Special All-American Issue

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Stuck Inside of Mobile

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Editorial

Gordon Van Gelder

When I took a course in German literature, Professor Corngold started off the class by saying, “This will not be a happy course.” He then proceeded to give us a syllabus that bore out his claim: just scanning the titles indicated we'd have death in Venice, young Werther's sorrows, and a man without qualities.

I don't mean to suggest that all Teutonic literature is downbeat and depressing, but I do think that there are tones and qualities distinctive to the literature of different nations. (I hope all of you Comp. Lit. majors are nodding your heads in agreement.)

Unlike some of our special theme issues, this one did not start out by soliciting material to go with the theme. None of the stories in this issue were written specially for this issue. Rather, we noticed a strong American theme running through a lot of recent stories and we built the issue around them. The columns then followed.

So if you think any of the stories don't live up to the All-American theme, blame me for including them, not the writers for failing to wave the Stars & Stripes. It seems to me that you get a truer picture this way, but if you disagree, drop by our online message board and let us know.

And yes, the thought of following up with a special International issue has crossed my mind....

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We asked Mr. Stoddard if this epic tale was written in response to the events of 9/11/01. He said no, that his main influences included James Macpherson's translations of the ancient Gaelic epics of Ossian, Fingal *and* Temora, *but then he added that "I think the new patriotic climate made it easier for me to think that someone would want to read this kind of story."*

Born in Kansas and raised in Oklahoma, James Stoddard has called Texas home for the last two decades. He is the author of two novels, The High House *and* The False House.

The Battle of York

By James Stoddard

Three thousand years have elapsed since the passing of America. Though scholars have uncovered multitudes of valuable archaeological evidence, little written literature exists from that era. It is indeed unfortunate that books made of paper were replaced by magneto-optical disk storage by the middle of the twenty-first century. The worldwide magnetic field disaster of the twenty-second century did more than herald a new Dark Age—it erased the literature and history of the world, even as the accompanying geological disruptions obliterated cities and landmarks.

Fortunately, near the end of the twenty-seventh century, an unknown scholar passed through the American regions, collecting the stories and legends we now call the "Americana." Though we can expect little accuracy from a

people dependent on electronic data storage rather than oral tradition, we believe there is always a grain of truth concealed within the tales. But to quote one of the figures from the Americana itself: “When the Legend becomes fact, print the Legend."

Young General Washington rode alone on his white stallion through the Sequoia Forest. His battle-axe, Valleyforge, hung glistening from the pommel of his saddle, the blood fresh-scrubbed from its edge. He had slain too many soldiers in the war against the Gauls and American Natives, and was glad to be going home.

I will never fight again, he thought, *but will return to the Mount of Vernon to become a surveyor and farmer*. There was no pursuit more important to any country than to improve its agriculture and its breed of useful animals. How he longed for the simple cares of a husbandman.

He brooded on the horrors of war, his dead comrades, and the American Native maid, Pocahontas, whom he had loved. He loved her still, though she had betrayed him to the Gauls.

In his people's language his name, *General*, meant *pertaining in common to all*, and that was what he had become, a leader to the American tribes in Virginia. As a youth, an enchantment had been laid on him by the Wise Woman, Betsee Ross, the Star Weaver, that he could never tell a lie. Because of this, some called him “Honest Gen.”

As the last rays of twilight turned the ancient American forest golden with dust and sent the shadows streaming east, he heard the cry of the hawk and the distant howls of wolves. He shivered uneasily. The sequoias rose all around, hundreds

of feet tall, the trees the American Natives called the Silent Giants. His men had accompanied him through most of his journey, until he had chosen to shorten his trip by going through the woods. Even the bravest had refused to follow him then, for the forest was said to be haunted. At the time he had thought it just as well; he had wanted to be alone, to try to forget. He had intended to pass through the woods and into the safety of Virginia before nightfall, but weariness had overtaken both him and his mount, and in his brooding he had dawdled.

He dared ride no farther that night for fear of losing his way. Already shapes grew gray and indistinct. The howling of the wolves sounded nearer.

If I continue, I will lame Silver, he thought. He stroked the stallion's neck, then reined him to a stop. He dismounted, then led him forward a few paces, intending to make camp beneath one of the great trees. The shadows seemed to close around him.

The hoot of an owl overhead startled him. “My nerves are frayed,” he said softly.

General removed Silver's bridle and saddle and let him go free. He was unconcerned about the stallion wandering off; the horse was loyal as a hound. Silver nickered uneasily, as if he, too, distrusted the woods.

“Easy, boy,” General murmured automatically. Though he preferred traveling unseen through the forest, he needed to start a fire to ward off the wolves. Picking up twigs and dead limbs, he soon had enough wood to last the night.

He knelt with flint and steel. Sparks flew and a tiny dribble of flame sprang up. Before he could fan it into a full fire, Silver nickered again.

General looked up, then stood, his hand to Valleyforge. A spectral green light haloed the enormous tree trunk. Washington crept around it and looked across the forest floor.

A man approached, a tall, inhumanly broad figure carrying a lantern that glowed with an unearthly luminance. Washington felt his mouth go dry; his heart pounded against his chest, for he thought he recognized the intruder. He wanted to hide, but there was nowhere to go if the Pilgrim sought him. He drew Valleyforge and held it close.

The figure paused a few feet from Washington. The lantern light spread at General's feet, turning the ground emerald and olive.

“General Washington,” the figure said, his voice a deep drawl. “I am Waynejon. Some call me the Pilgrim.”

“Have you come for me?” General asked. Despite his best effort, his voice trembled.

The Pilgrim rumbled a laugh. “I'm not death, if that's what you mean. I'm a man. I put my pants on one leg at a time.”

Washington remained unconvinced. According to legend, the Pilgrim had died many times, but death could not keep him, for he was cursed to walk the Earth until the end of the age because of an ancient wrong. He stood a head taller than Washington, who was a tall man himself, and wore a square, black hat with a buckle at its front, a black cloak, and ebony riding chaps. A black eyepatch covered one eye and a rooster stood on his left shoulder. He carried an ancient blunderbuss.

“You look like you're getting ready to eat. If you'll share your fire, I have some salted beef in my pack.”

General nodded, then finding his voice, tried to sound confident. “What brings you to the woods?”

“As a matter of fact, I've been looking for you.”

“And then,” Waynejon concluded, “the boys got the cattle to the railhead.”

Washington laughed and sighed. The fire cackled warmly before the pair. They sat across from one another, the flames between them. In the last hour, General had lost most of his fear. “An excellent tale. Whatever happened to the lads?”

“They turned out to be good men, most of ‘em. But they're all long gone to their reward on Boot Hill by now.”

In the subsequent silence Washington found himself asking, “Why were you looking for me?”

“You get to the point. I like that.”

The Pilgrim took a drink of coffee from a tin cup, then gestured with it toward the woods. “This country, this new land, it's wild, untamed. It could be a great nation, different from any other, a place where people could come from all over the world. A place of freedom.”

“We all want that. It's why my forefathers came.”

“Mine did the same. They fled the dark realm of the Old World to escape the tyrants. But it's not enough, General. The people aren't free.”

“We've driven the Gauls back to France.”

“But you didn't get Prince Louis.”

Washington shrugged. “He escaped to Mexico. No American can cross the Rio Grande and live. An enchantment prevents it.”

“He's done more than escape. He's made alliance with the Huns.”

Washington drew a deep breath. This was bad news. The Huns, led by their leader, Hitler, the Wolf Prince, were a constant threat, raiding the coasts on their dragon-headed ships, striking and then fleeing. Was there never an end to peril?

“And it's not just Louis and Hitler,” Waynejon said. “There's a powerful wizard living in the dark regions of the Canadian north, whose heart is cold as the bitter winds that blow there. The Mounties can't stop him because he's conjured a giant from the Old World, tall as a mountain. They're climbing down the steep cliffs from the ice fields with their armies, preparing to march to York. The Huns, whose longships wait outside York Harbor, have promised the wizard great rewards if he helps them conquer America. The Gauls are reforming along the Rio Grande. We're in danger, General.”

“What can we do?”

“Only the Words of Power in the iron box on Mount Rushmore can stop the giant. The titan has no strength against them.”

“Mount Rushmore!” A chill ran along Washington's spine. “None have ever gone there and returned.”

“It doesn't matter what others have done, General. I'm asking you.”

“It was not my intention to seek further adventures.”

“You gained a reputation in your battles against the Gauls.”

“I heard bullets whistle, and believe me, there is something charming in the sound.”

Waynejon laughed. “Sarcasm doesn't suit you, General.”

“I meant none. By the miraculous care of Providence, I was protected beyond all human expectation, for I had four bullets through my coat and two horses shot under me, yet escaped unhurt. It was an exhilarating experience, but one I have little desire to repeat.” He shook his head. “I fear you have chosen the wrong man.”

“How do you figure?”

Washington hesitated, not wanting to say the words. “My men love me, but though we seem to return from the war in triumph, it isn't true, at least not for me. I was the one who began the war against Gaul, when I urged the Virginian governor, Dimwiddie, to build Fort Necessity at the joining of the Ohio and Allegheny rivers. Had we not confronted the Gauls there, the colonies might have been spared much bloodshed. There should have been another way.

“Under my leadership, we struck out to attack Fort Duquesne. Though I knew better, out of my own vanity, we went like soldiers on parade, for I thought our movements were unknown. In my pride I had told our plans to ... someone I cared for deeply ... someone who betrayed us. We were unexpectedly attacked by three thousand Gauls and American Natives, and though our numbers were nearly thrice their own, my men were struck with such a deadly panic that

nothing but confusion and disobedience of orders prevailed amongst them. We broke and ran as sheep before the hounds. If Braggart had not reinforced us at the end, the final battle would have been lost. Braggart himself, a mighty commander, was wounded behind the shoulder and into the breast. He died three days after.

“No, Pilgrim. I, a failure in all I have undertaken, am not the man to perform this deed. You must place your trust elsewhere.”

Waynejon took a long sip of coffee. “Seems to me that's the thing about this country, General. It's a land of second chances. Someone must go or America is lost.”

Washington, who had ducked his head in shame, looked up into the Pilgrim's steady eyes, and for a long moment they held each other's gaze. Finally, General said, “If I make the attempt, who will help me?”

“Near the slopes of Rushmore waits the Iron Hewer. Go to him. He will show you the way.”

Washington stared into the fire and sighed. War had found him again and he could not refuse. Human happiness and moral duty were inseparably connected. “I suppose it is easier to prevent an evil than to rectify mistakes,” he said. “I will set out tomorrow morning.”

“That's good. That's mighty fine.” Waynejon set his tin cup down. “I have to be on my way. Thanks for the grub.”

Without another word, the Pilgrim rose and strode into the woods, his broad back disappearing into the shadows. Washington shivered, feeling very much alone.

For seven days General rode through the Sequoia Forest, and on the eighth reached the wheat-covered plains of Kansas. The whole Earth shook with the pounding hooves of herds of buffalo pursued by the valiant Comanches, who looked dreadful in their war paint. To escape their notice—for they had no love of the white man—Washington hid himself among the amber waves of grain.

At night, storm clouds built in the south and swept over the plains, the lightning tearing at the sky, the tumult of the thunder reminding Washington that should he survive Rushmore, he would have to face the wizard and his giant.

He crossed the country of Mount Ana, a stark land, all sky and earth, and came in the evening to the banks of the Little Bighorn, where sat a rider on a white horse caparisoned in midnight blue. The rider, too, who had a golden mustache and penetrating blue eyes, wore blue and gold, with a deep blue cape. His curling hair, falling down to the middle of his back, shone like ripe wheat in the Sun. But Washington did not believe fine clothes necessarily made for fine men, any more than fine feathers made fine birds.

“Hurrah, good sir,” the stranger called. “What brings you to the banks of the Bighorn?”

“I am Washington, who cannot tell a lie, a son of Virginia. I seek the Iron Hewer on the slopes of Rushmore.”

“Then you seek death,” the stranger replied. “I am Custard, named for the creamy white of my skin and my golden hair. I am called Arm Strong for my might, Lord of Horsemen, Captain of the Seventh Cavalry.”

Washington quickly perceived this Custard had no lack of vanity, though he was indeed a mighty warrior. But General said, “I have never been to Rushmore before. Perhaps, if you know the way?”

“Why do you want to go there?”

“I seek the Words of Power to defeat the Wizard of Canada.”

Custard gave Washington a long look before replying. “I will take you at least part of the journey, though I cannot stay long. I have unfinished business here. The Sioux have risen against me.”

Washington nodded. “I thank you for your kindness.”

Together the two set off toward Rushmore. Along the way, Arm Strong told tales of his many deeds. Though he listened politely, Washington found such boasting distasteful, for it had always been his motto to show his intentions through his works rather than his expressions.

“And someday,” Custard said, “I will be the President of all this country, from east to west, and men everywhere will praise my name.”

“I am unfamiliar with the word, *president*,” Washington said.

“Like a king, but even greater, presiding as judge over the land.”

“Perhaps,” Washington said, thoughtfully, “if the Huns and Gauls can be driven back. But even a president should answer to the people.”

“The people should answer to their liege lord, not the other way around.”

“That is the old way, the manner of kings and queens,” Washington said, as he stared out at the endless horizon. “Like all the dark necromancy of the Old World, it should best be forgotten. It will not be like that here. The purpose of all government, as best promoted by the practice of virtuous policies, ought to be the aggregate happiness of society. As the Pilgrim told me, America should be a place where everyone has a voice.”

“You have seen the Pilgrim?” Custard asked.

“Yes. He was the one who sent me.”

Arm Strong fell silent then, in awe of General Washington, and dared brag no more of his own accomplishments.

After two days’ travel they reached the Black Hills of Dakota, where they rode through the gloom of a perpetual twilight, for the Sun never shone there and eternal shadows lay across that country.

As they struggled through the gloom, Washington spied a great eagle watching them from the back of the carcass of a bull buffalo, which the bird had apparently slain. As the travelers passed, General gave a respectful bow from his saddle, calling out, “Greetings, Master of the Air. I see you will have a fine feast.” But the eagle only watched the men with unwinking eyes.

That evening, they came to a valley ringed in jutting peaks, and had traveled only a short distance when a cold voice called down to them from the heights. “Who dares trespass on the aeries of the eagles?”

High overhead, its talons clinging to the tallest peaks, stood an eagle twice the size of a stallion.

"I am Washington," General said, "with my companion Arm Strong, seeking passage to the Mount of Rushmore."

"This day we will surely break your bones," the eagle screeched, "for I am E. Perilous Union, mother of the eagles who make their homes both in the Peaks of Usps and the Mountains of the Moon."

Other, smaller eagles, lurking on the lesser crags encircling the travelers, raised their voices in reply.

"Hear us, I beg you," General called, in as brave a tone as he could muster. "Spare us, not for ourselves, but for the sake of our mission, for we are on a journey for the freedom of our countrymen."

A ruffling of wings passed around the heights.

"Freedom!" E. Perilous cried. "Freedom! You speak the sacred word of the eagles. What is the meaning?"

"It is a word sacred to us as well," Washington replied.

"Mother," another eagle called across the heights. "Let us spare these men who speak of Freedom, for when I met them on the plains, the pale-faced one bowed and addressed me with respect."

"Is this so?" E. Perilous Union asked. "Tell us then, children of men, the purpose of your journey."

Washington did so, and when he was done, E. Perilous said, "We have heard of this evil wizard and despise his ways. Because my son, Apollo Leven asks it, I will permit your passage. More, in the sacred name of Freedom, I will send him with you as a guide."

Washington and Custard thanked the mother of the eagles, and Apollo Leven lifted himself off the heights to accompany them.

As they continued through the Black Hills, wolves and evil spirits tried to destroy them, and more than once they battled for their lives, but Washington, his face grim and terrible to behold, fought with his great axe, Valleyforge, that shone silver in the darkness; and Arm Strong, wielding a golden blade, proved dreadful in combat. Apollo Leven strove beside them as well, and his terrible beak and talons slew many a foe.

The eagle led them true, and they finally saw Mount Rushmore looming in the distance, awful and majestic, a living monster shaped like a mountain with four heads. The heads were craggy and ill-formed, and shifted from side to side, guarding against danger.

“The Iron Hewer lives at the base of Rushmore,” Arm Strong said, “where the behemoth cannot reach him.”

They came by twilight to a house made of iron. As they approached, a figure stepped out dressed in simple gray garments and bearing no arms. Around his otherwise bald head he wore a circlet with five silver stars that glistened in the dusk.

Washington expected to be challenged, but the man raised his hand in salute and gave a slow smile. “Welcome, strangers, and be at ease. I am Eisenhower Iron Hewer, but my friends call me Ike.”

Washington found he liked Ike immediately, and the two travelers dismounted and introduced themselves. When

General told Eisenhower why he had come, the Old Commander shrugged. “Though I have never liked war, I won't shirk from a fight, not if Waynejon sent you.”

From out of his larder, Eisenhower prepared a fine meal, though where he got his victuals Washington could not guess. Afterward, full and content, they sat before the fireplace, drinking hot coffee and smoking tobacco from wooden pipes, listening to the wind whistling around the iron eaves, while Apollo stood in a corner, his eyes reflecting golden in the flames.

“There is only one way to approach the creature,” Ike said. “All its heads face south, except for the fourth one, which looks to the north. But that head is blind in one eye. If we're careful, we can creep up the northwestern slope. The box containing the Words of Power is hidden in a cave below the monster's chins. We'll know if it sees us, for its faces, which normally resemble rough stone, always take on the features of its victims.”

“Can the monster be slain?” Custard asked.

“He can,” Eisenhower replied. “A single blow to the mountain's heart can kill the beast, if the warrior who delivers it is pure of soul.”

“Who knows if such a man is among us?” Washington asked.

“I would like to try my hand at it,” Custard said, “if the chance arises.”

“Such a task is not for me,” Eisenhower said. “I am unworthy, for I've sent too many men to their deaths.”

“Is that why you live here alone?” Custard asked. “A warrior such as yourself would be highly honored in York.”

“I live here to serve and have had all the honors I need. I have led good men.”

“You display great humility,” Washington said.

“Humility must always be the portion of any man who receives acclaim earned in the blood of his followers and the sacrifices of his friends.”

“I have not fought for such, sir,” Custard said, “but for the glory of combat. You give me much to consider. Still I would like to set my good right arm against the monster.”

“The Pilgrim sent me here many years ago, to act as a guide. There is a prophecy that one day a man will destroy the creature and use the Words of Power to preserve the land. I hope you are that one, but many have scaled those slopes and none have lived to tell of it.”

“These are strange times,” Washington said, “filled with magic.”

“True,” Ike replied, sagely, “but things are more like they are now than they have ever been before.”

Washington nodded his head and stared into the fire. It was good to befriend a man of Ike's wisdom.

The three companions rose with the morning light. They left their horses in Eisenhower's iron stables and went on foot, angling toward the west, while Apollo wheeled away to watch from a distance, lest his presence alert the four faces. If the monster saw them, it gave no sign. By midday they reached a region strewn with boulders, where they were near enough to see the heads closely. Washington gaped up at

them. Three faced toward the men, one away. They were large as houses, and all looked identical, with gray eyes, weather-beaten noses, and thin lines for mouths. Their guttural voices rose and fell, as they murmured among themselves in an ancient tongue.

The travelers headed north until they came to a point behind the mount, where only the easternmost face kept watch, its left eye staring vacantly down the slope.

“We begin the assault here, just before sundown,” Eisenhower said.

“Shouldn't we wait until dark?” Arm Strong asked.

“No. They see as well at night as in the day, but at twilight the setting Sun will be in their eyes.”

For three restless hours the companions waited for sunset, saying little, thinking of the coming encounter. Custard stared fixedly at the mount.

“Ike,” Arm Strong finally said, “exactly where would the killing blow have to be struck? I cannot rightly ascertain the location of the beast's heart.”

Eisenhower pointed. “There, just between the two central heads. Front or back makes no difference.”

“And the Words of Power?” Washington asked.

“A few yards farther down in a narrow cave. It's hard to see from here.”

“You have guided us well,” Washington said. “You need not accompany us.”

“I don't have to, but I will. I've always stood with those who make the attempt.”

When the Sun was still three finger widths above the horizon, Eisenhower ordered the travelers to move out. They crept between the boulders, keeping always to the blind side of the head, and were soon scrambling up the mountain slope. Pine trees provided concealment until they were two-thirds of the way up, but after that the mount lay barren.

Washington's heart pounded in his chest as he climbed, trying not to look up at the terrible face above him. At first he could not see the cave, but then he spied it, a narrow opening half-covered by an overhanging shelf. If they could reach it, the head would not be able to see them at all.

Abruptly, the terrible visage turned, with the sound of rock scraping on stone, and the three flattened themselves against the boulders, scarcely daring to breathe. For a moment the good eye swept along the slope, but the sunlight blinded it, making it squint and look away. The men kept climbing.

Custard was the first to reach the cave, and he helped the others under the protection of the ledge. They clapped one another on the back and turned toward the opening.

It was little more than a niche in the rocks, and Washington searched only a short while before finding the iron box set in a recess. It proved neither long nor heavy, and he drew it out easily and opened the lid, which needed no lock with such a terrible monster guarding it. Within lay a brown parchment.

“The Words of Power,” Washington whispered. He placed the scroll within his breast pocket and slipped the box back into its place.

“Have any ever come this far before?” Custard asked softly.

“Only two,” Ike said. “Their bones are strewn across the slope.”

Shuddering at Eisenhower's words, Washington told the Old Commander to lead them back down.

They were nearly to the tree line again before Washington realized Custard was not behind him. He turned to discover Arm Strong ascending the mount. General clutched Eisenhower's arm and pointed to their comrade.

“That vainglorious fool!” Eisenhower hissed.

Reaching the region above the monster's heart, Custard raised his sword high above his head, shouting, “Die, beast, in the name of Arm Strong, Captain of the Seventh Cavalry!”

He looked magnificent at that moment, his cape billowing, his golden hair sweeping back behind his head, the last rays of the Sun glinting on his blade. With all his power, he thrust downward.

The sword snapped beneath the weight of the blow, leaving Custard gaping at it in astonishment.

A scraping noise filled the heavens as all four of the monster's heads swiveled toward the captain. General gasped, for the faces had transformed into the features of Custard, Washington, and Eisenhower. Only the head with the blind eye remained unchanged.

The air filled with roaring as the heads screamed their rage. The whole mount trembled as vast arms rose from either side, reaching toward Custard.

“Let's go!” Eisenhower ordered. “He won't make it.”

“No,” Washington cried, handing Ike the parchment. “Take it and flee!”

General did not hear Eisenhower's reply; he was already sprinting toward Custard, Valleyforge at the ready. Though it had taken several minutes to creep down the mount, he ascended in seconds and was beside Arm Strong as the giant arms groped toward both of them. Washington saw his own face, filled with hatred, glowering down upon him.

Do I really look like that? he thought. *My nose seems so large*.

At that moment Apollo Leven streaked from the sky to harrow the faces with his talons. But the action bought the men only a moment before the rocks erupted around them, lifting them off the ground and sending them sprawling down the incline. Custard's expression was wild, but he held a knife in his hand as he rolled to his feet. Washington scrambled back toward the mountain's heart, axe upraised, staring straight into his own seething eyes.

The mount rippled beneath him, but as he fell he brought his axe down on his target with all his strength. He expected nothing but the destruction of his weapon, followed by his own death, but Valleyforge cut easily through the rock.

The whole mount screamed, a deafening blast. Blood rilled from the wound, covering General in ichor. He rolled on his back and saw the faces above him, including his own, writhing in their death struggles. He watched himself expire, the light leaving the eyes, the head lolling downward.

The mountain shuddered and sank. The four dead faces stared across the plain.

For a moment, Washington could hear nothing, but finally Custard's voice came to him, as the captain helped him up. “You have shamed me, sir, and saved my life. I am in your debt forever.”

Eisenhower reached them a moment later and fell immediately to his knees before Washington. “You are the one,” Ike cried, taking the circlet of five stars from his forehead and casting it at Washington's feet. “The one who was to come. You have ended my vigil. Accept my service. Wherever you go, I will go also, and will serve you until my death.”

“I, too, will follow you,” Custard said, though he did not kneel. “Accept my service as well, General.”

Scarcely understanding their words, Washington gaped up at his defeated foe. “But how?” he exclaimed. “How could a failure such as I be named worthy to destroy the beast when Arm Strong could not?”

Apollo glided to a landing and placed his large head under General's hand. “Do not question the turn of events, Washington Paleface, but accept the fealty of these men, and mine as well, for I, too would follow you.”

Still overwhelmed, Washington laid his hands on the shoulders of the two men. “I do not understand, nor know where this will lead, but I cannot refuse the service of such brave warriors, nor of this great eagle. Now rise. We have a giant to kill.”

“Another?” Ike asked.

They spent the night in Eisenhower's house, where Washington cleaned the blood from himself and his garments.

In the morning they left Rushmore far behind, and the four dead heads gaped at them to the edge of the horizon.

They rode once more across the darkness of the Black Hills, and as they went Eisenhower asked, “General, why did you go back for Custard? You had the scroll. If you and I had died, there would have been no one to stop the wizard.”

“I could not leave him behind.”

“If a commander thinks expending ten thousand lives will save twenty thousand later, it is up to him to do it.”

“Custard was not ten thousand, but one,” Washington said. “And though you have a point, I labor to keep alive in my breast that little spark of celestial fire called Conscience. I could not desert him and live with myself.”

They passed back into Mount Ana, where Custard seemed to grow increasingly nervous. At last they came once more to the banks of the Bighorn River, where they topped a hill and found a giant American Native standing before them. Behind him sat a creature with the head of a stallion whose eyes were lit with madness and another with the head of a bull.

“I am Bitter Gall,” the native said. “The appointed time is come.” He raised his arms and hundreds of warriors suddenly appeared over the hills, dressed in feathers and skins, war-paint covering their fierce faces.

Sweat broke across Arm Strong's brow, but he said nothing.

“What do you want?” Washington asked.

“Your people have sinned and there must be death,” the sitting bull said.

“I have done it!” Arm Strong burst forth. “I am not what you think me, General. I admit it, now. I have shed the blood of children. I spoke before of unfinished business. Long ago, it was prophesied that I would meet my death by the banks of the Little Bighorn. I hoped to redeem myself in the slaying of Rushmore, but I failed there, too.”

“Only one life is required,” the crazed horse said. “One of you three. But none shall pass until the deed is done.”

“I have accepted the fealty of this man,” Washington said, “and I cannot tell a lie. I am responsible for him. I will accept the punishment in his stead.”

For a moment Arm Strong's eyes became crafty. But he looked at Washington and shook his head. “No, General. I have been a villain, but you returned for me on Mount Rushmore when I would not have done the same for you. You must live to fight the wizard. My fate is sealed. You have shown me the way to restore my honor, and I will go with the Sun shining on my face.”

Custard bowed low to Washington, then strode down the hill toward Bitter Gall, passing out of the story and into history. But Washington wondered if someday, he too, would have to pay for the deaths of so many of his men in the battle of Fort Duquesne.

Washington and Eisenhower, grieving at Custard's loss, made their way through the Sequoia Forest, where they had many adventures. At last they came to York, a city of magnificent spires. Others heard tell of Washington's heroism on Mount Rushmore, and warriors came to him offering him their service, so that he gathered a group of America's finest

around him. Of these, Lafayette DeGaul was one of the greatest. Though a Gaul, he had vowed to follow Washington when General had saved his life many years before, and had been with him through the Gaul and American Native War.

“Mon General,” Lafayette said, “it is good to see your face. The wizard, accompanied by his giant, approaches the city and is encamped beyond the banks of the Mighty Delaware. Those sent to stop it have been smashed to bits. I was just preparing to go myself, to die for the cause of freedom.”

DeGaul was a wild-eyed man, with a mustache and plumed hat. Until he met Washington, he had been a member of the famous Musketeers, who had fought against the powers of darkness and evil in the Old World.

Washington assembled his company, which had grown to more than five hundred men, just inside the gates of York. As he looked upon them, despair ran through him, for they were poorly armored and had few supplies, the Hun's blockade of the harbor preventing needed goods from entering the city. Despite his reservations, he drew a deep breath and addressed them briefly, explaining the situation.

He ended with: “The time is now near at hand which must determine whether Americans are to be Freemen or Slaves. The fate of untold millions will depend, under God, on the courage and conduct of this army. Our cruel and unrelenting enemy leaves us no choice but a brave resistance or the most abject submission; this is all we can expect. We have, therefore, to resolve to conquer or die.”

The men gave a ragged cheer while Apollo Leven wheeled and cried overhead.

Knowing how few warriors he had, Washington ordered a special surprise in the form of large, mysterious crates loaded onto the supply wagons.

As they rode out through the gates of York toward the Canadian Ice Fields, a crowd assembled to watch them go, young women pinning flowers and kisses on the warriors. Washington was approached by one of the most beautiful ladies he had ever seen, with pouting lips and eyes that flashed like fireworks. Her dark hair flared long and wild over a necklace hung with wooden teeth, suspended over a dress of forest green. She handed him a red, white, and blue standard covered with thirteen stars and stripes.

“Take this, General,” she said, “and fight for York. The Star Weaver herself has enchanted it, washing it in the tears she sheds for those who die beneath the titan's heels. Tie it to your axe-handle in your moment of need, and its magic will give your blade power.”

He reached down from the heights of Silver's back to take the cloth, and for a moment their hands and eyes met. “What is your name?” he asked.

“Martha Custis.”

“I thank you for this,” Washington said.

She smiled and watched him ride away.

“She is a beauty, that one,” Lafayette said.

“There is no time for such things,” Washington replied, but his hand felt warm where she had touched it, and he raised the standard high.

For three days the company traveled north, and by the second afternoon icy winds began to blow. Snow flurried by

evening, and the warriors soon rode through banks of white. It was bitterly cold, and Washington's men lacked sufficient clothing.

By midafternoon the company reached the edge of a valley, where ran the Mighty Delaware River. In the vale's center stood the giant, Britannia the Great, hundreds of feet tall, an enormous creature with the face of a woman, wearing a crown and carrying a heavy mace that it used to pound the earth. Wherever it walked or struck, it flattened houses, fields and living things, a brutality that came to be known as the Stamp Act. The wizard stood upon the titan's shoulders and an army of ten thousand red-clad warriors followed behind.

“How can we face them?” Lafayette asked.

“I have a plan,” General said. “But the Words of Power will not work unless the monster hears them, so I must be very close. We will wait until nightfall.”

The snow fell harder as evening progressed. The men carried half-shrouded lanterns, but it was still difficult to see through the storm. Everyone shivered with the cold, but Washington led them to the banks of the Delaware, accompanied by the wagon filled with the mysterious crates. They found boats upon the shore, left there at Washington's request by his American Native friend, Massasoit. In the dead of night, scarcely able to find their way, the company crossed the torrent of the Mighty Delaware, Washington standing upright, holding the red, white, and blue banner before him. He shivered from more than the cold, knowing that if the wizard or Britannia discovered them upon the waters, they would be doomed.

After a long hour, they reached the farther shore. Washington divided the men into three sections, under the command of Eisenhower Iron Hewer, Stonewall Jackson, and Benedict Arnold, three of his greatest warriors. Giving them their orders, General turned to Lafayette. “The rest is up to us, I fear. Come with me.” Washington took the banner Martha Custis had given him and tucked it beneath his cloak.

Together, the two comrades crept toward the titan, whose gigantic form blocked the stars. They slipped between the sentries, then waited until moonrise. As the first rays lit the land, Lafayette called in a loud voice just outside the Wizard Cornwallis's tent. “Come out, great magician, for we have seen your might and know we have no chance against you. Come and accept our surrender.”

The sentries around Cornwallis's camp leapt to their feet, but Lafayette drew his bow and covered them. “Stand back, my friends. We surrender to Cornwallis alone.” As the guards hesitated, the wizard appeared at the tent door, a dazzling lantern in his hand. Lafayette lowered his weapon.

The wizard wore a bulky red robe and a white, pointed hood, which allowed only his dark eyes to show. His voice was grating as he spoke. “Who dares interrupt the slumber of Cornwallis, Grand Wizard of the Empire?”

“It is I, Lafayette DeGaul, with the great General Washington, who asks you to accept his surrender.”

The giant, Britannia, gave a low rumble and raised its mace, but Cornwallis bid it stay its hand.

“Why do you come slinking to me in darkness?” Cornwallis demanded.

"We came as quickly as we could, to end the bloodshed, for who knows what this behemoth of yours will do?" Lafayette replied.

Cornwallis laughed. "I almost believe it. How like your people, the wretched refuse of the Old World, vermin sent to pollute these fair shores, fit to be nothing but slaves. When York is overthrown, I will show you how such should be treated."

"We are willing to do as you say," Lafayette said through gritted teeth. "Only accept our surrender."

"I have heard of you, Washington. It is said you cannot tell a lie. Tell me then, commander, is that truly why you have come? I will believe it from your lips."

Washington dared not answer, knowing the truth would spring unbidden from his mouth.

"I thought so," Cornwallis said, signaling to the giant.

"Scatter!" Washington ordered.

The Americans moved just in time to avoid a shattering blow, as Britannia brought its mace down with all its force. The impact tossed Washington off his feet, but even before he hit the ground he was unrolling the scroll containing the Words of Power, for this had all been part of his plan, to bring the giant close to the earth in striking. On landing, Washington instantly sprang up and began reading in a mighty voice.

At the first word, everything seemed to freeze in place, as if time had stopped. Britannia remained immobile as Washington spoke:

We hold these truths to be self-evident, that all men are created equal, that they are endowed by their Creator with certain unalienable rights, that among these are Life, Liberty, and the Pursuit of Happiness. That to secure these rights....

On and on Washington read, his voice growing stronger with the reading, his delight rising as he saw the wizard and the giant both helpless against the words. He raised his arms as he ended: *And for the support of this Declaration, with a firm reliance on the Protection of Divine Providence, we mutually pledge to each other*

our Lives,

our Fortunes,

and our sacred Honor.

The moment General finished, Cornwallis fell to his knees. When he tried to rise, Lafayette, with the speed of thought, raised his bow and placed an arrow through the wizard's evil heart.

“Liberty, Equality, Fraternity!” cried Lafayette.

Britannia gave a terrible scream, for the Words of Power began to turn its feet to stone. With a snarl, it fled toward the south, stomping away on increasingly clumsy members.

A roar rose from the valley's edge as hundreds of fireworks, the contents of the mysterious crates, were released at once. The sky erupted in red, white, and blue flares as Eisenhower, Arnold, and Jackson led the Americans into the valley toward the Red Army, which was milling in confusion, stunned at being attacked from a direction they thought safe.

