an organic product.

Holden has a place in the warren of comics small press, producing his own work and appearing elsewhere. Even when he made the great leap seven years ago and joined *2000AD*, drawing *Rogue Trooper*, *Judge Dredd* and the *86ers* he still kept his hand in with smaller projects.

Fearless (Image comics), his most recent work, has just hit the comic shelves.

Paul J. Holden has cleverly produced his own comic, something he has done in the past, but now for a wider audience. In this 32-page comic you will find twelve stories and strips by a mix of authors, including fellow *2000AD* stalwart Gordon Rennie. There is a humorous edge to some of these stories: borderline school boy humour and regular characters such as Strontium Dog and Rogue Trooper appear in single page side-splitters, as never seen before.

Mixed in with this are some nasty and sick ideas. Holden goes through a whole repertoire of genres and styles: some of these stories have never been published, while others have appeared in various places. It's a rare treat of quality storytelling, from an eclectic bunch of writers.

Whether it's a newspaper-style strip, or the longer Broken Claw, the artwork is clean and strong. Holden knows his tough men, but has a real knack for parody and the finer female.

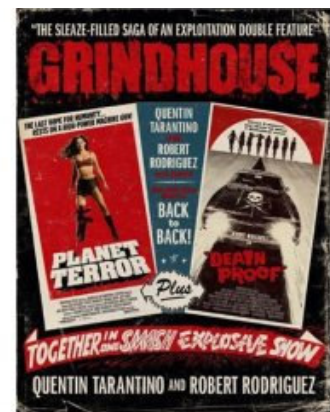
It's hard to find fan-produced or small-press comics. Orbital Comics on Charing Cross Rd, London, seem to specialise in in this type of comic, but otherwise acquiring decent underground work is hard. Whether it's right to call this underground is a matter for consideration, but it isn't mainstream, it's by a local lad and it's bloody good.

Grindhouse: The Sleaze-filled Saga of an Exploitation Double Feature

By Quentin Tarantino and Robert Rodriguez

Published by Titan Books

£24.99



You can't go wrong with a title like that, can you? Unless, that is, you're Miramax who've managed to completely hobble what should have been one of this year's golden geese. Releasing a period horror double feature on Thanksgiving weekend could be charitably described as an attempt at counter-programming, but trailing that double feature internationally, *then* releasing the two films separately and *then* quite clearly favouring one with the majority of the publicity budget smacks of stupidity.

It's a real shame too because, as this book amply demonstrates, never have two exploitation movies been made with such loving care and attention. Tarantino and Rodriguez are two of cinema's most mercurial talents, but when they're on form, they're some of the strongest directors working today. As this book shows, their love of the form and sheer glee at being able to produce movies which are *fun*, nothing else, is incredibly strong.

In the original version, Rodriguez's *Planet Terror* opens the double-bill and the first half of the book is devoted to it. Every aspect of the process from scripting to costume design to gore is covered and Rodriguez's love for his material is palpable. There are some interesting notes, including the conscious decision to have Rose McGowan's final outfit echo superhero costumes and the exact mechanics of Quentin Tarantino's melting genitalia. Yes, it's that sort of film.

The *Planet Terror* section is rounded out by the complete script and again, it's interesting to see how Rodriguez writes, with each action scene mapped out in surprising detail. Packed full of stills from the set and design sketches, the first half of the book is an incredibly handsome and detailed package.

But of course, it's only half the story. After a section focussing on the faux trailers between the two films (Edgar Wright's *DON'T!* is particularly great), the book switches over to *Deathproof*. Tarantino's fifth film is very different from his previous work and the book goes into tremendous detail about the plot and production and the films it echoes. Tarantino is, as anyone who's seen him speak, an endlessly energetic figure and that comes across on the page. Once again, it's packed with stills from the set, but there's a little more commentary here than in the first section. *Deathproof*, for a film about a serial killer who crashes his car to kill his victims, has some surprisingly complex things to say about gender politics and the collision between old and new Hollywood and that debate is at the very least touched on here. While there's no script for the second feature, this section remains one of the strongest in the book.

Grindhouse, ironically, is going to come to life on DVD, with a double disc release already planned. In the meantime, frustrated fans or students of cinema history should beat a path to the door of this book. It's an astonishingly handsome and consistently entertaining trip through the minds of two fans first, and directors second. A blood-soaked gem.