“The giant!” Washington cried. “It heads toward York.”

Washington and Lafayette captured two of their enemies' horses and sped after the titan, but clearly the mounts could not keep up. As soon as they reached their camp, Washington leapt off his steed and onto Silver, who stood waiting for his master, impatiently pawing the earth.

"Go on!" Lafayette shouted to Washington. "Go on, mon General! I will catch up."

Faster than the wind Silver ran, while Washington kept his eyes upon the giant. But when he reached the banks of the Mighty Delaware, General found the titan had already crossed. He nearly despaired at that moment, until Apollo Leven streaked out of the sky and landed before him.

"You must ride upon my back," the eagle screeched.

Still bearing the banner Martha Custis had given him, Washington climbed in front of Apollo Leven's wings. The eagle took a single bound and streaked over the great river.

Yet fast as they were, the monster strode far ahead. It steadily approached the gates of York, dwarfing the city's gleaming spires. Washington was still some distance behind it as it raised its mace, preparing to sweep the city away.

In desperation, General lifted Valleyforge and tied the banner to its pommel. As he let it fly, the weapon streaked toward the giant, the flag streaming behind, and as it flew it grew, powered by the flag's enchantment. It struck Britannia full in the back, and the monster writhed away, stumbling as it went, its massive feet missing the gates of York.

In its frenzy, it thrashed into the water. Most of its lower body was stone, and it moved with awkward, hesitant jerks. Crossing the bay, it pulled itself onto a massive rock rising

out of the harbor. By the time it reached the top, its waist had turned to stone, leaving it unable to move its legs. Gradually the effect crept up its body. It raised its enormous mace in defiance and turned its face toward the sea, looking for its home across the waters.

Washington's axe, returned to its former size, fell from the giant's back and clattered down the rocks.

With the giant and the wizard destroyed, the Red Army, thinking the fireworks the beginning of an enormous assault, fled in terror. Washington returned to his men and led them back into the city in triumph, the whole company singing *When General comes marching home again*. Washington was declared a great hero and some wanted to make him king, but he refused, remembering Custard's words of a new office of *president*.

He recalled what the Pilgrim had said as well, and saw that America was indeed a land of second chances.

The Gauls retreated from Mexico and Hitler drew his boats back across the sea. But though Washington searched through all of York for many weeks, he found no sign of Martha Custis, nor anyone who knew her. However, he did find his axe with the flag still tied to its pommel, on the shores of the rock where the giant stood.

Afterward, a great Convention was held in honor of Washington's victory. A tremendous plan was conceived to build an enormous door, gilded with gold, across York harbor, to prevent the Huns from ever attacking again.

There was talk of tearing down the stone titan, but Lafayette had the last word. “Let it rather be a symbol, this

vanquished foe. And we will call it Lady Liberty, for with its defeat we have won our freedom."

Being a poet as well as a warrior, in mockery of the words the wizard had spoken, Lafayette etched the following lines upon the base of the rock where the giant stood:

Give me your tired, your poor,
Your huddled masses yearning to breathe free
The wretched refuse of your teeming shore
Send these, the homeless, tempest-tossed to me
I lift my lamp beside the golden door!

The Convention ordered a flame lit atop the statue's mace, that became a torch burning across the waters, so bright it could be seen from the shores of the Old World. And when the kings and emperors of that shadowy realm looked upon it, they trembled.

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Books To Look For

CHARLES DE LINT

It's been said that the two original art forms that the United States has given to the world are comic books and jazz.

Now, I'd be hard pressed to fit any discussion of jazz into this column, though I will say that it can make an excellent soundtrack while reading sf. Just try some Coltrane—Alice or John—while reading, say, William Gibson. But I have discussed comic books in previous columns and with the U.S.-centric theme of this issue, perhaps it's appropriate to discuss a couple more—or at least a couple of comic book-related items:

Mythology: The DC Comics Art of Alex Ross, by Chip Kidd, Pantheon Books, 2003, $35.

If you go into a comic shop these days you'll find the shelves filled with the new edgy comics—many adult-oriented—or familiar characters, made just as edgy by new creative teams trying to redo old concepts for the contemporary audience. Frankly, it doesn't always work. Sometimes, the reinvention dilutes what first made a character work. And many of these characters really did work for a whole generation of young readers.

Way back when, DC Comics ruled the roost. Yes, Marvel came along with upstarts such as Spider-Man and was soon vying with DC for the top spot, but DC was there first. And

never mind the movies, TV series, and prose books of varying degrees of quality. Ask most people to name a superhero and they'll come up with one of DC's three flagship characters: Superman, Batman, or Wonder Woman.

If you have any fondness at all for these pop culture icons, you'll probably appreciate this collection of Alex Ross's art.

Who is Alex Ross?

I like the way it's summed up in one of the pages of the book's introductory material, and if this isn't the quintessential American success story, I don't know what is:

“Once upon a time a lonely little boy in Lubbock, Texas, turned to comic book heroes for friendship. And they did what they do best—they rescued him. But then, after a decade and a half of hard work and intense study, something amazing happened.

“He returned the favor.”

Save for the place where he grew up, this could be in the biography of half the men and women working in the sf/f field as well: they were rescued in their youth by the fiction and art that today provides them their method of making a living. And along the way, they complete a circle by inspiring another generation to follow in their footsteps.

In Ross's case, what he brought to the table wasn't so much innovation as a glorious reconfiguring of comic book superheroes who, if it weren't for their spandex outfits, would no longer be recognizably the same characters. Ross finds what made the characters work in the first place, and puts that into his paintings: modern production values combined with old-fashioned character values. You see it in the faces he

depicts. The characters don't have to say a word for us to know that they are honorable, dedicated, and larger than life.

In the few short years that Ross has been working in the field he has quickly become a force to be reckoned with. His comics are fully painted—every panel, of every page—and if you're unfamiliar with his work, *Mythology* is an excellent starting point to see what the fuss is about. It features page after page of paintings and sketches, informative text, and even an eight-page strip done solely for this book. The production values are superb throughout—so much so that, if tearing apart a book wasn't such a horrible concept, many of the pages could be framed and hung as if they were art prints.

Lovecraft, by Hans Rodionoff, Enrique Breccia & Keith Giffen, Vertigo/DC, 2003, $24.95.

Many of us in this genre were first drawn into reading fantastic fiction by the *Weird Tales* authors, of whom H. P. Lovecraft was a prime example. And if we weren't taken by Lovecraft and his peers, we probably were drawn in by someone influenced by them. Either way, most people are at least aware of him and should enjoy this fictional biography.

Lovecraft had an odd enough upbringing as it was (mother dressed him as a girl for years, parents died in an asylum, etc.), but the authors of this illustrated book take the strange moments of his life and amp them up with the rather unsettling conceit that perhaps the morbid and fantastic creatures of his Cthulhu Mythos were real. That the reason so much went wrong with the reclusive Lovecraft was because he was aware of a true vast and monstrous reality that lies

just on the edge of our own, and it was only through his writing that he was able to keep our world safe from it. The cost was his own happiness.

I'm not an expert in either Lovecraft's life or the Cthulhu Mythos, but from what I do know, it appears that the authors have done a fine job of weaving truth with fiction.

The story is based on a screenplay written by Hans Rodionoff adapted to a comic book narrative by Keith Giffen. The art is a wonderful mix of realism, Gahan Wilson-inspired art, and the strange grotesqueries that illustrated so many of the stories that appeared in *Weird Tales*, or its later children such as *Weirdbook* and *Whispers*. It won't be to everyone's taste, but it does an admirable job of bringing to life Providence in the early part of the last century, fictional Arkham, and the more fictional (I hope!) creatures and beings of Lovecraft's eldritch mythos.

You don't need to be familiar with either Lovecraft's life or his fiction to be able to appreciate what the creators of *Lovecraft* have accomplished, but those of you who are will certainly get an extra buzz while reading it.

The Knight, by Gene Wolfe, Tor Books, 2004, $25.95.

When I think of iconic American fantasy writers, I'm afraid it's not Robert Jordan or David Eddings who come to my mind. I'm far more likely to consider the likes of Jane Yolen, Patricia McKillip, and Gene Wolfe.

Anyone who has read *The Book of the New Sun* series will immediately understand why I mention Wolfe, though unfortunately, Wolfe—like, say, Samuel R. Delany in the sf field—has somehow acquired the reputation of being a

difficult writer. I don't mean difficult as a person (one would be hard-pressed to find a more genial individual in our field than Wolfe), but rather that his books require a large investment of time, and a lot of concentration, to appreciate.

I don't believe that to be true, and it's certainly not the case with this new book of his, the first half of a duology called *The Wizard Knight*.

Simply put, by a method with which Wolfe doesn't bother to burden us, a teenager from our world falls into another. As soon as he arrives he begins to lose his memories of our world, or they get mixed up with memories of a life in this new one that he's pretty sure he didn't live. After a while, he's no longer certain, and since he's the narrator, we readers can only go by what he tells us.

A chance meeting with a knight early in the narrative sets him on a quest to become a knight himself, and therein lies the story.

It's an episodic ramble through this new world as the narrator has various adventures in and above the sea, in fairyland (here called Aelfland), and in the mortal world. He's a bit larger than life (helped by an aelf spell that leaves him a teenager in his mind, but with the body of an adult) and has a refreshing sense of honor and doing what is right, no matter the circumstances. But best of all—for this reader—*The Knight* is one of those rare high fantasies where I couldn't begin to predict where the story was going after only a couple of chapters—a failing for far too many fantasies that I start but never finish.

Wolfe has done a terrific job with this book. He's given us a world that's invigoratingly fresh and a storyline that, while it plays with the archetypes of high fantasy, chooses its own path to follow. He has caught a wonderful, dead-on voice for the first person narrative (this young boy in a man's body). And what attracted me the most, and the principle reason I would recommend *The Knight* so strongly to you, the book is steeped with that delightful sense of wonder that started so many of us reading this sort of material in the first place.

There are lyric passages that sing, but at its heart, it remains an earthy book, the first of two, as I mentioned above. And happily, Wolfe plays fair and leaves us with a breathing point at the end rather than a cliffhanger, so that while we want to know what's going to happen next, we don't feel the need to go by his house, banging on his door to demand the next volume right *now*.

We can be patient for ... oh, a week or so.

Material to be considered for review in this column should be sent to Charles de Lint, P.O. Box 9480, Ottawa, Ontario, Canada K1G 3V2.

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Books

JAMES SALLIS

For Us, The Living: A Comedy of Manners, by Robert A. Heinlein, Scribner, 2004, $25.

Pronounced trippingly on the tongue or not, the words slip away from us, not the sound of them, never the sound of them, for nowadays they resound all about, an incurable tinnitus, it's the hard-won meanings of the words that slip and slide and get lost, even as we say them. Freedom, liberty, democracy. Liberal, conservative. Stephen Dedalus was quite right to fear those big words that make us so unhappy.

From time to time I tear myself away from writing, conceal myself in what a friend deems “grown-up clothes,” and go off to teach. Recently I guest-lectured a course in science fiction. *Why do we read this*? I asked of a dozen students whose ages ranged across four decades. One wore a short-sleeved white dress shirt, polyester gray slacks. Another sported a spiked collar, studded bracelet and belt, black-painted nails.

That was my first question. Follow-up question, to myself, had to be: What do these people have in common? One, close to my own age, grew up hearing stories of the Depression and World War II, code-talkers, packets of yellow dye squeezed into pale margarine to make it more palatable. Another is innocent of the Rosenbergs, Korea and Vietnam, the CIA's toppling of the Chilean government.

My wife falls somewhere between. An inveterate reader of science fiction and fantasy, Karyn credits Robert A. Heinlein's *Stranger in a Strange Land* as a major influence in her life, asserts that she would not be who she is now—the most tolerant, most loving person I know—were it not for this book, and for science fiction in general.

We're looking for something here, right? I ask the students. *Something we can't find anywhere else*.

And continue: Does our reading of science fiction change us in some elemental way? Is there something intrinsically *liberating* about science fiction, embracing as it does other lives, even other life forms, other ways of thinking?

Personally, I feel that science fiction both politicized and humanized me. I came to late adolescence listing heavily to the left. Books like *The Stars My Destination, More Than Human*, and *A Mirror for Observers* are much to blame. Yet looking back decades later, I'm forced to remember as well all those tales of interplanetary colonialism, paeans to militarism and capitalism, of a status quo wrung from the very jaws of otherness. We saw the future—and it looked like the U.S. in 1950.

What exactly is going on here?

Few realize that Robert A. Heinlein in 1934, taken with the candidate's utopian vision, campaigned for Upton Sinclair, who had recently left the Socialist Party for the Democrats, or that Heinlein continued in politics for many years, at one point going so far as to run for the California State Assembly. He had graduated Annapolis in 1929; by 1934, tuberculosis forced his retirement from the military. He sold his first story,

“Life-Line,” to John Campbell in 1939. Beginning in December the year before, in four months he wrote his first full-length work, *For Us, The Living*, now at long last published.

It's 1939, and Perry Nelson, engineer, has a traffic accident in which he dies only to awaken in 2086, not inconsequentially in the apartment of an attractive, accomplished, artistic woman. He learns to drive an aircar, watches endless hours of video history, talks to various experts, is remanded to psychiatric treatment following an act of violence triggered by recidivist jealousy, talks to another expert or two, and becomes a pioneer rocket pilot.

Th-Th-Th-That's all, folks.

Did Heinlein believe he was writing a publishable novel? Apparently so, since he submitted it for publication at least twice. But what he wrote, what we now have in our hands, is a series of lectures—it would be kind but gravely in error to call them Socratic dialogues—on society and the individual's place in society, on government, on personal ethics, on economics: oversize beads threaded on the thinnest string of narrative. Heinlein was working, of course, in the Utopian tradition of Edward Bellamy's *Looking Backward* and H. G. Wells's *When the Sleeper Wakes*. He was far from the consummate storyteller he would soon become. He was an engineer, with an engineer's mind. Every problem had a logical, practical solution. *(International economics? Give me a moment, I'll work it out for you on my slide rule!)* He was also a young man, with a young man's smug belief that he alone knows how the world should be, and can fix it, if you'll just give him half a chance.

In many ways Heinlein never lost that smug certainty. Though he learned to cloak his sermons in compelling stories, the lectures always peeked out, beggars beneath the rich man's table.

In Heinlein's world, the exceptional individual—and all Heinlein's protagonists are exceptional individuals—has license to do as he wishes, extracting the best of what society has to offer, bending it to his needs, living at the same time within and beyond it. History in fact is, for Heinlein, little more than the story of these exceptional individuals. True, the individual still has obligations, as in Heinlein's famous assertion that only those with military service should be full citizens, allowed to vote. But beyond that, pretty much anything goes.

The exceptional individual, at least in later life, will also quite naturally be surrounded by adoring, half-clad females, themselves exceptional; but that's another story.

Little wonder that at least three generations of readers have found themselves confused by Heinlein. On the one hand absolute sexual freedom, on the other the rampant xenophobia and jingoism of *Starship Troopers*. Over it all, an unremitting championship of the individual and individual rights, your basic American frontier mentality, actually—assuming always, of course, that the individual is exceptional.

A doctrine of absolute individuality based on elitism?

What exactly is going on here?

“How could a man who supported the Socialist Upton Sinclair and the Democrat FDR become a supporter of arch-conservative Republicans Barry Goldwater and Jeanne

Kirkpatrick?" editor Robert James asks in the Afterword to *For Us, The Living*, answering his question with Heinlein's quip to Alfred Bester circa 1959: "I've simply changed from a soft-headed radical to a hard-headed radical, a pragmatic libertarian." The old John Dos Passos fade.

Words that slip away from us, words that duck and shimmer.

Few more slippery than *libertarian*.

Its impress scores science fiction's DNA, in stories by Cyril Kornbluth *(The Syndic)*, Eric Frank Russell ("And Then There Were None"), A. E. van Vogt ("The Weapon Shops of Isher"). Ayn Rand's Objectivism from her novels *Anthem* and *The Fountainhead* soon got grafted on. Heinlein's 1966 *The Moon Is a Harsh Mistress* became the rallying point and, certainly within sf, the movement's Bible.

Reviewing *Give Me Liberty*, an anthology of sf with the common theme of challenging government, Robert Killheffer in these pages remarked libertarianism's penchant for minimal government and a society based on unrestrained competition, comparing recent libertarian-influenced work (L. Neil Smith, Vernor Vinge, John Varley) to the social idealism of older writers such as Lloyd Biggle, Christopher Anvil, and Frank Herbert. The stories of *Give Me Liberty*, Killheffer observed, propose a radical equalization in society, their hat set toward dignity for all—a culture of cooperation, not competition. "It is an anti-government vision insofar as the authors reject government as the means of achieving their reformed societies, but the foundation of them all—

equalization of power—has far more in common with New Deal progressivism than with Rand's Objectivism."

Similarly, David Hartwell and Kathryn Cramer in their introduction to *The Hard SF Renaissance* (2002) hold that the resurgence of "the new hard sf" ("baroque hard sf" or "baroque space opera") in the Nineties, spearheaded by writers like Paul McAuley, Iain M. Banks, Greg Egan, Bruce Sterling, Ian McDonald, and Kim Stanley Robinson, was in direct opposition to "a perceived trend in American sf in the 1980s toward militarist, right-wing, or libertarian space war fiction marketed as synonymous with hard sf."

Back to Heinlein.

What should come as no surprise, all this having been said, is how much of what was to come shines through in this first novel. "[I]t is so immensely much more than just a first novel," Spider Robinson writes in the Introduction. "It is *all* of them, dormant." Here are the seeds of "If This Goes On—," "The Roads Must Roll," "Coventry," and *Beyond This Horizon*. Heinlein's advocacy of Social Credit, worked out in some detail here, becomes seminal to *Beyond This Horizon* (1942) and continues to surface in later works as far forward as *Time Enough for Love* (1973). Robinson goes on to list a half-page or so of other constant concerns and themes: multiple identity, advances in technology leading to hedonistic comfort, the balance of privilege and responsibility, alternate histories, alternatives to monogamy and conventional marriage, the metric system, general semantics.

Some passages are chilling, as in this stark portrait of U.S. isolationism following a brief history of the war that devastated and depopulated Europe. The situation now?

“We don't know, Perry. Not in any great detail. The Non-Intercourse rule has never been fully lifted and we have never resumed commercial or diplomatic relations. The population is increasing slowly. It is largely agrarian and the economy is mostly of the village and countryside character. Most of the population is illiterate and technical skill is almost lost.”

—While in the U.S. all live in comfort, work only when they wish to do so, fly aircars, eat marvelously, lack for nothing.

Or this sketch of a past U.S. president's policies:

Once in office Malone ran things with a high hand. Congress was willing in the first session to pass almost any law he desired. One of the most important was the Public Safety bill which was in effect a gag for the press and other means of public information. Inasmuch as it was first used to suppress news of labor troubles which resulted from the discontinuance of the dole, the capital controlled press submitted to it without really knowing what they were in for. Then a law was passed which greatly increased the scope of the G-men or Federal enforcement agents and making them directly responsible to the chief executive.

If that doesn't chill your blood in these days of PATRIOT Acts, steady erosion of civil rights, and anomie on the part of our representatives, seek medical attention immediately.

Like many my age, I grew up on Robert Heinlein. The first book I can recall reading, in my brother's Science Fiction Book Club edition around age eight, is *The Puppet Masters*. I

worked my way through all the Scribner juveniles, many of them over and again, read later novels as they were serialized in magazines (*Have Spacesuit, Will Travel* in these pages, *The Moon Is a Harsh Mistress* in *IF*), sat over coffee in the student union at Tulane with a mass-market *Stranger in a Strange Land* propped up on copies of Hawthorne, Melville and Twain as I read. Later, along about *Friday*, I lost him, or we lost one another. I kept stumbling over roots, shaking my head at an old man's fantasies. What I never lost was the sense of how important this man, this writer, was to me.

It was from Heinlein initially, later his peers, that I learned tolerance, learned to question authority, came to think deeply about the individual's place in society, about man's place in the universe.

Science fiction, it seemed to me then, was forever on the barricades, taking nothing for granted, plowing up everyday life for richer soils beneath, challenging all our assumptions and exploring radical ideas, causing us to think in different categories. And while I couldn't be sure about man's place in the universe, I knew that *my* place had to be on those same barricades.

I'm still there.

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George Guthridge was a frequent contributor to the sf magazines back in the 1980s. In the early '90s, he cowrote the three novels in The Madagascar Manifesto *with Janet Berliner-Gluckman. Nowadays his efforts go into teaching primarily—he teaches in multiple disciplines at the University of Alaska and has won several national honors. At the moment, he's marketing a book called* Island on the Edge of Forever *about his experiences in coaching Eskimo students to three national championships in academics. Originally from Washington state, George has lived in rural Alaska for many years and brings a lot of experience to bear in this near-future speculation on whether our flag will have fifty stars for much longer...*

Nine Whispered

Opinions Regarding the Alaskan Secession

By George Guthridge

Northern Alaska: Point Barrow. Inupiat.

Sleet shushes against my parka's vinyl hood, fluttering the synthetic ruff. I stab my harpoon into shelf-ice. *Useless*. No more whaling:

banned by those who kill cultures to save creatures. They whose ancestors harpooned bowheads to light the lamps of Boston.

The aurora crackles—science thinks it soundless—ancestral spirits insisting I *Resist!* A rapallo-chuted, thermal-suited,

oxygen-tanked daredevil crosses the sky on titanium, surfing the dancing green-gold. Shuttered behind Kodaks, Japanese wearing image-intensifying goggles point and ooh. They flock here to fuck, children conceived beneath the lights born lucky.

Tourists: riding boards and beds among the colors of my soul.

Northeastern Alaska: Ft. Yukon. Gwich'in.

You lie paralyzed, her baby naked beside you. The cabin's shadows whisper: a lemming rustling behind the paneling, munching insulation and #12 wire. Seeking electrocution. You would kill your woman, had you the brains or balls. You would think of a way.

To maximize storage, your bed is atop dressers. Beyond the window, caribou graze in termination dust beneath the pipeline. After you lost your oil leases, and before she found your spine in her crosshairs, both of you in alcoholic rage, you testified for your people that drilling for oil in ANWR—the Arctic National Wildlife Refuge—would curtail calving. One of few Native voices raised in opposition, yet the media reported that *all* Natives objected. Your history, written by Whites.

Each evening she plugs into the newest Internet, *emotional-linked,* selling the feeling of being Native to wannabes. Her regulars, hooked, hook in. Soon, you want to tell her, she'll feel nothing at all. But you two don't communicate. You never did.

She is gone: bingo or balling. You wonder if she will bring another lover home, brazen in her anger, their next-bedroom murmuring and rustling like that of the lemming.

She considers you dead.

You wish you were.

Eastern Alaska: Near Northway. Upper Tanana Athabascan.

From her checkpoint-booth window, Shoryn looks down the cars and motor homes, the line extending over the rise into Canada. She wonders if any contain what the new *Anchorage Times,* surprisingly reactionary despite its right-wing bent, calls subversives: agents illegally entering to urge Alaska to join the UAS—the Union of Arctic States—an economic entity with a tiny population and more military import and natural-resource wealth than Arabia. Siberia, the Yukon, the Northwest Territories, and Nunavut have joined, they urge; Greenland soon will. Alaska must not hold out.

“You-all really need this?” A man shoves a filled-out Binky card under the window. He wears a tattered cowboy hat, black shirt, silver-tipped boots. A wooden match balances from his grin. Another Texan, she figures, up the AlCan for summer construction, taking jobs from locals, returning south when winter hits or holing up in Anchorage, bitching about weather and wages and Alaskans receiving Permanent Fund checks.

“This here all necessary?” He taps the card with a grease-blacked finger.

She smiles inwardly at the card's polar-bear face. *Her* creation. A schoolgirl letter to the editor a dozen years ago had led to the law. Tourist information on the one side; warnings on the other.

Do not photograph loved ones in front of calving glaciers. Do not try to put children onto moose. Do not hike in tidal moraine, we might have to cut off your legs to save you from drowning. Do not clean salmon at your camp in grizzly country.

The bill the result of an Australian tourist who squeezed through bars for a closeup of Binky, the Anchorage zoo's polar bear, a stunt a local teen imitated on a dare—and lost his balls.

Binky 2, Bozos 0.

Not that signing *I will respect Alaska's wildness* will stand up in court. The meek might inherit the Earth, her father had said, but the morons will inherit the money.

Again he taps Binky's picture.

“Gonna get me one of them.”

“Only Eskimos can shoot polar bears,” Shoryn tells him.

“Shee-it. I ain't born yesterday. I mean a grizzly. Couple moose, too. They any caribou hereabouts?”

“Not in this part of Alaska.”

“Well, I'll be all over this here country"—looking around at the alders.

She stamps the card and gives him the yellow copy, remembering the Sierra Clubbers who came to her village after she and her father finished minor roles in the Steven Seagal flick. “*But of course you can ride horses, you're Indians.*” A hard winter had wiped out most moose, and the Sierra Club was desperate to keep the wolves from being shot by hunters who would restore the balance. Nature and money

were at stake. Her father spoke in favor of shooting. Outsiders whispered *Whitewashed.*

Over beadwork and a pipe, her father told her, *Maybe we should shoot more than movies.*

That year, his last year, for the first time he did not moose-hunt.

The man slides into his Chrysler. Bull horns for a hood ornament. A trailer that looks pregnant. Shoryn starts to raise the gate, then sees him lean out and toss the crumpled Binky card toward a trashcan. Misses. No effort to exit the car and pick it up. He repositions the match in his mouth, grins a feral grin.

Shoryn steps from the booth, trembling, stands at the gate. It separates her from the rest of the world. Down the line, drivers lean out.

The man in the Chrysler honks, startling her. She looks down the line, a chill racing up her back despite the July heat. Climbing from vehicles are users and abusers, do-gooders and self-servers, Californicators and Colorapists and more Texas Trash, Steven Seagal and John Denver and Al Gore lookalikes beside men with chainsaws and women with feathers and flowers in their hair, granolas who refuse to carry firearms into wilderness and fringe fucks for whom bazookas aren't big enough. All arriving at the Great Land, all with agendas—their minds made up about what should or should not be, Alaska to them but a colony without a voice, not even a whisper.

On impulse she turns and runs, government-issue boots clocking against pavement, the uniform suddenly constrictive. Alders waver. The Sun seems a smear.

A tall man with gray in his hair steps from behind a willow, holds out a weathered hand. His eyes look dark, and kind, and caring.

"*Prikhadit.*"

She'd had Russian at Mount Edgecumbe, Sitka's boarding school.

Come.

She senses he's a UAS agent—knows she is at a crossroads where none exists, only a two-lane that disappears into the land she loves. She hesitates—takes his hand. They slide onto his Yamaha.

When they roar away, she pulls out the tails of her blouse, shakes her hair free, refastens the beaded barrette her father made.

Southeastern Alaska: Sitka. Tlingit-Tsimshian.

Half-Tlingit, half-Tsimshian, half-crazy: or so whisper his neighbors the day he steals the Cessna, flies it upside-down underneath the Sitka-Mt. Edgecumbe bridge, and ends up cracked up on the volcano's black cone. Booze, most conclude; or Vietnam. Nobody says his name—which his National Endowment checks, cashed for liquor or love, claim is Eagle Charlie, Charlie Eagle, Eagle Charlie Eagle, or Sitka Charlie, depending on his mood. His neighbors know him only as Totem Tom, and when they speak that name they do so with raw reverence.

Some claim his temper, both alcoholic and artistic, drives his adz and chisel. His cedar creations, towering among the Douglas fir above the Sitka Channel, embrace the sky. The story of the Eagle clan, told by totems, shouts *permanence* to the world.

Though he never poses for photos, never answers questions, his tolerance for tourists is legendary. A sign tells them they can photograph a work in progress but not the artist, yet with a wry smile and work-gnarled fingers he beckons picture-seekers forward.

Closer, his fingers gesture; *closer.* When the camera lens is almost against the log, he gently removes the camera and, following his lead, the viewers put an ear against the odorous wood. *Listen to its voices,* he seems to say.

Everyone loves him—until the day when he unveils his two newest totems. No photos, no touching, no listening to the wood. The secrecy brings the press; and the press, his National Endowment caseworker, whom the paper dubs the Woman from Washington. The event takes place one week before Alaskans will vote regarding the state's non-participation in federal affairs, and the press cannot avoid sarcasm about the caseworker's arrival, the real reason for the unveiling as hidden yet obvious as the totems sheathed in white silk.

Should Alaska approve the measure, Totem Tom's funding will be among the first cuts.

Wordless, he stands holding the tether, face red with rash, not rage: like many other Tlingits, he is lactose-intolerant, yet that hasn't stopped him from bingeing on pizza. He watches

the totem instead of the colorful whirling robes of the Tsimshian dancers wearing bird masks and furred boots, seems to listen only to the wind rather than to the drumming and singing, the speeches, the polite applause. Everyone pretends he is part of the ceremony. When the Woman from Washington compares the day to Michelangelo's unveiling *David,* many roll their eyes, gaze skyward. Rain clouds coil and corkscrew.

Governor Stuck, continuing to clap, nods to Tom, who releases the rope, the silk from the nearer totem drifting down like a negligee.

Applause and ahhhs ring as an eagle appears—diminish when the spectators realize a map of the Lower Forty-eight is in its beak, a sculpted bottle in one claw. The other claw clutches a small car from which flies a Domino's Pizza flag.

Mouth agape, the Woman from Washington clumps toward him across the grass, broad hips rising and falling as if machinery is working within to produce each footfall.

“An *automobile*? Your proposal calls for,” she digs through a purse, draws out a folder, “something *traditional!"*

He looks up at the totem. “Beer and pizza. How much more traditional can you get?”

“Never letting us see a sketch before you carve, changing the name for check-issuance a dozen times....” She lowers her voice. “We've tolerated your antics too long!”

His wry smile returns as he walks toward the second totem, she hurrying behind. “Must people like me be *tolerated*?”

“A totem's to show *Indian* tradition.”

“Which kind? Sioux? Shoshone? Hindu?”

“You know very well which kind!” She smiles as onlookers approach. “Animals and...*things.*”

He takes out a pocketknife, she abruptly backing, holds one of the second totem's guy ropes in a loop like a magician. “Something like this?”

He saws the rope.

The veil falls, revealing ... nothing.

The crowd starts forward—*something* was holding up the silk, the remaining ropes attach to *something*—then realizes there *is* a totem ... one that, except for the barest refraction of light, is almost invisible.

They run their hands over the familiar figures, murmuring approval.

“Air-gel,” he tells her. “Solid, but unseen. Like my people. And, like my people, damn expensive. I couldn't have afforded it, if you hadn't kept issuing checks under all my old names.”

“This isn't about you.” She shakes the folder at him. “It's about this secession business. They're playing you like a puppet.”

He strides to the totem and, kneeling, cuts the main tether. “I filled its center with helium,” he tells her, standing and watching as the totem rises toward the clouds. “Repossess it. Take it home with you.” Only the ropes, streaming like kite strings, reveal its existence. “If you can.”

Interior Alaska: Mt. McKinley. Sourdough.

From the summit, Governor Diedre Stuck—Didi to her friends—looks out at the lesser peaks, bathed in alpenglow.

Between them, glaciers lie like white rivers, their dark ragged crevasses evident even from this height, their width rendering miniature the real rivers far below, silver with snowmelt.

Mulling the mountain—and the mountainous decision she faces after her descent—she feels a deep kinship with those who have gone before. The first ascent had been of the north and slightly shorter peak—scaled not by professional climbers but by four sourdough miners, subsisting during their summit day on doughnuts and hot chocolate and dragging a fourteen-foot larch pole up with them, to be erected into wild winds at the 19,000 foot level, wrongly reasoning that it could be seen from Fairbanks and thus prove their accomplishment. In 1913, an Athabascan, together with her ex's great-great grandfather, the Reverend Hudson Stuck—whose writings brought the mountain to the American imagination—were two summiteers of the higher south peak. Exactly a century before her own climb, this one originally timed for her political map—but now, she hopes with more than a little remorse at that earlier unthinking ambition, the goal purely personal.

The wind is barely a whisper, everything eerily calm. Their initial hurrahs over, she and the other six in her party—*climbing, not political,* they had teased her on the way up—are silent. Perhaps, she tells herself, like her they feel they are in the center of a storm. She closes her eyes. *Denali,* she murmurs as though in prayer, reveling in the mountain's Indian name, the one most Alaskans use, her sunburned lips seeming to move as of their own accord.

Reality intrudes. *They've even tried to take our mountain away,* she reminds herself. Officially named for a man who

never set foot in Alaska, nor probably wanted to. For her the mountain will always be *Denali.* An anagram, she realizes with a bitterness that surprises her, for *denial.*

The team leader tugs her rope, indicating with a mittened hand that it is time to return to the world below. Her breath catches in her throat—as much from attitude as altitude. This would be a good day to die, it abruptly occurs to her; and the best place.

Another gesture of the mittened hand sloughs away her naiveté. Several thousand feet below, snow and spindrift have begun to blow along knife edges. A whiteout, coming without warning. Typical for Denali.

Assuming they make it down safely, worsening weather will ground the Chinook coming to pluck her from the rescue/medical camp at 17,000 feet and chopper her home to Juneau, where she will decide whether to sign or veto the secession bill. Either choice means political suicide. Sign—the feds will slice and dice her. Veto, and her fellow Alaskans will.

She knows that, unlike crazies who wish to found their own America for whatever reason, many—now *most*—Alaskans have long wanted to rescind the statehood choice made in the heady Cold War competition of ‘59. But the Civil War decided secession legality, if it really resolved little else. Hadn't its last battle been fought not in the South but here in Alaska, two whaling ships battling it out, not knowing the war was over? But until now, no state had challenged the feds on the question of a state's right to refuse to participate. *Like Melville's Bartleby,* she thinks, remembering the writer who also had been a whaler, *we prefer not to.*

Should she sign, the two senators and Alaska's sole representative in the U.S. Congress will officially come home. Unofficially, they already have returned, for they know the state's political temperature, as brutal as the Sun against her cheeks. Here, the Independence Party has long been not fringe but near the heart of the state, having seated a governor back in the ‘90s and any number of the state's other political leaders. Disgust began in earnest with Clinton's attempt to keep Alaskans from selling lumber overseas. It seethed when senators from back East, wooing the environmental vote by damaging another state's economy, led the charge against ANWR but refused even to visit Alaska, perhaps fearing to pop their Hollywood vision of pristine wilderness that in reality was 2000 acres of tundra—a euphemism for muddy marsh—in a state where that was barely a backyard, where forest fires ten times that were considered minor and ones a hundred times larger not unknown.

She knows that Alaskan ire did not boil, though, until Congress imposed price controls on oil following the Iranian invasion. America needed to break her dependence on foreign fuel; Alaska would have to ante up. Alaskans, it seemed, could no more understand economics than they could wilderness: it was up to the rest of America to determine Alaska's destiny.

Keep your mind on the mountain, she tells herself, fighting to concentrate as she starts down the ridge, testing each footfall with a hard-pressed heel, using the haft of her axe for added balance.

Mind and body rapidly deteriorate above 17,200 feet; she keeps imagining days in the state legislature this past year. Listening to the Anchorage senator pontificate about how the Alaska Permanent Fund meant that the state could print its own money. And the woman from Nome who continually reminded everyone that Alaska is the most strategic missile site in the northern hemisphere. And then the scientist from the University of Alaska Fairbanks who announced the harnessing of the aurora, with its inexhaustible energy—not voicing what many already knew: its compacted power would dwarf that of the hydrogen bomb.

Finally the vote came, her urgings to the contrary. She reminded the legislature that the feds and the media were treating the proposed secession with respectful bemusement—a tantrum by children with nothing better to dream during Alaska's long winter. America, she insisted, would never loosen its grip on Alaskan oil. Nor now, its hold on their heart song, the aurora borealis....

The wind rises, snow needling her cheeks. When the leader calls a halt and tells everyone they have to move *fast* or risk being blown off the ridge, fear gives her new clarity. Stooped, her weight upon the axe, she adjusts the weight of her pack, takes what deep breath she can manage and mentally prepares herself, glancing around at what peaks she can still see. Her ex's ancestor, Hudson Stuck, was right, she tells herself. Denali *is* the window of Heaven.

Setting her sights on following the next Alaskan's lead, she descends into the maelstrom.

Southern Alaska: Prince William Sound. Eyak.

The gunshot that eventually leads to martial law comes from the unlikeliest of sources.

Mary Sarah Nelson, 93, is not the last of her tribe—there are four dozen left—but the last speaker of its language. The federal attempt to grant tax credits to Native American parents whose children prove fluent in Native languages has failed. When she switches from English to Eyak, there is a sadness to her that neither language can express. Young men wearing ponytails—she calls them all *Mr. Young*—hold up microphones, prodding her to talk about *the old days*, as if there is no present or tomorrow for her people. *Culture is to be perpetuated, not preserved,* she wants to say, but they will not understand, though they will convince themselves they do. Doctorates depend on it.

Today she is not at home—which is always disorderly, opposite of the natural world. Nor have they sucked her into Anchorage, where the sterility of the Pioneer Home awaits if her health continues to fail. Today she is in her heaven, Prince William Sound, its name as regal as its environs. Otters dive and roll. Sea lions laze. Hundreds of puffins and murre wheel among crags.

Here, on its ironic reef, Bligh Reef, the *Exxon Valdez* ran aground. *What did you think of the oil spill*? each new ethnographer wants to know. *Bad,* she says—does not ask why they let the spill happen in the first place. For that they will have no answer. Or else, denial.

From her wheelchair clamped to the back of the *Sound Princess,* a Modutech converted without aesthetic success to reel in tourists rather than salmon, for once she does not

mind the microphones, headphones, tape recorders. Were it not for Smith, the day would be fine.

“Enjoying yourself?” he asks.

He smiles down at her, straightens her blanket. Clean-shaven, trim hair—latest of a plethora of government people. To her they are *Smith:* come to cajole her opinions on the secession question. Her opinions, they assure, carry great weight with the Native people. As long as her opinions are government opinions, she knows, the Smiths will give her gifts, take her boating.

“Alway enjoy.” She gazes across the water. A ribbon seal pokes up its head, curious about the boat. “Get gun,” she says.

Mr. Young, wearing a windbreaker that says REI, steps into the wheelhouse, retrieves the ought-six. The stock is discolored, the barrel's bluing black with age. “Was this your husband's, Mrs. Nelson?”

She gives him a hard look as he hands her the rifle. As if by instinct, the seal dives. She rests the gun across her lap, waiting for the seal to resurface.

“Is this a good idea?” Smith asks. His smile reminds her of someone trying to suppress a turd.

“Love seal,” she says.

“Is it a good idea to *shoot* one? I mean, at your age?”

She raises the rifle and sights down the barrel, reveling in the heft. So many years since she fired it. Not, she thinks with satisfaction, that she would ever tell *them*.

He leans with his back against the rear rail. “It's a good thing, Native Americans being able to hunt sea mammals.

There's been a lot of international pressure brought to bear on the American government to have the practice stopped, and what with Alaska now having demanded sovereignty, it's difficult to justify...."

"Sovereignty?" Mr. Young pops open a Bud Lite. "Alaska hasn't seceded. Nor asked for sovereignty. It just isn't participating anymore."

"It's a de facto issue," Smith says. "Rather like the matter of the bones."

"Want the bones back." She still is sighting down the rifle.

"We're well aware of that, Mrs. Nelson. Lot 3776, a total of thirty Eyak bones."

"Thirty bones not a lot," she says.

"I didn't say 'a lot.' I was referring to their lot number." He lights a cigarette.

"Want them. In my lifetime." She presses a fist to her heart, as she does during Mass.

"That can be arranged. Though more difficult right now, what with the sovereignty issue."

"There *is* no sovereignty issue," Mr. Young insists.

"Sending ancestral remains between what almost amounts to separate countries—there's a lot of red tape."

"We Eyak were last Indians in America to be called tribe," she says.

"I wasn't aware of that, Mrs. Nelson."

She lifts the rifle, aims between his eyes, his face abruptly bloodless.

"Being named tribe took lots your red tapes too. But we alway a tribe. *We* alway know that."

Mr. Young reaches for the gun just as she shifts—and shoots. Smith drops the cigarette. She snaps on the safety, lays the gun across her lap.

In the water, the seal rolls, sinks, then floats to the surface amid a red pool.

Southwestern Alaska: Cold Harbor. Aleut.

Glenno sits on a wooden Chevron aircraft fuel box, itself a collector's item, the newspaper open before him on the workbench. *Near-Centenarian Centurion Shoots*, the headline reads, referring to what is front-page news. He isn't reading—has perused the story half a dozen times. He is looking at the dented, rusted torpedo hanging by block and tackle from the rafters. *My finest possession,* he thinks. It means more to him than does his commercial boat, *Aleut Pride,* or his baidarka.

The comparison, he knows, is moot. An Anchorage couple drove the *Pride* away, to convert it to a houseboat. He sold it for a song. The baidarka, which he handcrafted with native materials, is bound for the museum in Unalaska. And he—bound for *life elsewhere.*

He hates himself for not having anticipated the inevitable. Any fool could see that the fishing was not going to last, especially with the advent of farmed fish. He remembers how he laughed aloud at that Anchorage guy who suggested that farmed fish would usurp the industry.

Even more painfully, he remembers his wife's and daughter's tears the day they left.

Her boarding the plane, she whispered that day, was merely symbolic. He left her years ago, she insisted, although

they shared the same house. When he said *the same bed,* she shook her head. Merely symbolic, she said.

It was a favorite phrase of hers, ever since she took that college class.

The Frankenfish—*those* were not symbolic.

Created in an experimental hatchery on Canada's Prince Edward Island, Atlantic salmon had been modified to carry a growth-hormone gene from the Pacific chinook. Ecologists had warned that transgenic salmon could wipe out natural populations, since the chance of farmed salmon escaping from netted pens in shallow coastal waters was 100 percent. Other escaped farmed species had quickly outnumbered their wild counterparts. The size of the Frankenfish, scientists warned, could disrupt the ecology of salmon streams by competing with native fish for resources; studies showed that Frankenfish mated with native fish in high numbers but produced offspring that did not survive as well: it took only forty generations for the genetically modified fish, GM fish, to drive populations to extinction.

Responding to the criticism, the aquaculturalists created sterile salmon.

As predicted, some escaped.

Glenno snorts as he unties the torpedo and lowers it to the floor, remembering the first of the GM fish he netted. Bigger than even the doomsayers imagined. The GM fish had not competed *with* native species for resources—they *ate* native species. Fifteen-pound silvers were merely herring. He had seen kings four or five times that with hunks gone where Frankenfish attacked them.

Nor were GM fish commercially viable. Only sports fishermen bothered with them, and then only aficionados who practiced catch-and-release. American shoppers wanted to eat genetically altered fish about as much as they wanted a nuclear power plant in their backyard.

He runs a hand over the torpedo's rusty surface. The Japanese, invading Alaska in ‘42, had fired two torpedoes toward his grandfather's village. One killed six people. The other beached below the church. His, now. Passed down from his father, who inherited it after *his* father died during the Japanese banzai charge on Attu, America's westernmost island.

He wraps a belt wrench around the head but, despite securing the wrench to a pipe for a fulcrum, it won't budge. Taking hammer and cold chisel from his toolbox, he chips at the corrosion. Half an hour later he tries the belt wrench again. With a screech the head loosens.

There is no primer. His father dismantled that part before hoisting it aboard the *Pride.* Ransacking shelves, he locates a soup can, trims it with shears to hold a 12-gauge shell—but thinks better of it. Too much like *African Queen*, he decides. Imitating Bogart might be considered *symbolic*. Remembering the movie, he wonders if she read the book. He wonders if there *was* a book.

He opens the boathouse door. Though he has more than enough room to pull out the baidarka, he opens the door fully, framing the ship in the distance. It is a federally funded craft, here to study the impacts of Frankenfish, the

government officially as incensed as the fishermen by the disaster. Yet he considers the ship the enemy.

His comealong, he is certain, tied to the setnet spike he has inserted into the black-mud beach, will enable him to winch the torpedo to the surf. From there he will buoy up the torpedo, attach it to the baidarka. Somewhere in the boathouse, he knows, he still has the grenade-like bomb his Siberian-Yupik friend gave him. They affixed them to whaling harpoons.

Just *stab* the end of the thing. No getting away when the torpedo blew. No kissing Hepburn.

He likes it that way.

Western Alaska: St. Lawrence Island. Siberian-Yupik.

You have seen suicides, murders, men brought to their knees in the snow. Their caskets ripen on the headland. Wavelets along the north beach whisper their names. You chip a pebble from the shore ice, place it on your father's table. “Is it an Eskimo rock,” you ask, “or a White man's rock?”

He contemplates it between knuckles and thumbs, in fingerless hands that make Smithsonian-sought carvings.

All good answers come swaddled in silence, but you're anxious.

“Just a rock, *Atada,*” you whisper.

He hands you his latest carving. “Once, we roared and hunted like tigers. Lions came, and we tried roaring and hunting like lions. When we realized we weren't lions, we couldn't roar like tigers anymore.”

As he closes your fingers around the swan, you think of the Aleut who torpedoed the research ship, an act that brought the soldiers. “For three thousand years we fought the Siberians,” you say. “They came for our women and food. But they are still our relatives.”

“Go. With God.”

Your skinboat sits amid floes, its sail unfurled. The emigration must be soundless and in darkness. The FBI, flying to the island, seek several aboard, you included, for what they term *terrorism*.

Northwestern Alaska: Little Diomede Island. Inupiat.

Sleet shushes against my hood, fluttering the synthetic ruff as I look down the cliff. Noon blooms: a dawn and dusk that, united in the winter Arctic, reveals the bridge, its spans arched above the Bering Strait ice. Joining the continents; the original destination of the Alcan Highway more than complete. *All* roads lead to Nome.

And away from it. Driving four-by-fours and four-wheelers and snowmachines, bent-backed under mountain packs, the exodus crosses west. Returning to beginnings, people whisper to each other; home to Siberia.

Beneath tires and mukluks the snow seems dry as death, like the powder of bones.

Author's note: This story was the result of a bet with Bruce Holland Rogers. It had to consist of nine vignettes, each of which had exact attributes, including a specific number of words and an sf idea of its own besides being integral to the story. The word counts I chose were 100 for vignettes one and nine, 200 for two and eight, 800 for three, four, six, and

seven, and 1100 for five. As may be obvious, “snowmachine” is Alaskan for “snowmobile."

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Who was it who quipped that the reason why Americans want a Great American Novel is so that they'll only need to read one book? Little did he or she realize it's only one short story they need to read—

A Life in the

Day of Eb and Flo: An American Epic

By John Morressy

Eb was born at sunrise. At two minutes old he was walking and talking, and by seven o'clock he was star of the college football team. By eight he had graduated with honors, served his country, and returned from the war a decorated hero. At eight-fifteen he married his childhood sweetheart, Flo, and at nine started work for the firm. He was made VP at ten-thirty. At noon Flo presented him with twins.

After Eb was named CEO at one-fifteen, the twins left for college. Eb ran for the Senate and won by a landslide. Later that afternoon he smashed the military-industrial complex and abolished the income tax. By cocktail time, all the children had married and were raising families of their own.

Eb and Flo quarreled at dinner during Eb's midlife crisis. After the reconciliation Eb ran for President. Shortly after ten, upon completion of his second term, he retired from public life to devote more time to his family.

Eb died at eleven that night, survived by his wife, four children, ten grandchildren, and thirteen great-grandchildren. His last words were, “Where did the time go?”

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Rod Garcia grew up in California and attended UCLA, where he received a Ph.D. in history. Most of his recent stories for us have been set in Markovy, a fantasy world based largely on Eastern Europe. His new adventure, however, takes place in a time when being American meant choosing a side. "Stuck Inside of Mobile" throws quite a few characters into the mix, both real and otherwise (and you might recognize a face or two from Mr. Garcia's 1990 tale of old San Francisco, "Four Kings and an Ace"). The results are sure to chase away those Memphis blues.

Stuck Inside of Mobile

By R. Garcia y Robertson

"...I've often imagined that the last day of the world will come when some immense steam boiler, heated up to three thousand millions of atmospheres, will blow our globe into space.

"And I'll bet the Americans will have a hand in it..."

—Jules Verne, *Five Weeks in a Balloon*

Hitting Bottom

Eugene Beauregard Fontenot, Lieutenant, C.S.N., sat on a folding camp chair on the *Tennessee*'s skillet-hot fantail, drinking a cold cup of Confederate coffee and reading a months-old copy of *Magasin d'Éducation*, brought from Paris aboard a blockade runner. Bareheaded in the summer heat, Beau was close to forty, with shaggy black hair falling past his

ears into the open collar of his rumpled gray uniform. Captivated by a French adventure story, he tried to block out the banging from below decks. Behind him the armored ram's gun ports were thrown open for ventilation, and the black muzzle of a seven-inch rifled cannon poked out, aimed at the shining expanse of Mobile Bay, which sparkled like a sheet of diamonds in the morning Sun. Dark bobbing cotton bales drifted in with the tide.

Cotton bales in the bay, the banging below, and the chicory in Beau's coffee cup were all dire signs for the Confederacy. Signs Beauregard Fontenot sought to ignore by throwing his frayed imagination into the adventures of three make-believe Britons crossing Africa in the balloon “Victoria.” He hummed a tune to drown out the hammering below:

Wish I was in Mobile Bay,
Rollin’ cotton by the day,
Stowin’ sugar in the hold below,
Below, below, below...

“Hey Beau,” a voice called to him, from atop the ironclad's armored casement. “How goes the submarine service?”

“Swimmingly.” Beauregard Fontenot did not look up, still engrossed in his story—the adventurer's ground line had tangled in an elephant's tusk, and they were being towed about the savanna. Beau happily hummed the chorus:

Hey ho, below, below,
Stowin’ sugar in the hold below.

“We have company,” the voice called down—it was Bennett, who commanded the gunboat *Gaines*, standing atop the *Tennessee*'s steel casement to get a better view.

Beau glanced up from his French magazine, staring past massive Fort Morgan, nervously searching the mouth of the bay. Out beyond the flat Gulf horizon lurked the Federal fleet, tall wooden steam-sloops, with names like *Hartford, Brooklyn, Oneida, Lackawanna*, and *Monongahela*. Beau had served aboard the *Brooklyn* before the war—never imagining her nine-inch smooth-bore Dahlgrens turned on him. All Beau saw was more cotton bales drifting between tiny flags marking the torpedoes in the channel. “Not Yankees, I hope.”

“No.” Bennett laughed at his alarm. “Genteel visitors. General Page, a Texas congressman....” Relieved not to see the Federal Navy bursting up the heavily guarded channel, Beau went back to his magazine, and his humming:

Hey ho, below, below,

Stowin’ sugar...

“...And a lady,” Lieutenant Bennett added, coming down from the casement roof to join Beau on the fantail. “Thought you should know, since they are comin’ ta see the *Memphis*.”

Beau stopped humming, squinting up at Bennett, standing between him and the morning Sun. “What sort of lady?”

“Purty one. With a purty Frenchified accent, not at all yer usual Creole drawl.”

Closing his magazine, Beau got up, set aside his chicory cup, and straightened his gray uniform. Any sensible sailor wants to wear blue, but the Federal blockade kept the South from importing indigo dye, forcing Beauregard Fontenot to dress like an infantryman, and drink chicory instead of coffee. Buttoning his collar, he pushed black curls away from his face, “Why did you not say so?”

“Jes’ did.” Bennett nodded at the magazine. “What ya reading?”

“‘*Cinq semaines en ballon*.'” Beau slid the *Magasin d'Éducation* inside his coat. “That's ‘Five Weeks in a Balloon’ to a barbarian like yourself.”

Bennett chuckled. “Hey boy, got ta git that head out of the clouds.”

Whatever for? Beau thought it but did not say it, already absorbed with the visitors boarding the Confederate flagship. Brigadier Page had deep-set eyes, bushy brows, and a neat white beard—on him gray looked good. Alongside the brigadier was a broad-beamed civilian reeking of cigar smoke, who must be the Texas congressman. But the women drew Beau's attention, two of them, about as unalike as grown girls can be. One was young and petite, with ivory skin and delicate features, dressed all in white—white gown, white parasol, white ribbons in her midnight black hair. She even had a white book tucked beneath her arm, but Beau could not read the title. With her was her maidservant, maybe twice the younger woman's age, tall and very black-skinned, with white staring eyes, wearing a plain black dress, with a black lace kerchief covering graying hair.

Admiral Buchanan himself was there, his ship's prow nose thrust high, welcoming them all aboard the *Tennessee*, answering amazed questions about the huge armored ram. “She was built on a high bluff above the Alabama River, near the city of Selma. Her plate was rolled in the Atlanta mills, and she draws more than two fathoms, too much to clear the

Dog River bar at the mouth of the Mobile—so she had to be lifted over with camels."

"Camels?" The young woman's dark eyes went wide. "Where did you ever find them?" She had an entrancing French lilt to her voice, not Awlins Creole, nor pure Parisian either—Beau had heard that accent before, though he could not think where. "Why not plain Alabama mules?"

Men around her laughed, which seemed to be her intent. Admiral Buchanan explained, "Not those sort of camels, Madame. Barges lashed to the ship's sides lifted the *Tennessee* over the bar. Yankee spies burned the first set of camels, but the second batch got her over." No one mentioned the banging below decks. Beau knew why; the great ram's steering gear did not match her size and armor, and for more than a month this marvel of Southern engineering had been swinging at anchor, the most powerful ship on the Gulf, but too big for her steering gear, and apt to careen alarmingly out of control. Beau saw a lesson there.

Admiral Buchanan ushered the delegation Beau's way, saying, "Perhaps Mademoiselle would like to meet our submarine service."

Beau made a final stab at straightening his uniform, finishing up with a stiff bow, saying, "Lieutenant Eugene Beauregard Fontenot at your service." Surprise visits by pretty damsels were never his forte. "But you may call me Beau."

Mademoiselle batted long black lashes, asking in coy French, "Because you are so good and handsome?"

He returned her smile. “Because I hate to be called Eugene.”

Her laugh was high and musical, like a songbird's. “Mademoiselle Emma de Pralines,” she held out her hand to be kissed. “You are our entire submarine service?” she asked archly. “Its sole officer?”

“Yes, Ma'am.” He kissed her cool, light hand, then straightened up. “Its sole surviving officer.”

Her fingers gave his hand a squeeze, and her voice fell to a whisper. “Oh, I see.”

Beau doubted she did—not that it mattered. He loved that squeeze of sympathy, and the little black ringlets framing her dark eyes. Cute young women need not concern themselves with the woes of the submarine service, aside from comforting its sole surviving member. While Beau stood entranced, Admiral Buchanan introduced the congressman, but Beau could not have cared less what the fat Texan was called, being far too concerned with Emma de Pralines. Since Grant took Vicksburg they barely got mail from Texas, making Texas congressmen more useless than most.

No one introduced Mademoiselle's slave maid, but Beau knew her well enough already, or at least women like her. She was a sharp-eyed, managing grandmother, with no time for foolish talk, but with keen opinions on everything. Beau bet she spoke French as well as her mistress, and had a wealth of clever stories. Moralist, house manager, and lady's maid, she was the sort of woman who made her mark, even as a slave. Beau's mother had died in childbirth, and he had been raised by a woman like the slave, which he hoped gave

him an advantage with her young mistress; get the maid on your side, and you were practically in the bedroom.

As Emma de Pralines slowly withdrew her hand, Beau nodded at the long black hull of the blockade runner, *Stonewall Jackson*, moored in the lee of Mobile Point. “Does Mademoiselle wish to see the *Memphis*?”

“*Absolument*,” she replied, with a twirl of her parasol. The Texas congressman declared that he too wanted to see the *Memphis*—making it unanimous. Beau helped the delegation board a steam launch moored to the ironclad's fantail for the trip over to the *Stonewall Jackson*.

Guiding Mademoiselle de Pralines into the bow of the launch, he got a look at the book she was carrying—*Voyage au Centre de la Terre*. “An intriguing title,” he told her.

Mademoiselle settled into the bow, deftly arranging her skirts. “Yes, it is by a new writer, Jules Verne.”

“Really?” Beau recognized the name. “I was just reading him.” The *Magasin d'Éducation* was still tucked inside his uniform coat. “An outstanding storyteller.”

Mademoiselle smiled. “Indeed, too bad it is all fiction.”

Too bad, but charming to know they had something in common. This impromptu inspection was going famously. Beau saw Bosun help Mademoiselle's maidservant into the boat. Big and bald-headed, with taut, shiny black skin, Bosun had worked on riverboats before the war put an end to life on the river. Beau had won him in a poker game off a carnival barker a couple of months before, and the big man had proved indispensable, being a genius with machinery and fearless on the water, qualities hard to find in the South these

days. As he helped the old woman into the boat, Bosun made a curious gesture, touching his forehead, lips, and belly with the first two fingers of his right hand. Mademoiselle's tall gray-haired maid nodded solemnly in reply, one of those odd bits of silent communication that went on between slaves. Lord knew what it meant.

Brigadier Page and the Texas congressman settled in amidships, making Beau the only naval officer on the launch. He nodded to Bosun and they got underway, nosing past floating cotton bales, headed for the *Stonewall Jackson*. Mademoiselle de Pralines asked, “Why is this cotton adrift in the harbor?”

Sitting beside her, Beau let Bosun guide the launch. “Last night a blockade runner went out, the *Speedwell*, carrying cotton and tobacco. She must have been surprised by a Federal steamer and forced to lighten ship.” Leaving a small fortune in cotton to float back to where it came from.

Mademoiselle looked shocked. “Do you think she was taken?”

“The *Speedwell*? Depends on the Yankee chasing her. *Brooklyn*'s a fast ship, but not so fast as folks suppose. And a year or so ago the *Florida* outran the *Oneida* in broad daylight. So the *Speedwell* has a chance.” But win or lose, her cargo of cotton would do the Confederacy no good. Enterprising shrimpers were already fishing the bales out of the bay, each worth hundreds of dollars in gold—in a British port.

“You know these Union ships well,” she observed.

"I used to serve on them." As he said it, a huge column of water rose out of the ship channel, heaving itself straight into the morning sky. Hanging suspended for a moment, the heavy column collapsed under its own weight, then disappeared back into Mobile Bay. He told Mademoiselle de Pralines, "You are about to hear a loud bang."

Her quizzical look turned to wide-eyed wonder as a dull boom rolled over the water. "What was that?"

He pointed to a fading white ring on the water. "One of those cotton bales hit a torpedo at the harbor entrance."

"My God," exclaimed Mademoiselle, "what sort of weapon attacks harmless cotton bales?"

Beau shrugged, "Not a very smart one, I suppose."

The *Stonewall Jackson* loomed ahead, her long low hull painted with a combination of whitewash and lampblack to blend into the night. With two slim masts, no superstructure, and telescoping smokestacks, she could run hull down, burning smokeless Cardiff coal, barely visible even in daylight, hiding behind the curve of the Earth. Someone called down, asking their business. Beau called back that they were coming aboard.

What they had come to see sat supported by wooden timbers in the *Stonewall Jackson*'s cavernous forward hold. Shrouded in semi-darkness and surrounded by scaffolding, the *Memphis* was hard to make out. Instead of the straight sharp lines of a surface ship, she had a curved metal guppy-hull, making her look like some giant, goggle-eyed, steel-skinned sea creature. Pointed at both ends to slide easily through the water, *Memphis* had a rudder, fins, hydroplanes,

and a big four-bladed propeller. Portholes ringed the small stubby conning tower.

“So this here's the submarine?” boomed the Texas congressman, stating the obvious while everyone else stared in awe. Even Beau, who found fewer and fewer things to believe in everyday, was awed by the *Memphis*. He had been aboard her numerous times, but knowing her every nook and cranny did not dim the feeling that he was seeing and touching the future.

“Yes suh,” Beau softly agreed, “she is indeed a submarine. Designed by Dupuy de Lome himself. Built by Bougois and Brun for the government of Paraguay—paid for with smuggled cotton.”

“But Paraguay does not even have a sea coast,” Mademoiselle de Pralines pointed out. “Why would they need a submarine?”

“Why indeed?” Beau smiled at the thought of the *Memphis* headed up the Parana River, to protect Asuncion from unruly neighbors. That absurd story had been a salve for French consciences and a deliberate slap at the Yankees—who knew full well where the submarine was headed.

“Suppose that's why we had to take her off the damned Dago's hands,” suggested the congressman with a laugh, happy to have put one over on Honest Abe. “Save ‘em from drowning themselves.”

“Would you like to see her from the inside?” Beau asked the congressman, realizing he did not even know the fellow's name. General Page had already been aboard.

“Not me, son.” The Texan looked askance at the narrow ladder and slim scaffolding, leading to a hatch that would barely admit him. “That's why we have a navy.”

“Could I please go aboard?” Handing her maid her parasol, Mademoiselle de Pralines stepped to the foot of the ladder, still clutching her book, ready to climb one-handed.

“By all means, Mademoiselle.” Beau bet that under her white petticoats was a body made for the submarine service. “But please let me take your book, and go ahead to see it is safe.”

“Only if you call me Emma.” Dark eyes sparkled.

“Delighted.” Taking her book, he started up the ladder, with Emma right behind him. Halfway up the submarine's round metal side, he paused, letting her catch up. Then he pointed at the forward hydroplanes. “See those fins up forward?”

She stopped to look. “Those little wings in the nose?”

“Those little wings are wonders, letting you control attitude underwater, along with ballast and trim tanks. We had none of that on the *Hunley*. That is what killed her first crew. She dived nose down into the mud, with no way to free her.”

“How horrible.” Emma looked properly shaken, though she could hardly know the half of it. Who could? Being stuck in the mud of Charleston Harbor, crammed in a stifling steel coffin full of terrified men, slowly suffocating. Beau still had nightmares.

He set off climbing again. At the top of the curved hull sat the stubby conning tower, circled with portholes. Opening the

hatch at the highest point, he moved aside for Emma, saying, “This is a historic moment.”

“Really?” She peered through the open hatch at a little metal ladder leading down into the dark. “How so?”

“No woman has ever been aboard the *Memphis*.” He knew that was a stretch—the *Memphis* had been built in France. It would be a miracle of nature if some Frenchman had not already said this. “You will be the first.”

“Pish, this does not count.” She swung her legs through the hatch, no mean trick when wearing a ball gown. “We are in the hold of a ship. I want to travel beneath the sea.” Emma disappeared into the submarine. Beau waited for her to clear the ladder, then climbed down to join her, knowing that in the cramped space beneath the conning tower there was just enough room for the two of them to stand close together, between the helm and hydroplane controls.

Turning his back on the ladder, he found Emma only inches away. Her warm scent and Paris perfume drowned out the cold, wet, submarine smell. “Very cozy, suh. I can see why the submarine service does not wear hats.” Or white silk ball gowns.

“Still want to be underwater in her?” Beau asked. “It gets pretty dark when you close the hatch.”

“Then how will we see?” She refused to be intimidated by cold dark surroundings.

Beau reached over, flipped a switch, and low illumination came from two glass bulbs overhead. “De Chagny platinum-filament lamps, designed for use in the mines. Everything is

electrified. Big batteries of electrical cells lie beneath your feet, for running the lights and electric motor."

She oohed appreciatively at the electric light.

"And even more important, internal pressure doors." He pointed out the big circular pressure doors at either end of the cabin. "That is what killed another *Hunley* crew. Water came in through the open hatch and filled up the ship. These doors divide the *Memphis* into three watertight parts, so a leak in one will not sink the whole ship."

"Suh, I swear you are trying to scare me off." She eyed him slantwise through black lashes. "Were all the crew of the *Hunley* drowned?"

"Just about," Beau admitted. "Hunley himself drowned inside her. Once the submarine commander and his first officer got out. But the commander was killed on his very next trip, along with all of the new crew."

"How ghastly," she declared. "What about the first officer? The one who escaped with his commander?"

Beau shrugged. "He stands before you."

"Oh." Her voice softened again. "I see." Maybe she did. For someone who toured naval vessels with a parasol and a lady's maid, she actually had a sort of down-to-Earth sense about her. Beau liked that. Emma ran a slim hand over one of the hemispherical doors, asking, "What is on the other side?"

"Here, I will show you." He undogged the aft door and swung it open. Aside from her double hull and watertight bulkheads, the *Memphis* had no internal cabins or divisions, and just the single bit of deck beneath the conning tower. The dim line of platinum-filament bulbs led clear to the end of the

ship, and the submarine's ribs formed closed circular rings shrinking as they receded. Batteries of electric cells, the great hand-operated crank shaft, the electric motor, steering gear, pipes, and compressed air tanks were all fully exposed.

"*Incroyable*." Emma shook her head in wonder, then turned back to him. "What is behind the forward door?"

As if in answer, the forward pressure door undogged itself, swinging open to reveal a man standing in the bow. Red-haired and handsome, he wore seaman's clothes and looked a bit younger than Beau, with alert eyes, a strong straight nose, and the beginnings of a beard. He acted as shocked as they were. "*Pardon! Je suis désolée*...."

Beau never found out what the fellow was sorry for, because the redhead's gaze fell on the book he was holding. Sculpted lips broke into a smile, "You must be the man I have crossed the Atlantic to see."

"How so?" Beau recognized the fellow as one of the Frenchmen who came with the *Memphis*, but he was not an engineer. Beau had put him down as a newspaper reporter, or some other sort of professional busybody. The oddest sort of people came to America these days, just to see the war.

"You have my book." The Frenchman pointed at *Voyage au Centre de la Terre*.

Beau nodded to Emma. "This book belongs to Mademoiselle, I was but holding it for her."

"Even better." Spoken like a Frenchman. He managed a bit of a bow despite the close quarters.

"Emma de Pralines." She held out her hand.

Leaning through the pressure door, he kissed it. “Jules Verne, at your service.”

Beau held up *Voyage au Centre de la Terre*. “Not this Jules Verne?”

“Afraid so,” Verne admitted. “Do you not like my book?”

“I have not read it,” Beau confessed. “But I am halfway across Africa in your balloon.”

“And I hope you are enjoying the trip?”

“Splendidly!” Anything to distract him from the deadly adventure around them. “You have a marvelous imagination.”

“Wait until you get to the Center of the Earth.” Emma looked a shade less surprised than she might have been. Peering past the novelist's shoulder, she asked, “What is the big hand crank for?”

Verne looked behind him. The huge hand-operated crankshaft ran the length of the ship, passing under the short conning tower deck. “Electricity is a wonderful agent, obedient, rapid and easy, conforming to every use, but batteries of electric cells last only so long. Ten crewmen turn the crank to keep the submarine going, and at the same time recharge the batteries. Six men sit in the stern, four in the bow.”

“Ten heroes, from the way Beau tells it.” His *Hunley* stories had impressed Emma. “Do you have a crew for the crankshaft?”

“Not yet.” Beau winced a bit. “There is talk of using galley slaves.”

Jules Verne looked shocked. “Surely you jest?”

“Would that I were joking.” By now Beau had seen plenty that would have sounded ludicrous before the war.

“Someone will be found to run her,” Emma assured the men.

Her certainty surprised Beau. “You sound like you would ‘man’ her yourself.”

Dark eyes framed by black curls looked haughtily back at him. “Why not, suh? Are only men allowed to drown for what they believe?”

“Do you believe that much in Southern freedom?” Four years of ceaseless killing had Beau questioning his own commitment.

“*Absolument!*” Emma acted amazed at the question, totally undeterred by Beau's horror stories.

“*Très bien*.” Verne applauded her determination. “I too would like to volunteer.”

Beau arched an eyebrow. “Another friend of Southern freedom?”

Jules shook his head, “No, I am a Frenchman, and will not take sides in your war.” How comforting to know that right or wrong, you could always count on the French to criticize your choice.

“Why then come aboard?” Anyone who sailed with the *Memphis* was not just siding with the South, but taking a tremendous risk as well. It was safer by far to ride full tilt into a battery of Federal Gatling guns than to join the submarine service.

Verne's voice dropped, “I want to write a novel about a submarine voyage for thousands of leagues beneath the sea.

I have read every book there is on hydrostatics and the theory of submarine navigation, but books take one only so far....” He patted the metal hull, “Here is the real thing.”

Beau rolled his eyes. With Grant battering at the gates of Richmond, and Sherman marching on Atlanta with a hundred thousand bluecoats at his back, the South must accept help from whomever, and for whatever reason. Still it seemed ridiculous to go to war just to write about it, or at least it did to Beau.

To Jules Verne it made perfect sense. “When I found out that Bougois and Brun was shipping a real submarine to Paraguay, I signed on as supercargo. They were happy to have someone accompany the *Memphis* for free—someone unconnected with the firm. I thought they merely wanted to save on expenses, so imagine my shock when Paraguay turned out to be Mobile, Alabama. Not that I have a thing against Americans.”