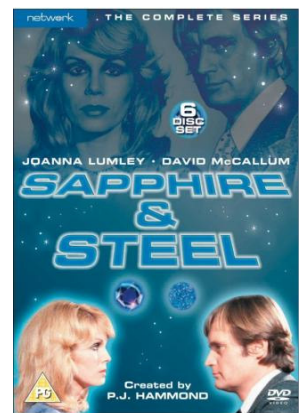
Sapphire and Steel – The Complete Series Special Edition

Directed by Shaun O'Riordan and David Foster

Starring David McCallum, Joanna Lumley, David Collings

Network

£59.99



It's hard to believe that since its original transmission between 1979 and 1982 *Sapphire and Steel* has never been repeated on terrestrial television.

It's even more amazing when you consider that it is one of the most important and influential scifi/fantasy series since Nigel Kneale's

Quatermass of the 1950s and the long running *Doctor Who* serial. A

forerunner to shows such as *The X-Files* and *The Omega Factor*, *Sapphire*

and *Steel* began life originally intended for the 5pm children's teatime slot. Over concern that the show's content might be too frightening for younger viewers, it was quickly rescheduled for 7pm on Tuesdays and Thursdays, prompting writer/creator P.J. Hammond to rewrite the scripts with this new older audience in mind, something he was only too pleased to do.

Using the rather novel idea of time itself actually doing the 'travelling', breaking through into present day in an attempt to alter the fabric of future history and generally causing mayhem, the eponymous 'heroes' of the title are elemental Time Agents assigned to identify the cause of each problem and resolve it using any means necessary. Aside from possessing extraordinary powers (telepathy, time manipulation, teleportation) very little is actually revealed about the two main character's origins or identities throughout its 34 episodes, though other elemental agents are introduced as the series progresses such as David Colling's wonderfully eccentric Silver and the gentle giant Lead, a man so jolly he's bordering on insanity!

Considered by many to be one of the most disturbing television shows of all time, *Sapphire and Steel* still has the ability to send a shiver down the spine of even the most fearless viewer. In fact, watching *Sapphire and Steel* again over a quarter of a century after its original transmission, it is remarkable how well it has stood the test of time. Without a doubt the centrepiece of the entire series is the epic eight-part *Assignment Two*. A firm favourite amongst the fan community *Assignment Two* is arguably the finest piece of scifi/fantasy ever created for television. Although Hammond has recently gone on record to say that, in hindsight, the story would have been much better as a six-parter, this darkly chilling tale of a malevolent entity of pure darkness feeding off the resentment of the dead soldiers that haunt the platform of a disused railway station remains one of the most tightly scripted and beautifully directed stories of the show's entire four year run. It is a show that has given us so many powerfully iconic images: the ghost of the World War I soldier wandering the dark platform whistling 'Pack Up Your Troubles'; the Man With No Face emerging from the shadows as he slowly climbs the stairs; Sapphire's eyelids flying open to reveal

totally black eyes as the Darkness invades her mind; Sapphire and Steel standing trapped and helpless behind a window as it hangs in space... the list goes on!

At last, a brand spanking new box set to replace the Carlton collections released a few years ago! Collected together for the first time over six dvds, Network (taking its lead from previous releases like *The Sweeney*) offers up a nice extras package, something they take great pains to do for many of their releases. P.J Hammond and producer/director Shaun O'Riordan don the headphones to provide two marvellously informative chat tracks for episode one of *Assignment One* and episode four of *Assignment Six*, the first and last episodes of the entire series. These, along with a fantastic 22 page Viewing Notes booklet, tell you all you need to know about how the series was created as well as behind the scenes factoids and stories. If you're new to the series or haven't seen it for years, it's strongly recommended that you don't read the booklet until you've watched the episodes as it contains spoilers for every story! Every disc contains script PDFs and a photo gallery of rare and unseen pictures specific to the story contained on that particular disc, while over on disc 6 we have the marvellously entertaining (yet woefully brief) 28 minute documentary *Counting Out Time*, featuring interviews with Hammond and O'Riordan as well as stars David McCallum and Joanna Lumley, together for the first time in 25 years!

This is one DVD that should be on every sci-fi fan's Christmas list! Don't be put off by its hefty £60 price tag: it's worth every penny. If you're old enough to remember Sapphire and Steel the first time around then you'll be pleased to know it's as good now as it was when it began 28 years ago. If you've never seen it before then I strongly advise you to go out and buy it this very minute - you're in for one heck of a treat!

If you have enjoyed this week's issue, please consider making a small donation at www.hub-mag.co.uk. We pay our writers, and your support is appreciated.