That was good to hear. With Americans so eagerly killing each other, one could hardly blame the French for lending a friendly hand. Beau helped Emma de Pralines out of the submarine, leaving Jules Verne aboard the *Memphis*, happily practicing at the hydroplane controls.

As the steam launch chugged back to the *Tennessee*, the Texas congressman declared that submarine warfare would save the South from “negro-hugging, negro-worshipping Abe Lincoln,” speaking as if the slaves aboard were stone deaf. Bosun and the lady's maid exchanged slight smiles as the congressman prosed on about the upcoming elections. Yankee elections, of course. What did the South have to vote

about? How depressing to violently rebel against the Federal government, kill tens of thousands of U.S. soldiers, and still have your fate hang on the fall elections. Washington was inescapable, unless Bobby Lee managed to burn the place down. “Congress hates Lincoln,” the Texan confided, “and would impeach him if they could, while the Democrats are pushing General McClellan on a peace platform. Yankees are sick of war. Volunteering has ceased, and Grant drives on Richmond over the bodies of draftees. Aside from a few Black Republicans, the North yearns for peace.”

So does the South, thought Beau, though he did not say it. Beau had no faith in posers like McClellan, who called his old commander-in-chief the “original gorilla.” Only a Democrat could think that qualified McClellan to be president. “Gorilla” Abe would most likely give General McClellan a bigger thrashing than Robert E. Lee ever did. Wait for the Democrats to end the war, they would be fighting until kingdom come—unless *Memphis* came to the rescue, breaking the blockade and driving the U.S. Navy from the Confederate coasts. Then anything could happen. Old Abe had history against him; no president had won reelection since Andrew Jackson, thirty years ago. *Memphis* and McClellan might yet save America from a Lincoln dictatorship.

Emma shouted excitedly, “Look, a man walking on water!”

Following her finger, Beau saw a shrimper standing atop the *Speedwell*'s bobbing cotton bales, claiming a shoal of them for his boat. Beau hoped they came for him before the turning tide took him back toward the torpedoes. Aboard the *Tennessee*, he said a sad good-bye to Emma de Pralines,

grief-stricken to be parting so soon. Emma told him not to fret. “We shall surely be seeing each other again.”

“Soon, I hope.” Beau gave her hand a kiss and squeeze.

“Why then, soon it shall be,” Emma replied warmly.

Beau felt so buoyant he could have walked back to the *Stonewall Jackson* by himself—but he took the steam launch instead. On the way he asked Bosun, “Did you know the young Mademoiselle's maid?”

Bosun nodded. “Everyone knows Mama Love.”

Beau certainly did not know Mama Love. “Who is she?”

“She's the Hoodoo, that's who she is. She comes from Louisiana. People down there come from miles around to ask her questions, an’ see her do magic.”

“Is she a slave?”

“Long as anyone knows. She belongs to the de Pralines. They're from Awlins too, though a lot of them left when the Yankees came.”

And now Admiral Farragut, who took New Orleans with a wooden fleet, was hanging off the bay, waiting for ironclads to help batter his way into Mobile. Back aboard the *Stonewall Jackson*, Beau stood with Bosun, admiring the *Memphis*, which reminded him of a verse from the Bible:

“Egypt shall gather them up;

Memphis shall bury them....”

Bosun grinned back, then quoted the next verse:

“The days of punishment have come;

the days of recompense have come.”

Beau was a bit taken aback, not guessing his slave knew scripture so well. “I see you know your Hosea.”

Bosun merely went on:

"Israel knows! The prophet is a fool,

the spiritual man is insane,

because of the greatness of your iniquity...."

Beau cut him off, saying frostily, "I am familiar with the text." He was being made light of by his own property, but you cannot whip a man for quoting Hosea. Not even in Mobile.

Next morning, huge cranes lifted the *Memphis* out of the *Stonewall Jackson*'s forward hold. Sailors aboard ship and crowds of Mobile citizens in pleasure craft cheered the metal fish, flying through the air before she even took to water. Beau was too concerned to applaud, holding his breath as the cranes lowered *Memphis* into the bay, hoping the submarine did not head straight for the bottom.

She floated, serenely and evenly. Beau exhaled, relieved that the submarine had not come all the way from France just to fill up and founder. He boarded at once, with Jules Verne right behind him. Flinging open the conning tower hatch, Beau peered inside. No sign the submarine was taking on water. He had checked and rechecked the hull and seals, but the water in the bay was bound to find any crack he missed. Descending into the conning tower, he and Jules did a complete check of the submarine, finding the seals secure, the air tanks full, and the batteries charged. His novelist-cum-first officer grinned at him. "Nothing left to do except see if she runs."

Beau nodded, telling the Frenchman to take station at the big metal double-wheel controlling the hydroplanes. Climbing

up to the open hatch, Beau signaled to release the lines, raising another cheer from the sight-seeing boats. Strange how much of the fighting took place in front of an audience, like the folks who lined the bluffs above *Memphis* to watch riverboats do battle for the city. In France, fifteen thousand spectators crowded the cliffs at Cherbourg to see the *Alabama* duel the U.S.S. *Kearsarge*; so many people wanted to view the war that the railroads ran special excursion trains from Paris.

With his head and shoulders sticking up through the conning tower hatch, Beau could still reach the helm wheel, as well as the compressed air valves and the electrical controls. Flipping a switch, he fed current to the electric motor, and slowly the *Memphis* began to move under her own power. He turned the helm to swing her away from the *Stonewall Jackson*, aiming for the ship channel at the center of the bay.

More cheers erupted. Beau found such enthusiasm embarrassing—*Memphis* was supposed to be submarine, but just circling about on the surface more than pleased the multitudes.

Time for the true test. Reaching behind him, Beau closed the hatch cover. His last clear sight of the surface was Emma waving excitedly to him from a nearby boat. The view from the conning tower portholes was not nearly so clear, since they were lower down and already splashed with water. Beau could see well enough to avoid the floating spectators, but he could no longer make out faces, nor hear their cheers.

Beau took a deep breath, remembering his last dive aboard the *Hunley*, and the terrified scramble to escape as Charleston Harbor came rushing in, drowning all but two of them. He had sworn he would never go down again, not caring if they called him a coward, or crazy. Instead Beau let others throw their lives away. But *Memphis* was not the *Hunley. Hunley* had been a suicide machine, a hand-cranked boiler plate submarine, built by a doomed designer taking his first stab at naval construction. *Memphis* was designed by the greatest living naval architect. In addition to forward hydroplanes and internal watertight doors, Dupuy de Lome had given her a double hull, compressed air ballast, trim tanks, and electric power—everything nineteenth-century science could offer. Beau called down to Jules, “Get set to dive. Down hydroplanes.”

Beau opened the ballast tank valves. Air roared out of the tanks in a thunder of bubbles, as water rushed in through flooding hatches no longer held closed by pressure. Slowly *Memphis* lost buoyancy, starting to go down by the nose; water curled up, lapping at the portholes. He could see the flat surface of Mobile Bay rising to engulf him, covering the forward portholes, then rising up the side ones at a slant. When the last porthole was covered, he was underwater.

“Hydroplanes level,” he called out. There was a periscopic mirror fixed above the helm, allowing him to see straight ahead so long as *Memphis* was just below the surface. He peered into the slanted mirror.

And saw nothing. Just murky grayness, light at the top, getting darker at the bottom. Beau realized the periscope was

already underwater. He glanced at the depth indicator; the water level in the U-shaped tube was rising. *Memphis* was still headed down, diving for the bottom, plunging out of control.

"Up hydroplanes," he shouted, at the same time shutting off the electric engine, before they tried to bore a hole in the bottom of the bay.

"Help me!" cried Verne, hanging one-handed on the big double wheel, unable to make it turn.

Beau threw himself at the wheel, adding his weight to Verne's—both big wheels began to turn together. Triumph surged through him....

Cut short by a sickening crunch. Thrown from the wheel by the blow, Beau was tossed against the forward pressure door.

Blackness descended. At first Beau thought he had been knocked out, but slowly he realized he was awake—it was the submarine's lights that had gone out. *Memphis* had come to a dead stop. Without lights or engine, everything sounded unnaturally silent, except for a shrill rushing that he thought was his head ringing. But it was not a ringing, and not in his head; it was water pouring into the forward compartment, audible even through the pressure door. *Memphis* was nose down in the muddy bottom, and fast filling with water.

The sea does not belong to despots. Upon its surface men can still exercise unjust laws, fight, tear one another to pieces.... But at thirty feet below its level, their reign ceases, their influence is quenched, and their power disappears. Ah! sir, live! Live in the bosom of the waters. There only is independence! There I recognize no master, there I am free!

—Captain Nemo

Oh Mama

Black water roared into the sub, and Beau pictured the *Hunley*'s first crew, suffocated in Charleston Harbor mud. He had helped haul out the dead, crawling into that cramped, stinking, airless space, dragging on waterlogged bodies—as close to asphyxiation as he ever thought to get, until now. Now he was in the metal coffin. Even if the forward pressure door held, how would they ever get *Memphis* out of the mud? With a huge weight of water in the forward cabin, and just him and Jules working the big hand-crank in the dark? Assuming the crank still worked. Beau called out in terror, "Jules! Are you there?"

"Yesh. I cannot shee." Verne did not sound in good shape. "Lights, *s'il vous plait*."

"How?" Beau was totally in the dark.

Jules Verne's voice came back slurred and weak. "Paired switches, either side of the helm. Parallel circuits. All electrical systems duplicated...."

Beau felt about for the switches, finding the port one worked—being right-handed, he had barely noticed the duplicate.

They had light.

Jules looked horrible, with his face paralyzed on the left side, one eyelid drooping, and saliva dribbling from his mouth, which would not close properly. "Wash happened?"

"We are on the bottom, nose down in a mudbank—probably the Middle Ground bar. With the forward compartment holed, and filling with water."

“Mush surface,” Jules mumbled, “taking on too much water. Did the electric motor fail?”

“No, I turned it off before we hit.”

“Good, the motor runs backward too. Jush rehearse the current.” Verne waved at another pair of switches.

Locking the hydroplanes in the up position, Beau centered the helm and tried the engine. *Memphis* shuddered and started to lift out, her heavy nose dragging on the Middle Ground bar. Beau heard sand scraping on the hull, as Verne feebly suggested, “Blow ballast....”

Beau reached for the knobs.

“...but shut exhaust valves firsh.”

His hand froze on the ballast control. During their wild plunge to the bottom he never bothered to close the ballast exhaust valves. If Jules had not warned him, he would have blown their precious compressed air into the bay. Sheepishly Beau shut the valves, then shot air into the tanks, driving water back out the flooding hatches. With a soft hiss, *Memphis* lifted off the bar and began to float, though at an alarming angle.

“Craft's nose heavy,” Verne croaked needlessly. “Compensate with the trim tanks.”

Trim tanks? Beau had neglected to set them before diving. *Hunley* had no water ballast at all—much less trim tanks. *Memphis* might be a wonder of modern science, but there were far too many things to do at once. Shutting off the electric motor, he adjusted the trim tanks, flooding the aft tanks and filling the forward ones with air. He needed another pair of hands to work the valves and switches, while he kept

hold of the helm. And someone to watch the depth gauge while he looked where they were going. But Jules Verne seemed in no condition to do that. Beau asked, “Were you hit hard?”

“No. Neuralgia. Nerve condition. Stabbing headaches, and sometimes left-side paralysis—but never this badly.”

“Why did you not tell me?” And Beau thought *his* nerves were shot.

“Never hit so fast before. Never this paralyzing.” And Verne had never tried to control a plunging submarine before. Beau needed a new hydroplane operator as well.

“Look.” Verne pointed up at the conning tower. “The surface.” Light poured through the portholes. Climbing into the conning tower, Beau saw they were indeed on the surface, drifting slowly backward, away from the Middle Ground—still badly down by the nose. They did not look likely to hit anything, but he opened the hatch to get a better view.

Cheers greeted him, wild applause rolling across the water from the assembled boats. His audience was blissfully unaware that Beau had nearly wrecked the submarine. Seeing *Memphis* disappear beneath Mobile Bay, then rise triumphantly to the surface, bystanders naturally assumed they had witnessed a successful test, not a near catastrophe.

With no hat to wave, and alarmingly low in the water, Beau turned on the electric motor to get headway. He ran backward for a bit, then remembered to reverse the current, finally going forward. These unplanned maneuvers brought more happy cheers.

Guiding the *Memphis* back alongside the *Stonewall Jackson*, he ended the trial run by having the crippled submarine hoisted back into the forward hold. Again, to thunderous applause.

Beau was not nearly as impressed, nor were his superiors. Having this new submarine practically duplicate the first disastrous dive of the *Hunley* sent the submarine service's stock plummeting. Not only was he suspect, but he had now tarnished the *Memphis* as well—not to mention holing her, flooding her, and nearly sinking her. And he was the one who was supposed to know submarines. Only one good thing came out of this mess, the opportunity to be personally congratulated by Emma de Pralines. Two days later, he took her in a rented carriage along the seven-mile Shell Road, a bayside boulevard of hard oyster shells, and the best carriage road in a countryside better fit for riding than driving—but it was bad enough to be uniformed like a soldier, without actually mounting a horse.

Meaning to mount something much softer, Beau basked in Emma's flirtatious praise as he guided the buggy. It bolstered his ego to hear himself called a “brave Southern knight of the sea"—though he winced at the image of riding the waves in full armor. At the end of the oyster shell road was a public house where Beau found the food delicious, but the prices outrageous. Beer was twelve dollars a bottle, and homemade cherry wine thirty-five dollars. Coffee was three dollars a cup. Even butter for their bread cost a dollar a pat. His bill for two light vegetarian lunches, *risotto à la milanese*, with sweet yams and salad vinaigrette, plus tip, topped a hundred

dollars—but then it was only Confederate money, and the coffee was real. Fortified by risotto and cherry wine, he told Emma her praise was undeserved. “Fact is, my first test dive nearly wrecked the ship.”

Emma looked shocked. “Surely they do not blame my brave knight for that?”

“Some blame the French,” he admitted, breaking open a yam. “Others blame me. But most blame me and the French.”

“How terribly unfair,” protested his pretty companion in her soft French accent.

Beau shrugged, spreading a couple of dollars’ worth of butter on his yam. Faith in the *Memphis* had sunk considerably, adding to the woes of the submarine service. “I am hard put to find a crew. Folks figure that if a Confederate submarine will drown you, a French one will only do worse.” Reducing Beau to employing a neuralgic novelist, and the only slave he owned. Right now Jules was overseeing repairs in the forward hold of the *Stonewall Jackson*, while teaching Bosun to work the hydroplanes. “It is hard to promote a battered boat by arguing that it has not killed anyone yet.” Though that could happen on the next dive.

“Pish! We shall find a crew,” she assured him. “You will see.”

Emma did not realize how desperate things were. Beau told her, “Folks are suggesting we use slaves to turn the crankshaft.”

“Absolutely the perfect crew!” Emma leaped to agree. “My family could supply them—men right off the rivers, boatmen,

firemen, deck hands, serious workers not given to skylarking."

"And these men will fight for the Confederacy?" Working on the Mississippi was not the same as going to war.

Emma had not the slightest doubt. "If Mama Love says so."

"Mama Love?" Beau knew of the Hoodoo woman's powers from Bosun, but never thought to use them for naval recruiting.

"My old nurse. You met her that first day when I toured the *Memphis*." Emma had not really introduced them, but the stern black woman had certainly made an impression. "Every fireman and Texas tender on the lower river trusts in Mama Love. Any steamer Mama Love dislikes is lucky to get a boat crew, but if she says the right spells, they will gladly serve on a submarine."

No matter what Mama Love might say, Beau felt mildly aghast. "Do you not see a moral dilemma?"

Emma de Pralines looked blandly back at him. "What dilemma?"

"Using slaves for such dangerous work?" Slaves dug trenches, walked picket lines, and served aboard Confederate men-of-war—but a faulty French submarine?

She snorted. "Do you think it is unsafe? You will be going too, won't you?"

Years of war had made "safe" a relative term—target firing by the big Brooks gun at Fort Powell, across the bay, shook the windows while they talked. Beau conceded that he totally trusted the *Memphis*.

“There, you see.” Emma triumphantly sipped her cherry wine. “Slave or free, what does it matter if they are able and willing to do the work? Men make too much about rights and freedoms; otherwise we would not be at war.”

Beau had never thought of it that way. “Are women so indifferent to freedom?”

Emma smiled primly. “My dear sir, women are almost all slaves. Every wife, every girl child, spinster, and kept mistress, every woman living in a man's house is a slave. Men make so much of freedom because they have it.”

“Why talk of slavery between men and women?” Beau had only owned one slave in his whole life, and Bosun was enough. “I thought you were one of those women who wants to equal men.”

Emma de Pralines's smile widened. “Why so? Man as my equal I can barely imagine. Man as my master I can easily handle.”

Beau shook his head in amazement. “You have such a way of talking.”

“Not a word of this is talk,” Emma declared stubbornly. “I will gladly serve aboard your submarine, alongside the meanest slave. Southern freedom means that much to me.”

Beau did not doubt it, merely reminding her, “We are looking for big men, to turn a four-bladed propeller.”

“Still, I think I could be useful,” she said. “I am small, not needing much space or air, and able to work comfortably in cramped quarters. My hands are nimble and adept at turning valves and switches, and I am blessed with an excellent

memory, easily finding things with my eyes closed. I could do all the little things that keep the submarine running."

Like adjusting trim tanks. Beau saw he had better switch subjects before Emma started making sense. "Do you know there used to be great fields of indigo here, before cotton covered everything? Now we must import indigo—when we can."

Emma raised an eyebrow. "I would not think a sailor cared what people planted."

"Indigo blue is the only true color for a sailor, because it does not show seawater stains."

"Sensible," she agreed. "But if everyone wore blue, how would we know which side you were on?"

Beau snorted at her ignorance. "Soldiers have to worry about mixing each other up in battle. Sailors only need know their ship. Do you think Drake or Hawkins wore uniforms?"

She smiled slyly. "Well, if they did not, I shan't either."

By the time the repairs were completed, Bosun had mastered the hydroplanes. He had been a helmsmate on the river, and guiding steamers through twisting channels, over sand bars and sunken snags, turned out to be perfect preparation for submarine work. Bosun was already used to navigating in the dark, getting his depth from an invisible leadsman, while knowing that the least mistake would bring the Big Muddy pouring in through a rip in the hull. Beau still wanted to know, "Would you be able to work underwater? Totally enclosed in iron?"

Bosun smirked at the question. "With massa Beau beside me, I will not fear water, nor iron."

He was not used to thinking of himself as “Massa Beau"—but he supposed it was so. “Why is my presence so important?”

“When I was on the river, I served under good captains and bad ones. Bad captains can get a man killed; good ones will get you home.”

Hardly believing he had won such loyalty on a hand of cards, Beau decided to test his unsuspected popularity. “Would more river men work the submarine? Would they turn the hand crank?”

Bosun nodded eagerly, “If Mama Love says so.”

Beau's ego deflated. “This Mama Love is a noted nautical engineer?”

“Mama Love sees the future,” Bosun replied proudly.

Beau knew it was pointless to argue. So far as slaves were concerned, the power of such women was absolute. Beau himself had taken it in with his nurse's milk, hearing the lullabies, and later the spirit tales. His father had always been tickled by the way little Beau would instinctively reach out to black women for comfort and approval. Beau asked his slave, “Would Mama Love say yes?”

“Maybe, maybe no.” Bosun refused to answer for Mama Love.

“Ask her,” Beau ordered, since it could hardly hurt, and a single success, even with a slave crew, would securely launch the *Memphis*. For the next test dive, Beau planned to have Bosun's steady hands on the hydroplanes, and use Jules Verne only as a technical advisor.

On the big day, everyone turned out to see them off. Emma was accompanied by Mama Love, who seemed to give stern blessing to the enterprise, or at least did not object to Bosun going aboard. While Beau stood with Emma on the dock beside the *Memphis*'s open hatch, the Texas congressman made another speech, being introduced as “his Honor” Aaron Maria Spinoza.

And Beau thought Eugene was bad. He asked Emma, “Since when is a congressman honorable?”

“Sush,” she hissed. “He was a judge in Texas.”

So much for Texas justice. Maria Spinoza's speech was the same old politician's lament, about how Southerners were being strangled by the Yankee blockade, forced to go without simple necessities like butter, coffee, tea, soap, bacon, and glue, not to mention bigger things like steel rails, rolling stock, and rifled cannon—all because of the ring of black steamships circling Southern ports. But politicians never took proper credit for their hand in all this. It was deranged Southern Democrats who decided to make war on the United States Navy, not Lieutenant Eugene B. Fontenot, happily serving his country at the time. War with the United States had left Southern sailors with the insane choice of fighting against their home states, or committing naval suicide. Farragut had gone north in disgust, and now commanded a wooden flotilla bigger than the entire seagoing Confederate Navy. Southerners who stayed loyal were reduced to untried weapons and suicide attacks.

Yet the South could have had powerful naval allies. England and France were ready to break the Union blockade

with their oceangoing ironclads—but only if the Confederacy renounced slavery. Which congress would never do, acting as if freeing the slaves was somehow worse than flat-out Yankee conquest. What did the fools think Abe Lincoln would do? Having thrown Southern sailors headfirst into the harbor, telling them to take on the world's best navy barehanded, politicians could at least have the decency not to cheer.

His “honor” finished with the fervent hope that *Memphis* would blow the Federals clear back to Washington, “like a pocket-sized Popocatépetl.”

Folks applauded the congressman, who had not heard from his constituents in over a year. Jules Verne stepped down off the dock, onto the deck of the submarine. Smiling to Beau, he asked, “Was that the great Southern oratory I have heard praised so mightily?”

“Not by a Yankee mile.” Beau laughed at the suggestion. “When I was a boy, I sat on the knee of John Randolph of Roanoke, a congressman from a fine old Virginia family, going clear back to Pocahontas. He was a famous orator who debated the likes of Jefferson and Jackson, Patrick Henry, Daniel Webster, Henry Clay, and John Quincy Adams. As a boy will, I once asked him who was the best of all, and he told me the greatest Southern orator he had ever heard was a woman.”

“*Vraiment*?” Jules looked surprised. “What was her name?”

“John Randolph did not say,” Beau admitted. “All Randolph said was that she was a slave and a mother, and her rostrum was an auction block.”

Verne stared at him for a long moment, then opened the hatch and descended, silently taking a seat in the forward cabin bench, beside the hand crank. That left the only good-bye that mattered. Beau stepped off the dock into the open hatch, finding the ladder with his boot toe, then he smiled up at Emma de Pralines. She leaned down to bring their faces together, whispering, “Come back to me safely.”

“My fondest intention,” Beau confessed.

“Good.” To show her appreciation, Emma kissed him, boldly and forcefully in fine French fashion, dipping down her parasol to provide the needed privacy.

Beau never had a submarine voyage get off to a better start. When their tongues untangled, Emma told him, “Next time, take me with you. It will be worth your while.”

Cheers rolled over the water, as sailors and townsfolk applauded the kiss, turning another perfectly natural act into cause for loud celebration. Beau grinned in delight, saying, “Mademoiselle is most persuasive.”

Emma smiled back at him from the dock. “Only because I believe in you, and the *Memphis*.”

Beau too believed in the *Memphis*. If anything could break the Union blockade, it was this submarine. Standing at the helm, with just his head and shoulders above water, he was level with the flat surface of the bay, seeing the world in a whole new way. Here he could feel the immensity of the water, and see just how helpless the ships were that sat on it. Even the mighty *Tennessee*, with her six-inch armor, floated on a bottom he could easily pierce. Simple physics gave him an absolute advantage. Guns must batter at the exposed

parts of the enemy, and could easily be turned aside by armor; but armor did not work underwater, since the incompressibility of sea water focused the blast into the hollow hull. All Beau had to do was put holes in those thin hulls, letting in the sea.

But first he had to show that the *Memphis* could maneuver without killing her crew; then they could worry about damaging the enemy. Bosun was already at the hydroplane wheel, eyes fixed on the depth tube, his feet braced fore and aft, feeling the balance of the boat. Jules had come up with a check list, to make sure the electrical systems functioned and the trim tanks were properly set. Then he coached Beau on dive procedure, admitting, “Last time I over controlled.”

“Over controlled?” They had been wildly out of control.

“You ordered ‘down hydro,'” Jules explained, “and *Memphis* dived. Hydroplanes should be up when we are going down, so we make a hydrodynamic descent instead of hydrostatic one.”

Another wonder of the underwater world, “up hydros” to go down. Beau closed the hatch and got underway, then opened the dive tanks. Bubbles roared past his head as the *Memphis* slid under the surface, but this time there was no wild bucking or headfirst plunge into the mud. *Memphis* plowed easily through the still bay, maintaining depth with up hydroplane and negative buoyancy, flying through the water, rather than floating.

Unfortunately, they were flying blind. Peering through the conning tower windows into murky bay water, Beau could barely see the nose of the sub. If anything was ahead of

them, his first warning would be the crash of contact. He called down to Bosun, “Up hydroplanes.”

Immediately, there was a flash of sunlight as the periscope broke the surface, but the lens was covered in droplets, and all he saw was a blur. *Memphis* needed a taller periscope, one that did not fog so easily. Another moment and they were on the surface, with light shining in through the ring of portals around the hatch. Rather than peer through the portholes, he popped the hatch to get a better view.

Applause greeted him, but by now he was used to it. What pleased him more was seeing they were right on course, headed out into the deep channel, away from the anchored ships and the Middle Ground. Even if he could not see, he could still chart a course across short distances. And the *Memphis* only needed to go a few hundred yards to make a successful torpedo run.

Or so Beau assumed. There was only one sure way to find out. Beau had arranged for a David to haul the *Memphis* out into the Gulf, to go hunting for the Union fleet. Davids were small steam torpedo boats that were trimmed to run with just their funnels and hatches above water, and armed with a spar torpedo. At night they were nearly invisible, but even by day they could hide low down close to the sea, burning smokeless coal. Without a crew to work the crank, the *Memphis* could not travel any great distance—or recharge her batteries—but she could make a mock torpedo run, if they found the right target.

He signaled to the David, who took them under tow, hauling *Memphis* down the main channel toward the sea, past

Fort Morgan, and the torpedoes at the harbor entrance, marked by a series of black flagged buoys, ending with a red one. These torpedoes were beer kegs filled with powder, studded with fulminate tubes and percussion fuses, and anchored a fathom or two beneath the surface, set to blow up whatever bumped against them. Beau had small faith in fixed torpedoes, telling Jules, “Such floating horrors will not stop Farragut.”

“Though they may sink the ship beneath him,” the Frenchman pointed out from his perch below.

Maybe, but Beau had served under Farragut, and knew what the old Admiral's answer would be—"Damn the torpedoes, and full speed ahead!” Only the *Tennessee* was stopping Farragut, a ship named for the Admiral's home state. Until Federal ironclads arrived, the armored ram remained the mightiest ship in Alabama waters, though her deplorable steering kept *Tennessee* from turning Farragut's wooden fleet into kindling.

Memphis had gotten over her steering problems. Bosun brought a sense of balance to the business, which the submarine service had sadly lacked. His firm grip on the hydroplanes was vastly superior to Jules Verne's palsied enthusiasm. Jules was much more useful sitting in the forward cabin, giving advice through the open pressure hatch, and helping with the valves and switches—though after that kiss good-bye, Beau found himself wishing it was Emma de Pralines lending him a hand.

Jules kept complaining at the lack of scenery underwater, saying, “Submarine travel is boring, surrounded by cold steel,

unable to see outside, enduring all the dangers of ocean travel, with none of the advantages. My submarine will have huge pressure-proof windows, and electric reflectors able to light the sea for a half-mile around."

Standing with his head out the hatch, Beau was the only one able to see Fort Morgan fall behind them, as they entered the final length of channel between Sand Island and the South East Shoal. Ahead lay the Gulf, as smooth and dark as leaded glass. Searching the horizon for the black masts of blockading steamers, he asked Jules, "Why stop at windows? Why not a library and smoking saloon, with a piano organ to while away the hours underwater?"

"Of course, and a dining room, galley, and private cabins. Nonetheless, it is good to know where you are going."

Too true. Seeing the Gulf of Mexico at surface level was unnerving. Land slipped swiftly out of sight below the near horizon. Beau was within swimming distance of the North American mainland, but the great land mass had shrunk down to Mobile point, and a few big dunes poking out of the water behind him, notably Sand Island and West Sand Island. Somewhere ahead of him, Farragut's tall steam sloops would appear as black masts poking out of the sea, or a thread of smoke on the horizon. Sailors on the mastheads would be keeping a keen watch to landward, but Beau was confident he would see them first. He warned Jules, "Too many luxuries will sink the boat."

"What luxuries?" The Frenchman sounded puzzled. "Surely, a decent galley and wine cellar are obvious necessities."

Suddenly the tow line slackened, and the David turned around, chugging back toward him. As the tiny torpedo boat approached, its commander called out, “Did you see her?”

“See who?” Beau had seen nothing but sea and sky.

Pointing back toward Sand Island, the ensign replied, “Federal ironclad, lying up in the lee of those dunes.”

“Are you sure?” Beau had seen nothing, but he was looking out to sea.

“You can see haze from her stacks, coming from behind that big dune.”

Sure enough, Beau saw a shimmering column of air coming from the far end of Sand Island. Someone was sitting at anchor, within a mile or two at most. And they too might see the heat coming from the David's folding smoke stack. There was no chance of the torpedo boat making a daylight attack with its spar torpedo, so Beau told him to cast off. “Wait for us here. We will need a tow to get home.”

Without a crew to turn the crank, *Memphis* could not maneuver for long, and lacked the power to pull a torpedo, but they could make a test attack. By using the idling propeller to drive the motor-generator during the tow, they had fully charged the batteries. Beau called down to Jules, “Enemy in sight.”

“Who is that?” Not actually being at war, the Frenchman was somewhat at a loss.

“Union ironclad, in the lee of Sand Island.” Though Beau had only seen a thin bit of haze. “Got to get a closer look.”

Leaving the David waiting at anchor in the channel, Beau headed around to the leeward side of the dunes, hugging the

shallows. Sure enough, as he rounded the tip of Sand Island, he saw a deck canopy, then a gun turret emerge, followed by a tall funnel, then another turret. Beau called down to Jules, “She's there. Chickasaw class, twin turrets, and shallow draught, lying a mile or so northwest of West Sand Island.”

“Let me see,” Jules pleaded. Few Europeans had seen the U.S. Navy's new turreted ironclads. Like the *Memphis*, the Chickasaw class were ships of the future, with no masts or portholes, fought with their metal decks nearly awash, showing only smoke stacks and armored turrets to the enemy. Sailors living below the ironclad's waterline, seeing by lamplight and breathing through ventilators, might as well be inside a submarine.

Beau took pity on the novelist, squatting down so Jules could squirm up for a look. “Don't have an attack.”

Jules Verne stuck his head out of the submarine and gasped, “My God, those gun muzzles look a foot across.”

“Eleven inches,” Beau informed him. “And there are four of them.” No Confederate ship had even one gun that big. *Tennessee* with her seven-inch rifles was no longer the mightiest ship on the Gulf.

But *Memphis* could beat all these metal monsters, and Beau meant to prove it. Ordering Jules below, he prepared to make a mock attack, pulling the torpedo release, then shutting the hatch. Bosun stood ready at the hydroplanes; no one offered him a peek at the U.S. Navy. Lining up the ironclad in his periscope, Beau calculated distances. *Hunley* had sunk the *Housatonic* with a spar torpedo, but the blast had destroyed the submarine as well. Beau preferred a towed

torpedo, so when the submarine passed under the enemy ship, the torpedo would hit the on the far side of the foe's hull, well behind the submarine—giving *Memphis* an even chance of surviving her own attack. Submarine service was never for the timid.

Unable to tow a heavy torpedo, Beau had substituted a buoy studded with percussion fuses, and fifty yards of light line. As soon as he dived, the buoy would float free, and the line would unreel. Or so Beau hoped. He crept toward the ironclad, running the engine at half power, with just the snorkel and periscope exposed. Men were moving about on the metal deck, but there was small chance he would be spotted. Lookouts were searching the ship channel, unworried by underwater attack.

When the sailors were clearly visible, Beau blew more ballast and dived, not wanting to see the expressions on men he might be drowning tomorrow. The whole point of this exercise was to prove he could kill them. As water rose up to cover their faces, he told Bosun, “Level off at three fathoms.”

Bosun kept his gaze fixed on the water level in the depth indicator, calling out the depth riverboat fashion, “Ten feet. Quarter-less-twain. Mark twain....”

That meant twelve feet of water overhead, and the ironclad only drew eleven or so. One more fathom, and they could pass cleanly under the metal monster's keel. Bosun continued his call, “And a quarter twain. Half twain. Quarter-less-three. Three even.”

Bosun leveled off, and Beau held his breath. Minutes ticked by as Beau stuck to his compass heading, trying to make his

pass directly amidships, with the booby-trapped buoy trailing hard behind him. Suddenly Beau felt a shudder, and the hiss of sand under the keel.

“What was that?” Jules seemed about to have another attack.

“We've touched bottom.” Beau called out to Bosun, “Up hydroplanes.”

Bosun obeyed, calmly reading out the depth, “Quarter-less-three. Half twain....”

“Level off at a quarter twain.” By Beau's calculations they should be right under the ironclad. He had a horrid picture of them duplicating the *Hunley*'s feat; accidentally ramming the Yankees, then having the enemy sink on top of them.

“And a quarter twain.” Bosun threw his whole body into keeping the submarine level. But the boat kept rising. “Mark twain. Quarter-less-twain....”

Beau tensed for impact, unable to blow air without sending the *Memphis* back to the bottom. Gripping the ballast valves, he listened helplessly for the first crunch of contact.

Instead he heard a muffled bang, followed by another one. Jules looked up at him, his white face starting to twitch. “What were those?”

“We did it!” Beau could barely believe it. “We hit!”

“Hit bottom?” That hardly seemed possible, since they had been headed up.

“No, we scored a hit on the ironclad.” Beau had gotten the course right, but badly misjudged the distance. “Those bangs were the buoy's percussion fuses exploding.”

Jules looked at him in astonished relief, while Bosun slowly intoned, “By the quarter twain.”

They had leveled off again. Gingerly, Beau made sure the exhaust valves were shut, then blew out the dive tanks, telling Bosun, “Up hydroplanes. I am going to surface.”

As soon as light streamed in the ports, Beau popped the hatch and looked out. By now the twin-turreted ironclad was nearly a hundred yards away, and showing no sign of distress. No one was searching the water, or looking his way. Heaven knows what the sailors made of percussion fuses bursting against their hull. Reeling in the buoy, Beau found that two of the fuses had indeed blown; all he needed was to attach them to explosives.

Asked if he had any runaways, my husband roared, “Never! It's pretty hard to keep me from running away from them.” He loudly proclaimed that his slaves should all go to the Yankees and stop living off him.

—Mary Chesnut

Memphis Blues, Again

Admiral Franklin Buchanan met Beau at the dock, along with Brigadier Page and most of the masters and commanders. Admiral Buchanan was the one man who knew how Beau felt, having commanded the first Confederate ironclad, the *Virginia*, at Hampton Roads. After that first day, when *Virginia* had sunk the *Cumberland* and set the *Congress* ablaze, Buchanan must have felt like he had broken the South's chains. He had been the Confederacy's first free captain, able to steam where he would, without fearing the

U.S. Navy. Wounded, Buchanan turned over his command in triumph, only to have his victory taken away the very next day by the first Federal ironclad.

Now Beau had the cure for ironclads in his hand, triumphantly showing Buchanan the buoy with its pair of blown fuses. Had either been attached to a barrel of gunpowder, nothing could have saved the metal monster. Whatever doubts Admiral Buchanan might have about Beau's claims were tempered by the certain knowledge that a Chickasaw-class ironclad was moored in the lee of Sand Island. If Beau could not sink her, *Tennessee* would have to take her on, facing many times her weight of metal, with bad engines and worse steering.

Buchanan needed a miracle, and Beau promised to provide one in the morning, making him instantly popular. Commanders and lieutenants clapped his back, applauding the first mission of the submarine service that resulted in useful intelligence, and not the loss of the crew. Bennett, from the *Gaines*, could not restrain a gibe, asking, “How does it feel to kiss a Yankee?”

“Wouldn't you know that better than me?” Beau had no idea what Bennett meant.

“Not a real Yankee, maybe.” Bennett backed off slyly. “Jes’ a Yankee spy.”

“What Yankee spy?” Beau had been kissing only one person lately.

“Emma de Pralines.” Bennett was keen to see how he took the news. “Or should I say Dousinelle.”

“Dousinelle?” Jules stepped up, equally perplexed.

“That is her name.” Murphy of the *Selma* seconded Bennet. “She is no de Pralines, not even from Awlins at all. Her name is Emma Dousinelle, of Montreal.”

Montreal? Beau realized where he had heard Emma's accent before, it was Acadian, not true bayou Acadian, but something closer to French Canadian. Even as pieces fell into place he protested, “It's not possible.”

Bennett added gleefully. “And that fat Texan too.”

“He cannot be Canadian.” Beau refused to believe that, since the honorable Maria Spinoza had been pure Texacan, able to pronounce “Popocatépetl” like an Aztec.

“Maybe not,” Bennett admitted, “but he was a spy for the Yankees. Upriver troops recognized him as one of the men who burnt the camels at the Dog River bar. When that would not stop the *Tennessee*, Spinoza followed her here. He broke free from the men who grabbed him....”

“Acting godawful spry for such a big man,” Murphy noted.

Bennett agreed. “Spinoza shook off three men who had hold of him, easy as shedding a coat, then bowled through the crowd, getting clean away. But they caught the girl with coded messages in her things, meant for signal corps officers attached to Farragut's fleet.”

Beau imagined there must be dozens of semi-innocent explanations for all this, though none came readily to mind—but he had more pressing needs than to bandy words with Bennett. Pulling Jules aside, Beau told him, “I cannot credit any of this, unless I hear it from Emma herself. We must see her at once.”

“You must,” Jules corrected him. “I am a married man.”

“A married Frenchman,” Beau reminded the adventure writer. Chivalry would have died out ages ago, if it were confined to bachelors.

“Too true.” Jules could not pretend disinterest. “Still, I am here to pursue submarines—not beautiful American spies. Let me see that the *Memphis* does not come to mischief, while you deal with any and all damsels in distress.”

Fair enough. Let it never be said that Frenchmen were stingy with women, especially other men's. Convincing Confederate authorities was not nearly so easy, and it took Beau more than an hour to talk his way into the Fort Morgan brig. His ostensible purpose was to find out how much this Yankee spy knew about the *Memphis* and her mission. Of course Beau had already told Emma everything he knew about submarines, but he had sense enough not to say so to his superiors, pretending he was as mystified as they. Fairly easy, given the circumstances.

He found Emma behind bars in a brick cell, illuminated by an oil lamp and a barred window. She was wearing the same white gown she had worn that morning, and when she saw him, she smiled the same smile. Beau found it terribly unreal, having cold iron bars between them while Emma was confined to this little cheerless room. He asked, “How is this possible?”

Emma shrugged prettily, as if to say it was not her choice either. “Spinoza knew Jujitsu, and I do not. He used to be a carnival wrestler, a rather good one, it seems.”

And a clever liar as well. Beau had been so indignant that the Texan could be in congress, it never occurred to him that

Spinoza lied about that too. But that was not the deception that hurt. Beau whispered reproachfully, “You lied to me.”

“Not about anything important,” Emma protested coyly, coming up to the bars, so their hands could touch. “Certainly not about liking you.”

Or about having a passionate interest in submarines. “You lied about being Emma de Pralines.”

“That was no lie.” Emma looked appalled at the suggestion. “Any lady is allowed to employ polite deceptions, and protect her identity when armed ruffians have her under duress.”

Her pretenses could be incredible. Beau had squandered his pay on wining, dining, and carriage rides, and gotten only a dockside kiss from a suspected spy. Luckily, he was used to being laughed at. “What ruffians?” he demanded. “What duress?”

Emma rattled the barred door of her cell. “This duress. Right now I am being held against my will, by ruffians armed with submarine torpedoes, who are in rebellion against their own elected government.”

“Only because you are spying for the Yankees.”

“If there were no secrets, there would be no spies,” Emma replied tartly. “I am not spying for the Yankees. I am Canadian, and we have beaten back our fair share of Yankee invasions. And do you know how?”

Beau sighed. “I am sure you will tell me.”

“Because we all fought together, red, white, and black, British and French, Acadians and Chippewa, Canadians and foreign born, all joining together to keep out those pesky

Americans." Emma smirked at what passed for Canadian nationalism. "Lord knows we hate each other, but we hate the Yankees more."

"If you hate us so much, what brought you here?" They were standing as close as when they kissed on the dock, with only the bars between them.

Emma laid her hand lightly on his. "I said I hated Yankees. Not fine strapping Southern ruffians like yourself."

"Really?" Despite all that had happened, Beau still wanted her—more than ever in some ways.

"*Absolument*." She squeezed his hand warmly. "Everything I told you is true. My affection for you, and for the South. I said I would do 'anything' for Southern freedom, and I think this pretty much qualifies."

He kissed the slim fingers lying atop his. "Do Canadians always love their enemies so?"

"You are not my enemy." Emma squeezed his hand again. "You Americans are the ones fighting a civil war. I am completely unconflicted, caring only for freedom, which knows no boundaries, not even national ones. I came here for Bosun's freedom, and yours."

"For mine?" Beau was on the unbricked side of the bars.

"Anyone who keeps a slave can never really be free." Emma kissed his hand to take away the sting of truth.

"But why you?" They were a long way from Canada.

"You might as well ask why I breathe. My parents ran a station on the underground railroad, so I was raised to help people find freedom. Why should I not help you?"

“Because it is insanely risky.” Leaning in, he kissed her on the lips. Emma kissed back, giving herself as completely as her jail cell allowed. Which kept them from discussing submarine navigation, or Admiral Farragut's plans, as they discovered how best to kiss between the bars. Before he knew it, the time Beau had begged was up.

And he had thought Emma de Pralines was forward. Beau could honestly tell his superiors that Emma Dousinelle posed no threat, and had not compromised his plans to assault the ironclad, since she was in custody before he made them. “And I much doubt that she could have signaled anything of value to Farragut.” It seemed utterly foolish to be holding her at all, but folks were beyond taking his advice, especially concerning Emma.

As he left Fort Morgan, Mama Love was being admitted, with a basket of things for her mistress. While the guards inspected her basket, Mama Love gave Beau an approving smile. Beau smiled back, knowing that whatever Mama Love was bringing to Emma would hardly be in that basket. Slaves had a lifetime of experience at keeping secrets from their masters, and even a torture rack would not get anything out of Mama Love that she did not want to tell. Since no one wanted Beau's advice, he was content to watch the Hoodoo woman pass easily between the heavy sloping ramparts and thick brick walls of Fort Morgan.

Somewhere beneath that brickwork, Emma sat in a barred cell, which Beau found both sad and stupid. How was she going to harm the South? Farragut's fleet was what they had to fear, not pretty Canadians. Finding out Emma was a

Yankee sympathizer did not upset Beau as much as he might have thought. Hell, some of Beau's best friends were Yankees, or close to it. He had served under Farragut, and liked the old man, who was technically from Tennessee but bled Navy blue. Bosun was a slave, which did not make him a Yankee either, though it certainly made him a sympathizer. Bosun was just too polite to show it—much. Beau was not among those massahs deluded enough to think slaves liked being property.

Discovering Emma was a Yankee spy made her suddenly accessible. Emma de Pralines had been an impossible ideal twirling a white parasol, a walking emblem of Southern womanhood, all done up in satin ribbons—and likely trailing a dozen infatuated beaus, each able to buy and sell a stranded naval officer. What chance did he really have with her? Emma Dousinelle was a flesh-and-blood woman, warm and willing, and infernally contrary, who boldly put her body behind her words. And a woman who needed Beau far more than Emma de Pralines ever could; though Emma never suggested he help her escape or intervene in any way, only asking for his free affection. Beau did not doubt for a moment that he would get much farther with Emma Dousinelle—if he could somehow get her out of jail.

Jules came out to greet him when he got back to the *Memphis*, saying excitedly, “Your crew has arrived.”

“My crew?” Beau saw no one at the dock but a couple of sentries, some stevedores unloading smuggled coal, and a half dozen slaves sitting around a fire, brewing chicory.

Jules Verne cocked his head toward the slaves by the fire. “They arrived less than an hour ago, saying they had come to turn the crank on the *Memphis*.”

Beau called for Bosun, asking if he had talked to the new men. Bosun nodded. “They are all river men, firemen, deckhands, and the like. They say they belong to the de Pralines.”

“Do you believe them?” Beau had neglected to ask Emma how much of her story was made up.

Bosun shrugged. “I only know one of them, that big fella in the brown coat. His name is Amos, and he fired the middle door on the ol’ *Natchez*, back befo’ the war. Someone owned him then, and it could have been the de Pralines.”

Quizzing these men was next to impossible, since the whole elaborate system to detect runaways, or slaves posing as free, broke down when slaves claimed to be someone's property, especially someone rich and respected. If they did not belong to the de Pralines, it was up to their masters to say so. Beau asked, “What plantation are they from?”

“Some place up in Mississippi,” Bosun replied, “but they hate it, because it's far from the river, and they do not like growin’ hogs and cotton. They want to be tootin’ downriver on a first class steamer, sneaking saloon liquor, an’ gettin’ fat off the grub pile.”

Who would not? War was hard on everyone, even the slaves it was supposed to free. “Keep ‘em here,” Beau decided. “And see if we can get them something better to eat than chicory coffee.”

Jules laughed, saying, “Where do you think they got the chicory?”

Suddenly the submarine service was having to feed people. Slaves no less. Beau foresaw difficulties with the commissary. “I'll see about drawing a peck and a pint for each of them.” Slave rations were a peck of corn and a pint of salt. “Until then, give them what we got.”

Jules produced some garlic, rice, beans, raisins, pepper, and cooking wine from his personal stores, cheering up the river men, who already favored poor man's French cuisine. Beau had to find out who these so-called slaves belonged to—if anyone—and what their role in this was, beyond cadging a free meal. Having them show up the day before his planned attack on the ironclad was just too pat. All that kissing between the bars kept him from asking important questions about who else was in on Spinoza's plot, and what they could expect next.

What came next was the infantry. A lieutenant and sergeant strode up the dock, saying Beau's presence was requested immediately at Fort Morgan—that and nothing more. Plainly it was important, but if they wanted him to ask questions, they would not have sent the army. Beau made the best of it, offering them some chicory, and telling Jules to see to the slaves. “Above all, do not let them on board the boat.”

“*Absolument*,” Jules agreed. Both of them were determined that no harm should come to the *Memphis*. The *Tennessee* and the submarine were the two most likely targets of any Yankee plot.

Back at Fort Morgan, Beau was jointly interviewed by Brigadier Page and Commander Johnston of the *Tennessee*. Johnson led off, saying, “We must know everything that passed between you and the prisoner, Emma Dousinelle.”

Luckily Beau had just gone over this set of lies, and only had to elaborate on the tales he had already told. He had gotten no information out of Emma because the girl plainly did not know anything. “Miss Dousinelle was most likely an unwitting accomplice to his man Spinoza.”

“But did anything physical pass between you?” Brigadier Page demanded.

Nothing but saliva, though Beau did not say so. “Physical? You mean like a message, or memento? No, nothing of the sort.”

Commander Johnston shook his head. “We mean, like a key to the cell. Emma Dousinelle has escaped.”

Beau's heart leapt. No wonder Emma had not begged his aid. Struggling to hide his glee, he gave in to genuine astonishment. “Escaped? How could that happen?”

“We were hoping you might tell us,” Page replied dryly.

Beau could honestly say he had no idea. “Were the bars cut? Was the door unlocked?”

“Neither,” replied Page. “Miss Dousinelle apparently disappeared from her locked cell, not long after seeing you.”

“When I left, Emma was securely locked away; something I protested mightily at the time.” Then the answer hit him. “What about Mama Love?”

“Mama who?” Page was obviously new to the Hoodoo.

“Her maidservant, a tall Negress, who came in as I left.” Beau remembered the Hoodoo woman's slim smile as her basket was searched.

“There was nothing in that slave woman's basket,” Page insisted, “and Emma Dousinelle was in her cell when the Negress left.”

Nonetheless, that was how Emma had escaped. It might be as simple as a lock pick and disguise, or gold to bribe the guard, but Beau bet on the Hoodoo. Women like Mama Love could make men see what they wanted to see, instead of what was there. Getting a slim pretty woman out of a locked cell, in a fort full of men, was nothing compared to calling spirits and making the dead walk, both of which Beau had seen as a boy—but try to tell the army that. He merely said, “Find Mama Love, and you will most likely find Emma too.”

Unless Beau found her first. When he got back to the dock, he found the sentries and stevedores gone, and the slaves lounging about their fire. Sitting out in the bay about fifty yards away was the *Morgan*, under Commander George Harrison, a sidewheel gun-boat with a seven-inch rifle at either end. Admiral Buchanan had brought the *Morgan* in close to keep watch on the *Memphis*, fearing someone would seize the submarine and open her dive tanks. Jules and Bosun sat together on the dock, sharing a cup of hot chicory and a corncob pipe. Beau recognized the sweet, pungent smell of something stronger than tobacco. Jules grinned up at him, saying, “Bosun swears hemp is good for the nerves.”

“What you got to be nervous about?” With Emma gone, and a Yankee ironclad off Sand Island, all Beau needed was for his Frenchman to have another neuralgia attack.

Jules took a long pull on the corncob, then pointed with the stem. “Go look inside the *Memphis*; you'll see.”

Beau went at once to check the submarine, fearing to find her taking on water. But *Memphis* seemed fine, riding high in the still water, with her hatch open to let in air and light. Looking down, he saw no sign of a leak, but decided to check the bilges. Beau swung around, and swiftly descended the ladder, into the cool metal interior. At the bottom, he turned about, and saw at once what Jules meant.

Emma sat on the lower rim of the hydroplane wheel, hunched forward, hands on her knees, her face turned to him. She wore a baggy homespun dress and a tattered kerchief about her neck, but looked as lovely as ever. True beauty shone through shabby clothes and dim lighting. Without wasting a word, they kissed, glorying in the freedom to feel, no longer separated by iron bars, or layers of lace. When they were done, Beau asked, “What are you doing here?”

“Waiting for you.” Emma sounded like that should have been obvious.

“That is wonderful, but....” Also wildly impractical. How could he hope to hide her, with infantry combing the area, and a full dress naval inspection scheduled for the morning? Admiral Buchanan was keeping a sharp watch on the *Memphis*, now that Federal spies were after her.

Emma pulled him closer. “I want you to come with me.”

Beau liked the contact, wondered where it was headed. “Where to?”

“To freedom.” Emma kissed him again, harder than ever.

He returned the favor, first on her lips, then on the curve of her throat. There Beau noted, “You have black paint behind your ear.”

Emma did not bother wiping it off, asking instead, “So are you coming with me?”

By now he very much wanted to go, more than he wanted to face a Chickasaw class ironclad in the morning, with a crew he did not trust. “How are you hoping to get to freedom?”

“By submarine, silly.” Emma's smile widened. “That's the exciting part.”

And Beau thought this was the exciting part. “You are mad as usual. How do you hope to pilot this submarine?”

“Jules will help,” Emma declared. “And Bosun too.”

“They will?” Beau let go of Emma, and hoisted himself up, until he sat on the edge of the hatch, asking the Frenchman on the dock, “Is this so?”

“Alas, yes.” Jules seemed embarrassed by his deception. “I vowed not to take sides, but France abolished slavery in 1789. I could not let the greed of a few cotton financiers bring shame on my country.”

Beau turned to Bosun. “Et tu, Bruté?”

Bosun rose, grinned, and snapped off a regulation salute. “Sergeant Nehemiah Lee, Corps d'Afrique, Ninety-second U.S. Colored Troops, Colonel Henry M. Frisbie commanding—on detached service.”

“And these gentlemen?” Beau indicated the slaves by the fire, finishing off the last of Jules's rice.

They also rose, and saluted with a smirk, their leader saying, “Corporal Amos Jones, Corps d'Afrique, at your service.”

Uncle Sam was plainly their master, not the de Pralines; a squad of Yankee infantry had penetrated the Mobile defenses, and Beau was the only one who knew, aside from a French novelist and a fetching Canadian spy. He asked Bosun, “So, am I your prisoner?”

“Only if you want to be.” That came from Emma, sliding up to join him, aiming to be as persuasive as she could.

Beau found himself surrounded, though there was not a real Yankee in the crowd. He had long ago come to terms with losing the war. *Memphis* had been one last shot at breaking the blockade, but she was now in Union hands. Beau could give up on the Confederacy, but he could not give up on Emma and *Memphis*. “If you are going, I am going.”

“Good.” Emma gave him a swift kiss, then they scrambled out of the way, and the Corps d'Afrique filed into the submarine, followed by Bosun and Jules. Emma was small enough to sit beside Beau in the conning station, ready to work the valves and switches, just like she said.

He pulled easily away from the dock under electric power, heading out into the bay. George Harrison hailed him from the *Morgan*. “Beau, where you headed?”

Lacking the heart to invent some lie, Beau closed the hatch and told Bosun to dive. “Blowing dive tanks, level off at half a fathom.”

Hoping to see through the periscope, he frantically adjusted the trim tanks, and was rewarded with a blurry image of the empty bay ahead. At least he need not fear hitting anything big. Seeing no sense in running down the batteries, he called to Bosun, “Sergeant Lee, have your men turn the crank.”

Bosun passed on the order, then added, “You can call me Bosun. I never liked Nehemiah, and Lee is my old massah's name.”

Eugene Beauregard understood, happy he did not have to wrap his tongue around “Nehemiah.”

“But I will be calling you Beau now,” Bosun warned.

Beau nodded. “Just so it is not Eugene.”

As the crank began to turn, the sub surged ahead, and Emma adjusted the electrical system, reversing the motor to recharge the batteries. From deep in the belly of the *Memphis*, behind the rear pressure door, came a low strong chant, swelling as the crank turned faster:

No mo’ auction block for me,

No mo', no mo',

No mo’ auction block for me.

Which was answered by an even deeper chorus, from the men in the forward section:

Many thousands gone.

Many thousands gone.

So strong was the chant, and so eager were the hands on the crank, that Bosun had to back off the hydroplanes to keep them from bursting out of the bay, surfacing through sheer enthusiasm. Propelled by the Corps d'Afrique, they plowed

along, just beneath the surface, showing nothing but the foam V made by the periscope, and the ball-valve snorkel. Slowly the cold, clammy submarine grew hot and stuffy. Too many people were breathing in a confined space, through a slim tube. By the time they reached the main channel, Beau decided to surface and get his bearings, figuring he had left George Harrison far enough behind.

Blowing out the dive tanks, Beau surfaced, and flung open the hatch, letting fresh air into the submarine. He had reached the main channel, and to starboard black flags marking the moored torpedoes fluttered between him and Sand Island. One of the Davids was making for the signal station near the line of piles west of the channel.

Looking aft, Beau got the surprise of his life, finding young George Harrison was not the fool he supposed. Churning along in the wake was the *Morgan*, working up a full head of steam. Only the enthusiasm of the Corps d'Afrique had kept them well ahead of the oncoming steamer.

But not for long. No matter how hard the men cranked, the steamer would soon be on them, and *Memphis* had no torpedo to drag in her wake, no weapons of any kind, unless the Africa Corps had smuggled some aboard. Beau never carried a sidearm, and Emma and Jules were nonviolent by nature. *Morgan* was bulging with cannon, ridiculously overarmed for a small passenger steamer, and behind her, Bennett was getting up steam in the *Gaines*.

“What do you see?” Emma demanded, practically in his lap, but unable to look out the hatch.

"Boatloads of trouble," he told her. "Switch to electric power, and prepare to dive."

Emma repeated his commands to the men below, at the same time busily flipping switches and adjusting the trim tanks. Like she promised, Emma was his extra set of hands, letting him concentrate on the helm. He plotted a mental course for the east side of Sand Island, planning to just shave the moored torpedoes, keeping as clear as he could of Fort Morgan, and the ships moored behind Mobile Point. When his mental course was set, he closed the hatch and gave the order to dive. As they descended, Emma asked softly, "What is happening?"

"Two gunboats are giving chase." He spoke loudly so everyone could hear. "We have to inch out of the channel under electrical power, staying down as long as we can, and using as little air as possible." No cranking, no singing, and no nerve attacks—then they just might make it.

Memphis fell silent as Bosun leveled off at two fathoms, and Beau tried to steer a compass course through the strong channel current. Tide was headed out, which helped some. For a while Beau heard only labored breathing aboard the submarine, then he made out a more distant rattle, muffled by the water, but growing louder. Emma asked, "What is that?"

"Paddle wheel," Bosun replied, like there was no other possibility. He called to the men in the rear compartment, which was thrown open for ventilation. "Sounds like a side wheeler. What would you say, Corporal Amos?"

Amos listened, then answered, “Would say it was the *Morgan*. Wi’ that loose linkage, she whines like a windmill.”

“Sure ain't the *Selma*,” Bosun agreed. “*Selma* runs real sweet.”

Beau had heard river men name off boats in the dark, just by the sound of their engines. Hearing it done underwater was a new twist. As the steamer drew closer, Beau could make out the slap of paddles hitting the bay above. Unnervingly loud, but futile at the same time. So long as the submariners slid along, saving their breath, the whole Confederate navy could not stop them. Jules observed smugly, “We hear them, but they cannot hear us.”

And neither side could see, giving a whole new meaning to blind man's bluff. Sweat trickled down Beau's uniform collar as he listened to *Morgan*'s paddle wheel beat nearer, then pass overhead, and finally recede as the gunboat went thrashing off down the ship channel. Ironic cheers for the Confederate navy echoed through the submarine.

Beau saved his breath. It was already getting stuffy again, and he was no longer so sure of his direction. He could not hear the *Morgan*'s paddle wheels, which might mean the gunboat was heading out to sea, or that *Memphis* had strayed from the ship channel. There were treacherous shoals east of the channel, and on the approaches to Sand Island. He whispered to Emma, “I want to take us up for a quick look, and some fresh air.”

She whispered back, “Is it safe?”

“No, but we have to breathe.” And see where they were going. Beau crept back to the surface, and swung open the

hatch, letting cool air flood into the *Memphis*. And found the *Morgan* waiting for him, sitting just down the channel with her paddle wheels idled, covering the narrow gap between Fort Morgan and the moored torpedoes, seeing if the submarine would resurface. And they had, with the gunboat smack in their path.

While Beau wondered what to do next, a bullet whizzed past his shoulder, hitting the water about ten yards away. He turned to see the David chugging toward them, while a man in the open hatchway worked the lever on a repeating carbine. Beyond the David, Bennett was bringing the *Gaines* down the channel toward them, boxing *Memphis* in still further.

Another shot whistled by his head. He could not stay here, and his pursuers expected *Memphis* to run down the channel to the open sea. Dropping down, he shut the hatch, hearing a bullet ping off the metal. This made it perfect; both navies, North and South, were now out to get him. He turned to Emma, saying, “We have to run on the snorkel, trim for half a fathom, and be ready to recharge batteries.”

“What's that pinging?” Jules demanded, unduly alarmed.

“Some fool firing at us with a Yankee carbine,” Beau complained. He called down to Bosun, “Half a fathom.”

Beau put the helm through a half circle, thinking of the spar torpedo on the prow of that David. He had only one sure way to escape, though he hated to take it. “Full speed on the crank. We have to go under the torpedoes.”

“Why in the world?” asked Jules anxiously.

"It is the one place they will not follow us." No one disputed Beau's reasoning, because it was the one place none of them wanted to go—but by now they knew that any hesitation was literally a waste of breath. Hard strong hands turned the crank, and deep voices echoed through the *Memphis*, singing to a rising tempo that drove the crank even faster:

No mo' driver's lash for me,
No mo', no mo',
No mo' driver's lash for me.

And the chorus from the forward cabin got faster as well:

Many thousands gone.
Many thousands gone.

By now Beau knew the war had gone on way too long, and did not need the Ninety-second U.S. Colored Troops to tell him many thousands had died. Every man that went down in the *Hunley* with him had died, and so had half his friends and relations outside the submarine service. From Mobile to Richmond, Southerners were mostly fighting to stay alive, and gallant saber charges had given way to cowering in trenches and bomb-proofs. Raids into Ohio had brought even worse news; it seemed that only the South was fighting this war. Confederate raiders reported that Ohio was a country at peace, full of people working prosperous farms, who wore good shoes and store-bought clothes, and ate meat for dinner. Southern farms were run by women and slaves, but Ohio was full of farmers and local militia, who shot at them with brand new breechloaders. You never would have known the Union had a million men under arms—yet Northern

Democrats kept whining that the war was too “costly,” as if the South were not even worth conquering. At least the Republicans did not pretend to like you. Such insufferable arrogance made you want to blow up a U.S. Navy ironclad, just to wipe the smug smile off their well-fed faces. Even Beau might be tempted to throw himself away just to teach Washington a lesson, but he would not throw away Emma—that would be just plain stupid.

Through his blurry periscope he could see the fluttering picket flags marking the moored torpedoes. Most of the torpedoes were moored at less than two fathoms, to catch shallow-draft ironclads, and the *Memphis* should be able to pass beneath them. But torpedo depths were haphazard at best—moorings shifted, and torpedoes broke loose, or sank below their proper depth—while Beau would be running blind. If folks were not shooting at him, he never would have had the nerve. “Stop the crank,” he called out. “Switch to electric power. Blowing ballast. Bosun, take her down.”

Emma got the motor going, while Bosun called out the depth, “One an'half, quarter-less-twain, twain....”

Beau doubted there were any mines moored below two fathoms, but he meant to go as deep as he could, just in case. “Quarter twain, half twain, quarter-less-three....”

“Level off at a half three.” With twenty feet of water overhead, Beau felt tolerably safe.

Until a horrid clang came from up forward, followed by a shudder of contact, and a scraping sound that came toward him, sending shivers down Beau's spine. He called out, “Torpedo cable.”

No one said a word in reply. Emma merely squeezed his hand.

“Down more,” Beau ordered, at the same time applying port helm, trying to keep the cable from fouling the hydroplanes, or worse yet, the propeller. He pictured the *Memphis* pulling the torpedo right to them.

“Quarter-less-four.” Bosun sounded as though he were giving the time of day.

Suddenly the scraping stopped. Beau held his breath, backing off the helm, listening intently. All he heard was shallow breathing aboard the *Memphis*.

Bosun called out, “Four even.”

“Level off.” Beau did not want to hit bottom again.

Another shiver went through the ship, followed by more scraping as the prow hit a second cable. Beau put the helm to port again, softly saying to Bosun, “Keep her level.”

“Four even,” Bosun intoned, careful not to fight the cable.

Emma's hands left the trim valves, and her arms circled Beau's waist, pulling them closer together. If even one of the torpedoes overhead went off, the Mobile channel would come crashing in on them, crushing *Memphis* like an empty egg shell. She whispered in his ear, “Do not worry. Mama Love is watching over us.”

Beau hoped so. Mama Love had gotten Emma out of a brick cell in Fort Morgan, so seeing them through a submerged maze of moored torpedoes should be a breeze. He glanced at his watch, trying to gauge speed and distance. Emma whispered, “How long?”

“Two more minutes,” Beau estimated. “Two minutes and we are safe.”

Emma started to speak, but Beau kissed her instead, mindful of the need to preserve air. He continued preserving air well past the two minutes. There were no more cables, and no explosion. No wall of water rushed in to drown them. Which meant Beau had to go back to steering.

When he surfaced, he found they were indeed past the torpedoes, and well beyond the line of piles, halfway to Sand Island. *Gaines* had joined the *Morgan* back up the channel, beneath the guns of the fort, but by now they were a couple of miles off, and Beau doubted they saw him. He called down to start the crank, and the chant picked up below:

No mo’ peck an’ pint for me,
No mo', no mo',
No mo’ peck an’ pint for me.
Many thousands gone.
Many thousands gone.

Sitting alongside Sand Island was the ironclad, with hatches open and wash hanging from the awning lines. It said a lot for Yankee overconfidence that Beau got within hailing distance without anyone seeing him. He sang out, “Ahoy, this is the Confederate submarine *Memphis*, wishing to surrender.”

That brought heads up to hatches, and sailors spilled out of the turrets, surprised to see half a Confederate coming toward them across the water. By the time he was close alongside, the ironclad's commander was at the midships rail, as curious as anyone. Suddenly, the Yankee commander's

face brightened, and he called out, “Beau! Beauregard Fontenot! Hello, Beau, don't you know me? It's Tom Stevens.”

And it was. Beau recognized him from the *Brooklyn*. Tom had been many years his junior on the lieutenant's list, and now he commanded an ironclad. War had been pretty good to the U.S. Navy. Beau bet that half the commanders in Farragut's fleet were men he knew from the “little” prewar Navy.

He waved and shouted back, “‘Course I do, Tom. I would not surrender my submarine to anyone but you.”

“That's awfully nice, Beau.” All Tom could see of the *Memphis* was the open hatchway, with the attached periscope and snorkel, but he must have heard about the submarine in Mobile Bay. Yankee intelligence was much better than anyone had thought. Tom asked, “Want some ice water?”

“Sure thing.” Beau was a hot, sweaty mess, but he meant to do things right. “I must see my crew off first.”

Starting with Emma. He ducked down, gave Emma a swift kiss, then helped her slip past him, into the air and light. Handing her up to a couple of eager sailors, he told the Yankees, “This is Emma Dousinelle, a Canadian citizen, in the employ of your government.”

“Always delighted to meet another public servant.” Commander Tom doffed his cap. “Welcome to the *Winnebago*.”

Bosun was a tighter squeeze, but he also made it past Beau, and was welcomed aboard the *Winnebago*. Then Beau retreated to the hydroplane station, allowing the rest of the squad from the Ninety-second U.S.C.T., Corps d'Afrique, to

emerge from submerged *Memphis* like men in a magic act. Soon they were all downing ice water on the iron deck.

With Jules's help, Beau secured the *Memphis* to the ironclad's side, and dogged the submarine's hatch. Then he went aboard the *Winnebago* to get his ice water. There Beau introduced his foreign advisor, saying, “Tom, this is Jules Verne, the French novelist. And a neutral party.”

“Not entirely,” Jules confessed. “I was privately contacted by Charles Francis Adams, the American ambassador to England, and asked to discover if the *Memphis* was meant for the Confederacy. I fear that in my enthusiasm, I have exceeded my commission....”

“No one blames you.” Tom shook the Frenchman's hand. “You have struck a timely blow for freedom.”

“And redeemed the honor of France,” Jules added, glancing wistfully back at the *Memphis*—now knowing all there was to know about submarines.

Beau alone felt at a loss, being the only one on the losing side. He was at worst a prisoner of war, and at best a traitor to the South, however much he might be a hero to the Yankees and their many sympathizers. Emma was ringed by attentive naval officers, and Jules was basking in Commander Tom's congratulations. Beau found himself cooling his heels with the Corps d'Afrique, ex-slaves, and an ex-Confederate, wondering what to make of this brave new world. With no more slaves and masters, they were all going to have to find real jobs. He asked Bosun, “Was I a bad master?”

Bosun looked at him like he was crazy. “Hell, no! You were first rate. There are some stupid-mean crackers that should never be allowed to own a man.”

“Glad to hear I am not one of them.” Bad enough to be a slave owner, without being a cruel idiot as well.

“Buck up, massah.” Bosun slapped him on the back. “You gonna enjoy being free.”

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Plumage From Pegasus

Paul Di FiliPpo

The Slan Corps Wants You!

“Bristol [Massachusetts] Sheriff Thomas M. Hodgson wants to send certain prisoners nearing the end of their sentences halfway around the world to places such as Afghanistan. The program Hodgson is proposing would be part Foreign Legion, part Peace Corps. The maverick Republican sheriff said newly released prisoners could help rebuild war-torn countries while also benefiting personally.... Prisoners would have to volunteer.”

—"Sheriff: Let prisoners rebuild Afghanistan,” Eric Convey, *The Boston Herald*, January 31, 2004.

Luckily, I had packed enough reading material for the nearly twenty-four-hour trip from the U.S.A. to Pakistan. Two large postmodern British space operas, a fantasy trilogy by a promising new writer, Dozois's and Datlow and Windling's *Year's Best* volumes, a short-story collection that contained a recent Nebula winner, and a few fanzines. As it was, I had barely enough material to last me, and had to go back and memorize the copyright pages in the short-story collection and anthologies to kill the final five minutes before landing.

Once I had swiftly passed through Customs—my special passport garnered instant recognition and respect—I was met by a delegation from the Slan Corps, veteran members

already resident in the country. Oh, of course, the Slan Corps wasn't the official name of our sponsoring organization, one of the most brilliant successes in the history of American diplomacy. To the federal government we were known as the Futurological Ambassadors. But every man and woman in the FA knew we were really the Slan Corps. The U.S.F.A. insignia on our uniforms—designed by Barclay Shaw—could not conceal what was in our hearts and minds, or deny the prosthetic tendrils beneath our hair that substituted for a regimental tie or ring.

Among my greeters, I recognized Jenny Cribb. Jenny and I had been on the Worldcon Committee together in 2006. I nodded in her direction and she spoke first.

“Live long and prosper,” Jenny said, making the appropriate hand-gesture.

“TANSTAAFL,” I replied.

“Do you want your briefing verbally or as hardcopy?”

“My eyes are just a little bit sore from the flight. Why not tell me what's up in your own words?”

“Sure. Let's get in the car, though. A lot of this stuff isn't cleared for the mundanes.”

I shook hands all around with the other Slan Corps “geeks"—a term like “queer” that only members of the clan could honorably apply to themselves—and we soon found ourselves in an armored limo being driven through the streets of Lahore. The limo featured an inbuilt DVD player showing the first season of *Babylon 5*.

“Since the implosion of the Pakistani government last month,” Jenny said, “we've had our hands full just

maintaining civic order and vital services. India is chafing like a thoat at the bit to come in and take over, but we've held them off so far."

One of the other geeks who had introduced himself as Chester "Little Fuzzy" Seeger snorted and said, "It's worse than trying to get the riders of Rohan to fight Mordor. The Hindus can't get it through their heads that we're all on the same side. You'd think they had never even read *Lord of Light!* But we modified some of Aragorn's arguments slightly and used them on the Indian Prime Minister, and he agreed to give us six months to make the country stable enough for new elections."

I whistled nervously. "Whew! Not much time—"

Jenny exuded confidence. "It's going to be plenty. We've got a bombshell announcement that's going to be a bigger shock than *Thraxas* winning the World Fantasy Award. We just captured bin Laden yesterday."

"How the sprock did you manage that? He's been untraceable for six years now."

Jenny just smiled. "After you've stopped the Mule from taking down the Foundation and followed Muad'dib's logic, an amateur like bin Laden is easy to psych out."

"Well, this changes everything. Our allies are going to be as ecstatic as if they were dosed up on Ubik, our enemies will be spitting anti-matter, and the fence-sitters will be forced to declare whether Schrodinger's Cat is dead or alive."

"All we need to do now," Jenny continued, "is to make sure no rogue elements within Pakistan do anything to destabilize the situation. And unfortunately, one of those rogue elements

consists of the generals. We know that at least three of them have nuclear weapons under their personal command, and no compunctions about using them, either as threats to get what they want, or on the battlefield. That's where your particular expertise comes in. Do you think you're up to it?”

Everyone in the limo looked a little apprehensive, and I realized a quip was in order to defuse the tension. “If I can't convince these half-educated zwilniks not to unleash Armageddon, then *Battlefield Earth* was a good movie.”

By the time the derisory hoots of laughter stopped, we were at the Slan Corps compound, a converted *madrasa* building. Getting out of the car, I paused to salute the two flags flying high in the courtyard: Old Glory waving uppermost, and beneath that a banner bearing the logo of First Fandom. I was shown to my room, which was nicely decorated with several *Star Wars* posters and framed photographs of such inspirational heroes as H. G. Wells, Jules Verne, Robert Heinlein and Harry Warner, Jr. I was left alone to rest up from my flight, and after I did my Bates Eye Exercises I read a few select passages from David Drake, Poul Anderson and Gordon Dickson to get in the proper military frame of mind. By five p.m. local time I felt ready to take on the generals in our scheduled meeting.

The conference room chosen by the generals featured lots of gold leaf and heroic statuary and a giant table, all out of Robert Jordan by way of David Eddings. I think I was supposed to feel insignificant. But after you've seen Trantor, Rama, and Lothlorien, you're not so easily impressed.

The tension in the room was thick as thread on Pern, and I knew that no pleasantries would suffice to dispel it. So I just launched right into my little show.

I started out slow, telling them about a few pastoral post-holocaust scenarios, like *Davy* and *Earth Abides*. They let down their defenses, imagining maybe I was even going to endorse their recklessness with atomics. But then, gradually, I began ramping up the carnage. I hit them with all the horrors conjured up by Judith Merril and Ward Moore, Fritz Leiber and Nevil Shute, Pat Frank and Algis Budrys, Harlan Ellison and Theodore Sturgeon. After ninety minutes of vivid story-telling, I had them all convinced their children would grow up Baldies or Richard-Matheson-style zombies. By the time I unlimbered my biggest gun—*A Canticle for Leibowitz*—this roomful of burly, formerly stolid men were weeping into their mustaches like a bunch of pre-teens reading the final Harry Potter book, the part where it's revealed Harry is Voldemort's son. At the end of three hours, the repentant soldiers had all confessed the locations of their secret missile caches to me, and I had already dispatched three squads of Marines—nicknamed the Dorsai, the Fremen, and the Starship Troopers—to lock down the illicit nuclear armories.

I was sweating when the meeting broke up. I had never doubted that I could accomplish my mission, but the effort had taken a lot out of me nonetheless. I decided I needed a little downtime before bed, so I went to the lounge, where several D&D games were going on. Other Corpsmembers were boning up on the standard manual of spook tactics by

Linebarger and the advanced one by Sheldon. A few hours of roleplaying soothed my nerves, and I left for bed.

But not before reciting the Three Laws of Robotics, Clarke's Laws and Sturgeon's Law, lighting a candle at the official altar devoted to Hugo Gernsback, and—since it looked like my success in Pakistan might send me next to North Korea—filling out a Change of Address form for my subscription to *F&SF*.

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While he's born and bred in the U. S. of A., Bert Cowdrey seems like the most international of all the writers in this issue. Perhaps it's the result of his years of working for the government, or maybe it's the French influence from his native New Orleans (his stories often call Saki and de Maupassant to mind). In any event, the tale before us now takes a look at two talented Americans and the three thread-spinning sisters called Fate who bind their lives.

A Balance of Terrors

By Albert E. Cowdrey

Dr. Anna Weiss felt nothing but relief when the big clock on the laboratory wall—the one from the National Wildlife catalog, with heads of animals and birds instead of numbers—told her it was finally time to go.

She smiled absently at a photo of a tortoiseshell cat tacked to the wall of her workspace while adding a few items to her purse and snapping it shut. She must remember to buy Felina a pint of crabmeat—the kind she loved, with the big lumps—before, well, before what had to happen tonight.

Anna hung up her rumpled white coat on a hook, bowed to a small mirror and ran a comb through her bushy, iron-gray hair. Then she shrugged on a nondescript brown coat and set forth.

Outside the Bethesda Biomedical Institute a bright wind whipped the flags, and a grove of crabapple trees strewed the ground with glorious blossoms. Anna didn't notice; impatient

now to get away, she paced up and down, wondering what was keeping the love of her life (who also happened to be the hate of her life).

The son of a bitch, she thought, he'll be late to his own funeral. The phrase made her smile grimly.

At that moment, James Parmenter, M.D., was relaxing after a tense flight.

The New York-Washington shuttle had been crowded, the security procedures unnerving. He'd sat next to a bearded young man with vaguely Middle-Eastern features, who was wearing *tennis shoes*. Parmenter had eyed him—while trying not to seem to eye him—the whole way. With a trip around the world in prospect, how splendid to be, at least for a few hours, on solid ground again!

Along Ohio Drive, marble archways gleamed, and cherry trees blossomed on terraced slopes. Parmenter sighed and almost visibly expanded, enjoying the ample space, the cushioned seat cradling his cushioned backside. If only he could travel to Atlanta like this! London! Paris!

“You know some folks at the Institute, Sir?” the driver asked, bringing him back to reality.

“One of them. I'm doing lunch with one of my old colleagues, Dr. Anna Weiss. She's quite a genius in her field.”

“Never heard of her.”

The price, thought Parmenter, of being merely brilliant instead of famous.

The limo glided on toward the Far Northwest, past towering viaducts, budding woods, Rock Creek glittering in its

stony bed. But Parmenter hardly noticed. Speaking Anna's name had sent his mind on a long journey.

He was remembering the smoky redbrick warren of East Baltimore, forty miles to the north and a generation ago. Ugly Victorian towers of purplish brick, close-packed row houses and narrow streets that were wind tunnels in winter and baking arroyos under a smoky summer Sun. He could almost smell the medical school's dead house with its stink of formalin, its corpses in a state of semi-arrested decay. And the permanent odor of cats and burnt bacon in the slum apartment where he lived.

Shuddering a little, he wondered how he'd ever stomached life with Anna. Well, of course, he'd needed her help to get through medical school. One of the secrets of success was finding the right people to help you, and then motivating them to do it. With an awkward, homely young woman who was, rather amazingly, still a virgin at twenty-three—well, the way to motivate her had been obvious....

But what a way to live! She furnished the apartment from a Greenmount Avenue second-hand store called the Mouse House. Their living room had no room for living because it was filled with hand-made bookshelves, rough boards bending under the weight of knowledge. Medical texts, propaganda from the environmental movement, anti-war stuff begotten by the mess in Vietnam. Pot grew in the window boxes and posters on the walls celebrated Earth Day—a time capsule from an ancient, long-forgotten era called 1970.

Parmenter's only real concern about the war had been to stay safe in medical school until it was over. But he never told

Anna so. She'd been a peacenik, a zealot, ignoring practical things like comfort but always ready to settle the fate of the Earth. What a genius she was, and what a bore!

Not surprising that he'd cheated on her with an army nurse just back from Vietnam. What was her name anyway—Sophie something. Captain Sophie. Tough broad, sensible. “I used to want love and money,” she liked to say. “Nowadays I'll settle for a good fuck.” Well, they'd had that, over and over again in empty rooms at the hospital. Hospitals were like that, so conveniently supplied with beds.

And so, straight to the catastrophe.

He still shuddered to think of it. The pain, the recriminations, the basic vulgarity of the whole business. That rampaging infection he'd caught and passed on to Anna—her hysterectomy—all ending so astonishingly when, recovered at last, she forgave him for everything.

Or said she did. But if she harbored a grudge, why had she kept contact with him over the years? Why did she help him with his work, as she'd done so long ago with his studies? So that she could look down on him and think how superior she was, morally as well as intellectually? She'd always liked the feeling of superiority, and he'd certainly given her that—among other things!

“Biomedical Institute,” said the driver.

Parmenter woke from his reverie. Yes, there she was, tall and awkward in a shabby brown coat. Pacing like a caged leopard, ignoring all the splendors of April. Anna loved the environment: it was only nature she had no time for.

Parmenter lowered a window, smiled, waved and took a deep breath. As always, the sight of her made him feel vaguely uneasy, the way he felt when revisiting scenes of his youth, where everything that had once been familiar was now strange.

In Georgetown the limo slid comfortably into a No Parking zone on M Street. Instructed to wait, the chauffeur leaned back against the headrest and tipped his billed cap over his eyes.

With her blunt features and iron-gray hair, Anna did not make the most elegant of luncheon companions, thought Parmenter as a doorman bowed them into Papillon. In the lobby she shook off her nondescript coat, and when the maitre d' showed them to a table she laid a small shabby purse down beside her. It clinked, making Parmenter wonder wryly if she carried specimen bottles to lunch.

Before taking his own chair, he gave her a light kiss and said, "Anna, how kind of you to interrupt your important work to waste time on me!"

It was the sort of thing he said automatically, and meanwhile he was thinking: Yes, she's brilliant, but what's she actually accomplished? Forty or fifty publications understood by, at most, a thousand people on Planet Earth. Whereas he'd never discovered anything, yet lived the life of Riley, doing marvelous work for the Foundation, guiding international funds to aid the sick and suffering in backward nations.

And how much respect he earned by having his hand on the purse strings! On his last trip to Asia, he'd ridden into

Kathmandu on a sacred elephant and slept in a gold-leafed chamber of the royal palace. How wonderful it was—doing well by doing good!

"You're looking incredibly prosperous," Anna remarked. She'd always had a husky voice, and now it was descending toward baritone level, roughened by breathing the tainted air of laboratories.

He shrugged. "Not rich, Anna. Not likely to be. I live modestly."

About that he was sincere. His West Side condo had cost a mere 960K, paid for by the well-to-do wife he'd taken care to marry. Worth a lot more today, of course, but still ... in Manhattan ... an apartment that had cost less than a million could hardly be considered *posh*.

Anna smiled somewhat grimly. "Jimmy, I have to thank you for getting my grant renewed."

"Frankly, I didn't understand a word of your proposal, and I'm not sure the reviewers did, either. But the signature block had your name in it, and that was enough."

"And I'm sure you put in a good word."

"As always. Shall we order? I'm due in the Russell Building at three."

Papillon was comfy and pricey—one of those fake French farmhouses with scythes and sickles hanging on the walls, and rough exposed beams that were really hollow. Rusticity, Parmenter noted from a glance at the menu, came at a price. Fortunately, like most of his meals, this one would go on his expense account.

“It's nice get away from that damned laboratory for a while,” Anna sighed.

She stared with a kind of awkward naiveté at the well-dressed, soft-spoken people sitting at other tables. She'd lived her whole life in cities, yet behaved like a country cousin.

“I believe you said you're off on your travels again,” she remarked.

“Ah, yes,” he sighed. “Busy, busy. I testify before the Senate committee this afternoon. Fly out immediately afterward. Stop at the Centers for Disease Control on my way through Atlanta. Then to London for a meeting at Guy's and another at the Wellcome Institute. I take the Chunnel to Paris, visit the Institut Pasteur, fly to Stockholm for a conference at the Karolinska. Then Moscow, Tokyo, Los Angeles, and finally home.”

“It sounds marvelous. You'll meet so many people I know only as names on technical articles.”

He nodded importantly. “I'll be seeing almost everybody who's anybody in infectious disease. No patients, of course. I haven't seen an actual patient since 1987. Shall I choose the wine?”

When he'd ordered for both of them—in very decent French—Parmenter got down to business.

“Now,” he said, “Anna, my dear, you know I like to pose as a man who understands what's happening on the research front, instead of what I am, a man who understands the sources of public and private funding and has good connections.”

Anna allowed herself another grim smile. “Jimmy, that's part of your charm. You're an honest fraud.”

He smiled with her. A generation past she'd believed firmly that medicine could solve all the problems of the world. He wondered if Anna had kept her adolescent enthusiasms, and decided she probably had. Husbandless, childless, she had so little else.

She went on, “I know what you want. You want a few bits of cutting-edge news from the research front. Things that you can drop oh-so-casually on Capitol Hill, or else to your contacts overseas. Well, here's a couple. I'll try to put them into language you can understand.”

And she did. Anna went over recent evidence for the spread of multiple-drug-resistant TB and the declining effectiveness of all known antibiotics. Anthrax, smallpox, West Nile, ebola ... a marvelous *tour d'horizon*. The news, he noted with pleasure, was almost all gloomy. Bad news meant good funding for research.

What about supplying cheap drugs to developing nations? Parmenter asked. The senators would want to know about that. Her view was dark—increasing supplies would mean little in practical terms, except more rapid emergence of drug-resistant strains.

Unkillable bugs! Incurable ills! When had the world turned into a 1958 horror comic? Even Parmenter was beginning to find this relentless catalogue depressing. Gloom was fine, but if you wanted money you also had to hold out the hope of progress.

“Isn't there any good news?” he asked somewhat plaintively. “AIDS, now. Always a hot-button issue, and it's your specialty. Even Christians want to help the victims nowadays. Any gleams of light that I can point to?”

“Oh, we're learning so much!” she exclaimed.

Spots of color appeared in her sallow cheeks as she plunged into the natural history of the virus. Feline AIDS, for instance, and how the great cats survived it. Some new studies of the African green monkey and how it maintained a symbiotic relationship with simian HIV.

“What we're finding is that different forms of the virus pervade the sub-Saharan environment. Most species long ago learned to tolerate it. Only people don't. And domestic cats—they're susceptible too, poor things.”

Parmenter sighed. The fact that lions and leopards and monkeys had reached a private peace with the virus was not likely to be seen by the senators as a great leap forward. He asked about the human form, and she plunged into an account of the new fusion inhibitors that was a bit too technical for him to understand. He tried to look intelligent, but actually he was rather glad when the wine arrived.

He did know wine, especially the rituals of drinking it. He tasted the Malbec, let it bathe his tongue—it had a kind of acid sparkle, hard to define—nodded, and the waiter poured. He and Anna clinked glasses.

“A fascinating creature, HIV,” mused Parmenter. “It's never done us a bit of harm personally, yet we spend our lives trying to destroy it. Are we, perhaps, a disease of the virus?”

He meant it as a joke, but she didn't smile. Parmenter found himself thinking about her long-ago encounter with gonorrhea—one of the tough strains that had developed in Vietnam during the war. How was he to know that damned Captain Sophie was sheltering a few bugs in the folds of her vagina? How was anybody to know? She was asymptomatic—she didn't know herself....

Suddenly he wondered if Anna's illness was the source of her fascination with AIDS. Unpleasant as it was, the clap episode had meant so little to him, a week of painful urination, two million Oxford units of penicillin in the backside. Hard to believe it might have shaped Anna's whole life, rendering her sterile, fixating her mind on STDs—sexually transmitted diseases.

Hastily he guided the talk into a safer channel.

“Anna, Senator Loomis has warned me that some committee members are obsessed with the old biological warfare chestnut. Of course my aim will be to get them to invest more money in research, but how should I pitch it?”

Anna swallowed her Malbec without noticing the flavor, the bouquet, or the price, which vaguely annoyed Parmenter. When somebody paid for your wine, you ought to appreciate the gift.

“Talk designer viruses,” she said briefly. “I guess everybody's heard about them by now—even senators.”

“If only I could convince them that an AIDS bomb is possible,” he mused. “The money would flow like water.”

“Well, it's not. The virus is too slow. The only way HIV might become a weapon....”

She hesitated, the freshly filled glass halfway to her lips.

"How?"

"Well, suppose some genius managed to weave together two genomes—a really virulent strain of A-type flu and HIV. One's a retrovirus, the other's not, but you can convert RNA into viral DNA with reverse transcriptase.

"Suppose you could create a virus that spreads like flu—by breathing, shaking hands, sharing the same air—but attacks the immune system like HIV? Suppose you could design protein keys to give it multiple entry sites to the T4 cells, so the fusion inhibitors wouldn't work? Whole populations would lose the ability to fight off contagion. Anything could kill them—the common cold, chickenpox, animal diseases like toxoplasmosis. You name it."

Parmenter stared at her. "Is anybody capable of doing that?" he asked.

"If not now, then soon."

For a moment Parmenter forgot to be practical. He was shaking his head, staring into an abyss. "The ultimate pandemic," he muttered. "A thousand diseases in one. It'd be the end."

"Not entirely. There are natural immunes to everything. Some people would survive."

She brooded for a moment. "But billions would die and the Earth would gain a breathing space. A reprieve. The survivors might even learn to control their reproductive energies, to treat nature with respect...."

The onion soup arrived, and they had no further conversation for several minutes. As he spooned soup into his

mouth, Parmenter tried to find reasons why the master virus wouldn't work. Finally he came up with one.

“But with no vaccine,” he said, “anybody who released an organism like that would be destroying his own life, too.”

“So?”

They both paused in their meal, memories of collapsing skyscrapers and a cratered Pentagon in their minds. These days, the dangerous people were the ones who wanted to die.

“Ah, the things we inflict on one another,” Parmenter murmured, polishing off his soup. With life so good, the will to die was beyond him.

Anna didn't really know how to converse; at work she lectured her colleagues, at home she lectured her cat. Suddenly thirty years vanished into thin air, and she began haranguing Parmenter as she used to do when they were living together.

“And what we inflict on everything else! Isn't it reasonable to see humanity as a disease of the whole Earth? The things we've done! And worse, the things we will do, to other species, to the air, the forests, the oceans!”

Parmenter sighed quietly. She was well launched now. Global warming, mass extinctions, rain forests, blah, blah, blah. Didn't she follow the election news, didn't she know environmentalism was dead forever?

When she paused for breath, he tried another little jest. “Why Anna, you haven't joined People for the Ethical Treatment of Animals, have you?”

“No, of course not. Yet I can see the viewpoint of those animal-rights people, even though they're so silly and give us

so much trouble. Whenever I read about them trashing a laboratory, I find myself thinking—oh, if you just had the knowledge! And the technique. And the equipment."

Just then, nice portions of *canard à l'orange* were set down in front of them. Weary of apocalyptic visions and wanting to enjoy lunch, Parmenter reached over and patted Anna's capable hand with its strong fingers and its short clean nails.

"Thank you so much, my dear," he said. "You've given me something to scare the Senate with. And when they're scared, lawmakers tend to appropriate. I'm sure there's quite a lot of money in synthetic viruses—assuming the boys and girls at Fort Detrick haven't already gobbled it up!"

They ate largely in silence. When Parmenter remarked on the excellent quality of the food, she said, "It's just fuel, after all."

Which again made him feel a certain pain at the ... ingratitude of her outlook. But the meal passed quickly. When both food and wine had been polished off, Parmenter found himself with a good half-hour to waste before leaving for the Russell Building. He suggested coffee and dessert and she accepted.

"Anna, you must be on holiday," he mocked her gently.

"I don't have many of them," she said, and something about her voice struck him as almost pathetic.

Watching her, he saw the lineaments of a younger face emerge from her gray middle age. How much she'd changed and yet how little! Her superb mind was still a bit inhuman, a moonscape of brilliant lights and impenetrable shadows. No

wonder he'd stepped out on her. The wonder was that he'd waited so long.

Well, he could hardly tell her that she was now, and always had been, a little bit crazy.

“You work too hard,” he said, picking his words carefully. “Your reputation's made. Everything you write commands respect from the most brilliant people in the world. You ought to slow down a little, my dear. Smell the roses.”

“I can't. It's too late.” Something was in her tone—a hint of stifled emotions, of frozen passions? Something, at any rate, that made him uneasy.

“I know my life's barren,” she said, in a voice so low he had to strain to hear her. “It just goes on and on, every day alike. Work and feed my cat and sleep. Work and feed my cat and sleep. I live in a long tunnel, only there's no light at the end, and I think sometimes it must be night outside. But I can't go back to the beginning and start over, and until I reach the end I'll never be free.”

“Anna, Anna,” he muttered, searching for just the right button to push. “Your work is so important. So crucial. So many, many lives have been saved because of you.”

He prided himself on his pep talks. Researchers—compulsive-obsessive loners isolated in their laboratories—needed a pat on the back now and then. And he was just the man to give it to them. Those who can, do. Those who can't, encourage.

Only this time it didn't seem to work. Anna looked bleaker than ever.

“I'm afraid I don't believe in my work any longer, Jimmy. Here we struggle for prevention and cure. Yet without the diseases we fight every day, world population would be even more out of control than it already is. More empty bellies, more devastation of the natural world as pathetic, starving people fight to feed themselves. We'll end by destroying everything, ourselves included.”

“That's simplistic,” he assured her. He'd heard that old zero-population-growth argument a thousand times before, and he remembered somebody or other saying it was simplistic, though he couldn't remember exactly why.

“I've become simple. My life's an old movie, all the color gone. I live in black and white.”

Then she shook herself and managed another of her quick grim smiles.

“Now I've got that off my chest!” she said. “Thanks for the meal, it was a real treat. And to think that in the next few weeks you'll see them all! All the experts at almost all the great research institutions in the world.”

By now, Parmenter was enjoying a tart with Sabayon sauce. The cup of black coffee at its side sent up dark bitter fumes that perfectly contrasted with the delicate shades of sweetness on his tongue. The odors of old corpses and burnt bacon and cats were forgotten.

“Yes, if everybody I'm going to shake hands with died at once, the world would be left practically defenseless against epidemic disease. It's a sobering thought,” he said, smacking his lips.

“Except, of course, for some people a mile or so north of here in Bethesda,” said Anna, thoughtfully.

“That really means you and your colleagues, doesn't it?”

She said nothing while he finished the tart. He raised his eyes then, and caught the most astonishing look on her face. A faraway look, as if she were seeing through him and the wall and the maze of Georgetown's redbrick walls at something miles and miles away.

She caught him staring at her and said, “You have such a nice effect on me, Jimmy. I was just thinking, maybe there is light at the end of the tunnel.”

She finished her meal with good appetite and suggested a second cup of coffee to clear their heads.

“It'll have to be quick,” he warned her.

“If there's one thing I'm good at, it's keeping to a schedule. Oh, and Jimmy—”

“Yes?”

“In the pocket of my coat—you know the brown one? On the rack in the lobby? I left a new publication of mine in the left-hand pocket. It might be useful on your trip. Would you mind terribly getting it for me? Meantime, I'll catch the waiter.”

After all the fluids he'd been drinking, Parmenter needed to visit the men's room anyway. Besides, he was an agreeable sort; doing small favors for big returns formed at least half his secret for getting ahead in the world.

When he came back, fresh coffee was waiting and she signed the reprint for him in her tightly controlled script, *With the compliments of the author, Anna Weiss*.

She's impersonal, he noted, even with me.

He drank quickly, glancing over the article as he did so. Another one of these damned things he really didn't understand—some recently uncovered nuance in the evolving technology of gene-splicing. Her gift was well-intended, no doubt. So many useless things were well-intended.

His eyes kept straying to his watch, his thoughts now fixed on what lay ahead. The Senate committee—well, his testimony was pretty cut and dried. He'd try to see Loomis ahead of time, prime him with a question about bioterrorism that he could answer intelligently.

Then back to Reagan National for his flight to Atlanta. He didn't relish the long security procedures he'd have to go through again. And there were all those other airports on his itinerary, each with its stomach-knotting hints of terrible possibilities—young men with plastic knives, with explosives tucked into their shoes, into plastic bags in their rectums, into God knew where.

No wonder his second coffee had an odd, unpleasant aftertaste from which the first had been free.

He rose; Anna did too; her purse clinked again. In the lobby he helped her into her coat and bowed her through the door of Papillon. He didn't have time to return her to the Institute and offered to pay her cab fare, but she refused.

“After that lunch I need exercise! I'll walk to Foggy Bottom and take the subway back.”

Out on M Street, with his yawning chauffeur revving up the limo, Anna proved the wine had made her just a bit drunk.

She pulled his portly form to her and kissed him—right on the lips!

"Do you know, Jimmy," she whispered, "that you're the only man I ever loved? You'll never know how hard it was, getting over you. Getting over ... everything."

Well, what was he supposed to say? That she was the most improbable woman he'd ever screwed? That now, at this moment, he wanted to get the hell away from her? But *suavité* had become automatic with him and he found a diplomatic answer.

"And you, Anna, are the most ... remarkable woman of my life. So brilliant, so wise. And so forgiving."

He was rather glad when the car pulled away from the curb. The driver needed to turn east, across traffic, and paused, waiting for an opening to appear. Parmenter smiled and waved at her through the tinted glass. She waved back and almost seemed—surely not?—to be crying.

Poor Anna! he thought. In her nondescript brown coat and her obsessive, empty life. So out of place in prosperous Georgetown among the well-dressed hurrying people with their sunny faces and their warm, meaningful lives. Her pale mouth that he had once known so well formed the words, "Good-bye, my dear. Good-bye."

The car slid smoothly into the eastbound lane. Parmenter sighed with relief and an instant later had forgotten her.

Instead of returning to work, Anna went home to her condo on the seventh floor of a large blank box of a building on Van Ness Street. On the way she stopped at a Safeway

and bought a special treat of lump crabmeat (sixteen dollars a pound!) for her cat, Felina.

In her blank living room, filled with furniture that was both nondescript and uncomfortable, she sat and watched the plump tortoiseshell tabby consume the meal in a kind of ecstasy. Anna wept again, fluids clogging her nose.

Felina polished off her meal and wanted to sleep. But Anna picked her up and buried her face for a moment in her fur. Felina made a sleepy sound, batted her cheek with half-extended claws. Anna stood up with the animal in her arms, carried her into the bedroom with its anonymous motel-type furniture and laid her on the bed.

Two hypodermics were in her purse, and Anna took them out, along with two vials, one large, one small. The empty tube that had held the viral concentrate she threw into a wastepaper basket.

She administered euthanasia to Felina and to herself, and lay down on the bed beside the cat. Anna touched a control and a small TV flicked on, permanently set to the Nature Channel. She wanted to drift away with her eyes on natural scenes, and this was as close to nature as she ever came.

Images of jungles and great beasts flickered as cold began to invade her hands and feet. The sound was muted; voices tried to interrupt her inner monologue. She was wrestling for the last time with the central puzzle of her life, Jimmy Parmenter. How could she—so deep, so serious, so intense—have wasted so much of her time, energy, hate, and love on that trivial man?

Was she merely a case of arrested development? Had her emotional life ended thirty-three years ago? Had she, in some sense, died then—crushed by his betrayal, and still more by his blank inability to see what his betrayal meant to her?

She tried to sit up, intending to pull a coverlet over Felina and herself, but found that she could not. So she relaxed, waiting for the cold to fade as the warmth had, and be replaced by darkness, or by nothing at all.

Her brief, grim smile made its last appearance. It took me thirty-three years, she thought, but I returned his gift at last. And through him changed the world. Jimmy Parmenter, the targeted missile, carrying death to the centers of research—from where it will spread to almost everyone.

Then the jungle scenes were interrupted by a news flash and she tried to focus, to see what had happened ... oh, another plane brought down by a bomb ... why, it's just south of here, she thought, over Virginia, headed for ... surely not Atlanta?

Surely not! Some silly little fanatic, frustrating her great plan to purge and renew the Earth? Wait, she thought, I still have work to do!

But it was too late.

Her breathing grew oppressive. She hadn't thought there would be this struggle to breathe. It was like a creeping paralysis; she was made of marble, she weighed tons, yet inside she was still feeling, still trying to move, to seize a mouthful of air.

Had she done this to Felina? Was this what dying really meant—this strangulation, this crushing weight, this icy cold?

How could she, who loved all living things, have done it? How could she?

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Originally from Brooklyn, long settled in Connecticut, Esther Friesner clearly finds Americans interesting. In recent years, she has written about New Englanders ("How to Make Unicorn Pie"), Texans ("Just Another Cowboy"), and a Japanese exchange student in the US ("Why I Want to Come to Brewer College"). Her last story in our pages was "I Killed Them in Vegas" (Sept. 2003). Now she digs up some of this country's roots and replants them in her own garden (which one might say is—in the best way—lushly enriched by the chief fertilizer used in tall tales). See if you don't find the results most tasty...

Johnny Beansprout

By Esther M. Friesner

Supper'll be ready in just a lick, young'ns, so quit your fussin' and I'll tell you the tale of Johnny Beansprout, may he burn in hell. Now this here yarn commences way back in the early days of this great nation of ours, back when these American shores was still wide open to the scum of the Earth that decent countries wouldn't keep on hand, less'n they ran outa likely participants for a good ol' up-country hangin'.

Johnny Beansprout's folks come over from England, which is enough of a setback for most people. But they couldn't leave well enough alone. No sir, they had to go and make their initial handicap all the more worse'n it was to begin with by being vegetarians. Now I know what you're all gonna say: You're gonna say, "Uncle Paisley, what's the use of being at

the top of the food chain less'n we gets to chew on the flesh, bones, sinews, and assorted organ meats of our natural inferiors?" Well, children, that is precisely what the neighbors said to Johnny's kin. Then they et 'em.

Those were hard times.

Anyhow, when the neighbors come by and et up Johnny Beansprout's immediate family, they made the mistake of their lives: They didn't eat Johnny. There wasn't no sense in that, him being just a tender baby at the time, and them's good eatin'. I don't need to tell a fine, healthy, smart-as-a-whip passel of young'ns like you that when it comes to vittles, ain't nothing beats baby, both for taste and convenience. Most folks knew that bit o' common sense long before the learned Dean Jonathan Swift wrote up *A Modest Proposal* for the edification and nutrition of the Irish. I hate to think what might've become of that noble nation if they'd had to rely on something so chancy as vegetables. Put not your trust in princes *or* potatoes. 'Course I have heard tell as how the family what devoured Johnny Beansprout's blood kin was mostly Scots, fresh come to America and pretty much greenhorns. Us *real* Americans all know how strange those folk can be when it comes to vittles. Any nation that'd put a haggis on the table sooner'n an infant has got them some problems.

Afore we go any further, you might's well understand that there's more'n one version of Johnny Beansprout's story out there, particularly the part about how come he survived when his family didn't. Stories are a lot like cats: One basic model, but let the varmints breed and you wind up with more

variations than you can shake a stick at. (And believe me, you'll want to, and a might big stick at that.) Also, they tend to come wandering in and start socializing with people if you leave the back door open too wide for too long. One of the ways I heard Johnny's tale told was that the mother of the neighbor family what et his folks had just lost a baby of her own, likely through inattention to details, and so her heart was hungrier than her belly. She was the one who heard the infant Johnny a-weepin' and a-wailin' in his cradle and scooped him up outa there before anyone could set a tooth to 'im. She kept him hid just a little while, 'cause she knew that once everyone else was all done eatin' on Johnny's birth family, stuffed fatter'n a wallow of tax collectors, he'd be safe enough.

So little Johnny was raised by the Bean family, but he never did fit in. All of the young'ns he was raised with—the ones he believed was his real, true sisters and brothers—they was all big, strapping louts and loutesses, due to having been raised on a strict diet of meat, harvested off the yearly crop of travelers on the road that passed by the Bean homestead. They was mostly Presbyterians, for some reason, and there's a lot of fine white meat on a Presbyterian.

But Johnny was nothing like his adoptive kin. Why, that boy was the puniest, scrawniest, sickliest little runt that ever drew a wheezy breath. Many's the time his oldest brother, Sawney Jr., would ask the woman they both called Mama "How come our Johnny's such a pitiful thing? Why, if he's any kind of a Bean, it's gotta be a stringbean!" And Lord, Lord, how they all would laugh.

All of them except for Johnny. He was a broody sort. Mopish. Melancholy. Finally turned to *reading*—did you ever hear the like?—and that made a bad situation worse. You can have a good education or a good digestion, but not both, and Johnny made his choice.

His mama felt sorry for the boy, sorry and just a mite guilty, knowing what she did about his true family background and all. She was forever encouraging him to go out and play in the fresh air with his brothers and sisters, to say nothing of saving him all the best cuts off the Sunday roast.

Johnny didn't seem to care ‘bout all her motherly kindnesses. He was a sullen boy and a picky eater. Why, sometimes whole months would go by without a scrap of meat passing his lips. It was just as if he knew, somewhere deep inside that stringy flesh, all the way down to the tasty and nutritious marrow of his bones, that he was not a Bean at all.

We got us a saying in these parts: It's all good until the cow-pats hit the mechanical device for the rotary circulation of air. It's not what you'd call a *handy* saying, but it's true. Even though Johnny's adoptive mama did all she could, you can't fight Fate forever. Sooner or later, the manure is flat-out bound to fly.

One rainy day, while Johnny's adoptive family had all gone out to check the traffic on the Boston Post Road—checking out their choices for the *entrée du jour*, if you're gonna be fancy-pants about it—the boy got bored. Like I said, he could read, but the problem with that was there wasn't a whole lot worth reading in the Bean house. Once you'd gone through

the Bible and the labels on all of Grandpa Bean's patent medicines, that was pretty much it.

Or so Johnny thought until he found the book.

No one knew how a book—let alone a book like *that*—came to be in the Bean house. It was almost as if it had just appeared out of thin air, though with more than a passing tang of sulfur and brimstone a-clingin' to it. (Folks say that the Devil finds work for idle hands to do, so it's not much of a wonder to learn that Old Scratch got into publishing.) Johnny didn't care was that book writ in the blood of the Archfiend himself: He was so desperate bored he began to read it.

And what a tale that cursed book had to tell, to be sure! Children, I don't want y'all to go home and have your sleep tore up by horrors, but the truth must be told: It was a cookbook.

A *vegetarian* cookbook.

By the time the Beans come home again, the damage was done: Little Johnny was hunched over that work of the Devil, a-smackin' his lips and a-lickin' his chops. Mama Bean saw what'd happened and got all upset. She knew where that book must've come from, though for the life of her she could not say how it had managed to traverse the ground between Johnny's old homestead and her house. Could be one of the Bean boys had taken it along to use for kindling, them being raised to be proper religious and all. Ain't nothing so warms the soul of the righteous as a burning book. Thing is, they never got around to tossing this particular book on the fire and the pernicious object slipped between the cracks as it were. Oh, she tried to take the book away from little Johnny,

but it was too late; the Devil had claimed his own. Johnny held onto the consarned thing like a bulldog, sometimes bellering ‘bout why *couldn't* he keep it, sometimes whining ‘bout how he wanted to whip up some of those zucchini recipes ‘cause they sounded mighty tasty.

Zucchini recipes. If that ain't proof of hell, I don't know what is.

In the end, Mama Bean gave up. She could've called on the rest of the clan to help her wrest the book from the boy's grasp easy enough, but she neglected her proper parental duties and just let the whole thing slide. Likely she told herself that if she didn't make a big fuss about it, he'd soon enough grow weary of the book on his own. (I cannot begin to tell you how many parents have fallen for that comforting lie, nor how many have subsequently woke up to the truth that the only *effective* way to have a child turn from wicked doings is for the parents themselves to pitch in and *participate* in the same, with a level of enthusiasm guaranteed to embarrass the child past bearing.)

So she let him keep the book and all was peace.

For a time.

The years rolled on and little Johnny grew to young manhood. He never mentioned the book again, and in fact it seemed to have dropped back into whatever sidepocket of oblivion had spawned it. Truth to tell, Johnny himself changed something powerful since the day that book showed up: He grew taller, heartier, more robust and handsome. He was still a picky eater, but apparently it agreed with him because you couldn't argue with muscles like that. His brothers tried, and

they got their noses bloodied for ‘em. His mama was just as pleased as Punch by all this and was even commencing to gaze out upon the prospect of a rosy future for her adoptive young'n when, as the saying goes, the other shoe fell.

It fell right into the middle of a Sunday dinner, though by this time—little Johnny's sixteenth birthday—the economic situation in this great nation of ours had improved to the point where most folks was no longer on a first-name basis with the Sabbath roast.

“Mama,” Johnny said, standing up at his place. “Daddy, I got something to tell you.”

The whole family froze where they sat. When a Bean rose from his seat during Sunday dinner, it was usually to announce an imminent marriage or birth, sometimes both and not necessarily in that order. You could practically hear Johnny's adoptive kin riffling through their mental picture files of every passable young woman for miles around, checking each image for the telltale bulge of a skirt or h'ist of an apron.

Before the tension got to be too bad—or before the kinfolk ran out of possible human females and started reviewing images of the more sweet-faced sheep on the farmstead—Johnny himself broke the rest of the news: “I'm leaving.”

“But why, Johnny? Why?” Mama Bean cried out in anguish. “How can you say that? Where will you go? What will you live on?”

“How soon can you leave and can I have your mattress?” his brother Angus asked eagerly. Mama Bean hit him with the serving ladle.

“Mama,” Johnny said, solemn. “I know the truth. I've known it for years, now. You and Pa and the rest, you ain't no more my kin than ol’ Reliable over there.” He nodded to where the family hound dog bitch lay sprawled on the hearthstones.

“How did you find out?” Mama Bean asked. You could hear her dear old heart cracking just a little more with every word she said.

So Johnny told ‘em all how he'd read that pernicious book cover to cover (I think it was called *To Serve Manioc* or some such nonsense) and when he come to the end of it he found a couple-three sheets of foolscap tucked into the back of the book. They was a letter that his birth-mama was writing to her kin back in England, describing her newborn son, and she'd even tried her hand at a little pencil sketch of the child. Now, one newborn baby looks a whole lot like the next, but Johnny come into this world with a birthmark on the left side of his face that kind of set him apart. It was about the size and shape of a lima bean, and his birth-mama had rendered it so perfect in her sketch that there was no mistaking: Johnny was her boy.

“All the time I thought this meant I was a *true* Bean,” Johnny said, touching the birthmark that was still plain as day to see. “Guess I was wrong. After I read that letter, I took to nosing around through the woods, searching for the place where I was born.” He lowered his eyes. “I found it. It was the most gruesome sight that I ever did see.”

An uneasy silence fell over the table. The older Beans could surmise all too well *what* Johnny had found in his old

home. Mama Bean reached across the table to swat her shiftless brother with the ladle and hiss, “I thought we told you to *bury* the leftovers.”

The family was still bickering ‘bout who'd been s'posed to cover shovelin’ duty on that long-gone day when, all sly-like, Johnny slipped out the back door and hit the road. He took nothing more with him but a change of socks, a knife, a spoon, a cooking pot which he chose to wear for a hat, and two zucchinis tied up in a big ol’ blue kerchief. Oh, and that book. He sure as hell must've took that blasted book. Ain't no one man on this Earth capable of doing as much harm as Johnny did unless he's got a good book at his back, guiding him on his thrice-cussed way.

His folks didn't hear from him none, at first. Mama Bean told the neighbors she was sorely grieved by the certainty that her little foster boy had likely met his Maker in the person of a mountain lion, a hostile tribe of Injuns, or even a distant branch of his own kinfolks. Though times was gettin’ better for America, there was still more'n a few families who clung to the old dietary habits, out of tradition if not need. Tradition makes a man do many a damfool thing. I hear tell they *willingly* eat a dish of lye-soaked codfish out Minnesota way come Christmas ‘cause it's tradition. Lutefisk, they call it, and lutefisk's the one food-like substance on Earth that can make a haggis look good. If that don't rest my case, I don't know what does.

Well, Mama Bean learned better, soon enough. Wasn't no one, man or beast, had et her Johnny. Might've been better for her and the rest of the family if someone had. She was

b'ilin' laundry the day the gov'ment men showed up to arrest her and the whole clan. Pa Bean and the boys put up a mighty fine fight, but there was just too many troops set out ag'in' 'em. They were put in chains like common criminals and dragged all the way to Washington D. of C. where they stood trial for having lived off the neighbors. Did you ever hear the like, young'ns? Now what was this great nation of ours founded for if not to teach us to support one another? They were tried and convicted and hanged by the neck until no longer gamy-tasting, and for what? For what they, as one hundred percent pure red-blooded Americans, chose to *eat!* And they call this a democracy!

I know, I know: That was long ago. That's no longer the way it is nowadays. Shoot, these times they can pitch you into the hoosegow for what you choose to eat *or* drink *or* smoke *or* otherwise introduce to your own personal body, and it's all legal, thanks to Johnny's meddling ways.

Oh yes, it was Johnny's doing even then, the way they lit on the Bean clan and dragged 'em off to their deaths. The ugly little onion-sucker made it his bidness to turn his adoptive family in to the Authorities before headin' west.

They say you can still walk the path that Johnny Beansprout trod when he set out for the great American frontier. He tried to shuck all kinship and connection to the Bean clan, but life's a funny thing: He wound up being known by a name that harks right back to our shared lineage anyhow, never mind how little he *or* us cared to maintain and acknowledge that old relationship. Folks come to call him Beansprout on account of how freely he handed out all

manner of sprouting green things, and how he preached the benefits of vegetables, and how he punched the daylights out of the first man who called him Johnny Zucchini.

Wherever he went, he planted. Sometimes it was beans, sometimes it was corn, sometimes it was potatoes, sometimes it was okra and other works of the Devil, but mostly it was zucchini squash. Those first two what he took with him from the ol' Bean homestead spread their insidious, imperialist seed all across the land. So did Johnny. There's many a farmin' family from the Appalachians to the Rockies and beyond what owes their start to Johnny having his wicked way with plowing their fields by day and their daughters by night.

They say that he's the reason that we're such a hale and healthy nation. They say that vegetables are good for you. They say that too much meat'll rush you into your grave quicker'n a raccoon on roller skates.

They say a lot of damfool things.

They also say Johnny's why the South and the North mended fences once the South stopped needing slaves to grow cotton and turned to zucchini farming. That blasted stuff seems to plant itself. Once one plantation gave it a try, the others couldn't help but follow, mostly because the vines took over every acre of arable land for miles around. So the slaves was all freed and some found employment right there in the south, riding herd on the zucchini so's it didn't get *too* unruly (though they was a mite too late to save the kudzu vine from extinction). Those that didn't choose to stay on headed west, hoping to find Mas' Johnny and thank him. The rest headed

east, to work in the big zucchini-bread factories of Boston and Baltimore and New York, or north to Canada where a man could still get him a pork chop without a lecture.

Y'see, that was the trouble with what Johnny done: It wouldn't've been so bad if he'd just promulgated vegetables, but he didn't stop there. Johnny spread his doctrine almost as broadcast as he spread his seed, to the point where folks was terrified to look breakfast in the eye just in case it come from a critter capable of looking back. Pretty soon, he was what you might call a *political* influence in the land, with a numerous following of fellow-vegetarians. They formed the Misery Loves Company party and as soon as enough vote-finagling thimbleriggers and power-hungry pettifoggers sniffed which way the barbecue-free wind was blowing, they had them a solid legislative representation in Washington. Folks who was too mealy-livered to eat a nice slice of liver for meals couldn't stand to see their neighbors chowing down on cows ‘stead of compost. I guess they reckoned that if they had to suffer, everyone was going to share in the privilege. And it goes without saying that all of Johnny's descendants chose to cast their ballots the way they figured that randy old bastard'd want ‘em to.

That was when they started making their laws. First it was Meatless Mondays, which they rammed through Congress as part and parcel of supporting our boys in the Injun Wars. Anyone heard you'd dared to put a bite of beefsteak in your mouth on a Monday and you'd find yourself facing a bunch of truncheon-wielding “*real* Americans” ready to make sure you wouldn't be able to chew anything harder'n mashed potatoes

come Tuesday. And once we rolled over and played dead on *that* law, it was easy to tack on Turkeyless Tuesdays, Steak-free Sundays, Sausageless Saturdays, Wienerless Wednesdays, Don't-Eat-Nothin'-with-a-Face-You-Heartless-Bastard Fridays, until by the time our boys was fighting the Boche in the trenches of France, they was doing it on sheer guts and tofu.

I fail to understand human nature. If a grown, supposedly rational man chooses to give up something he likes—something that's tasty or interesting or just plain fun to do—why can't he leave it at that? Ain't nobody *forced* Johnny Beansprout to live on rabbit food. So why in tarnation did he and his fool followers have to start forcing the rest of us to hop aboard the Beansprout bandwagon, sometimes at gunpoint?

Never mind, young'ns, we all know the answer to that one: *For our own good*. If'n I had me a nickel for every time someone's used *their* God-given right to free choice as an excuse to take away *mine*, I'd be a rich man. If'n those busybodying, brain-sucking, Beansproutist bullyboys shoved any more of my own good down my throat, I'd have to shoot myself out of pure joy.

So that's how come we're living how, as, and where we are today: Right in the seat of power, Washington D. of C. itself. Only seat you'll ever encounter what's got more'n one sphincter to it, like my Great-granddaddy used to say.

That's his daddy's picture hangin' up there on the wall. We're all mighty proud of him. Wasn't many folks could afford to have themselves a real live portrait painted back in them

days, but seeing as how it was his execution day and Great-great-granddaddy was a bit of a celebrity, he got it. Them's his last words under the picture, done all pretty in a sampler by my Great-granny's own hand, back when she was just a slip of a girl: *I Et Him And I'm Glad*. Words to live by.

What's that, young'ns? *Who'd* he eat? Why, who do you think?

Yep, it was one of those whatd'youcall'ems, a big ol' *historical coincidence*. Kind of like a fluke, but classier. Seems it was a mighty harsh winter out Californy way, and Great-great-granddaddy's wagon train got themselves snowed in on the road west just like the Donners, only not half so fortunate. Great-great-granddaddy Bean went out as part of a scouting party sent to fetch help, but he was the only one as made it any appreciable distance. It was rough going and short rations, even for a resourceful man like him, and it looked like he was about to die and go to waste—unlike the rest of the scouting party—when what should he see but an old, grizzled tramp coming up the mountain trail in his direction.

That white-haired coot had him a saucepan on his head, a lima bean-shaped birthmark on his left cheek, and a pair of zucchinis in his hands which he was brandishing in a perilous manner. The way Great-great-granddaddy told it in his affy-david, that old feller grinned like he had the lockjaw and hollered, "It's a good thing I found you, friend! Now you're safe. You come right on back to my cabin and we'll get you fixed up fine. There's plenty to eat there, believe you me."

And so there was.

Great-great-granddaddy might've got away with eating who he did, but family ways is hard to shake. Like his proud ancestors afore him, he was just too consarned lazy to dispose of the leftovers proper. It all came to light with the spring thaw. They say a nation mourned when they heard that Johnny Beansprout was dead and down the hatch, and you can be sure the Misery Loves Company party played on that sorrow like a cheap fiddle to push through all manner of new anti-meat laws. Finally this great country of ours come to the sorry pass we are at today, with otherwise honest folk doing twenty years to life for possession of a slice of salami and our finest young men and women running off ‘cross the border to live in the Free All-Beef Republic of Texas.

Well, that's all water under the slaughterhouse sluice-gate, like my daddy used to say. Maybe America's hog-tied six ways from Sunday thanks to the Know-nothings letting the We-know-what's-best-for-everyone types have their wicked way with our laws and our lives, but this is still a democracy. I'm a loyal American, a registered voter, and I firmly believe that if one pesky mouthful like Johnny Beansprout could get our proud nation into this meatless mess, imagine what all of us, in this one little family alone, can do to get us out again. Why, shucks, it's just a matter of being in the right place—namely here in Washington—and doing our mite to put the country back on the right track, one congressman at a time.

But here's your mama calling us to the table, and not a minute too soon. I'm so hungry, I could eat a raw rutabaga, and I'll bet you young'ns feel the same. Guess I'll save the political chin-wag to cool my after-dinner cappuccino.

Lord, we thank Thee for the bounty which Thou hast seen fit to set before us on every hand, which kind of makes up for our family having to live down here in the basement of this fine national monument while we do our small part to restore our beloved nation to where she should be. Amen and God bless America.

Donal, pass the senator.

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Films

KATHI MAIO

FOUR VERY HUMAN ROBOT STORIES

Eliot thought that April was the cruelest month. But January, February, March (and most of May) are also way harsh, in my book. Those are the months when major studios dump their designated loser films onto the market. The Oscar nominations are closed. The holiday season is over. And the Memorial Day start of the blockbuster summer cycle is still but a dream in the heads of Hollywood executives. (You can almost see their little legs twitching in their sleep, can't you?)

Movieland's dim and dull first quarter is a yearly misery for film lovers. Yet every April shower has a silver lining. Or so they say. And the bright spot in this annual gray season at the cineplex is those little gems of independent film that often show up at art houses this time of year. Most times, in most markets, such movies get lost in the shuffle. But this is the time of year when such films sometimes find the grateful audiences they deserve.

Here's hoping that's the fate for a small movie—or, to be precise, a modest quartet of linked short films—called *Robot Stories*. Writer/director (and actor) Greg Pak has been doing the film fest circuit for the last two years with his debut feature, and he is now in the midst of the Herculean task of self-distributing his film around the country and globe. In

February, the film finally got its theatrical premiere in its birthplace of New York. (The film started its digital video shoot on 9/10/01 and continued production in the midst of that sad season of tragedy.)

Throughout March and April of this year it has been rolling into a city here and a city there. Usually in one theater only. And usually only for one week. I tell you this because, despite the dead days at your local mall movieplex, you will have to keep your eyes peeled if you want to catch this one. And I would advise that you do just that.

For *Robot Stories* is not your average robo-flick. At a time when almost all films about technology-human interface seem to be filled with explosions and ultra-violence, and not much else, Pak has created something more subtle and respectful toward not only humanity but also the technological companions that will undoubtedly accompany us into our future.

And this film is unusual in another regard. Mr. Pak, whose father is of Korean ancestry and whose mother comes from a white, European heritage, is dedicated to telling stories that involve Asian-American characters. No, don't picture a live-action version of some noirish anime adventure here. And don't expect stereotypes of high-tech tongs ravaging Chinatown, either. The tales Mr. Pak relates in *Robot Stories* just happen to focus on ordinary Americans who are at least partially Asian.

“My Robot Baby,” the film's opening short, exemplifies how naturally Mr. Pak deals with race. Which is to say, how he makes it a non-issue. The film stars Tamlyn Tomita (one of

those many actors in *The Joy Luck Club* you hoped you'd see a lot more of, but never did) as Marcia, a hard-working marketing executive, who, along with her equally driven husband, Roy (James Saito), plans to adopt a baby.

Before the couple can be approved as parents of a human baby they have to do a test run with an oversized Easter egg of a substitute. “Bobby,” a programmed plastic orb, cries out for food and cuddling, and has to have his graphite discharge wiped away. Sensors are set to record how well the couple nurtures their “baby.”

It all seems like a simple test to pass. Especially when Marcia—with a little help from her techie papa (Glenn Kubota)—thinks she's figured out how to cheat the system. But before long the simulation grows all too real for the overwhelmed new “mom.” And just when the story seems set to degrade into a Spawn of Chucky horror plot or a Baby Boomish farce, it settles back into a very believable conclusion. In the final scene, Marcia learns a lesson about parenting that reverberates in her own long-ago experiences as an angry and frightened child.

The second short in the group is the strongest. However, it is not, as we eventually learn, even remotely sf. In “The Robot Fixer,” a young technology worker's traffic accident brings his estranged mother and sister back into his life. Unfortunately, the young man is in a vegetative state and on life-support. Doctors are advising that the family consider organ donation and let the young man go. But Bernice (Wai Ching Ho) is fiercely determined to have her son back. While cleaning his filthy apartment she discovers the broken

remains of his well-loved toy-bot collection. And before long she is scouring yard sales and junk shops trying to mend the broken toys as if each completed space ranger were a magic charm with the power to heal a mortally wounded man.

It is somehow fitting that this is the story that Mr. Pak was filming on and immediately after 9/11. It is a little gem of a film about loss and acceptance and healing. More *Playhouse 90* than *Outer Limits*, it features a brilliant performance by Wai Ching Ho, and an equally solid supporting performance by Cindy Cheung as Bernice's daughter, Grace.

The third segment, “Machine Love,” moves back into the realm of science fiction. It stars the filmmaker himself as Archie, a “G9 Sprout” robotic office drone, who delivers himself to an unpleasant office where he is designed to toil tirelessly at coding and programming. An innocent to office politics and everything else in the human world, Archie is pathetically eager to “interact” with his human co-workers. But they only enjoy taunting and exploiting him. (This *is* a slavery for the new millennium, after all.)

Pak doesn't go the predictable *Westworld* revenge-of-the-robots route. Instead, he opts for something a bit more whimsical and sweet.

The final short is a film called “Clay.” In it, veteran actor Sab Shimono plays a renowned sculptor, John Lee, who learns that he is dying while he struggles to complete a major commission. At this point in the not-too-distant future, people die of the simple infections that used to be successfully treated with antibiotics. However, they also have the option of choosing a kind of cyber-immortality before their bodies

expire. Scientists now have the power to make a “perfect digital copy of the human brain,” capturing a life's experience for continued interaction with the real world.

Lee's son and doctor try to convince him that having himself “scanned” is not only the logical choice, but a moral one as well. Lee doesn't doubt the logic. But he doesn't think he deserves, or even wants, the placid afterlife being offered him. For years he has shared his existence with his long-dead wife's digital consciousness. She is serene and kind, and seemingly content to be a gentle wraith who can pose for her husband at the same time she comforts a child in a hospital in South America. Yet there is a flatness in her affect that disturbs Lee.

Is it better to rage against the night, and die, or to live an eternity as a zen angel without anger, or artistic dynamism?

“Clay” doesn't quite work. It is an ambitious story to tell, and needed more than the few minutes of screen time the filmmaker is able to give it to do its themes and issues justice. The characters can't be sufficiently explored, and the story is just too compressed. In the end, it comes off as incomplete and a little pretentious.

Nevertheless, there is no denying that *Robot Stories* is a very impressive first feature. Shot on the cheap—Mr. Pak has said that his entire budget would probably have covered about three shots in Steven Spielberg's *A.I.*—you'd never know it from either the look or the feel of it. Inspired by the shape-shifting robot toys of his childhood, the television classics like *Twilight Zone* that he devoured in his youth, and his ongoing love of the science fiction of authors like Ray

Bradbury, Greg Pak has fashioned an impressive anthology of domestic science fiction.

Robot Stories is both heartfelt and entertaining. I found it to be one of the most human and humane science fiction films I've seen in a long time.

But will you be able to see it, gentle reader? Only time and entrepreneurial pluck will tell. Pak and his film have received good support from three communities: Asian-Americans, sf fans, and art house mavens. The movie has garnered good word-of-mouth and has inspired a virtual grassroots campaign to win it theatrical showings throughout the land. Yet, so far, it has played in fewer than a dozen cities.

Greg Pak, who is also a Web editor by trade, maintains a website for his movie. Check out *www.robotstories.net* to see where *Robot Stories* is playing next. You can also e-mail the filmmakers to suggest a possible venue. You may not be able to get your favorite candidate elected President this year. But you just might be able to help an admirable little movie find a larger audience.

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Here's a story that's as American as baseball and apple pie, only it's about movies and rocket ships (and yes, Mom too). Warning—critics take note: This story isn't technically science fiction, but it's so close that we doubt you'll mind.

When we published Daryl Gregory's first story back in 1990, he noted that he's the son of Tennessee mountain people and grew up in Illinois. Since then he has lived in Michigan, Utah, Pennsylvania, and Iowa. In short, he was raised by southerners in the midwest, before moving north, west, and east. Now only slightly dizzy, he's back in State College, Pennsylvania where he splits his time between writing and programming. His last story for us was "Free, and Clear" in the Feb. 2004 issue.

The Continuing Adventures of Rocket Boy

By Daryl Gregory

When I was sixteen, my best friend, Stevie, built his own spaceship. In a certain light, at a certain angle, it was beautiful: a rough cylinder over twenty feet tall, balanced on four thrusters, braced by stubby delta wings. The body and wings were warped plywood. The thrusters were four fifty-gallon steel drums, painted black, rimmed in aluminum foil. Later, police determined that Stevie had packed one of the drums with plastic milk jugs full of hydrogen peroxide distilled down to hydrogen monoxide—homemade rocket fuel. People heard the explosion as far away as Boone, five miles west.

I was a lot closer. At the edge of the field, maybe fifty yards away, both arms resting on the rail of a chain link fence. The fence stopped some of the bigger shrapnel, and that's probably the only reason I'm alive. I carry my piss around in a bag now, and I stump around on crutches. But otherwise I'm fine. It's just a body, after all. It's not *me*.

That's what Stevie was always saying, anyway. I try to keep that in mind.

The block where Stevie and I grew up looked the same as it always did: parallel trains of ranch homes parked under old pines and mountainous weeping willows. Some houses had gotten new paint, and a few back porches had become glassed-in family rooms, but nothing essential had changed. They were still just Masonite boxcars with small windows and big shutters.

The real estate agent didn't want to sell me a house here. She kept trying to show me the new “developments,” two-story houses on tiny, treeless lots on the north side of town where there used to be only cornfields. But I wanted to live here, on my block, preferably in the same house I grew up in. Stevie and I had grown up side by side, in houses so similar that our families could have swapped without having to buy new furniture.

My old home, however, wasn't for sale. My parents left it years ago, while I was at college, and moved to Arizona. The current owners had torn out the hedges and fenced the yard, but hadn't changed much else. They parked a tow truck in front of the house at night. Months ago I'd had the agent

make inquiries, but they didn't want to move, even at twenty-five percent over market value.

My second choice opened up all on its own. It was on the other side of Stevie's house, well within the hundred-yard range I required for my project. The owners had been the Klingermans, people I'd barely known. They didn't have children, but they did keep little yippy dogs, terriers or something.

Stevie's parents, the Speros, still lived in the same house. My new bedroom window faced the window to Stevie's old room. The drapes were light blue now instead of Spider-Man red. My first night in the house, sleeping on the floor because the furniture hadn't arrived, I could hear their new baby squalling.

On summer nights, Stevie would shimmy out of his bedroom window, cut across the back yards, and hiss through my window screen to come sneak out with him. We were twelve, thirteen when he started doing this. If my parents were both asleep, and if I could work up the courage, I'd go with him.

He was the same age I was, but ten pounds lighter, a skinny kid with pale, lank hair, thin lips, and translucent skin. Even by moonlight you could make out the blue vein that ran from his temple to his jaw.

The park was five blocks away, the quarry less than a mile. We'd dodge headlights the whole way, pretending every car was a cop out to bring us in. We'd dive into a ditch, and then he'd look at me and say, Oh man oh man that was *so* close.

We were scared of getting caught, especially by Stevie's dad. Mr. Spero scared me more than anyone else I knew.

But we went anyway. We built a fort in the trees beside the quarry. We talked about aliens and spaceships, but we didn't know anything about real rockets, or real stars and planets. It was all *Star Wars* and *Battlestar Galactica.*

The summer after seventh grade, we started making movies; really, one long movie with dozens of unconnected scenes. My dad had gotten a video camera for Christmas. It was a big, bulky thing, though we didn't think so at the time. Since it was my dad's camera, I was the Cameraman and Director. Stevie was in charge of Story and Special Effects.

Most of the effects required fishing tackle. We strung ten-pound test line between the trees and glued hooks to the tops of the models. Stevie would pull the ships from twenty feet away, reeling them in with a fishing rod. I would lie on my back, a cassette deck held up close to the mike to provide background music, and videotape the ships as they jerked overhead. We wanted to get the stars behind them, like the opening scene in *Star Wars*. The stars never came out on the tape.

We staged improbable space battles: a two-foot wide Millennium Falcon versus an eight-inch U.S.S. Enterprise, a couple of T.I.E. fighters vs. a Japanese Zero and an Apollo 11 rocket. We stuffed firecrackers into exhaust ports and turrets and blew them apart. We doused the models with gasoline, lit them (ignorant of the impossibility of fire in space), then yanked off the escape pods with fishing line.

After Stevie died, the papers made a lot of this obsession with spaceships and explosives and fire. The Signs Were There, if someone had Only Paid Attention. Bullshit. *Of course* we were obsessed with spaceships and things that go bang. We were American boys in Bumblefuck, Iowa.

“Timmy?”

“Hi, Mrs. Spero. It's just Tim, now.”

She stood on her front porch, holding something that looked like a toy walkie-talkie—a baby monitor. The baby was somewhere inside; I didn't hear it crying.

“You're moving in?” She sounded surprised and happy. I'd seen her look out her front window a half dozen times since the Atlas truck pulled up an hour ago. Time enough to prepare that happily surprised voice. To remind herself not to look at the aluminum crutches.

I nodded toward the two guys carrying a dresser into the house and managed a smile. “Sort of. Most of the furniture's going into the back bedroom until I can get the carpets taken out and the floors refinished.”

She stepped off the porch and walked toward the driveway, moving slowly, as if unspooling a safety line behind her. The baby monitor's red LED pulsed every few seconds.

Mrs. Spero had been one of the young moms, the hot moms, a fit-looking woman who pulled her hair into a ponytail when she worked and wore sleeveless shirts in the summer. Even before I hit thirteen I started watching whenever she reached to a high shelf, waiting for a glimpse of white bra and curve of skin.

She was in her late forties now, and though still attractive she looked worn out. Her face was puffy, and she'd gained weight in her hips. Her eyes seemed to have sunk a fraction farther into her skull. Had the new baby done this, or had the transformation started earlier?

I told her my folks had gotten the Christmas card with the birth announcement inside. “William Ray. That's nice. He's what, eight months old?”

She smiled, surprised. “Next Tuesday. We call him Will. You have a good memory.”

She asked about my family. I told her my parents were looking forward to retiring in a few years. My older brother was still in grad school. My sister was in Maine, with a kid of her own.

The monitor's read-out rose and fell. I couldn't help looking at it.

She told me about my house and the neighborhood. Mr. Klingerman had died of a stroke, and Mrs. Klingerman moved into a home. She didn't know what happened to their dogs. We talked about the new people on the street, and the few changes in town.

“So, where are you working?” she asked.

“Right here. In the house. I'll be telecommuting.”

“Oh. Right at home. Working on a computer, I guess?”

“I analyze quality control data for a parts manufacturer.” Nine times out of ten, this is as far as I have to go to explain my job.

“Well, that sounds....” She searched for a word. “You were always a smart one, Tim.” She glanced at the monitor, then back at her house. “I better get back.”

“Can I listen?”

She looked blank for a moment, then smiled. “Sure.”

I held the monitor to my ear. The baby seemed to be sound asleep, each deep breath loud and fuzzed by static.

“I can hear the ocean,” I said, and she laughed. I looked at the back of the device and noted the brand name. “This thing's amazing. You can hear everything.”

“Almost too much. Every little breath.”

“I bet. Well, tell Mr. Spero that I'll be here all the time,” I said. “If he ever needs anything.”

Stevie made bigger and bigger models out of painted plywood and pieces from other models. He blew them apart with M-80s that could rip open a mailbox. I wouldn't give him my dad's video camera anymore, but he stole a Super-8 camera and a projector from the school A-V room and switched to film. He couldn't do sound anymore, but he didn't mind. Video is a cold medium, he told me.

One night the summer after freshman year, we were coming back through the yards at 3 a.m. Stevie had the camera, and I was pulling a wagon full of props and models. We came around the corner of the house and saw Mr. Spero. He was sitting in a lawn chair under Stevie's window, a plastic tumbler in his hand. I dropped the wagon handle, but before I could take off he told me to stand there, and I was too afraid to move. He made Stevie drop his pants, right there in front of me. Told him to put his hands against the side of the

house. Stevie was already crying. Mr. Spero stood up, unlooped his belt, and folded it in half. He held it by the buckle, and slapped it against Stevie's thighs. The boy yelped, and started bawling.

I'll give you something to cry about, Mr. Spero said.

Sometime during the beating I ran to the back door of my house, not even bothering to sneak, and ran into my bedroom. My mom tried to get me to tell her what was going on, and I blubbered something about Stevie and his dad.

A few minutes later, Mr. Spero was at our front door. My dad went to the door barefoot in his robe, and then he called me in to the living room.

Did you sneak out? he asked me.

I nodded.

Don't do it again, he said.

And that was it.

I stood there for a moment, stunned, and then ran out of the room. But I didn't go far. I ducked into the bathroom and put my ear to the wall above the sink. Mr. Spero kept talking, in a low, spiteful voice. My dad didn't say much.

When Mr. Spero finally left I heard Dad say to Mom, That man's the southbound end of a northbound horse. I was fourteen, and thought that was the wittiest thing my father had ever said.

And then I started wondering. How long had Mr. Spero been sitting there in the dark, waiting for us?

The baby monitor Mrs. Spero used broadcast at 43 kilohertz. I bought a scanner in Des Moines and tuned in to Radio William. I listened to him whenever he was on. The

format was pretty regular: He cried, he breathed, he jabbered in his private language. I learned to differentiate the various cries, from hunger to anger. He had a special kind of yelp when he wanted to be picked up after his nap. Mrs. Spero would come to retrieve him, speaking to him in her calm way, and when she leaned into his crib it was like she was speaking into my ear. At night I would lie in bed and try to time my breaths to his, but he was too fast, like a rabbit.

Mr. Spero was a background noise, a distant rumbling that occasionally resolved into words. I listened for any change of tone, waiting for the flat contempt he'd used with Stevie. That first week I watched him leave for work in the morning, and come home in the afternoon. He looked the same: pale skin and thin lips, hair combed back on his forehead in a mini-pompadour. Only the hair color had changed, from sandy brown to white.

I unpacked, and shopped on the Internet. Most of the sites encouraged homeowners to be paranoid: about their babysitters, their housecleaners, or anyone coming within twenty feet of their front door. I was amazed at the range of equipment available. I put together a complete package for less than two thousand dollars: cameras, digital switcher, software, antennas, cables, everything.

UPS delivered it in pieces over the next couple of weeks. I played with my new toys, and I listened to Radio William.

All Stevie's movies—our movies—were part of a long saga called *The NovaWeapon Chronicles*. The plot was impossible to explain, even to ourselves, and changed depending on whatever special effects were available. We shot parts of the

story over and over when we changed our minds or got better models. There were large gaps in the story that we never filled in.

Most of the “chapters” had to do with Rocket Boy, played by Stevie in black snow pants and a mesh shirt. Rocket Boy was the only kid our age (twelve, fourteen, sixteen) who could pilot his own starfighter in the Counter-Revolutionary StarForce, which we'd called the “Rebel Alliance” until some kids said we just copied it from *Star Wars.* In the later chapters Rocket Boy became the strong silent type; once we'd switched to film we couldn't record dialogue anymore. Stevie would act out Rocket Boy working on his warp engines, or at the controls reacting to unseen laser shots, or gazing meaningfully into the distance. I appeared in various roles, from Flight Commander to Alien Overlord. My younger brother was drafted into playing ensigns, lackey aliens, and especially corpses. Stevie said Hitchcock used Bosco for the shower scene in *Psycho*, but we found out that Karo Syrup was cheaper, and looked just as good. On black and white film, Karo looked more realistic than real blood.

For the action shots, Stevie's stunt double was a G.I. Joe with life-like hair and Kung Fu grip. We dressed up the action figure (*never* a *doll*), inserted him into scale models, and then punished him in various ways. One day during summer vacation—this was the year before Stevie died, in 1991—we threw the Joe off the side of the quarry about fifty times. It was ninety degrees and ninety percent humidity, and I was losing interest in the *Chronicles*. But there was nothing else to do, and Stevie swore it was a critical scene that he needed

me to film. Rocket Boy's starfighter had been hit, and his escape pod had burned up in reentry (or something), and Rocket Boy was supposed to parachute the rest of the way down. So Stevie stood at the top of the cliff with a handkerchief bunched around Joe, and I was at the bottom of the pit with the Super-8 shooting up into the Sun. There was no wind down there and no shade and sweat was pouring off me.

And the fucking handkerchief would *not* come open. Joe just crashed into the rocks, over and over. And every time he hit, Stevie yelled down, Did you get it? Did you get it? Like there was anything to get.

After two hours Joe's face was looking like he'd been in a knife fight. I climbed out of the hole with the camera hanging from a strap around my neck, yelling that it was his turn to sit in the pit and broil.

Stevie was pulling on his shirt. His pale skin had turned bright pink, but before he tugged down the shirt I saw a dark stripe on his chest.

What the hell is that? I said.

This? He lifted his shirt. A long, thin welt, like a snake wending its way from his collarbone to his navel. That's nothing.

What did he use on you?

Stevie shrugged. One of my cables.

Holy shit, I said. That had to kill.

He shrugged. Not really. Pain's just a signal from the equipment. Like a telephone ring. It only has to hurt if you decide it should hurt.

He'd been talking like this all summer. The body is a machine, the mind is a pilot.

Yeah, I said, you're a regular man of steel.

I'll prove it to you, he said. Punch me.

Oh, you don't want me to punch you, I said.

This is an ugly thing that Stevie brought out in me. I was bigger than him, stronger than him. I could put him in unbreakable headlocks, manhandle him into closets, make him cry if I wanted. I didn't do it often, but I liked knowing I could.

So he tried to slap me and I knocked his hand away. Come on, come on, he said, and kept slapping. I fended him off, and flicked a few shots at his chin. He started swinging wildly, and I pushed his arms away, and then his fist connected with my lip. That pissed me off. So I socked him in the side of the head.

He spun away from me, a hand over his ear. See? he said. His eyes were welling with tears, but he made himself laugh. Okay, good, he said.

He charged at me again, throwing crazy punches, a tantrum, going for velocity and damage and not even trying to protect himself. You could only fight like this with your brother, or your best friend.

We went on like that for a while, until I was straddled on top of him, my fist raised. But I couldn't hit him while he was flat on the ground, bleeding, and smiling at me.

He dabbed at his nose, and held up his red hand. Sprung a leak, he said.

Sure, I said, and it doesn't hurt a bit.

Nope.

Why'd you start crying then?

He shoved me off him. Nobody has *total control,* he said condescendingly. Too many systems are on automatic. But I'm working on it.

I don't remember what I said at that point. Some crack.

Stevie shook his head and pulled up his shirt. You think this is me. *This,* he said, running a finger down the bruise, is hull damage.

He grinned. The pilot, he said, is intact. He pointed at his eye. Behind there. Can you see me? Hey man, I'm waving at you.

“It must be hard to do this again,” I said. We were in her back yard, sitting on the same green wrought-iron patio furniture they'd always had.

“You mean, at my age.” She was breastfeeding William, holding him close with a blanket draped over her shoulder and covering her breast, but he was a big guy, and kept yanking off the blanket. I kept looking away.

“No! Well—”

“It's all right. You know, I didn't breastfeed Steven. Back then, formula was supposed to be better. You were a formula baby, too.” She glanced up at me. “I never would have planned on this. But it happened, and I wouldn't trade him back.”

“Of course not.”

“Still, it'll be good to get away.” Mr. Spero was going to a convention over the weekend, and she was taking William to

her sister's house in Cedar Falls. “Thank you for watching the house, by the way.”

“Not a problem. That's what neighbors are for.”

The baby's head lolled sideways, eyes half closed. He looked drunk. She dabbed the thin milk from the corner of his lips, and he smiled. Then she did something to her bra, and deftly buttoned her shirt. All with one hand.

“Do you still have any of Stevie's movies?” I asked. She didn't look up. “You know, the videos, or the film cans?”

She shook her head slightly, still not looking at me. “I don't think so. I'm sure they're gone.”

“Gone where?”

“We gave a lot of stuff away, after. Boxes and boxes.”

The car pulled up behind me, the engine loud against the side of the house. I turned around, putting a smile on my face.

Mr. Spero stepped out of the car, his suit coat over one arm. “Well look what the cat dragged in.” He said it lightly, a little chuckle behind it.

“Hello, Mr. Spero.”

“Claire told me you'd moved in. I couldn't believe it.” He draped his jacket over the back of one of the patio chairs. His shoes were still shiny, his bright yellow tie still cinched, as if important clients might ring the bell at any moment. “Now where's my boy?”

He took the child from Mrs. Spero and turned to me. “He's a big one, isn't he? What a monster!”

It was true. He looked like he'd be much bigger than Stevie, more solid.

“Careful, I just fed him,” Mrs. Spero said. “I need to go turn on the oven.” She disappeared into the house, and Mr. Spero jiggled the boy in his arms.

“So what brings you back to our little town, Timmy? It can't be the job prospects.”

“I work over the Internet,” I said. “My office can be anywhere.”

“The Internet? I thought you guys all went out of business.” The baby started to fuss, and Mr. Spero sat down where Claire had been. “There we go, there we go.” He patted his back, and the baby twisted his head back and forth, knuckles crammed into a slobbering mouth.

“So why come back here?” Mr. Spero said. “I'd think that someone in your situation would want to be near family.”

“Situation?” I kept my face blank. I waited for him to glance at the crutches leaning against my chair, or the bulge under my shirt from the flange and colostomy bag. Just glance.

He stared at me over the top of the baby, and huffed. “Never mind. No one could ever tell you what to do. Or your dad, either.” The baby pushed up on his legs and grabbed one of his father's ears, and Mr. Spero shook his head back and forth playfully.

“I like this town,” I lied. “And somebody has to come back. To watch over the neighborhood. Make sure it stays a nice place to raise kids.”

“So you sit in your room and type on your computer. That's a hell of a job.”

“I analyze quality control data for a parts manufacturer.”

The baby grabbed an eyebrow, and Mr. Spero said “Ouch!” and pulled his face away. He held the baby's hands, and the boy stood shakily. Mr. Spero bounced his legs, and the baby went up and down, grunting: *hyuh-hyuh-hyuh.*

“I try to explain catastrophic failure,” I said. “Like when a tire blows out, or an O-ring disintegrates on lift-off.”

“Really,” Mr. Spero said. The baby grinned madly. Mr. Spero chuckled and bounced him higher.

“Estimating catastrophe time is a different problem, statistically, than estimating gradual wear—you get a Weibull distribution rather than a normal curve. We do test-to-failure runs, and just try to grind a part into dust. Everything fails eventually. My job is to figure out why some things fall apart too soon. I sort through all the variables and find out which ones contributed to failure.”

He ignored me. William looked ecstatic.

“A lot of the time, it's because of some flaw from early in the manufacturing process, like a hairline crack in the seal, say.”

The baby's head dropped forward, and a mouthful of gray fluid dumped onto Mr. Spero's shirt. William grinned, ready to play.

“Damn it! Claire! *Claire!*” He thrust the baby away from him, dangling it in the air. The child spit up again, spattering the floor, and started to howl.

Claire rushed out of the house, a towel already in her hand. “Were you throwing him around? You know what he's like after—”

“Christ, Claire, can you just get him off me?”

She took the baby from him and Mr. Spero grabbed the towel from her. He dabbed at his chest. “I'm too fucking old for this,” he said.

I held up my arms. “Here, let me take him.”

Mr. Spero threw down the towel and stomped into the house, already unbuttoning his shirt.

She shook her head. “I need to clean him up,” she said. “Maybe you could come back after....”

“Naw, I've got to get going anyway,” I said. “And you've got to pack. Enjoy your trip. I'll take care of things here.”

I said that he was my best friend. That's a lie. Sophomore year, I stopped making night runs with him, I stopped helping with the movies. I barely talked to him at school. I'd gotten onto the soccer team, and I had a group of good friends, some of them seniors. I had a girlfriend. What the hell did I need Stevie for?

He never stopped pestering me. I remember when he stopped me in the hall to tell me he'd spent spring break building a full-size starfighter out of silver-painted plywood.

See? He flipped open his notebook to his storyboards. He showed me a cartoon of a stick figure climbing into the hatch of a starfighter. The ship was maybe three times taller than the pilot, and drawn in much more detail.

You built this?

It's almost done, he said. He flipped pages. Now, he said, we switch from live-action to the models.

The panels showed the launch, then a far shot of the starfighter rising through the clouds, then a closer shot of the ship outlined against black space.

Look, he said. It's all there. It's a two-stage rocket.

God, he could be so pathetic. I don't remember any bruises on him that day, though at some point I'd stopped looking. It was easier to stop worrying about Stevie in the winter. With our windows closed we couldn't hear Mr. Spero shouting at him.

I took the book from him. Jagged pen strokes showed the starfighter exploding. What's this? Lasers or something?

The NovaWeapon, he said. It hits his ship.

In the next panel, Rocket Boy ejects. The last picture showed him in close-up—the stick figure filled up most of the frame, anyway—floating in space.

He can't eject into space, I said. He doesn't have a space suit. He'd die in ten seconds.

We'll make a suit, Stevie said.

I tossed the notebook back to him. Don't be a fucking retard, I said.

Even in the dark, I could tell that there was nothing left of Stevie's old bedroom. The shelves crammed full of plastic models were gone. The paneling and wallpaper had been pulled down, the walls painted glossy white and trimmed in pastel blue. The bed was gone too, replaced by a crib. The bed frame had been blond wood, with panels in the headboard where Stevie kept his paperbacks, videotapes, Super-8 cassettes, and cans of developed film. Had they really given everything away?

I toured the rest of the house in the dark, not wanting to turn on the lights and alert the neighbors. The basement had been divided into rooms and partially finished, but the other

rooms looked pretty much as I remembered. The main difference was that every trace of Stevie, except for a few pictures, had been removed.

It took me most of Friday night and part of Saturday to install the cameras and mikes and routers. I needed spots that were high up, with wide angles. The finished rooms in the basement were easy, because the drop ceiling tiles could be pushed out of the way. The upstairs rooms were harder. These ranches didn't have much of an attic, just crawl spaces above the house and garage that you accessed through little square holes. The work was draining: hours balanced on the beams trying not to put a leg through the insulation and plaster. I was used to working one-legged, but after a half hour I was sweating and trembling from exertion, and itching like mad from the insulation. I had to take a lot of breaks.

I ran power from the light fixtures, drilled down through the plaster ceiling, and popped the little fish-eyes into them. Each camera was about as big as a fifty-cent piece, and most of that was above the ceiling. The lenses themselves were smaller than a dime. I wired the circuit boards on the backs of the cameras to the digital switcher, which was broadcasting at 2.4 gigahertz. I put the antenna next to the wall facing my house. According to the specs I didn't need the antenna—I should have been able to pick up the cam signals from 700 feet away. But if there's anything my day job has taught me, it's that spec-writers lie.

Only three cameras came on without a hitch. The others had cabling problems of one type or another, and I had to spend another two hours crawling around in the attic. Last, I

had to vacuum all the plaster that had dropped onto the floors. The house would be cleaner than they'd left it.

By Saturday night I had everything working. I could sit at my desk and tab through most of the rooms in the house from my PC.

I went in again Sunday morning, and this time I actually watered the plants. Then I went room by room and searched every closet, trunk, and suitcase, looking for anything of Stevie's. I spent a lot of time in the storage room, going through Rubbermaid containers filled with Christmas decorations, photo albums, and old clothes. Under the basement workbench, hidden behind a toolbox, I found two new Jim Beam bottles, one empty, the other down to a couple brown inches, with a plastic cup over the neck. I put them back exactly as I'd found them.

Except for one box of grade school papers, there was nothing of Stevie's in the house.

It wasn't until nearly noon that I remembered the attic space above the garage. I had no idea when the Speros were coming back. But I had to check it out.

I left my crutches on the floor of the garage and hauled and hopped my way up the stepladder to the square hole. I pushed aside the lid and groped above my head until I found the string for the light.

The junk was half-familiar, stuff that could have come from my own family. A box for a plastic Christmas tree, a rotary fan, a set of kitchen chairs I remembered, taped-together boxes with pictures of toaster ovens and car stereos

and power tools. I stumped deeper into darkness, toward a stack of cardboard boxes. The seams were thickly taped.

I used my keys to poke and saw through the tape. The first box I opened contained a metal box, like a typewriter case. “Ames H.S. Library” was stenciled on the side. I flipped the metal clasps and pulled off the top.

It was the Super-8 film projector. There was even a spool of film on the arm.

I knew it. I knew they hadn't thrown it away.

I worked my way through the other boxes, unfolding the cardboard flaps and hauling things into the light. It was all there: the notebooks, the videotapes, the film cans. Even the models—two boxes filled with nothing but plastic spaceships and props.

I'll pay you, he said.

He was standing under my window, in broad daylight. He wore black cargo pants, shiny black combat boots. He even had on dark eye shadow. He looked like a dork.

Why don't you come to the front door like everybody else, I said to him. And then: How much?

Ten bucks. It's the last scene. The last time I'll ever ask you. All you have to do is hold the camera.

I'm not going to sneak out of my window for ten bucks.

Twenty bucks. Come on, you know you have to see this.

It was a Saturday afternoon, and I didn't have anything else to do. I went out through the back door, though I made sure nobody saw me.

First, give me the twenty, I said.

He looked annoyed. You're going to take the money?

I held out my hand. I didn't want it—I just wanted to see if he had it. And if he'd really pay me.

He handed me two tens, and I stuffed them in my pocket. All right, I said. You've hired a cameraman.

My house became a studio. The bedroom office was already wired to receive the video broadcasts from my cameras. In the living room I moved the couch to face the large blank wall, and set up the projector on the end table. I pushed the TV and VCR into the corner, so I could watch the videos without leaving the couch. I spent my nights moving between the two rooms, watching whatever I was in the mood for.

That first Sunday, before the Speros had even returned, I watched the first tape. Stevie had numbered the videotapes and film cans, so I was able to place them in order. Chapter One of the *NovaWeapon Chronicles* featured a twelve-year-old Stevie and Timmy, and interminable scenes of plastic models being jerked along on fishing line.

I expected it to be worse than I remembered. But it was worse even than that.

I started watching with the idea that I would capture the interesting or well-done bits and edit them into something coherent. But the videos were almost unwatchable. Often the screen was so dark I couldn't tell what was happening, and most of the time I couldn't remember what we'd intended. I was the only person on the planet who could possibly appreciate the *NovaWeapon Chronicles*, and I was fast-forwarding through hours of it.

The stream of images from next door, however, never stopped flowing, and those never bored me. Even when I was working, I kept a window open on my desktop that I could maximize whenever something caught my eye: Mrs. Spero mopping the kitchen, barefoot. Mr. Spero slipping into the basement and back in less than a minute, like a magic trick. I'd never been that interested in webcams, or reality shows, but this was riveting.

I could follow them from room to room, with a few exceptions. I hadn't put cameras outside, or in the garage. And I hadn't put any in the master bedroom or bathroom. I didn't want to be able to see the Speros naked, or having sex, because I knew I'd watch. Still, it was a small house. I'd like to say that I shut down the window the first time I saw Mrs. Spero walk from the bathroom to the bedroom with a towel around her waist. I never even reached for the mouse.

I found the televised William even more fascinating than the audio-only version. When he slept, he abandoned himself totally: jaw slack, arms thrown to the side. When he cried, he threw his entire body into it. I admired his focus. Sometimes when he was crawling toward a certain toy, or reaching toward the airplanes that dangled above his bed, I could *see* him thinking.

I was surprised that when he cried in the middle of the night, it was mostly Mr. Spero who got up to hold him. He picked up William without a word, and walked around the house like a sleepwalker, letting the boy cry himself out. After work, he threw William around like he had on the patio that

day. He rarely changed diapers or bathed the child, but he did get on the floor and play with him.

Had he been like this with Stevie, at first? Before Stevie crossed him for the first time, at the wrong time? Perhaps he liked his children better when they were small and helpless and compliant.

I waited for that moment when Mr. or Mrs. Spero would look up at the ceiling, squint at the discolored plaster, and go get the stepladder. But no one looked at the ceilings except William. Sometimes he'd be on his back, staring straight up at the camera, and I'd pretend that he knew. That some baby instinct told him I was up there, looking down on him. I'd wave at the screen. Hiya, Will. What are you thinking about, down there?

We walked out to the quarry, Stevie lugging the camera and a gym bag. The starfighter was set up on the field on the other side of the pit. It was twenty-two feet tall, sitting nose up like the shuttle before launch. The body was primer gray, with the red and black Counter-Revolutionary StarForce logos on each stubby wing. The foil rims around the thrusters glinted like hammered metal.

Holy cow, I said. You really did it.

It was only when we moved around the side that I could see that the back was unfinished. The cylindrical body was hollow, the two ends held together with crosshatched strips of unpainted wood.

The back doesn't matter, he said. We'll only film it from the front.

On the grass behind the ship were paint cans and stacks of cloth and empty milk jugs. One huge cardboard box overflowed with crumpled brown plastic containers. Stevie had been out here a lot.

I helped him lift his dad's extension ladder out of the grass, and we propped it up against the side of the ship. The structure shuddered and swayed.

I climbed up, excited despite myself. Stevie had managed to make a curved clear hatch out of two sheets of Plexiglas. It fastened to a wooden crossbar with big hinges, so you could swing it open and closed. There was a little platform in there, with a metal folding chair on its back, so Stevie could sit with his face to the sky. The flight stick was a black broom handle, the instrument panel a slab of wood with painted-on controls labeled in the alien alphabet we'd made up in eighth grade.

A car battery sat next to the chair, close to where Stevie's head would be. The red and black clamps of jumper cables lay next to the battery, unattached. The cable disappeared through a hole in the platform.

What's the battery for?

Special effects, he said.

Even with work and hours spent watching William, I skimmed through the dozens of taped chapters in a week. I promised myself I'd take more time with the Super-8 footage.

The films required more of a ritual. Before viewing each reel I spooled through it by hand, reconnecting the sections where the splices had broken. Stevie had sometimes used real splicing tape, but more often he'd used Scotch tape that had yellowed and split. The Bell and Howell projector was

touchy. I learned how to thread the film with a loop of slack to stop it from stuttering. I learned how to replace the lamps, ordered over the Internet from a warehouse in Oregon.

The filmed chapters were much better than the tapes. Shorter, for one. The film cost money to develop, so we couldn't let things just run on and on. And Stevie had edited down from there. His technique matured from reel to reel: he paid attention to time of day and the location of props, he showed exterior shots before jumping to the interior, and he cut cleanly between characters. Scenes had rhythm.

And I realized that Stevie was right: Video *was* a cold medium. It's too *specific:* all harsh colors and wind noise and tinny dialogue. Better to reduce to shades of gray and silence, and develop slowly in darkness. I don't know where the warmth comes from. Maybe something in the act of projection: the lamp blasting each frame onto the screen, suffusing it with light, reconstituting each tree and person and building in photons.

I took my time. I watched only one reel a night, though I allowed myself to watch it multiple times. After all, there was no reason to hurry. There was no final reel. Once there'd been a Super-8 cassette, undeveloped, pulled from the wreckage of the camera. Maybe it still existed. Maybe the police still had it, or the Speros, hidden in some niche I hadn't found. Or maybe they'd burned it, and no one would ever see it.

It didn't matter. I knew how the story ended.

Perhaps that was part of the attraction of my little cameras. Channel William, his ongoing saga broadcast live to

my PC, was never in reruns. Some nights I slept on the futon in the office, so I could check on him just by opening my eyes. I'd long since stopped feeling like a voyeur. I felt like I was in the house with them, intangible and invisible. The family ghost.

I climbed down the ladder, shaking my head at how much work he'd put in. The whole structure swayed with my weight.

Is that thing going to hold you? I asked.

It doesn't have to stay up long, he said. This is the last scene I need to film.

How can this be the last scene? What about ejecting into space, the whole space suit thing? How can you have him ejecting before you even launch?

Don't be a fucking retard, he said, in the same snotty tone I'd used. This is the last scene I need to *film.* I already finished the other stuff. Nobody films in sequence. I'll put it all back together in the editing room.

You mean your basement.

He rolled his eyes.

So what did you make the space suit out of? I asked.

There is no space suit.

And when he ejects, what? Suffocates? Explodes in the vacuum?

Stevie didn't answer.

Really? Rocket Boy dies?

What do you care? he said finally.

I started laughing. Come on, five years of the *NovaWeapon Chronicles* and they just shoot him out of the sky and he *dies?* That's like killing off Luke Skywalker.

Obi-wan died, he said, and came back in the sequels.

Only as a ghost. Ghosts don't count.

Stevie ignored me. He pulled off his T-shirt and squatted to open the gym bag. His back was covered with bruises so blue they were almost black.

Holy shit, I said.

He pulled the black mesh shirt out of the bag. Don't worry about it, he said. Just hull damage, right? He pulled on the shirt, and he was Rocket Boy again.

There were any number of things I could have said or done. New ones still occur to me.

Listen, Stevie said. I want a long shot—an establishing shot. He handed me the notebook, page open to the storyboards.

Just like that, he said. Stand over there by the fence. Film me getting into the rocket, and closing the hatch. Make sure you get me moving inside the cockpit, so they know it's not a model. Just keep filming until I tell you to stop, got it? Don't turn off the camera.

Obi-Wan was only a supporting character, I said, and started walking across the field.

The night I should have been paying the most attention, I was in bed, in the next room. I didn't even have the scanner on. The screams came through the computer speakers in the office.

I don't know how long they'd been going on before they woke me. Maybe only seconds. Maybe minutes. I bolted out of bed and stumble-hopped down the hall without my crutches. I swiveled the monitor to face me.

The baby was on the floor, shrieking. Mr. Spero stood over him, dressed only in pajama bottoms, his fists on his hips.

William had never made a sound like this before. It was a *screech*, as if he'd been cut or burnt.

Mr. Spero abruptly squatted, grabbed the baby under the armpits, and carried him out of the room. William was still screaming. I switched to the hall camera, but Mr. Spero walked straight into the master bedroom and I lost him again.

Fuck. I clicked through the camera views, but I couldn't see a thing. But I could still hear William. That piercing cry was being picked up by all the microphones.

I rushed back to the bedroom and pulled on a pair of sweats and a T-shirt that pulled down over flange and bag. I grabbed my crutches and lurched outside, bare toes scuffing the pavement as I crossed the two driveways.

I mashed the doorbell, then without waiting for an answer, banged on the wooden door and yelled. “Open the door! Now! Open the door!”

No one answered. I could still hear William screaming. I twisted the doorknob, but it was locked. “Mr. Spero! Where are you? Where's the baby?”

The door flew open. Mr. Spero's skin under his robe was fish white. “What the hell do you want?” he said, shocked.

I pushed forward, and got inside the frame of the door. “Show me the baby.”

“Get the hell out of my house!”

“Show me William.”

He started to close the door, but I lunged forward, got another leg inside. Mr. Spero raised his right fist.

“What are you going to do, Mr. Spero? Hit me?”

I wanted it. Local Man Hits Crippled Neighbor. I wasn't worried about being hurt—this body's only a vehicle, after all.

He slammed the door back against the wall. “Get out of my fucking house.”

“Not until you show me the baby.”

Mrs. Spero came into the room, wearing the green nightgown, holding William on her shoulder. He was quiet now.

She frowned at me. “Tim? It's two a.m.”

“I know, I just—”

I couldn't say, what was he doing on the floor? Did Mr. Spero drop him? Throw him on the ground?

“I heard him screaming.”

“Babies do that,” Mr. Spero said.

I ignored him, and looked only at Mrs. Spero. “He's all right? Are you sure?”

She turned slightly, so I could see William's face. His eyes were screwed up tight, and he was sobbing, but he didn't look bruised or hurt.

“Is he all right?”

“He had a stomach cramp,” she said. “He's fine.”

My memory is a series of still images, squared off by the viewfinder.

Stevie on the first rung of the ladder, knee raised, hands gripping the rails.

Higher, a dark look over his shoulder—not toward me, but toward some point in the distance, perhaps the enemy troops flying in.

At the top, the lid of the cockpit open like a beetle's wing, and Stevie gazing into the crowded compartment.

From my desk I watched her place the baby in his crib. He had fallen asleep in her arms, and barely stirred as she laid him on the mattress. Mr. and Mrs. Spero exchanged only a few words, then disappeared into their bedroom.

I sat in front of the PC for an hour, watching and listening. William's face was dimly lit from his nightlight. The house was absolutely still except for the sound of his breathing.

I went into the living room, too wired to sleep myself. I picked up the can of film I'd set aside for tomorrow night's viewing. It was the last can from Stevie's boxes, the last reel before the never-developed Last Reel.

I checked the film, going slow because it was heavily edited, spliced every dozen frames. He'd worked hard on this one. Eventually I threaded it into the projector and flicked on the lamp.

No sound except the clack of sprockets in the brittle film. The titles came up: a hand-stenciled sign. *The NovaWeapon Chronicles*. Flick, and the sign changed. *Final Chapter*.

I frowned. So far, Stevie had never made a chapter that spanned two reels. The movie couldn't be complete without the scene I'd filmed.

The screen flashed—sun glare on the lens—and out of the white a tiny silhouette plummeted out of the sky. The camera cut to another angle: the same figure, still far away, falling and tumbling, arms and legs outstretched. Then another cut, and another, each shot from a slightly different angle, and the figure fell closer and closer.

I saw a flash of rocks in the background. It was the quarry. I remembered filming it, shooting up from the bottom of the pit, staring into the Sun.

And then there were new images, things that Stevie had filmed himself.

I finished the reel, rewound it, watched it again.

A dark shape in the Plexiglas bubble like the pupil of an eye, his hand lifted in a StarForce salute.

I answered the door still wearing the sweats and T-shirt I'd pulled on the night before.

She held a squirming William on one hip. She turned toward the door as it opened, and smiled in a way that seemed rehearsed.

“Tim, I wanted—are you all right?”

“I'm fine.” My eyes felt raw. I probably looked like hell.

She paused, and then nodded. William pulled at her shoulders. “I'd like to talk about last night.”

“Sure.”

She smiled again, nervous. “Let's not do this on the front step. This boy is heavy.”

William bent backward over her arm, sure that it was impossible for his mother to drop him. He looked fine. Absolutely fine.

Mrs. Spero had never come into my yard before, much less my house. I glanced behind me. The drapes were pulled, and the room was dim. The box full of films and tapes sat in plain sight on the floor. The projector was next to the couch, aimed at the wall.

“It's kind of a mess.”

"I promise not to tell your mom," she said. A thin smile.

I didn't open the door. "I'm sorry if I upset you," I said.

"I know what you're doing, Tim."

My face went hot, and I smiled automatically. "Yeah?"

"You're looking out for me. For the baby. But you don't have to do that."

"I don't? That's what neighbors do for each other."

"John's different now. He's good with William."

"Hey, that's great," I said. "That's really good."

"You don't believe me."

"I'd like to believe you. Does it matter? I hope you're right."

William squawked at me, excited but serious, frowning like Alfred Hitchcock. I held my hands out to him, and he grabbed my fingers, hard. I laughed.

"He stopped drinking, Tim." She waited until I looked at her. "You know he used to drink?"

I shrugged, still holding William's hands. I'd only figured this out later, after college, after I'd met a few people who were in recovery. When I was a kid, I'd noticed Mr. Spero always had a drink in his hand. But he wasn't a *drunk.* That was Otis on the *Andy Griffith Show.* "I guess that's a pretty good excuse," I said lightly.

"It's not an *excuse!*"

I dropped William's hands, and he leaned toward me. Mrs. Spero shifted him higher on her hip.

"That's not what I'm saying," she said, her calm voice back again. "But you have to understand, he was a different

person then. He shouldn't have been so hard on Stevie, but—"

I stared at her. *Hard on him*? Did she not know? Hadn't she seen the bruises?

No, of course not. She hadn't seen a thing. None of us had.

"Tim, people can change. There are second chances. I know you may not want to believe this, but after Steven's suicide—"

"It wasn't suicide." I struggled to keep my voice level.

"What?"

"He showed me the storyboards. It wasn't a suicide. It was a plan, in two stages, like—"

"Tim, stop...."

"It was a *launch.* The starfighter is destroyed, but Rocket Boy ejects. The pilot is intact."

Mrs. Spero shook her head, her eyes wet. "Oh, Tim." Her voice was full of pity. For me.

"There's something you need to see," I said.

The ship, splintered with light. In the middle distance, the hint of bright metal and wooden shards, blurred by speed and spin, slicing toward the lens.

We sat on the couch like a little family, William between us, sitting up by himself and obviously pleased. Mrs. Spero regarded the blank wall, her face composed. She hadn't commented on the projector, or the box full of videotapes and film cans. She must have recognized them.

I turned on the projector lamp and the light hit the white wall, askew. I adjusted one of the legs and the image

straightened. The machine chattered through the blank leader tape.

William ignored the light and sound. He abruptly threw himself forward, making for the floor, and Mrs. Spero automatically put out a hand.

“Could I hold him?” I asked.

She nodded, her attention already on the flickering wall, and I moved my hands under his arms. I was surprised how heavy he was. I sat him on my lap, facing me. He was unimpressed.

The opening titles appeared. The final chapter. If she was surprised, she didn't show it. I might have been showing her the dense data tables I worked with.

In silence we watched the tiny figure falling out of the sky, falling out of the light. Reentry. The figure drew closer, until finally the rock walls flashed up and Rocket Boy hit the ground.

The camera switched to a point just above the pit floor, tilted slightly down. The sheet—the parachute—settled over the ground and covered a man-shaped lump. Touch down.

Mrs. Spero looked at me.

“Just watch,” I said. “He filmed this himself.” Before the explosion, before the Death of Rocket Boy.

Nobody films in sequence.

William twisted around, looking for his mother. “Don't worry,” I said. “She's right there. I got you.” I jiggled him on my good knee, wondering at what frequency and duration his stomach became unstable.

The screen darkened. It was night, and the camera looked down from the top of the quarry. At the bottom, the sheet reflected the moonlight. It was too big to be our handkerchief, and the lump it covered too long to be G.I. Joe.

The camera switched to the floor of the pit, tripod level. The “parachute” glowed prettily, but it was obviously just an ordinary cotton sheet, with none of the sheen of silk.

The sheet moved, and a naked arm reached out, fingers twitching. I had to smile, imagining the melodramatic background music Stevie would have wanted. The arm was streaked with fake-looking blood. Too pale, too shiny. He should have used Karo.

William pulled at my T-shirt, trying to get his feet under him. On screen, Rocket Boy tossed back the sheet.

“Oh God,” Mrs. Spero said.

Stevie was curled into a fetal position, naked. The blood described rivulets across his arms and neck. His back was covered with dark blotches—bruises. On film, they were too flat, too black, like holes through his pale skin, as unconvincing as the blood.

Stevie slowly got to his feet, facing the camera. Naked, pale skin shining. He looked up to the stars.

“The Return of Rocket Boy,” I said to her.

Rocket Boy raised his arms in triumph, held them there. The screen went black.

Mrs. Spero sobbed almost silently, her shoulders jerking with ragged breaths.

The last of the film ejected. The reel continued to spin, the tail of film slapping the body of the projector. Mrs. Spero stared at the square of empty light.

William yanked at the collar of my shirt. I lifted him in the air, and his face cracked open into a wild grin. His eyes were bright.

I recognized that look.

I tilted him left, right, flying him in my arms, and he cackled. Hey there, little man. Can you see me in there? I'm waving at you.

Coming Attractions

Next month's lead story is a whopper, an old-fashioned science fiction mystery set on a planet by the name of Bela. Colonel Robert Kohn pays a visit to the planet to investigate a series of inexplicable murders, and what he finds there ... well, to say that it's more than he bargained for is like saying you can drown in deep water. How far in over his head is he? Look to Albert Cowdrey for the answers next month.

Back here on Earth, Benjamin Rosenbaum will give us a look at the future of our youth-obsessed culture in “Starting the Clock” next issue.

We also have stories coming soon from Bradley Denton, Alex Irvine, and Robert Reed, among those ubiquitous others. And our annual October/November double issue isn't far away—we expect to have top-notch contributions from Richard Chwedyk, M. Rickert, and Gene Wolfe for that issue. Subscribe now to make certain that you won't miss any of the goodies forthcoming.

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Curiosities

The Gods Hate Kansas,

by Joseph Millard (1941)

There are those books whose titles are, in many ways, so spectacular that one fears they might overshadow the books themselves. There is Jack Butler's *Jujitsu for Christ*, for example, or *Dwarf Rapes Nun, Flees in UFO* by Arnold Sawislak.

And there's Joseph Millard's *The Gods Hate Kansas*. Right from the start you know you're in for something ... different. First of all, the title begs the question: Do the gods, in fact, hate Kansas, and if so, why? Well, don't hold your breath waiting for the answers. All we know is how the gods show their displeasure—by bombarding Kansas with more meteors per square mile than any other state.

Nine of them hit the Earth at the beginning of the story, the investigating scientists are zombiefied, and work begins on a spaceship. There's a beautiful (zombiefied) woman, loved by a (nonzombiefied) scientist, who, if not mad, is certainly awfully cranky by the end of the book, and there are aliens. What more could you want?

Well, how about a movie? It was filmed in 1967 as *They Came from Beyond Space*, but don't look for any better answers there. By comparison, the book is Great Literature.

Originally published in 1941 in *Startling Stories*, it did manage to predate other, better known aliens-take-over-our-minds yarns, but being first doesn't always mean being best. Millard himself went on to gain note as the writer of *The Cheyenne Wars* and other western non-fiction, none of which are as intriguingly betitled as this, his only sf novel.

—Bud Webster

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